

TALKING *the* TALK
SNAPSHOTS *from* AUSTRALIAN CLASSROOMS

Edited by

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How to use this book

Alyson Pauline, do you remember what we wanted to achieve when we first thought about writing this book?

Pauline We were both reading Robin Alexander's work on primary curriculum in the UK and were encouraged by his calls for better quality classroom talk. We were also working with Australian teachers in small-scale research projects to investigate talk in their own classrooms. Their projects highlighted the role of dialogue in learning by demonstrating through classroom-based research how theory about language and learning plays out. We wanted to share that work with other educators interested in literacy.

Alyson Yes, and we thought the book would be timely: the Australian curriculum highlighted classroom talk through its emphasis on students' interaction skills and their knowledge about how language (spoken and written) changes, according to our purposes and the situations of use. We also knew that if we invited other colleagues into the conversation, they would bring their experiences of working with diverse education contexts from round Australia.

Anne For me, joining the project meant a chance to work with colleagues investigating classroom discourse. Rich classroom talk is so important these days, where there's an emphasis on rote learning in some contexts. And I got to meet two fantastic teachers, who welcomed me into their classrooms.

Alyson We've learnt a lot from our professional dialogue with the teachers and with each other.

Pauline And we've been able to include literacy researchers from whom we've learnt much over the years – and who continue to contribute their wisdom and expertise to the field. The book is indeed an ensemble production, enriched by the range of 'voices' present and in dialogue.

With this book, we wanted to stress the power of dialogue that works on two levels: between classroom participants (teachers and students, students and students) and between teachers and mentors. We argue that teachers need to develop talk repertoires as much as students do. The collegial dialogue about matters of talk and learning reported in the book is an aspect of professional learning as envisaged by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) standards 6.3 (Engage with colleagues and improve practice) and 6.4 (Apply professional learning and improve student learning).

The collaborations reported on in this book enabled teachers to engage in professional learning that was tailored to their classrooms and was responsive, research-based and enriching for both teacher and mentor (as we see from the reflections in each chapter). This model of professional learning assists teachers to resist, with confidence, the many one-size-fits-all 'quick fixes' that are offered in the education industry. We recommend readers seek to set up similar collaborative experiences, either in face-to-face meetings, or using technology support for long-distance chats. Sometimes the mentoring relationship may be formal, such as between teacher and teacher educator; most of the time it is likely to be an informal relationship, in which teachers take turns at mentoring each other. This model is very powerful as it is highly sustainable and can lead to whole-school change over time.

The teachers whose work is presented in this book are keenly aware of their responsibilities with respect to their students' language (spoken and written). They describe a number of strategies (identified by this icon **S**) and activities designed to engage students in curriculum inquiry, and to support their literacy development, demonstrating how they meet the AITSL standards. Teachers' work in this context can be related to AITSL standards 1 (Know students and how they learn) and 2 (Know the content and how to teach it).

Relevant curriculum links are also identified in this way **YR 4 ACELY1688** in the classroom snapshots, Chapters 3–8. Because the classrooms visited in this book represent a broad range of settings in which Australian primary teachers find themselves working, readers will recognise many of the situations, observations and challenges described. See a full list of curriculum codes and content descriptors exemplified in **Appendix 1**.

READING THE BOOK

We suggest reading Chapters 1, 2 or 9 first, as these provide the theoretical basis for the following chapters and will help you gain an overview of research and current ideas about classroom talk.

Then we suggest reading the teacher–mentor classroom snapshot chapters – in sequence or starting with the ones most similar to your own context – and ask yourself the following questions:

- What were the talk-related issues addressed?
- How did they address them?
- What did they learn about dialogue and their students?
- And about dialogue and their own practice?
- What does this mean for my practice?

Such questions and others might form the basis for a reading group around the issue of classroom talk in your school or cluster.

IMPLEMENTING THE PRINCIPLES

These discussions can lead to some changed practices, so we recommend making some observations of talk in your classroom before attempting to alter anything. In that way, your efforts will be more focused. Some useful categories of student talk can also be found in the current *Australian Curriculum: English*. It is helpful to start small, for example:

- Focus on either teacher or student language
- Look at whole-class discussions, group or pair work
- See who talks/for how long/about what
- Observe one or two students for a length of time, noting their participation strategies.

Our chapters offer a range of ways of thinking about teacher and student talk. Perhaps you would like to focus on looking at:

- Your use of closed or open questions
- How you recast a student's contribution or clarify a curriculum concept
- How often you elaborate on answers

- What patterns of students' turn-taking you notice
- How you allocate turns
- Whether students initiate ideas or ask questions, and which students
- What happens when breakdowns in understanding occur and how these are repaired.

All of these ways of thinking about talk can be adapted to your students' needs, the curriculum contexts in play and the resources available. Our contributors look at just such a range of aspects of talk and use a variety of approaches to labelling it. We recommend drawing on these according to whether your focus is on teacher talk or student talk or perhaps both. We encourage you to audio or video record a lesson, and replay it, noting any critical moments related to your focus. You might also ask a colleague to act as a mentor and observe the lesson too – in that way you are well placed to engage in some collaborative reflection.

However, a word of caution is necessary. Studying classroom talk is a time-consuming business. We are not suggesting that teachers need to record, transcribe and analyse lengthy stretches of classroom talk. It has been said that an hour of classroom talk can take 15 to 20 hours to transcribe accurately, and we know that teachers' time is precious! We recommend summarising the lesson, perhaps adding a time stamp to sections so that you can readily find a point in the audio or video file when necessary.

Of course, there are many questions that can be asked of classroom practice. See **Appendix 2** as a starting point, and feel free to adapt and add to these as necessary. It is also likely that you will engage in more than one cycle of observation and reflection. However you choose to work with the book, we wish you well in your own explorations and trust the book fosters dialogue in your contexts.

We must also acknowledge the teachers and schools from around Australia represented in the book. Schools are busy places and teachers' work is very demanding – we are grateful for their participation and contributions made so generously. Our understandings are all the richer as a result.

Best wishes,

Pauline, Alyson and Anne

A WORD ON TRANSCRIPTION

Transcription conventions vary considerably. The editors have adopted the following basic approach, to which contributors have added additional information as necessary.

T:	teacher
S:	student
underline	overlapping turns (two speakers talking at once)
—	short pause
..	longer pause (can add length in bracket if relevant)
...	text omitted
UPPERCASE	written text
[annotation]	comment from transcriber
?word	transcribe unsure about a particular word
()	words in brackets are difficult to hear
bold	word/s are emphasised by speaker

PART 1

Talking the talk



Classroom talk: a resource for learning

Frances Christie

Talk is a fundamental part of life, so fundamental that we often take it for granted, rather like the air we breathe: it is always there, its presence brought to our conscious attention only in moments of apparent loss, when we are 'lost for words' in some unfamiliar or surprising situation.

Yet it is in talk that we construct experience, build relationships and shape our sense of the world. Talk and how we use it are fundamentally part of our identities. From the earliest years of life, young children learn the value of talk as they learn to negotiate relationships, explore the nature of experience and shape their knowledge of the world. It is a notable fact that language is always learnt in dialogue; even before they control the grammar and vocabulary of their mother tongue, children engage in dialogic situations with caregivers, using gesture, facial expression, play and a developing protolanguage (Halliday, 1975) to construct meaning jointly with others.

As a general principle then, language is learnt in dialogic situations where caregivers and children participate in shared meaning-making. Hence language is a major tool or resource for learning from the earliest years of life.

Nowhere is the issue of language as a resource for learning more important than in the classroom, where children undergo their formal education, coming to grips with the various areas of school knowledge and with the patterns of language in which these are expressed, including most notably the patterns of written discourse. Learning to function well in school, taking pleasure in its activities and being challenged by the areas of knowledge it opens up are together a major task of schooling, and here the teacher has significant responsibilities in teaching students to use language to learn.

This book offers a set of snapshots in which several primary teachers and educational researchers work in partnership to explore strategies to promote rich and varied uses of language for learning in classrooms. In doing so, they open up the possibilities for learning in a dialogic manner.

CLASSROOM DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

While interest in classroom talk is gathering momentum in a number of countries around the world, this current work is in fact part of a long tradition, with an upsurge of research in linguistics and applied linguistics occurring after World War II. By the late 1940s, applied linguistic research – literally the application of linguistic understandings to various social problems – had emerged (Grabe, 2010). From the 1960s and 1970s through to the present, a great range of research – linguistic, applied linguistic, philosophical, psychological, ethnographic and educational – has been undertaken.

Significant early research turned to children's language development (for example, Bar-Adon and Leopold, 1971; Halliday, 1975). Such research into language development was greatly facilitated by the

invention of cheap recording equipment after the 1970s, making it possible for the phenomenon of casual talk to be studied closely. In fact, talk became an important area of inquiry and many aspects intrigued researchers.

For example, there was the tendency in natural dialogue for people to create frequent overlapping exchanges – not ‘interrupting’ each other, as might be thought, but jointly constructing meanings. Another and related feature was the apparent hesitations and uncertainties as people spoke and rephrased and/or corrected what they said, as they sought to clarify what they meant. Such features, it was recognised, were a natural and important part of dialogic exchanges. Moreover, even apparently casual conversation was seen to be structured, and not random or haphazard as might be thought, for it facilitated both the making of meanings and the construction of relationships. Finally, as researchers turned more closely to the patterns of exchange in classrooms, they became particularly interested in the pedagogic exchanges and, among other things, the apparent tendency for teachers to dominate, while children often offered quite short contributions.

Early classroom analysts (for example, Flanders, 1970) wrote of ‘interaction analysis’, a term that captured early interest in the ways teachers and students related. Flanders, who was not a linguist, was interested in exploring patterns of classroom talk to improve teaching practices. The linguists Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), on the other hand, were not primarily interested in education in their study of classroom talk, but in the nature of human interactions, where classroom talk provided an example (Sinclair and Brazil (1982) later wrote a book exploring some of the implications of this study). Sinclair and Coulthard went on to identify the initiate–response–feedback (IRF) pattern, so called because it involved three steps: a teacher question to initiate the exchange, a response from a student and feedback. For example:



‘What is the capital of Australia?’
 ‘Canberra.’
 ‘Correct.’

Classroom ethnographer Mehan (1979) identified the same pattern, calling it the initiation–response–evaluation (IRE) exchange. As an ethnographer, Mehan’s interests were in more than the language used; they included, for example, the rules and procedures that applied in the classroom, the ways transitions from one task to another were effected, the placement of furniture, the dispositions of classroom participants and the principles that appeared to shape the organisation of school days. As a classroom ethnographer, Mehan’s interests were more akin to those of the contributors to this book, for they all engage with issues of classroom context and its impact on learning.

Reviews of the research since the 1970s, mainly linguistic and/or ethnographic, will be found in Christie (2002, pp. 1–11), Rymes (2016), Hammond (2011), Jocuns (2012) and Rezaie and Lashkarian (2015). Moreover, the most recent edition of the *Encyclopedia of Language and Education* (3rd ed), *Discourse and education* (Wortham, Kim and May, 2016) includes a range of papers examining aspects of classroom talk. Applied linguistic research and educational linguistic research remain important areas of scholarship.

Of the various educational researchers engaged in research into language in schools from a non-linguistic perspective, perhaps the most influential was Barnes (Barnes, Britton, & Rosen, 1971; Barnes & Todd, 1977), who wrote a great deal on patterns of language in student talk and revisited his ideas as recently as 2008. Barnes developed an interest in the values of exploratory and small group talk among children, particularly in secondary schools, and was able to show the value of encouraging such talk as a tool for learning. Mercer, a psychologist, also pursued an interest in the value of children’s talk

for learning (for example, Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Mercer & Hodgkinson, 2008), and he acknowledged a debt to Barnes.

Alexander (2001), who conducted detailed comparative research in several countries in the 1990s, undertook an educational study of a different kind. He sought to identify the pedagogic principles that applied in each society he selected. His observations about the differences in pedagogy and culture across the UK, the USA, India, France and Russia focused in particular on primary schooling, its purposes, its pedagogy, its patterns of language use and its relationship to the culture of the societies involved. Among many observations, Alexander came to propose ‘dialogic teaching’ (2008a) as a desirable mode of teaching and learning.

WHY DIALOGIC TEACHING?

The term ‘dialogic teaching’ was chosen because it stressed the need to draw on the natural affordances and opportunities that dialogue gives children to learn. Above, it was noted that language is learnt in the earliest years of life, and this happens only because of engagement in dialogue. Without dialogue children do not learn language, as a few tragic cases of isolated or deprived children have revealed (for example, see Christie, 2005, pp. 15–16). Preschool learning of language is achieved in dialogue, so that children enter school with a predisposition to engage in dialogue, though they still have much to learn of the language of schooling, as the snapshots in this book demonstrate. Alexander’s term, then, draws attention to the need to draw learners into sustained dialogue in order to learn productively in schools.

Dialogic teaching occurs, so Alexander and others have demonstrated, when students are enabled to engage in meaningful, sustained passages of dialogic exchange, where teachers have a critical role in promoting and guiding talk to learn. Constructive classroom talk, he argues, has many functions: it builds confidence and self-esteem; it promotes healthy relationships; and it can be used pedagogically to scaffold students’ learning, enriching their engagement with new information and ideas.

Among other things, Alexander drew attention to the relationship of speech and writing, and the importance of assisting students to move from the spoken mode towards successful control of literacy. Like Halliday (1985), Alexander has noted the considerable differences between the grammar of speech and writing, and the need for teachers to recognise the differences, facilitating their students’ grasp of reading and writing. Beverly Derewianka explores emergent control of the written mode in [Chapter 2](#). She looks closely at how language changes, depending on three contextual variables: the content or ‘field’; the relationships of the participants or ‘tenor’; and the ‘mode’ of communication, be that spoken or written. Written language draws on all three variables, though it is grammatically different from speech, and it takes some years to master it.

According to Alexander (2008b, p. 28), certain features are essential in dialogic teaching. To quote Alexander, the classroom must be:

- **Collective** – teachers and students address learning tasks together, whether as a group or as a class, rather than in isolation
- **Reciprocal** – teachers and children listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints
- **Supportive** – children articulate their ideas freely, without fear or embarrassment over ‘wrong answers’, and they help each other to reach common understandings
- **Cumulative** – teachers and children build on their own and each other’s ideas, and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and inquiry
- **Purposeful** – teachers plan and facilitate dialogic teaching with particular educational goals in view.

Rose (2016) provides a model of a pedagogy that exemplifies all these features in a teaching–learning cycle. Over a cycle of work, the activities are scaffolded so that children are assisted to each new stage of learning with confidence. At some points, particularly the start of a unit of work, students engage in shared reading and discussion with the teacher; at others, guided by the nature of the task they are given, students move into phases of more independent talking, reading and writing. All this is part of building the registers of pedagogic discourse.

As the talk and activity unfold over sustained periods, the dialogue changes (Christie, 2002), because the students take up new roles in the discourse and enter into new areas of knowledge, which is built cumulatively. Along the way, incidentally, the IRE pattern plays a useful role among other exchanges in the talk. The dialogue, while purposive and goal-directed, is often quite fluid as students shift from speech to written language (either reading or writing), and as they learn the various registers of schooling.

DIALOGIC TEACHING IN A RANGE OF SCHOOL SETTINGS

Turning to the contributions in this book, all the snapshots describe successful instances of dialogic teaching, revealing how children are enabled to engage in productive dialogic exchanges as they learn. The teacher’s role is of fundamental importance, for the teacher shapes and guides directions, while also actively participating in the dialogue. In some cases, the snapshots deal with the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, though the principles that emerge for teaching have value for teaching in all contexts.

For example, Helen Harper, Matt Lotherington and Bronwyn Parkin discuss a unit in an upper primary classroom for Aboriginal students in a remote community, where notions of clocks and 24-hour time-keeping were quite alien. Having pondered his students’ disengagement when teaching the unit (in maths) in a previous year, Matt sought to establish a context for learning by talking about time in a way that was relevant in the community (‘wet and dry seasons’) and worked from that to introduce the somewhat alien notion of time-keeping by using a clock. This was to achieve a kind of abstraction that was unfamiliar to the children, and by choosing his language carefully Matt was able to work with the students in constructive ways. Together they built and shared knowledge of western time, gaining a language relevant to the field such as ‘measuring the time’, ‘clock’ and ‘half past nine’. See [Chapter 7: Carrying the conversation in our heads: dialogue in a remote Aboriginal setting](#).

Anne Thwaite and her teachers, Jayne Gardiner and Kate McCullough, describe a teaching program in Years 4 and 5, in a school whose students spoke several languages, as well as Aboriginal English. Because many of the children found the registers of schooling challenging, Kate introduced strategies to teach the language of learning, for example, how to enter into discussion, to agree or disagree, and to explain or describe phenomena such as deserts. To do this, she introduced a metalanguage for talk, using terms such as ‘building on information’ or ‘restating someone’s ideas’. As these became familiar to the children, so they acquired confidence in entering into pedagogic exchanges. Her colleague Jayne developed similar strategies, preparing the children for turn-taking and for listening respectfully to others as they learnt. Such talk led to talk about writing persuasively to express opinions. In both classes, the object was to use a language of the field of knowledge and a language about language. See [Chapter 6: Talk about language in a diverse urban community](#).

Jennifer Hammond, Kim Cootes, Amanda Hayes and Cindy Valdez-Adams describe some work in the Science and Technology program with English as an additional language (EAL) students in Year 4, which had similar goals in teaching the registers of schooling. Cindy invited the students to behave like scientists and ‘observe’ a scientific phenomenon, while also inviting them to ‘hypothesise’ about their

'experiment'. The discourse that was generated developed control of the vocabulary of the scientific field (for example, 'glass jar', 'conductor', 'heat' and 'polystyrene'). Subsequent activity developed by Cindy and Amanda involved the children in writing recounts of the scientific experiment, showing confidence in making the shift from the spoken to the written mode. See [Chapter 5: Talking to learn and learning to talk: EAL students in the mainstream](#).

Alyson Simpson and Patricia Ryan take up issues of dialogic teaching involved in teaching literature to a Year 6 class. They discuss how Patricia developed her ideas about literature circles to open up opportunities for dialogic exchanges, built around discussion of selected literary texts. Patricia devoted considerable effort in developing principles to guide discussion of literary texts, exploring, for example, characters and their motivations. The extracts they display of classroom talk reveal variety in the ways children collaborated in sharing meanings about the texts. Literature, by its nature, should lend itself to fruitful dialogic exchange. See [Chapter 8: Talking the talk with children's literature](#).

Discussion of literary texts also features in the one-teacher school setting discussed by Pauline Jones and Marianne Powles. Marianne studied transcripts of her class talk and became interested in changing her questioning style in order to enhance the dialogic opportunities for her students. She was concerned about the instances of IRE in her talk and how these often constrained the children's talk. She consciously sought to alter her questions and to engage in more exploratory talk with her students about the literary texts she selected. At one point she physically changed the setting, gathering with the children as a group on the floor so that they could all engage in talk of the book and some of the issues it raised, such as whether it was right to kill animals. They were encouraged to work as a group. She also involved the children in oral rehearsal of their writing, building confidence in understanding some aspects of the written mode. See [Chapter 4: A year of talk in the multi-grade classroom](#).

Imogene Cochrane Bond and Susan Feez report a study in a Year 1 class where Imogene fostered dialogic teaching in talk about language. The object was to develop an understanding of aspects of the grammar of English. Using terms taken from functional grammar (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), she introduced terms such as 'process' to explore the verbal groups in which processes are realised. This was to engage the students in discussion of language at a reasonably abstract level, for it involved turning back on the familiar experience of language use and reflecting on it. The activity led in time to a games-based pedagogy about sentence structure, and the children learnt to use colour-coded cards representing different words in sentences. They needed to place them into intelligible sequences creating 'sentences' with 'processes', 'participants' and 'circumstances'. All this involves important reflection on language and how it works, while it also encourages children to understand the values of such reflection. See [Chapter 3: Dialogue about language and games-based pedagogy](#).

Looking over all the snapshots, I am struck by several matters. The first is that all the instances of class talk and associated work provide evidence of carefully structured and engaging dialogic learning. That is, all the transcripts show children talking, reading or writing in lively purposeful ways. Secondly, all show the children learning the registers of schooling, both in terms of the language of the field of knowledge taught and in the language of the pedagogic behaviour. By the latter, I mean the ways of talking, reading, writing and thinking which children need to acquire to enter successfully into school learning. Language in both senses is marked as explicit and constantly in play as children learn the literacy practices of the various curriculum areas.

Creating dialogic contexts for learning

Beverly Derewianka

It is primarily through talk that learning occurs. In educational settings, different types of talk generate different contexts for learning, and the most common type of classroom talk doesn't necessarily provide the most productive context for learning. Research is demonstrating that learning is enhanced when classroom interaction includes features that are characteristic of dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2017a; Mercer & Howe, 2012):

Table 2.1 Features of typical classroom talk and dialogic talk

FEATURES OF TYPICAL CLASSROOM TALK	FEATURES OF DIALOGIC TEACHING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk dominated by teacher (imparting information, explaining, giving instructions) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater talking space for students (pupil-to-pupil talk; students taking the initiative)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainly closed questions (yes/no, who/what?) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible mix of question types (probing thinking; encouraging analysis and speculation)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on 'correct' answers (recall of information; recitation) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authentic questions that provoke thoughtful responses (clarifications, explanations, justifications)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brief responses (five seconds; two to three words) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Longer exchanges (sustained chaining of considered questions and answers)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid pace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time for reflection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimal uptake 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cumulative, incremental line of thinking making links and connections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Empty' feedback (uninformative; routine praise) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback as cognitive stepping stone
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competitive vying for chance to answer ('hands up'; only certain students called on) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive participation by diverse range of students (attempts to reach consensus; collaborative meaning-making)

All types of interaction can play a role in the classroom. In any lesson, there is space for teachers to ask questions to check understanding, for changes in pace, for explanations and mini-lessons. The opportunities offered by dialogic teaching for higher-order reasoning, however, are often neglected.

In this chapter, we will explore the important role that the classroom context plays in fuelling the kind of talk that promotes active learning and develops student potential.

In terms of dialogic teaching, we need a model of context that can help us identify optimal conditions for learning. Halliday (1993) suggests that there are three key factors in school contexts that impact on the quality of language and learning:

- **Field** – what are the students learning?
- **Tenor** – what relationships and roles are the participants enacting?
- **Mode** – how is language mediating the learning?

The Australian Curriculum: English draws on these factors as a contextual framework, in which language choices are seen to vary according to the topics at hand, the nature and proximity of the relationships between the language users, and the channels or processes of communication available. Together, any particular combination of ‘field’, ‘tenor’ and ‘mode’ of any situation is referred to as the ‘register’.

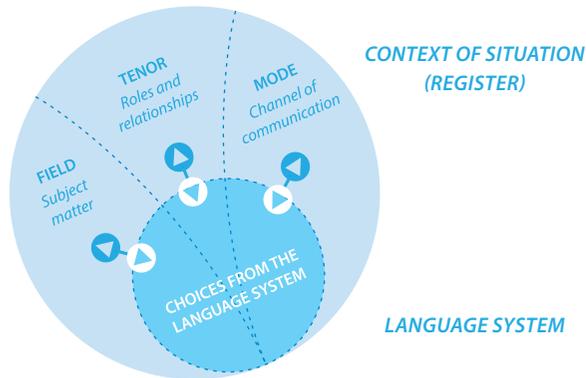


Figure 2.1 Interaction between the context and choices from the language system

Figure 2.1 illustrates how the choices we make from the language system are closely related to the context in which language is being used – the channel of communication, the relationship between participants and the subject matter being developed. These choices are dynamic, responding to the context and in turn creating the context as the interaction unfolds.

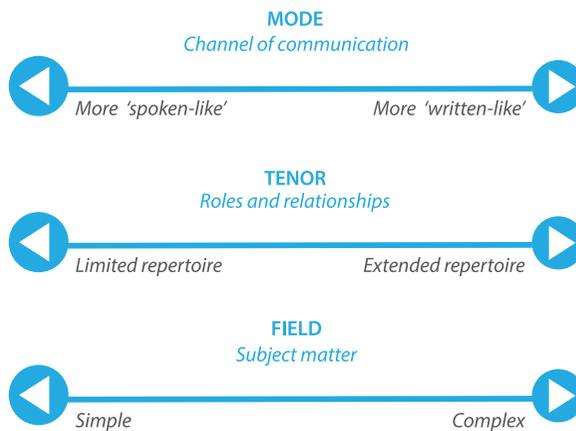
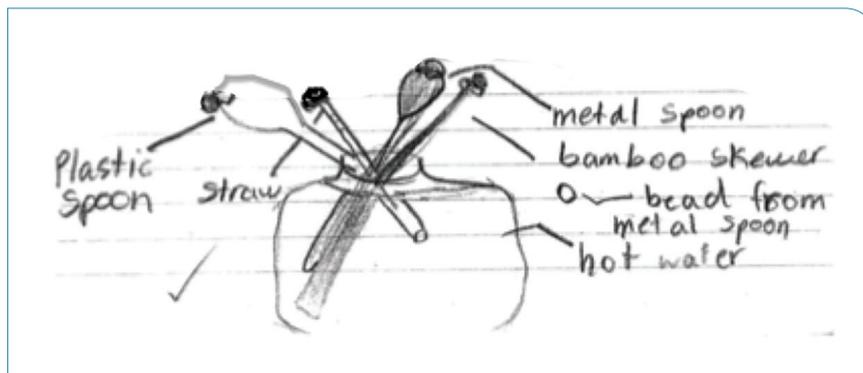


Figure 2.2 The register continuum

At different points along the continuum, the potential for learning changes. Dialogic teaching can facilitate this potential. Transcripts below from Chapter 5 illustrate the movement along the mode continuum as students carry out an experiment on heat conduction.



At the 'most spoken' end of the continuum, the learning is around a hands-on activity, with students engaged face-to-face in a shared context. There is no need to explicitly name things as they can be seen and touched. The language is simply accompanying the action. In fact, if you weren't there, you would not know what the students (S) were talking about.



- | | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| S | Yeah, the ... |
| S | It's melting. |
| S | Which one's going to go first? ... |

Their language is spontaneous, allowing for the free-flowing exchange of embryonic understandings. The learning potential is increased when the students are encouraged by their teacher (T) to speculate, predict and explain as they undertake the task.



- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| T | Let's hypothesise. Which bead on which material would fall off first? ... |
| S | The straw () melt. ... |
| S | No. Cos I can – whoop! (the bead falls off the metal spoon) ... |
| T | Wonder why the bead on the metal spoon fell off first. I wonder why. Mm. |

As students step back from the experiment and reflect on their observations, they can no longer rely on the immediate physical context and need to verbalise their thinking. They still struggle, however, to articulate their ideas and need prompting from the teacher.



- | | |
|---|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| S | Because like the metal, the metal ah the hot water () the metal and like and you can like (heat) the metal and so like, so like ... the bead |
| S | So the bead on () fall off the, on the bottom. |

T	So (E), when you said that you think the heat has been travelled through it, what do we call that?
S	Conductor.
S	Conductor.
T	So, metal spoon ...
S	Is the best conductor.

Here students are being asked to make sense of their experience, using language to recount and explain – an important transitional step away from the hands-on activity and spontaneous talk. While the meanings are being constructed interactively, the discussion is not yet fully dialogic. In a later episode, however, there is evidence of extended dialogue, where a student initiates an exchange, justifies his observation, speculates on alternatives, and challenges the consensus.



S	Miss, I think it would be faster because like because the heat is () out the glass jar so if we put it in a p ...
T	Polystyrene.
S	Polystyrene.
T	Do you think it would melt faster?
S	Yeah because because like the heat is just going to the top.
T	Yesterday, (F), what did we find out, which one was the best conductor of heat==
S	==Glass.
T	which material?
S	But we don't want to==
T	==Glass.
S	Miss, but we don't want to make it hotter um on the outside, we want to make the==

As the students become more confident in their understanding, and with guidance from their teacher, they are able to succinctly explain why glass was chosen as the container. The interaction is focused and goal-oriented, and the participants are able to offer informed, considered contributions. Here the language is starting to take on the characteristics of 'most written-like' language, where extended meanings are expressed coherently as a rehearsal for writing.



T	Why did we use a glass jar?
S	It's because it's the hottest in the ().
T	It's the material that gets the hottest, which means, what else did we find out yesterday? The?
S	The glass is the best conductor because the heat travels through the glass.

At any point along the mode continuum, learning can be enhanced through the deployment of dialogic strategies. It is further elevated when students are made aware of the nature of talk and its value in learning, as in the student’s reflection in **Chapter 8**:



Q	Did you feel that group conversations were deeper and more thoughtful this time?
S1	Our conversations were deeper because we had to take into consideration the ideas of others and add or argue with something they’ve said.

As Mercer, Dawes and Kleine Staarmanc (2009, p. 354) explain, ‘Dialogic teaching involves raising pupils’ awareness of the potential educational power of talk so that they develop a meta-awareness of the use of talk for learning.’

SHIFTING THE TENOR

In addition to the powerful role that the spoken mode plays in learning, we need to remember that learning is a social practice, involving interaction between people.

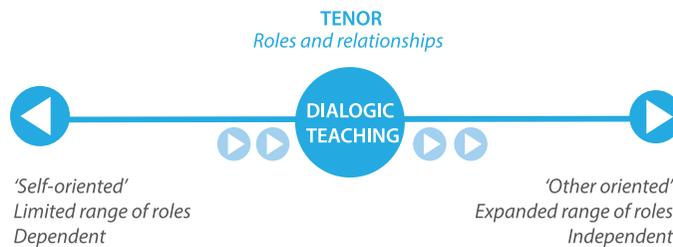


Figure 2.4 The tenor continuum



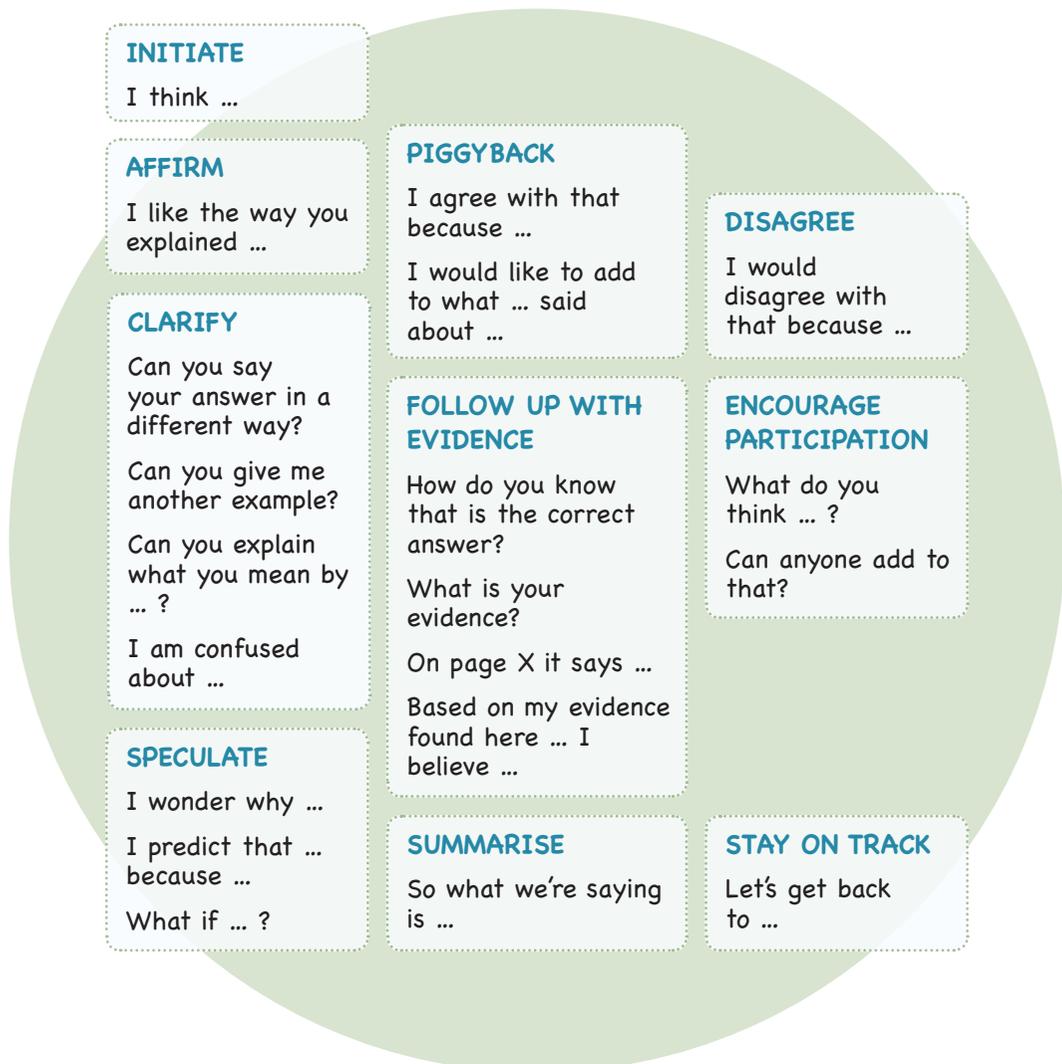
Here we are interested in how interpersonal language resources are used to create relationships and roles that generate stimulating contexts for learning. Again, we could view tenor as a continuum, from contexts where the learners are ‘self-oriented’, taking up a limited range of roles and dependent on the teacher, towards contexts where the learners are ‘other-oriented’, enacting an expanded range of roles and increasingly autonomous. These shifts in tenor can be supported through dialogic teaching practices.

In a dialogic classroom, students are expected to become other-oriented in their relationships. Dialogic teaching works most successfully in the context of a supportive community of learners, where explicit expectations regarding values such as respect, trust and empathy have been negotiated. These expectations are often written up as guidelines and displayed where they can be referenced regularly, as Patricia comments in **Chapter 8**: ‘We have a chart on the wall with expectations of group behaviour.’

Gibbons (2008) suggests that teachers treat students as ‘worthy conversation partners’. This is echoed in [Chapter 8](#) when the authors note that ‘the students in these two classes knew their talk mattered’, and in [Chapter 7](#), when the teacher asks, ‘What was that great word that Brendan used?’ [YR 4 ACELA1488](#)

All too often in school contexts, students adopt the role of passive recipient of knowledge rather than co-constructor of understanding. Dialogic teaching extends the students’ repertoire of roles as they are guided along the tenor continuum. [YR 2 ACELA1461](#)

Dialogic possibilities change as conversation roles change: from partner, to small group, to whole class, to teacher–student. In ‘Accountable Talk’ sessions, students are explicitly taught strategies for effective interaction where they take responsibility for the successful outcome of group talk (Michaels, O’Connor, & Resnick, 2007), as illustrated in some detail in [Chapter 6](#). A range of interaction ‘moves’, along with possible sentence starters, are often provided on laminated sheets for the group to reference, for example:





In some cases, these interaction moves are printed on playing cards and distributed among members of the group, who play their cards during the course of the discussion (Simpson, 2016). Once students are familiar with the different moves, these props can be withdrawn, as Patricia notes in [Chapter 8](#) when she found the roles becoming formulaic. [YR 6 ACELY1709](#)

In [Chapter 4](#), we can see Zoe taking on the role of encouraging participation:

TURN	SPEAKER	TALK
1	Zoe	Okay so it looks like an enchanted forest almost to me because of the mushroom and they sort of look like branches and it's just there are some butterflies there and stuff ...
2	Isabelle	Well I ...
3	Zoe	So what does it look like to you?
4	Isabelle	I think it kind of looks like a city maybe
5	Zoe	A city? Yeah ... /as well
6	Isabelle	a sort of .. like a city that's like in somebody's dreams or something
7	Zoe	Yeah
8	Isabelle	Because it's got all that in the background
9	Zoe	Yeah .. Molly what do you think? (pause) ... Like what do you think of this whole picture?
10	Molly	Well ...
11	Isabelle	What does it look like to you in your eyes?

And in **Chapter 6**, the teacher and students are using metalinguistic terms to refer explicitly to their dialogic strategies:

TURN	SPEAKER	TALK
1	Kate	Anyone to build on the information? Yes, Toby?
2	Toby	(Guns), rocket launchers or tanks, anything that's deadly, are not authorised in Antarctica [gesturing].
3	Kate	Yes. So were you restating someone's idea [gesturing], or were you having, having new information ?
4	Toby	Well, I was, well I was building on the people that just said about the tank. It wasn't just about the tank; it was also about the red sign.

As students move along the tenor continuum, extending their repertoire of roles and engaging in other-oriented relationships, they are developing the resources they need to become more responsible for their own learning and less dependent on the teacher.

BUILDING FIELD KNOWLEDGE

A primary aim of dialogic teaching is to develop students' control over substantial curriculum content. In our rush to get through the topic, we often lose sight of the value of deep, slow, cumulative learning, opting instead for the transmission of information through extended teacher presentations.

The field continuum indicates how dialogic teaching can guide students towards valued educational knowledge and understandings.

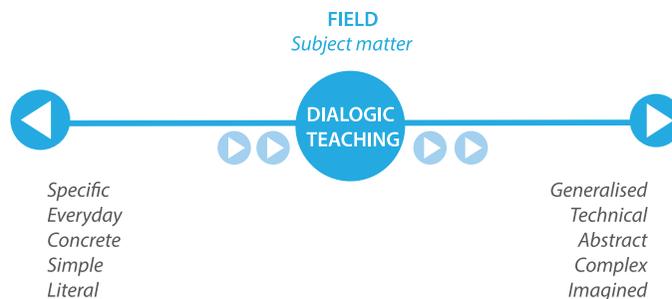


Figure 2.5 The field continuum

Developing field knowledge is more than simply teaching vocabulary items. It involves the purposeful, incremental building up of academic concepts through a dialogic approach, where the teacher orchestrates the interplay between:

- specific instances and generalised understanding
- everyday experience and technical knowledge
- concrete examples and abstract concepts
- simple and complex phenomena
- literal thinking and use of imagination.

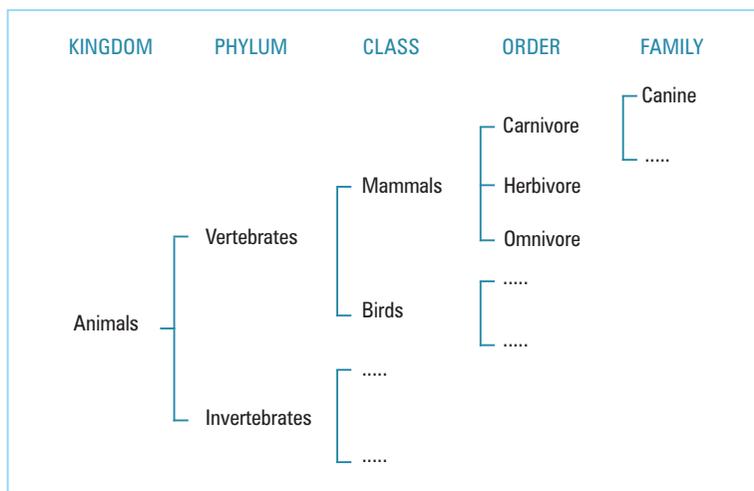
Just as a toddler learns that the family’s pet dog belongs to a category of animals that all have the same characteristics (barks, sharp teeth, furry), so students are guided towards forming generalisations from specific instances. In **Chapter 5**, for example, the students are guided to move from their observations of heating different kinds of spoons to the generalisation that metal is the best conductor of heat.

Along with generalising, students learn technical terms to define concepts: ‘a conductor is a material that allows the free flow of energy from atom to atom.’ In developing students’ understanding of other concepts of time, the teacher in **Chapter 7** constantly moves between students’ familiar, everyday experience – ‘So we know that at the moment it’s wet season. Alright? We know that then, it’s gonna be dry season’ – and the more technical notions of ‘natural time’ experienced through seasons and ‘measured time’ using clocks.

In building academic understandings, dialogic teaching converts concrete examples into abstract concepts. In **Chapter 8**, the students in their literature circle go from a concrete instance where ‘one of the soldiers hit him and blood dripped from their nose’ to an abstract theme that ‘everyone should be able to have an education without getting harassed’.

Beyond developing generalisations, technicality and abstractions, students need to understand how these enter into complex relationships. The category ‘dog’, for example, enters into a taxonomy where it is located within the canine family, which in turn is part of the carnivore order in the class of mammals, and so on (Table 2.1). Developing such knowledge involves an ability to generalise and technicalise, compare and contrast, categorise and taxonomise. Students doing the heat experiment in **Chapter 5** needed to not just observe the different rates of heating, but to explain the relationship between cause and effect in terms of how conductors and insulators work. In their literature circles (**Chapter 8**), students have to deal with intertextual relationships (‘in lots of stories people’s siblings die’) and with the complex relationship between the literal and the metaphorical.

Table 2.1 Building complex field relationships



Dialogic teaching involves students in the co-construction of field knowledge through interactions requiring such abilities as:

- reasoning
- hypothesising
- interpreting
- predicting
- justifying
- interrogating ideas
- evaluating evidence
- considering options
- analysing
- imagining
- explaining.

The dialogic development of field knowledge involves collaborative reasoning and the continual (re) negotiation of meaning (Mercer & Howe, 2012). In [Chapter 3](#), for example, Josh considers whether bicycles are processes or participants, and justifies his conclusion:

TURN	SPEAKER	TALK
1	Josh	Bicycles aren't an action. Bicycles are a <i>who</i> or a <i>what</i> !
2	T	Josh, why did you move 'bicycles' from an action to a <i>who</i> or <i>what</i> ?
3	Josh	Because a bicycle is something – you can't 'do' bicycles!

These abilities are best developed in the context of activities involving an element of contest and choice, such as:

- challenging a controversial statement
- interpreting a thought-provoking image
- seeking the solution to a problem
- responding to a literary text
- engaging in inquiry projects.

The nature of the dialogic talk varies between learning areas and between tasks. Talk in a maths activity varies from talk in a poetry lesson, for example. In some cases, the dialogue aims to establish a clear understanding of a concept. In others, the aim might be to encourage speculation or to express an informed opinion. In relation to Accountable Talk, Michaels, O'Connor and Resnick (2007) argue that the talk should be accountable to the kind of reasoning that is valued in a particular learning area.

CREATING CONTEXTS FOR LEARNING

We have used the notion of register as a way of modelling the features in any context that relate to the language choices being made in that context. Given that it is primarily through language that students learn, it is critical that we create contexts that afford opportunities for literate talk. The register continuum provides us with a way of conceiving how the context changes (and therefore how the language and learning potential changes) as we move from one end of the continuum to the other.

It is the teacher who has the greater role in creating contexts for dialogic learning, and it is the teacher who has a clear sense of ‘where the talk is going and what is required to lead it there’ (Alexander, 2017a).

The register continuum provides a useful tool for teachers to create contexts where dialogic interactions equip students with the linguistic resources to shunt between the ‘more spoken’ and ‘more written’, to extend their repertoire of roles and relationships, and to move from simpler to more complex field knowledge.