PART ONE

The socaility of classroom practice
Conceptualising classroom talk

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.

I say it just
Begins to live
That day.

Emily Dickinson

Introduction

Imagine a classroom completely quiet – not one where everyone is silently working but one where nobody ever talks. How much learning is taking place and how would you know? Of course classrooms are not like this, nor would we wish them to be. However, thinking about a ‘no talk’ classroom focuses attention on just how important talk is in supporting and promoting learning, both by students and teachers. Talk plays a central role in learning; in learning how to think and in talking your way into meaning. As Emily Dickinson suggested some would say that words are transitory while she believed that words have a life beyond their utterance – the sounds may die but the meanings live on.

It is, therefore, the purpose of this chapter to:

1. investigate the different ways that talk has been conceptualised,
2. look at how different researchers have described the role that talk has played in classrooms
3. examine how these ideas about talk have been translated into the pedagogies and practices enacted in classrooms.
Conditions that influence talk

Classroom talk as an unnatural act

The problem with something as universal as talk is that ‘common sense’ beliefs about the nature of talk have come to be accepted and adopted without any basis in evidence about what actually happens in classrooms when teachers and students are, or are not, talking. It is not so long ago when teachers were evaluated by the absence of talk (Booth & Thornley-Hall, 1991) and the quality of the learning taking place was judged by the ‘sounds of silence’. The sounds of silence can indicate that students are productively involved in completing a task set by the teacher but it can also indicate that the system of communication set up by the teacher has shaped the roles of the student learners into passive consumption rather than active engagement. There is also an assumption that productive involvement is best conducted in silence and that talk in and around a task is of no benefit.

Conversely, classroom talk was sometimes viewed as a natural act that occurred spontaneously and, as such, required little thought, planning or rehearsal. In this view classroom talk was seen as more of an informal conversation. (We will explore the difference between talk and conversation in more detail later in this chapter). This concept of talk as being natural is quite removed from the complexities of the classroom where rules for talk need to be established between teachers and students, that encourage cooperation in making meaning through talk (Mercer, 2000) rather than developing a competitiveness to be heard (Lefstein, 2006). In some classrooms students struggle to be heard over other students and have to embark daily on bidding to give answers. Such competitiveness means that talk is not natural.

Classroom talk is difficult and exploratory

Aside from being an unnatural act, talk is far from a smooth or even a continuous process. It often flounders and is convoluted as individuals, either teachers or students, struggle towards meaning having travelled up blind alleys and related personal anecdotes (Iser, 1974; Chambers, 1993). When students engage in this type of cooperative talk in groups (Wells, 1991), then what Booth (1988) called coproduction occurs where students draw out meanings from each other that they would not have arrived at on their own. This type of classroom talk where students explore ideas is, by its very nature, hesitant and incomplete and is what led Barnes (1976) to term it ‘exploratory talk’.

Teaching is an unnatural act: The myth of the born teacher

The unnaturalness of classroom talk is compounded by the unnaturalness of teaching. Quality teaching does not just happen but rather rests on well-thought out pedagogy (Bruner, 1966; Wolfe & Alexander, 2008) that takes note of such things as the diversity of the student population, the complexity of the content being presented, and the prevailing conditions in the classroom, school, community and system. Such a detailed concept of teaching does not allow for the view that there is such a thing as a natural, or born, teacher.
Talk pervades the whole curriculum

Teachers and learners do not engage in classroom talk only in English or literacy lessons. Talk happens across all discipline areas. These two obvious statements belie the fact that an emphasis on the study of talk and teachers teaching about talk most often occur within the discipline of English. Talking is most often thought of as making up those ‘basics’ of education that include reading, writing and listening. Yet it has only been since the latter half of the twentieth century that researchers such as Barnes (1976), Ong (1982), Heath (1983) and Alexander (1984) began to focus attention on the role and centrality of classroom talk.

Conceptualising classroom talk

Early conceptions: Exploratory talk and presentational talk

Barnes (1976, 2008) postulated that talk played a central role in learning by enabling students to increase knowledge and develop understandings about particular topics by talking their way into meaning. In this view talk allowed students to explore meaning and try out new ways of understanding and to modify existing ideas. Barnes termed this type of talk as exploratory and suggested that it was hesitant and incomplete because it involved experimentation with new ideas. Barnes concluded that the value of exploratory talk was that it required the learner to be actively engaged in the learning process.

Figure 1.1
Students engaging in exploratory talk
through deliberate participation. Such active participation depended on learners taking responsibility for their learning by asking questions, making predictions and inferences and generally being thoughtful and critical about their learning. There is, therefore, a relationship between exploratory talk and reflective and critical behaviour on the part of the learner. It is through this critical but constructive engagement that students are able to challenge and counter-challenge thinking and to make reasoning visible in the talk (Kerawalla et al., 2010).

In contrast to exploratory talk Barnes proposed a second function, that of ‘presentational talk’. He suggested that in presentational talk the speaker was focused more on content and audience. In this case the talk was more of a performance where information was shared or presented rather than a context in which meaning was developed. Presentational talk was seen more as a procedural display in response to a question from the teacher where some sort of evaluation would take place and where the emphasis was on providing information in an appropriate manner. Barnes (1976) reported that much of the talk that teachers required of their students was presentational, and while not denying the value of such talk, he concluded that teachers often expected this type of talk too soon in the learning process. In other words, students were often required to engage in display before they had been allowed sufficient time to explore and digest new ideas. These two functions of talk proposed by Barnes highlighted the role that exploratory talk played in the process of learning through talk and the role that presentational talk played in evaluation of student performance. Wells (1991) also attached importance to the exploratory nature of teacher–student and student–student talk in developing what he termed ‘verbally mediated assisted’ performance of joint literacy tasks. He suggested that teachers were commonly so focused on asking comprehension questions about literacy tasks that they inadvertently prevented exploratory talk from developing. He called for a greater emphasis on talk among students and teachers that he termed ‘collaborative talk’.

Features of classrooms that foster talk

Following the ideas of Barnes and Wells, the development of these functions of talk and behaviour required the teacher to develop a pedagogy that allowed students to be responsible for, and actively construct, their own learning (at least for some of the time). It also required establishment of a climate in the classroom where students felt encouraged to talk and where they were not constrained by a fear of making mistakes or being contradicted, but rather involved in making approximations in meanings and developing understandings. Students will engage in talk that is constructive only when they feel at ease to do so, and when they feel that the teacher has given them permission and allowed them the space to talk. In such classrooms teachers take a step backwards so that there is not only teacher talk but also learner talk.

The shift from whole class lessons to group work was seen by many teachers as a way of facilitating collaborative and exploratory talk. However, there were a number of provisos to group work including those suggested by Barnes (2008), in a review of his work. He cautioned against the idealisation of group work by suggesting that it should not be seen as a universal remedy and that not all students do well in group work. He also cautioned that the ability to think aloud and share thoughts was not universal. Earlier Wilkinson (1991) had suggested that achieving cooperative talk or consensus in group situations
Conceptualising classroom talk  

might be developmental in nature with younger students being more absolute in talk situations and older students more tentative and more prepared to listen to alternative opinions. Kahn and Fine (1991) in their study of talk in group situations found that students in Years 1 to 6 differentially judged their classmates according to ‘liked most’ or ‘liked least’ according to the frequency of their talk. Interestingly, in a more recent, very detailed study Cain (2012) also found that individuals (both children and adults) were judged favourably or unfavourably according to how much they talked in group situations. Cain also found that those individuals who spoke less frequently and were judged to be introverts exhibited higher order thinking skills than those of their more talkative, extrovert group members.

What these studies indicate is that teacher pedagogy and classroom climates are features that promote increasing amounts of student talk in everyday classrooms. The introduction of group work aids in this implementation but it is far from a straightforward process and requires careful consideration on the part of the teacher and a thorough knowledge of individual student abilities. As Cazden (2001) suggested, this presents every teacher with the problem of how to allow each student the freedom to talk their way into meaning, while at the same time leading them in the desired direction. The key, according to Barnes (2008, p. 8), is to allow adequate time for student reflection so that they can ‘recollect in tranquillity’. Earlier Wells (1999; 2001) suggested that in order to encourage classroom talk it was necessary for classrooms and schools to become not only more democratic to allow for student participation, but also that students needed to become more responsible for their own learning and work collaboratively with others. In this type of classroom the pedagogy would focus more on co-construction and less on transmission.

Figure 1.2  

Students engaging in collaborative talk
Studying teacher talk in classrooms

The early research about conceptions of classroom talk that we have discussed in the previous section focused on ideas about different types of talk and how these might be played out in whole class and group situations. However much of the research that grew out of this early work concentrated on classroom talk in whole class situations. Overwhelmingly, this research focused on teacher talk or what was sometimes called ‘recitation talk’, where pre-eminence was given to transmission of knowledge by the teacher followed by some sort of evaluation or assessment. Wells (2001) referred to this type of teacher talk as ‘monologic’ where the teacher acted as the giver of knowledge and the student as the passive receiver. This monologic talk took the form of a monologue by the teacher where the talk was instigated by the teacher and was therefore one directional – that is from teacher to student and was typically controlled by questioning by the teacher. A great deal of research into teacher talk was carried out by studying this type of interaction and led to what Wells termed a ‘genre of classroom discourse’. In the literature on classroom discourse this has become known as IRE sequencing (Initiation by the teacher in the form of a question – Response or answer by the student – Evaluative comment by the teacher) or IRF sequencing (Initiation – Response – Follow-up). IRE/IRF was found to be the most common type of teacher talk in many classrooms in many countries and led Cazden (1988) to refer to the IRE/IRF sequence as the default option because she found that teachers always returned to it. For the purposes of our discussions here we will use the term IRE. The research into teacher talk carried out by Wells (1999) and Mercer (1995) in the UK, Harste (1993) and Nystrand (1997) in the US and Baker and Freebody (1989a), Anstey (1993b) and Edwards-Groves (1998) in Australia, found the IRE pattern of teacher talk to be common in English/literacy lessons. In more recent work Resnick et al., (2010) and Alexander (2001a) found a similar reliance on the IRE sequence by many teachers. The Resnick study was of particular interest in that it involved studying teacher talk in science and mathematics lessons where IRE sequences were found to be as common as in English lessons (see also Solomon, 2008 and Mortimer & Scott, 2003). In the Alexander study, sometimes referred to as the ‘five nations study’, teacher talk was studied in five countries (UK, France, India, Russia, US) and the same reliance on the IRE sequence was found, particularly in the UK and US and to a lesser extent in France and Russia (a point we will return to later in this chapter). The common thread in all these studies was that the teacher was mediating students’ learning with little opportunity for student-initiated talk and that teacher talk was dominated by questioning. Both Wells and Alexander found this to be a ‘depressing state of affairs’ perhaps made even more so by a recent study by Smith et al., (2004, p. 408) that found that only 10 per cent of teacher questions were open with the average student response lasting five seconds and limited to three words or fewer in 70 per cent of answers.

It would seem that the IRE sequence in teacher talk is a universal pattern that crosses disciplines and is common in both English-speaking and non-English-speaking countries. Just why IREs are so common in classrooms is a matter of opinion and it may be that it represents a pedagogy based on the idea that that is the way teaching has always been conducted or it may be, as Cazden (1988) has suggested, that it is the default option that teachers always return to in times of stress. Cazden’s ideas may have some traction
since recently Moyles et al., (2003), Smith et al., (2004) and Wolf and Alexander (2008) have all postulated that the ‘standards drive’ in many countries has reinforced the more traditional patterns of teacher talk represented by IRE sequences, or at least encouraged teachers to abandon more interactive patterns of talk. Whatever the case, there is a considerable amount of research confirming the ubiquitous nature of IRE sequences. There is general agreement among the researchers that these IREs can encourage monologic teacher talk that severely limits student or learner talk, that in turn affects the amount and quality of learning by students. Also Nuthall (2005) has suggested that in classrooms where IREs predominate there is clear tendency for the students with the loudest voices to be heard and valued highly (particularly by other students) and where the teacher depends on the responses from a small number of key students. In a later study Nuthall (2007) concluded that continual responses to IRE sequences led students through their competitive bidding to supply answers to believe that learning was about being seen to be right rather than a collaborative process. However, this is not to suggest that IREs should be abandoned in favour of some other type of teacher talk. The major concern here is classrooms where the IRE sequence is the only one being used by the teacher. While it is the case that IREs limit students’ learning in particular ways (such as talking their way into understanding), there is nevertheless a place for them in certain lessons such as leading a class through a complex series of ideas (see Wells, 1993; Cazden, 2001; Alexander, 2004a).

Teacher expectations about the talk that students bring to school

Just as the patterns of teacher talk have the potential to impinge upon student learning, so do the beliefs that teachers hold and judgements that they make about the patterns of student talk. There is a long history of research that has explored the language that students bring to school, and linked the differences in students’ talk patterns to social class membership, categories of family talk and habitual child rearing practices. Most of this research emanated from the work of Bernstein (1971; 1973; 1975; 1990). Bernstein’s theory gained wide acceptance from the 1960s onwards although his ideas were highly contested by a number of researchers in the UK and particularly in the US. His original position (summarised below) was that:

- children came from different social classes (working class and middle class)
- members of working class families derived power in their family by virtue of their position in the family (father, mother, child) – termed ‘a positional oriented family’
- members of middle class families derived power in their family by virtue of personal competence (they had a particular talent) – termed ‘a personal oriented family’
- these different types of families, because of the roles and relationships within them, developed particular ways of talking
- positional oriented families used a particular way of talking (a code) that Bernstein called a restricted code
- personal oriented families used a particular way of talking (a code) that Bernstein called an elaborate code
the two codes were different in terms of how they used grammar, conjunctions, clauses, sequencing of ideas, use of pronouns, adjectives and adverbs, and use of repetitive phrases.

Bernstein’s theory about the ecologies of talk gained wide acceptance in educational circles and led some teachers to accept the proposition that children from working class families were deficient in their talk because of the families that they came from and their use of the restricted code. Conversely children from middle class families were advantaged because of their family type and their use of the elaborate code. These ideas led to the development of what became known as the ‘deficiency hypothesis’ although this was not a term introduced by Bernstein. The power of this hypothesis was that it transferred the responsibility of poor performance from the school (and teachers) to the family. Students were judged to perform poorly because of the families they came from and the code that they spoke. Student performance could then be explained through family background and child rearing practices and not through the presence, or absence, of particular pedagogies at school. The effect of the deficiency hypothesis was to ‘blame’ the parent not the teacher and to make a clear case for the relationship between social class, family type, student talk and performance.

Bernstein’s theories about talk were seen as controversial and were challenged by many including two researchers in the US, William Labov and Courtney Cazden. Labov (1966; 1969) carried out a detailed study of the talk patterns of African American students in New York and concluded that rather then being a case of an ecology of talk that proposed restricted and elaborate codes, the differences could be better explained by the concept of standard and non-standard English. This position became known as the ‘difference hypothesis’ and interpreted the difference between the two types of talk as a difference of dialect. Labov suggested that the non-standard dialect that his subjects spoke was a different form of English that was as elaborate as the standard form and should not be seen as some sort of penalty that resulted in poor performance.

Cazden (1967; 1970; 1972) also disagreed with Bernstein’s hypothesis but at the same time concluded that Labov’s explanation did not go far enough. She proposed that working and middle class children had access to both restricted and elaborate codes (or non-standard and standard dialects in Labov’s terms) but working class students lacked the sophistication to judge when it was appropriate to use either form whereas middle class students were capable of making these distinctions. She suggested therefore that middle class students were ‘communicatively competent’ because they were able to distinguish between less formal contexts (like the home and the playground) where less elaborate and non-standard forms of talk were appropriate and more formal contexts (like the classroom or some workplace situations) where more elaborate and standard forms of talk were expected.

Both Labov’s and Cazden’s explanations were more culturally appropriate in that they did not make pronouncements about student performance based on class or family membership. However neither Cazden’s or Labov’s ideas gained the same universality of acceptance in schools and classrooms as those of Bernstein. Almost four decades after the publication of Bernstein’s original article on social class and codes (1964), researchers were still finding clear evidence of teacher beliefs about the underlying premises of Bernstein’s theory. Freebody and Ludwig (1998) studied student talk in home and school by investigating the literacy practices of low socioeconomic, urban communities. Their main findings suggested that schools persistently categorised
student achievement in terms of social class. Parents from ‘disadvantaged’ homes were viewed as non-supportive and there was a general pattern of attributing the cause of poor performance in literacy to families rather than to the practices and pedagogy of the school.

Bernstein (1990) made many revisions, modifications and additions to further explicate his research in an attempt to answer his critics. Whether these attempts were successful or not is a moot point because many of his original ideas were adopted and are still evident in some contemporary classrooms and schools. The result of these beliefs is that in some classrooms, student talk is still being judged on the basis of doubtful assumptions – certain patterns of student talk are assumed to be the cause of poor literacy performance and teacher talk is not being varied in terms of practice or pedagogy.

The reconceptualisation of classroom talk

The two previous sections of this chapter that deal with investigating IREs and the prevalence of Bernstein’s perspectives give a somewhat negative view of what is taking place in classrooms today. Many classrooms are approaching both teacher and student talk from new perspectives based on contemporary research and reconceptions of the nature of talk and how it influences student learning and teacher pedagogy. There has been a substantial amount of research about talk and as Alexander (in Scott, 2009, p. 6) has suggested there are significant reasons why talk should play a central and fundamental role in learning. He suggested that there were five areas of research that have provided evidence that supports the importance of talk and have implications for teacher practice. A summary of these areas of research, adapted from Scott, is presented in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Areas of research that are significant in developing talk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of research</th>
<th>Evidence provided</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neurological</td>
<td>In the early years talk functions to assist in brain development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Talk plays a central role in the development of thinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio/cultural</td>
<td>Talk assists in the development of relationships and views of the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Democracies are based on citizens talking rather than just listening and discussing rather than just complying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicative</td>
<td>Talk is central to the development of skills that support meaning making.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This reconceptualising of talk necessitates a re-thinking, not only of the nature of talk, but also the roles that talk plays in classrooms. In the last fifty years this shift in the way researchers have conceptualised talk and investigated it in classrooms can best be described as a shift from monologic talk to dialogic talk.
Dialogic talk

As we have previously discussed monologic talk (see Wells, 2001), so called because it resembled a monologue by the teacher, where talk was teacher-instigated usually through a pattern of questioning, resulted in the teacher being seen as the fount of knowledge and the student being a passive receiver. In contrast, dialogic talk was defined as an approach where both teachers and students made substantial and significant contributions to classroom talk and to learning in general. The emerging conceptions of dialogic talk are enacted when:

- teachers and students share a joint inquiry where understandings are achieved through discussion and collaboration (Bruner, 1996)
- dialogue is mediated through open-ended and exploratory classroom activity (Wells, 1999)
- communication in the classroom is reciprocal between teachers and students and between student and student and involves exchanges of ideas (Mercer, 2000)
- talk is not only reciprocal but also collective (in group and whole class), cumulative (chaining of questions, answers and ideas) and supportive (Alexander, 2008a).

Dialogic talk encourages students to take on particular behaviours and roles and is more likely to occur when students:

- share a common purpose
- allow each other to talk
- value each other’s talk
- ask questions as well as answering them
- reflect on their own and others’ talk
- tolerate uncertainty and tentativeness
- explore and accept differences of opinion and points of view,
- give evidence to support ideas (Myhill, 2005; Myhill et al., 2006).

As the term suggests, dialogic talk attempts to engage students and teachers in a genuine dialogue in order to engage in the process of inquiry. It aims to promote critical thinking and encourage higher order thinking skills. As Alexander (2005a) suggested it is quite distinct from the question and answer routines that are a feature of the IRE sequence-based interactions that are commonly found in classrooms, where there is a preponderance of teacher talk and little learner talk. In classrooms where the teacher is concerned with dialogic talk, there is a real attempt to create authentic teacher–student exchanges through the exploration of ideas and the use of exploratory and collaborative talk.

Conversation and dialogic talk

As researchers began to analyse classroom discourse, a distinction between conversation and dialogic talk arose, necessitated by a commonly held belief that the two terms were synonymous. Alexander (2005a, p. 8) suggested that conversation was a more informal type of discourse where the direction and endpoint of the talk is largely unclear whereas in dialogic talk the teacher normally had a clear view of the purpose and direction of the talk. Further he suggested that conversation often consisted of a sequence of unrelated two-part exchanges where participants talked at, rather than to, one another. Conversely dialogic talk was seen to set out explicitly to seek attention and
engagement and was therefore much more likely to contain meaningful sequences than conversation. As Wolfe and Alexander (2008) suggest conversation tends to be relaxed whereas dialogic talk is more purposeful and coherent. It is this form of coherent utterance that forms the basis of research into dialogic talk.

This concept of dialogic talk owes much of its derivation to Bakhtin (1981; 1986) who suggested that in talk, each utterance was part of a sequence of talk that was all interrelated. He further suggested that such sequences were taken or learnt from other speakers. This view of talk is very similar to the concept of intertextuality where each text draws on meanings taken from other similar texts. Engaging in talk and drawing intertextual references are therefore joint activities that build on the contributions of others (or other texts). Talk in Bakhtin’s (1986, p. 92) view is ‘filled with dialogic overtones’ and can therefore be seen as collaborative and involves knowledge building through the co-construction of meaning. In this view each item of talk is a synthesis and reflection of the talk of others.

### Dialogic talk and ‘vacating the floor’

If talk is to be truly dialogic then student talk has to be appreciated as equally important as teacher talk by both teachers and students. If this position is to be adopted in a classroom then the teacher has to be very conscious of the use of IRE sequences. IRE sequences allow no space for student talk that is generated by the students themselves because they are too focused on answering of teacher questions (as is the teacher). **Dialogic talk requires the teacher to take a step back and provide opportunities for students to instigate talk in a classroom environment where they feel comfortable to do so. In the research on classroom talk this has been termed ‘vacating the floor’** (Bridges, 1988; Cazden, 1988; Perrott, 1988). Vacating the floor has come to be seen as one of the most significant factors in encouraging students to engage in exploratory talk and to take on some responsibility for shaping meaning through talk. In a contemporary study of the patterns of classroom talk, Godinho and Shrimpton (2003), concluded that vacating the floor created spaces for student dialogue and shared ownership of the talk where shared meaning making could take place between teachers and students. Further Godinho and Shrimpton (2003, p. 38) stated that such a move authorised students to become more analytical while still allowed teachers to be facilitators and mediators of meaning through talk and promoted a ‘collaborative inquiry approach’ to develop. Later in the study Godinho and Shrimpton reported that in classrooms where teachers had not vacated the floor students struggled to recall important points in discussions and that many teachers found this move difficult. Finally they identified in their study, three factors upon which classroom talk is dependent that might go some way to supporting teachers in a move towards vacating the floor:

- familiarisation of what constitutes a discussion by both teacher and student
- introduction by the teacher of strategies that encourage dialogic talk
- development of a pedagogy built upon a collaborative inquiry approach.

Teacher knowledge about what constitutes dialogic talk can be instrumental in supporting them to take the step towards vacating the floor. Mercer (2000) suggested that general agreement about the rules for talk was useful in creating a classroom environment where students could focus more on collaboration and acclimatising to having a voice of their own and less on competitive bidding for teacher attention. Mercer (2000, p. 98) also identified three types of talk that occurred in discussions:
Classroom talk: Understanding dialogue, pedagogy and practice

• ‘disputational talk’ that is competitive and is characterised by unwillingness to accept alternative points of view
• ‘cumulative talk’ that builds on others’ talk
• ‘exploratory talk’ that allows students to explore new ideas.

Obviously the more a teacher knows about how talk is conducted and what is involved in discussions, the more likely they are to be willing and confident to vacate the floor.

Advantages of dialogic talk

Alexander (2005b, p. 15) reported a number of positive outcomes from his work on talk in the UK that was a reflection of his earlier conclusions in his five nations study (2001). Among these outcomes was evidence that suggested a focus on dialogic talk led to:

• more talk about talk by both teachers and students
• a discernible shift away from hands-up competitive bidding towards more in-depth discussion
• teachers giving more thinking time to students to answer questions
• a replacement of IREs with questioning sequences that contained more open questions,
• a greater involvement of less able students and the quiet students due to the more inclusive climate of their classrooms
• An increase, due to a greater emphasis on talk, in the reading and writing abilities of all students, especially the less able.

Alexander also reported an increasing use of videotaping of lessons by teachers in order to study their talk with some teachers using the videos to include students in analysis of classroom talk. Of particular interest were Alexander’s findings that students were increasingly commenting on the dynamics of the classroom such as taking turns, engaging with others, appreciating alternative points of view and use of eye contact. This latter dynamic suggested that students were moving away from a reliance on the analysis of talk to an analysis of one of the codes of the gestural-semiotic system. There was no reporting of students engaging with the spatial or audio-semiotic systems or the other codes of the gestural-semiotic system. (For a fuller discussion of the semiotic systems and their place in the analysis of classroom interaction see Chapter 2.)

Wolfe and Alexander (2008) and Mercer and Littleton (2007) all reported that when students were involved in dialogue and discussion, they were more likely to engage in critical discussion, learn more effectively and raise the levels of their intellectual achievement. Similar advantages were advanced by Scott (2009) who cited a study by Game and Metcalfe (2009) that concluded that dialogic talk enabled students to engage in levels of thinking that they were not capable of on their own while still recognising that such thoughts were developments of their own thinking. Scott suggested that these types of collaboration could occur in interactions at whole class, group or one-on-one situations. Alexander (2005b) in discussing his five nations research concluded that students did not have to be directly involved in such interactions in order to benefit but rather just watching other students engage in dialogue was sufficient. An interesting contemporaneous development to this research was reported by Wolfe and Alexander (2008) who cited studies (e.g. Ravenscroft & McAlister, 2008 and Ravenscroft & Cook, 2007) that highlighted the potential of digital technologies to produce a series of
forums that were more personalised and informal, where interactions might take place. Such examples are internet networks that allow students to interact in forums (or what could be called communities of learners or communities of inquiry) where they can engage in dialogue.

There seems little doubt that the benefits of engaging in dialogic talk are many and varied and that there are advantages to be gained for both teachers and students. While the case for dialogic talk has been made the question now remains of how dialogic talk might be introduced into classrooms. The question of how leads to a consideration of the pedagogy of dialogic talk.

The pedagogy of dialogic talk

One of the most significant recommendations that came out of the research into dialogic talk was to decrease the amount of teacher talk and thereby allowing an increase in student talk. As we have already pointed out this did not mean an increase in conversational or colloquial forms of talk but rather the introduction of more formal styles of talk. Many of the researchers also pointed out this did not imply a laissez faire approach to pedagogy where students were left to themselves but a carefully crafted and guided approach to learning. The implication of ‘vacating the floor’ was not that the teacher would stop talking but that there should be a balance between teacher talk and learner talk. Alexander and many others concluded the teacher was still a vital component in dialogic teaching. Alexander (2005a, p. 1) described this type of pedagogy as an emerging pedagogy that exploited the ‘power of talk to shape children’s thinking’. He went on to suggest that pedagogy was best defined as the act of teaching together with the accompanying values, ideas and histories that shape it. We would suggest that the type of pedagogy that was being described by Alexander (and later by Wolfe & Alexander, 2008) could best be represented as a negotiated co-construction between teacher and student that rested on a joint responsibility for learning. Wolfe and Alexander (2008, p. 6) suggested that dialogic pedagogies were ‘… premised on the ability of students and teachers to establish reciprocal relationships through language’.

In order to further develop the idea of a dialogic pedagogy, Alexander (2005b, pp. 12–13) proposed three repertoires of approaches from which a teacher might select the appropriate one given the considerations of the learner, content and context. He suggested that an organisational repertoire would be concerned with how to group students ranging from whole class to individual interactions between the teacher and a single student. His second repertoire, teaching talk was concerned with different types of talk such as rote, recitation, instruction or exposition, discussion and dialogue. He was quick to point out that this did not mean that whole class teaching would be dominated by rote or that group work implied only discussion. His final repertoire learning talk described the different abilities that students required to operate within a dialogic pedagogy such as the ability to narrate, explain, speculate, discuss or negotiate. (These three repertoires are discussed in more detail in Chapters 2 and 5.) On the basis of these three repertoires Alexander suggested that if pedagogy was to be dialogic rather than transmissive it needed to adhere to principles that meet certain criteria. In Table 1.2 we have presented the five criteria that should be met in order to successfully engage in a dialogic pedagogy adapted from Alexander (2005b, p. 40).
Table 1.2: Criteria for a dialogic pedagogy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collective</td>
<td>Teachers and students engage in learning tasks together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocal</td>
<td>Teachers and students listen to one another and consider alternative points of view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>Students work cooperatively and express ideas freely without fear of giving ‘wrong’ answers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purposeful</td>
<td>Teachers plan for classroom talk that has a purpose by having specific goals in mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumulative</td>
<td>Teachers and students build on their own and each other’s ideas in meaningful and coherent sequences of talk and thinking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These criteria grew out of Alexander’s research in the UK and in the ‘five nations’ study of 2001, where they were enunciated into some 61 indicators. He continued that any pedagogy that a teacher might employ would depend on what he termed pedagogical values or what the individual teacher believed was the purpose of education and might include beliefs such as teaching as transmission, facilitation or negotiation. The utility of these criteria, indicators and values is that they attempt to specify clearly what a pedagogy of dialogic teaching might look like. Wolfe and Alexander defined such a pedagogy, at what they termed the micro level, by specifying particular teacher practices and strategies that would support a dialogic pedagogy. In Table 1.3 we have summarised these strategies and practices adapted from Wolfe and Alexander (2008, pp. 10–11).

Table 1.3: Teacher strategies and practices that support dialogic pedagogy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher strategies</th>
<th>Teacher practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Asking authentic questions</td>
<td>• Structuring learning to facilitate student learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Asking authentic questions</td>
<td>• Developing a sound knowledge of curriculum content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Using further questions to explore students’ meanings</td>
<td>• Asking a range of different types of questions to encourage a range of responses from divergent thinking to simple answers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Employing pauses to allow students think time and to answer fully</td>
<td>• Encouraging learner talk and extended utterances through probing and extending student responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Create a classroom environment that encourages tentativeness</td>
<td>• Offering constructive and formative feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Using a sequence of connected questions to follow the ideas of a particular student</td>
<td>• Using a range of multimodal texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Accepting responses without evaluating them</td>
<td>• Initiating and encouraging dialogue by vacating the floor and allowing students’ speaking rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Building on students’ interests</td>
<td>• Expecting students to listen to the contributions of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Expecting students to ask questions and make statements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The idea of linking a pedagogy of dialogic talk with strategies, and particularly with practices, is especially useful because it focuses attention on both learner and teacher.
Such an approach resonates with the concept of dialogic talk because of the emphasis on both teacher talk and learner talk. Much of the research into dialogic talk has addressed the question of implementing a pedagogy that supports both the teacher and learner role in the learning process. The work of Wells (2001), Alexander (2004; 2005) and Barnes (2008) has addressed this question and collectively they have suggested that the constructionist view of learning was the most appropriate. The basic tenets of constructionism revolve around the following ideas about learning:

- meaning cannot simply be taught but must also be learnt
- learning involves students in an active process rather than passive reception of ideas
- content is learnt most successfully when students are sometimes involved in uncovering ideas instead of always responding to teacher-led coverage
- students need to learn knowledge and skills but they also need to learn to critically question
- learning involves actively constructing new ways of understanding in order to construct a personal view of the world
- working on understanding involves relating new understandings with existing ones by incorporating students’ interests
- constructing new understandings takes place most effectively when students are not afraid to be tentative and prepared to make mistakes
- while constructionism can be described as learner-centred it still requires explicit instruction by the teacher and therefore is also teacher-centred.

Constructionism is so termed because an important component of this view of learning is that students are required to be involved in structuring their own learning. However, it would be a mistake to interpret this view as an invitation for teachers to take such a step backwards or to no longer see a role for themselves in teaching. Constructionism (also called: learning by discovery, inquiry learning, learning by doing or problem-based learning) is based on, among other things, the concept of differentiated learning where a balance is struck between teacher-centred and student-centred pedagogy. Nevertheless it is much more concerned with allowing students to play a role in their own learning. It is this feature that makes it an appropriate pedagogy for dialogic teaching where the concern for student talk, as well as teacher talk, is paramount. Wiggins and McTighe have taken this focus on strategies and practices and related it to the constructivist approach but also concluded that there was a place for direct instruction while still allotting importance to explicit teaching. These ideas are presented in Table 1.4 taken from Wiggins and McTighe, 2005, p. 241. Table 1.4 illustrates the fact that a dialogic pedagogy should include a focus on strategies and practices, that is, there is still an important role for the teacher in the learning process. The concept of vacating the floor does not mean that the teacher stops teaching but rather that the teacher allows space for students to play an important part in their own learning. The table also reinforces the value of explicit pedagogy when it is appropriate. The type of approach being recommended here is an inclusive one rather than the ‘either/or’ position that takes the view that if an approach is teacher-centred then it cannot (or should not) be learner-centred. We believe that the balanced approach is particularly suited to a dialogic pedagogy.

Wells (2001, p. 18) has taken this idea of the centrality of teacher talk and learner talk and related it to the talk of individual students and to the talk of others. He suggested the concept of a community of learners where each individual profits from participating in community activities and practices and where each member benefits from the learning and experiences of others. He further suggests that such a community of learners profit from an inquiry-oriented model of learning where these benefits could...
accumulate and where collaborative talk occupied a central position. Wells’ model is presented in Figure 1.1 and illustrates how talk supports the growth of reflection and understanding in a constructivist model of learning.

Table 1.4: Teacher and student roles in the constructivist approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What the teacher uses</th>
<th>What the students need to do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Didactic or direct instruction</strong></td>
<td><strong>Receive, take in, respond</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• demonstration or modelling</td>
<td>• observe, attempt, practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• lecture</td>
<td>• listen, watch, take notes, question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• questions (convergent)</td>
<td>• answer, give responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facilitative or Constructivist methods</strong></td>
<td><strong>Construct, examine, and extend meaning</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• concept attainment</td>
<td>• compare, induce, define, generalise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• cooperative learning</td>
<td>• collaborate, support others, teach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• discussion</td>
<td>• listen, question, consider, explain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• experimental inquiry</td>
<td>• hypothesise, gather data, analyse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• graphic representation</td>
<td>• visualise, connect, map relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• guided inquiry</td>
<td>• question, research, conclude, support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• problem-based learning</td>
<td>• pose or define problems, solve, evaluate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• questions (open-ended)</td>
<td>• answer, explain, reflect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• reciprocal teaching</td>
<td>• clarify, question, predict, teach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• simulation (e.g. mock trial)</td>
<td>• examine, consider, challenge, debate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Socratic teaching</td>
<td>• consider, explain, challenge, justify</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• writing process</td>
<td>• brainstorm, organise, draft, revise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coaching</strong></td>
<td><strong>Refine skills, deepen understandings</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• feedback and coaching</td>
<td>• listen, consider, practice, retry, refine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• guided practice</td>
<td>• revise, reflect, refine, recycle through</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1.1
Wells’ constructivist model for a community of learners (2001)
The value of the approach suggested by Wells (2001; 2006) is that it enables strategies that can be used by teachers to engage students in learning through dialogic talk in a collaborative inquiry environment. This approach has been supported by research such as that carried out by a growing body of researchers including Alexander (2005) and Mercer (2000) in the UK, Cazden (2001) and Bloome et al., (2005) in the US and in Australia by Godinho and Shrimpton (2003).

One of the common themes in much of the research around the pedagogies of dialogic talk has been an emphasis on practice. This is a very useful focus because it identifies for teachers those practices that are associated with the particular approach to dialogic pedagogy that is recommended by contemporary researchers in dialogic talk. Recently some in-depth research has been carried out about the role of teacher practice by exploring the concept of practice architectures.

**Teacher practice and practice architectures**

The concept of practice architectures has been the subject of study by researchers in Australia, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands (Edwards-Groves, 2008; Kemmis, Edwards-Groves, Wilkinson & Hardy, 2012; Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008; Kemmis & Heikkinen, 2011; Kemmis & Smith, 2008). This theory suggests that the practices of teachers are held in place by practice architectures that relate to the language of a particular educational site, the learning and activity that take place in particular arrangements of space and time, and the relationships of social space that exist in a particular context. The language, or ‘sayings’, represents the shared language that is related to particular practices at an educational site such as a school or classroom. The arrangements of space and time, or the ‘doings’ represent locations where teachers and students can be involved in practices through interacting with one another. The roles and power relationships that teachers and students adopt in particular social settings, or ‘relatings’, both presuppose and shape social spaces that occur in particular schools or classrooms.

Practice architectures, the sayings, doings and relatings, are characteristic arrangements associated with practices of different kinds. In this way the theory of practice architectures explains how practices are formed or modified in different educational sites in response to particular contexts, relationships or circumstances. This might be translated at a particular school by rearranging teaching spaces to promote an increase in student talk during an inquiry-based approach to learning that transformed the relationships between student and teacher and amongst a group of teachers. That is, a change in sayings and doings can produce a change in relatings. These architectures of practice are summarised in Table 1.5.

These practice architectures are constructed or designed by teachers and students within a school or classroom setting where teaching and learning are taking place. It is tempting to assume that these dimensions of practice, enacted by teachers and students, are affected by factors limited to school-based considerations such as the classroom program or the resources available in the school. However, there are other factors that come in to play from outside the school that contribute to how practice architectures, and the practices which are formed in classroom sites, are established. Curriculum
documents, for example, are developed by educational planners and policy makers that produce pressure for change at the systemic level that may even reach down to the way that individual units of work are designed and implemented. Professional learning opportunities available to particular teachers in particular districts also have the potential to shape the practices which enter particular classrooms. There also may be traditions that are passed down historically through a particular educational system that impinge upon practices that require teachers and students to look beyond the school.

Irrespective of these arrangements or design factors, the concept of practice architectures is a particularly useful one that informs and supports the construction and maintenance of practices within the school. We explore this concept more thoroughly in Chapters 2 and 7. However at this point it is worthwhile to conclude that the features of practice architectures allow for the effective development of dialogic talk and pedagogy by focusing attention on the design features of practices.

In order to revisit our ideas about how notions of talk have changed over time we have summarised our discussions about the reconceptualisation of talk in Table 1.6. The table also illustrates how concepts of talk have developed from earlier ideas of exploratory talk to more contemporary views of dialogic talk.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Talk</th>
<th>Origin/purpose</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Facilitating condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory talk</td>
<td>• exploration of ideas</td>
<td>• talk is distributed as everyone’s ideas are accepted</td>
<td>• teacher needs to create space for student talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Sometimes referred to as cooperative or collaborative talk)</td>
<td>• engage in critical analysis of ideas making reasoning visible</td>
<td>• everyone listens to and responds to each other’s talk</td>
<td>in order to encourage active learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• experimentation of ideas</td>
<td>• teacher facilitates students’ exploration but in terms of moving talk forward</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• often hesitant and incomplete</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.5: Sayings, doings and relatings realised through practice architectures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice architectures are:</th>
<th>Represented through:</th>
<th>Realised through:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• communicated through sayings</td>
<td>• forms of understandings and self-understandings</td>
<td>• language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• produced through doings</td>
<td>• skills and capacities</td>
<td>• space and time, activities and work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• connected socially through relatings</td>
<td>• relating to one another and the world through values and emotions</td>
<td>• relationships in social connections through the medium of power and solidarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Talk</td>
<td>Origin/purpose</td>
<td>Advantages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Presentation talk** | • talk focused on performance  
• procedural display by student following questions from the teacher  
• evaluation of talk takes place | • focuses students’ attention on content and audience  
• emphasis on providing or sharing information | • Students need time to digest and explore new ideas before presenting           |
| **Monologic talk** (sometimes referred to as recitation)  
IRE (initiation-response-evaluation) | • domination of talk by teacher  
• teacher acts as the giver of all knowledge  
• highlights transmission of knowledge | • useful for transmission of new ideas  
• assists in the transmission of complex ideas | • there needs to be a variety of types of talk employed by the teacher  
otherwise there is little, if any, opportunity for student-initiated talk  
• appears to be the default option that teachers employ particularly in stressful situations |
| **Dialogic talk** | • provides an opportunity for both teacher and learner talk  
• encourages reciprocal talk between students and teacher  
• allows student-to-student talk and students to initiate talk | • Students reflect on their own, and others’ talk  
• students are able to ask questions as well as answer them  
• teachers give more thinking time to students to answer questions | • classroom environment needs to encourage a toleration of uncertainty and tentativeness  
• students need to accept differences of opinion and alternative points of view  
• teachers need to be willing to vacate the floor |

**In summary**

This chapter provided an historical context for thinking about and researching classroom talk. It lay down the foundations for conceptualising and reconceptualising classroom talk by tracing the history of theorising practice, interaction and pedagogy and how these understandings connect to contemporary times. In particular it explored:

• the particular conditions that influence the development of talk  
• the conceptualisation of classroom talk  
• the study of teacher talk in classrooms  
• teacher expectations about the talk that students bring to school  
• the reconceptualisation of classroom talk  
• the pedagogy of dialogic talk  
• teacher practice and practice architectures

These considerations of practice form the historical backdrop for the chapters, which follow.