



## RESEARCH REPORT

# The impact of 'visibility protocols' on raising the quality of pupils' exploratory talk in the secondary classroom

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### Abstract

**Background and Purpose:** The participating teachers identified that, in the context of English and Classics lessons, pupils' confidence and competence levels when engaging in Exploratory Talk can sometimes be poor. Accordingly, they wanted to develop an activity that could be used and adapted in different subject domains.

**Aims:** Recognising that exploratory talk is a tool that promotes cognitive engagement, the teachers wanted to support secondary pupils in being able to develop these skills so that their understanding of the course content would become more sophisticated and nuanced. They also wanted them to become more aspirational in the way that they articulated themselves, and decided that introducing different 'visibility protocols' was a way of achieving these aims.

**Study Design or Methodology:** The teachers used a research lesson study design, across three observation cycles, using three case students in each one. In total, there were 34 pupils participating in the lessons that were observed (24 in one class, and 10 in another). In the first and third observation cycle, the same case students were used. The pupils had been identified as being at different levels in terms of their academic ability and exploratory talk skills: high academic ability and high 'talk' competency/confidence, high academic ability and low 'talk' competency/confidence, low academic ability and low 'talk' competency/confidence. The project involved taking post-lesson feedback from pupils in the form of an evaluation form. After each lesson, the participating teachers also took part in reflective discussion, which both helped to form qualitative data and which informed the adaptation of the methodology.

**Findings:** By giving pupils clear success criteria for exploratory talk, some pupils were able to evaluate the quality of other peoples' talk showing increased metacognitive awareness. Additionally, a 'visible talk activity' enabled some pupils to develop a better understanding of the skills required in the context of exploratory talk. The element of low-level threat that was involved also motivated some pupils to perform well. Indeed, it was noted that across the talk activities, some pupils demonstrated increased participation and confidence levels.

**Implications for Practice:** Methodologically, research lesson study is now starting to become embedded as a professional learning tool in the research school, due to the benefits realised through this for staff and student learning. Additionally, with regards to the research focus, the participating teachers now have a sequence of 'talk activities' that could be used within lessons in their subject domains, and adapted to meet the needs of particular classes. Finally, beyond the immediate context of the school, and with some adaptation, it is felt that this sequence of 'visible talk' activities could work in different contexts (e.g. key stages, subjects).

Keywords: oracy, self-regulation, metacognition, visible talk, exploratory talk

## Context

The school in which this study was conducted is an independent, co-educational boarding school in Hertfordshire. At the time of the lesson study, it had 900 pupils on roll, aged 11-18. The teachers within the school recognised that much of the research surrounding talk and its impact on pupil learning focuses on the primary classroom, and so they were keen to broaden the field by considering its application and impact in a secondary context.

## Motivation, focus and research questions

Based on their professional experience, the teachers within the Research Lesson Study group all acknowledged that Exploratory Talk was an important tool for cognitive engagement in their respective subjects - English and Classics - and that this was applicable across the Key Stages. Indeed, they felt that high quality talk could lead to deeper thinking, better retention, and, in turn, improved performance. This is the type of talk in which participants all actively participate in a discussion, sharing their ideas and opinions, and giving reasons for their viewpoints. Within it, knowledge is made more publicly accountable and reason more visible, as participants constructively evaluate each other's ideas. These ideas may be challenged, but this challenge must be justified and alternative hypotheses offered. (Mercer and Wegerif, 2004)

However, whilst these conditions are widely accepted as valuable, educationalists have noted that 'their fulfilment is often thought to be challenging.' (Howe, 2021). Correspondingly, a common observation amongst the teachers was that, whilst they might signpost these 'talk skills', or even encourage pupils to adopt particular 'talk roles' within the context of group discussion, the quality of the talk can often deteriorate when the pupils are not being directly monitored by a member of staff. For example, the talk can veer off-task, and if it remains on-task, it can lack productive features (Galton, Hargreaves, Comber, Wall, & Pell, 1999; Galton, Simon, & Croll, 1980; Kutnick & Blatchford, 2014). Indeed, it may involve features of Cumulative Talk, which is when participants add uncritically to what has gone before, and initiations are typically accepted either without discussion or with only superficial amendments (Littleton, et al., 2005). Alternatively, a scenario might emerge in which certain voices dominate, whilst others remain passive.

The teachers felt that the impact of poor quality of talk is that the quality of learning can be compromised, thus they felt compelled to explore the contributing factors. They hypothesised that perhaps students do not always have the metacognitive awareness about what this type of talk actually looks and sounds like. They also conjectured that, for some pupils, the fact that they are essentially shielded from the gaze of the teacher and the wider class in group discussion and therefore might feel relatively 'safe', can lead them to feel that they needn't perform to the best of their ability.

Research focusing on talk also suggests that learning results from 'active processes of reflection by individual students, where multiple aspects of group interaction are coordinated and appraised, often post-group, therefore after a group discussion has concluded' (Howe, 2009; Howe et al., 1992, Howe, McWilliam, & Cross 2005). This suggests that for learning to occur, a meta-cognitive perspective needs to be taken, and one way of achieving this involves ensuring that interaction within groups is observed and then evaluated by non-group members who are given an opportunity to tell classmates what happened within their groups. (Howe, 2021). It has been found that pupils tend to

find this type of activity valuable and that this can increase the perceived value of group work amongst pupils (Mercer, Dawes, & Kleine Staarman, 2009).

Taking the above into consideration, the teachers devised the following research question: What is the impact of 'visibility protocols' on raising the quality of pupils' exploratory talk in the secondary classroom? Whilst they intended to focus on lessons that required pupils to discuss ideas in relation to pieces of literature, the hope was that by adapting and honing an intervention through a series of observations, they would eventually devise a tool that could be used in a range of different subject domains. They identified that the following 'visibility protocols' would be introduced:

- More explicit signposting of success criteria in relation to Exploratory Talk
- Introducing a 'Visible Talk' activity, which requires some pupils to model a small group discussion, whilst being observed and evaluated by other pupils within the class. (They would offer feedback in a post-group work discussion).
- Using some students as 'guardian angels' to support the pupils engaged in the 'Visible Talk' activity (therefore attenuating any perceived 'threat' so that it is experienced to a manageable degree and performance is not entirely impeded)
- Encouraging pupils to reflect on their performance against the success criteria, in order to develop better metacognitive awareness

In terms of success criteria, the participating teachers identified the following:

- Pupils will be able to sustain quality exploratory talk in which they:
  - Give reasons or evidence to support their viewpoints, encouraging others to do the same
  - Build upon the ideas of others
  - Evaluate and challenge each other's ideas

## Lesson study plan and activities

The Research Lesson Study involved three inquiry cycles. Though the teachers recognised that it would be most beneficial to observe the same class in each of these cycles, this proved logistically problematic. This is because the nature of the intervention required the pupils to have a secure foundational knowledge of the taught texts and so could only take place towards the end of a unit of work. As a result of this, the teachers alternated between two classes, with the end of each cycle providing the teachers with an opportunity to reflect on pupil progress, and to modify the interventions accordingly before the next observation.

While one researcher (the lead teacher) delivered the lesson, the second and third teachers observed the lesson, focusing their attention on three pupils that had been pre-selected by the lead teacher. The teachers used an observation and a post-lesson discussion template provided within Pete Dudley's *Lesson Study Handbook*. They also used a self-made electronic evaluation form at the end of each lesson to survey the students. The same form was used after each cycle with no adaptations made to it. The purpose of it was to glean what the pupils had learnt in terms of the curriculum content and also their oracy skills. They were also given an opportunity to evaluate the efficacy of the lesson and to provide suggestions for improvement; the participating teachers then

used this feedback, along with their own observation, to adapt the lesson activities, before the next observation cycle began.

### **Cycle One: Year 10 pupils (ages 14-15) studying GCSE English Literature (24 pupils in total)**

Within this class, there were several pupils with English as an Additional Language, and some pupils with a dyslexic profile. The pupils in the class had been studying 'Of Mice and Men' over a number of weeks. At the start of the lesson, pupils were sat on tables that were located around a central table, in groups of six. The lesson was split into 4 phases:

The pupils were asked to reflect on their experiences of group work in the past- when it had been successful and when it had proved challenging. The pupils then generated 'success criteria' for Exploratory Talk and fed back their ideas to the teacher, who recorded these ideas on the board.

The teacher introduced a Talking Point about the text ('Curley's Wife does not deserve pity and is responsible for the events at the end of the novel'. To what extent do you agree with this view?), and instructed the pupils to discuss this in their groups, striving to meet the success criteria for Exploratory talk. The group nominated a Scribe (whose role was to summarise the ideas that were generated on a support document), and a Quality Assurer (who was responsible for monitoring the quality of talk and providing feedback).

The groups were asked to nominate a spokesperson who joined the central table. These 4 individuals engaged in a public discussion centring on the Talking Point; they used the support document as a prompt. The observing pupils on the surrounding tables functioned on Guardian Angels. When the felt it was needed, the pupils on the central table were able to turn around and seek guidance from these peers about further content that they could use in their discussion.

To conclude, the teacher encouraged the Guardian Angels to summarise the arguments that the core pupils had explored, and to provide feedback on the efficacy of the Exploratory Talk in line with the success criteria. All pupils were then asked to evaluate their use of Talk skills, and the efficacy of the lesson using the aforementioned evaluation form.

### **Cycle Two: Year 12 (ages 16-17) pupils studying IB English Language and Literature (10 in total)**

The pupils within this class were ethnically diverse (Italian, German, Nigerian, Columbian, and Russian) but fluent speakers of English. The pupils had recently completed their study of Moshin Hamid's 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist'. They sat in groups of 3/4 in a horseshoe, located around a central table. As with cycle one, the lesson was split into 4 phases:

- (1) In an amendment to cycle one, the pupils were given the success criteria for Exploratory Talk and were asked to rank themselves against the skills. The teacher used visual stimuli to encourage the pupils to elicit the difference between Exploratory Talk and Cumulative Talk, explaining that the latter should be avoided. The visual stimuli were images taken from the internet to serve as metaphors for the different talk skills for example, a picture of a spade to represent the idea of probing; two individuals pulling on a rope to signify the idea of challenge, and different images of Lego pieces to represent building upon each other's ideas and also the idea of cumulative talk,
- (2) The teacher introduced a Talking Point: '*Hamid presents Changez as the antagonist\* in the novel, for whom we shouldn't feel sympathy*'. To what extent do you agree with this view?

Within their groups, the pupils used Exploratory Talk to interrogate this in relation to the text; one student compiled their ideas on a support document.

- (3) The groups were asked to nominate a spokesperson to move to the central table. These 3 individuals engaged in a discussion on the Talking Point. In an amendment to cycle one, the observing pupils on the outer horseshoe either worked as 'Quality Assurers' or 'Content Guardian Angels'. The former monitored the quality of the talk, using the Exploratory Talk success criteria sheet to log the talk skills that they observed; the latter monitored the content of the talk considering what further evidence could be discussed, or how ideas could be challenged. In an amendment to cycle one, every 3/4 minutes, the discussion was paused so that the core pupils could liaise with their Content Guardian Angels and so that the Quality Assurers could provide a strength and an area for improvement regarding the nature of the talk. This made the learning environment more calm and controlled.
- (4) The teacher encouraged the observing pupils to summarise the arguments that had been explored. As with cycle one, pupils were asked to use the evaluation form to summarise what they had learnt about Exploratory Talk, and to offer feedback on the efficacy of the lesson.
- (5) As an amendment to cycle one, this lesson was then followed by a homework task in which pupils recorded themselves speaking about the Talking Point individually for three minutes, using the ideas generated in the lesson.

### **Cycle Three: Year 10 (ages 14-15), pupils studying GCSE English Literature (24 in total)**

This class contained the same pupils as in cycle one. For this observation, the pupils had been studying 'A View from the Bridge' over a number of weeks. As in cycle one, at the start of the lesson, pupils were sat on tables that were located around a central table, in groups of six. The lesson was split into 4 phases:

- (1) As above (see Phase 1 in Cycle 2)
- (2) As with previous cycles, the teacher introduced a Talking Point: *"The audience should not sympathise with Eddie - he deserves a tragic ending!" Discuss*. Within their groups, the pupils used Exploratory Talk to interrogate this in relation to the text; one student compiled their ideas on a support document.
- (3) As above (see Phase 3 in Cycle 2)
- (4) As above (see Phase 4 in Cycle 2)

### **Ethical considerations and relationships**

The participating teachers liaised with the Deputy Head Academic, along with the Heads of English and Classics to quality assure the research question and ensure that all observations were conducted in line with school policies.

In this school, pupils and parents are aware that Oracy is a whole school developmental focus, and that there is an 'open door' policy, with observation as an established norm. Regardless of this, in order for any pupil anxiety to be minimised, the teachers forewarned their respective classes that their next lesson was going to be observed; the pupils therefore had an opportunity to ask questions, to voice any concerns and to have these addressed, and to potentially opt out (though this did not

occur). In each lesson, the structure of the observed lesson was explained fully and pupils were made aware of all expectations.

Additionally, the case study pupils did not know that they had been selected for close observation because the teachers felt that having this knowledge might influence the pupils' behaviour during the lesson, and therefore potentially impact their results.

Finally, it was felt that there were no safeguarding concerns as the teachers were not filming the participants (and therefore did not need parental consent for image use, as outlined in the school's safeguarding policy). All data remained confidential during the project, with names anonymised within this research paper.

## Findings

After each cycle, pupil feedback from the evaluation form provided the teachers with insight into the impact of the visibility protocols on the pupils' understanding of what effective talk looks and sounds like. Interestingly, when asked what they had learnt about Oracy Skills, one pupil in observation cycle one stated that: *'I learned what they were. [Before] I had heard teachers talk about them but I wasn't sure what exactly they were. Now I can have a group discussion that is successful'*. This suggests that by making the final talk activity 'visible', the teacher was able to make abstract talk skills more tangible to the pupils, helping them to better understand what they should be trying to emulate. Elsewhere, in observation cycle two, one pupil stated: *'I was able to hear different opinions concerning the book coming from multiple people, which changed my perspective on the main character and other aspects of the novel'*, whilst another articulated: *'I learnt that it is very important to build up on others' arguments and to not try to get through all of your own points. One should try to be more responsive and less focused on voicing new ideas trying to tick all the boxes on a list. This is what I will try and do in the future'*. These comments corroborate the last point made and also suggest that the sequence of talk activities in the lessons might have helped some pupils to become more flexible and sophisticated in their thinking, as they became able to consider different perspectives. In cycle two, the increased complexity in pupil thinking was demonstrated in the quality of work that was produced for the subsequent homework task (a three minute talk in which pupils recorded themselves speaking about the Talking Point individually for three minutes).

During the project, the teachers found that these visibility protocols might improve the engagement of relatively low ability pupils who are sometimes disengaged and who tend to distract their peers (potentially as a mechanism to conceal their own low confidence). In observation cycle 1 and 3, Pupil C did begin the activities displaying off-task behaviour, seeming to want to entertain his peers rather than to take the activity seriously. However, in time during the first small group discussion, he started to offer more sensible suggestions, and eventually put himself for the visible talk activity. It is important to note that although the quality of pupil C's ideas in the context of this activity was variable, and though he used a relatively low academic register, the lead teacher felt that his level of engagement had improved.

Additionally, they also found that these visibility protocols may well increase the confidence of high ability pupils, who do not normally tend to thrive in the context of exploratory talk activities, remaining relatively quiet. Indeed, in the small group discussion in observation cycle one, Pupil A seemed to struggle to assert herself: her utterances often remained unfinished, and other pupils

spoke over her. However, she then put herself forward to be in the visible talk activity. In this context, she was by far the strongest of the central speakers, offering perceptive observations about the text, building on the ideas of and using questions to probe the thinking of others. The positive impact of Pupil A's was recognised by one of her peers who joined her in the visible talk activity. In the evaluative feedback they said that *'I feel as though this lesson was very productive and it brought out the best of me as a student. I also believe that I have been challenged greatly by [Pupil A] as she asked me very challenging and thought provoking questions that made me dive and delve deeper into the novella'*. One might infer from this that the activity gave Pupil A the opportunity to show that she was strong to her peers. Interestingly, in observation cycle three, during the small group activity in which pupils generated ideas for the talk activity, the other pupils looked to Pupil A for affirmation and she took the lead in generating ideas. Similarly when she was a 'Content Guardian Angel', she was proactive in sharing her ideas in order to support the pupil in the centre of the room.

## Resources

The participating teachers developed a document that not only establishes the success criteria for effective exploratory discussion, but can be used when observing and evaluating the talk of others. It is an effective tool to promote metacognitive awareness.

## Reflective evaluation of the process

The participating teachers all enjoyed the collaborative and supportive nature of this project, and how it gave them an opportunity to identify and troubleshoot a challenge that they all shared in their respective classrooms. Classroom observation can sometimes tend to focus heavily on the actions of the teacher and it was refreshing for the observers to focus their attention entirely on the learning of pupils so that any subsequent change to teaching was more closely aligned with their needs. As an aside, this has influenced how a couple of the teachers have conducted observations in their role as line managers. Additionally, all participating teachers recognized the value of having multiple observers as each participating teacher brought a new perspective to the post-observation discussion.

That being said, there were some minor external challenges. For example, firstly, it proved difficult to find suitable lessons that all participants were able to attend. To help solve this issue, the teachers chose to use two different classes (Year 10 and Year 12 respectively), rather than observing the same class over three observation cycles. In the end, this actually proved beneficial as the teachers were able to see the intervention work within two different key stages. Additionally, the teachers found that post-observation reflections were also demanding in terms of time. Moving forward, to make projects such as this sustainable, school leaders would need to protect more time for professional development and also for department meetings to be more developmental in their focus, as opposed to administrative. It is recognised that this may be particularly challenging in the context of a boarding school, where it is difficult for all staff to meet at the same time outside of specific in-service training. This is because there are always pupils who need supervising. This may be easier to achieve in the context of a day school (either state or independent), because in these contexts, staff are able to attend regular twilight sessions.



## Changes to Practice and Next Steps

Moving forward, the participating teachers have agreed that they would all continue to use the visibility protocols in future lessons. The participating teachers are also intending to cascade these ideas back to their respective departments and to other areas of the school. When this is shared, they intend to underscore that the intervention and resources should be adapted to suit the age, stage ability and 'talk competence' of individual classes. For example,

- The 'exploratory talk success criteria sheet' could be used in different ways to suit the needs of different groups of pupils. For lower ability classes, the sheet could be simplified, with some of the information being removed, or with a focus on fewer talk skills. If a teacher wants to increase the pupils' metacognitive awareness in terms of their talk skills, then they might ask the pupils to evaluate their competence and/or confidence with each individual criterion. In terms of using the sheet to evaluate their peers, the teacher could ask pupils to tick different talk skills when they observe them, or alternatively, they could make more detailed notes about what they see and hear.
- When pupils are engaging in exploratory talk in small groups, the teacher should use this as an opportunity to observe and critique the quality of talk. For example, if a pupil is 'opting out', then the teacher might comment on this and encourage other group members to involve them. Equally, if the teacher observes that the pupils are engaging in cumulative talk, then they should pose questions to the group that will encourage them to evaluate the quality of ideas being shared.
- Within the central talk activity, we advise teachers to engineer the group, based on the aims of the individual lesson. Picking weaker students to sit in the middle, in a supportive environment, will increase their confidence and help them engage in academic discussion. While picking stronger students will expose the rest of the class to a higher level of discussion (perhaps particularly appropriate at a revision stage in a unit?). Additionally, the teachers could also rotate who speaks on the central table. This would open up an opportunity to compare the quality of talk across groups.

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