Let’s Talk About Talk for Learning: Oracy and the New National Curriculum

Valerie Coultaes examines Gove’s standards on Spoken English and child-centred approaches to teaching.

Elocution or learning through talk?

Towards the end of the 20th century English teachers started to develop a new model of talk. They were moving away from ‘an elocution model of spoken language ... a view of talk’ as the way children ‘represent’ the world ... by telling someone about it and in so doing clarifying it for ourselves’ (Howe, 1992:5). This view of talk and learning is still controversial today and the dual role of talk in the classroom, in developing skills in spoken language and using talk to learn, is not always fully understood.

If we compare the talk for learning model of spoken language and its role in learning with that advocated in the Newbold and Norwood Reports, we can see how this ran into conflict with a prescriptive view that maintained that Standard English had a superior linguistic status to other, non-standard dialects. Howe (1992) highlights how, in the Norwood Report, the writers had suggested that ‘refinement of speech indicates a certain graciousness of thought’ (p1).

The suggestion that children’s home language should be valued and not considered as linguistically inferior and that the teacher should not insensitively ‘correct’ the child’s home language, but rather provide opportunities for the use of different registers in different contexts and for different audiences, was a strong challenge to the traditional view of spoken language.

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Correct or appropriate?

This concept of the appropriateness of language, as opposed to the ‘correct’ use of language and the alleged superiority of Standard English, continues to be a source of controversy in the discussion of spoken English today (Davies, 2000). According to Scott (2007), one of the few changes that was made by Margaret Thatcher to the draft of the English curriculum in 1989 was to delete the words ‘where appropriate’ at the end of the sentence that stated that children should be taught to use Standard English. Nor is this view just an old fashioned one. Alexander points out (2004) that even very recently National Strategy English Advisers to a ‘centralising and controlling government’ have attempted to reduce his notion of dialogue to ‘using formal language and spoken standard English’ (p 54). Thus the issue of the definition of talk and oracy and the dual nature of talk in the English classroom are still at the heart of the discussion of how we can promote oracy in schools. For ‘at the same time as they are learning to talk more effectively pupils should be talking to learn more effectively’ (Doncaster LEA, Undated: 1).

And writers and teachers who have argued the case for talk, while recognising the need to plan for a wide repertoire of talk based activities, are not at ease with the heavy emphasis placed by some on improved spoken English, or improving speaking and listening, by focusing exclusively on the more presentational types of talk that require the use of formal language and Standard English. Many teachers and writers suggest that Standard English is one form of dialect that pupils should be familiar with but that it is not intrinsically superior to other forms of dialect. Pupils should indeed have a range of opportunities to use Standard English where it is the appropriate spoken register when in role as a lawyer or TV presenter, for example, but it does not have to be imposed in more informal discussions.

Process or product?

The point that the London English teachers in LATE in the 60s and the 70s were making about language in the classroom was that schooling needed to change to value, nurture and develop the language skills that all children brought to school. They were excited by the new language in the classroom and used tape recorders to transcribe and analyse children’s speech. They also highlighted the important role the more learned adult or teacher had in valuing, guiding and prompting all children’s language development. Significantly Douglas Barnes (1971) argued that teachers often moved too quickly to presentational styles of talk and writing without planning for the kind of learning conversations that helped to empower all children as effective thinkers, speakers and writers.

It is interesting to consider the views of those who were critical of the new ‘child-centred approach’ to English teaching in the 60s and 70s. A group of Conservative thinkers wrote a series of pamphlets in the 80s, the Black Papers, that hit back hard against the key elements of what for example John Marenbon (1994) dubbed ‘the new orthodoxy’. The ideas within these papers constituted a full frontal attack on the ideas of progressive education and child-centred English teachers who, they suggested, were too concerned with ideas of personal growth. Instead this group of conservative thinkers argued that English was about teaching a body of knowledge, which involved re-establishing the pre-eminence of the English literary heritage and the explicit teaching of grammar and Standard English.

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Listening or talking?

They also began to establish the importance of ‘standards’ by arguing that standards would only be maintained in schools if they were clearly and publicly defined. Part of this critique included an attack on classroom talk,
for Sheila Lawlor suggested that there was ‘no reason to suggest that children learn from talking’ (Lawlor, cited by Jones, 1989:66). John Marenbon agreed stressing that oracy is redundant and certainly not as important as literacy since ‘children learn to speak and listen by being present at these activities’ (Marenbon, cited by Jones 1989: 67, Marenbon, 1994). Here, for the first time the case for talk was being directly challenged.

These philosophical viewpoints were considered extreme at the time but some of these ideas, particularly the idea of accountability and publicly defined ‘standards’ have influenced government policy over recent decades and are now becoming more influential in the new policy of the coalition government.

The new programmes of study for English have no separate strand for oracy or advice on talk for learning. The elocution model is reinforced and the talk for learning model set aside. Standard English and presentational talk have a high value and exploratory talk has become invisible again. The understanding that exploratory talk assists all develop a wide range of talk repertoires is lost. This curriculum makes the Cox English curriculum drawn up in 1989 look very progressive.

The past or the present?

The New Standards for QTS, for example (DFE, 2012), suggest that teachers should ‘demonstrate an understanding and take responsibility for promoting high standards of literacy and articulacy and the correct use of standard English, whatever the teacher’s specialist subject’. This is the government’s response to language across the curriculum: all teachers must promote the ‘correct’ use of standard English.

The new programmes of study for English have no separate strand for oracy or advice on talk for learning and the main focus is on reading, writing and spelling and grammar. English becomes literacy once again. But the value of formal spoken English is highlighted because ‘there will be an expectation that pupils master formal English through recitation, debate and presentation’ (Gove, 2012). The elocution model is therefore reinforced and the talk for learning model set aside. Standard English and presentational talk have a high value and exploratory talk has become invisible again. The understanding that exploratory talk assists all pupils to develop a wide range of talk repertoires is lost. This curriculum makes the Cox English curriculum drawn up in 1989 look very progressive.

Although there are some nuances, the links to the authors of the Block Papers, who were strong defenders of the English Literary heritage and Standard English as a superior dialect are therefore clear and Jones (1989) and Ball (1994) have defined this approach as cultural restoratistion.

Elitist or comprehensive?

Ken Jones has argued (1989) that it was only towards the end of the conservative administrations of 1979-1997 that aspects of the critique of comprehensive ideals found their way into any tangible government policy, for example the promotion of City Technology Colleges, the pre-cursor of Academies. The Conservative party, he suggests, took quite a long time to develop an education policy that distinguished itself from previous labour governments. This was partly because of conflicts between ‘modernists’ and ‘cultural restorationists’ among Conservative party members; but another reason for this delay was the popularity of the comprehensive ideal. Yet another feature of the move towards more intervention in the school curriculum was Britain’s decline in the world economy and the need to retrofit on government spending. As Wyse and Jones (2000) point out effective child-centred education is teacher-intensive and this necessitates expensive small class sizes.

Today we have an Education Secretary who is reactionary and elitist and has no compassion for children or the hard work of teachers in schools. He is trying to turn the clock back on many aspects of education -- including forward-looking pedagogy and talk for learning.

References


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