Exploratory Talk for Writing
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Context and Aims
Teaching in a nurture group setting, my students experience low self-confidence stemming in part from their profound literacy difficulties. I wanted to investigate how Exploratory Talk can help create a safe, collaborative environment during literacy lessons to build students’ self-esteem and contribute positively to their writing by increasing instances of higher order skills.

Key Research Question
How does Exploratory Talk contribute to the writing of low attaining year 8 students?

1. From students’ perspectives
2. From teachers’ perspectives

Challenges are justified and alternatives suggested. Joint agreement in decision-making is the end result. (Mercer 1995:104)

Staring Point: Key Ideas from the Literature
The term Exploratory Talk was first identified by Barnes (1975) through his work in Primary classrooms and is characterised by in-depth and collaborative investigation of a topic by students with their peers. More recently the term has been used by Mercer and his colleagues on the Thinking Together Project at Cambridge University. Mercer identified 3 types of talk among learners (Disputational, Cumulative and Exploratory) and argued that it is Exploratory talk that provides the best language for learning.

Unlike Barnes, who held a Piagetian view of learning where the social arena does not influence outcomes, Mercer approached classroom talk from a Vygotskian perspective, which asserts that the social sphere necessarily links the cognitive-psychological modes of thought with the cultural and communicative aspects. Thus Mercer postulates that when students discuss learning together social and communicative needs necessitate that they share, explain and justify their decisions to each other. It is these processes in talk that then lead to a development of higher order thinking skills in students.

Overview of Action Research Phases

Rationale for research model
An action research cycle was used for this study to enable the specific context of the classroom to be learned in depth.

To accommodate the complex dynamics of the classroom environment a process of triangulation using interviews has been utilised for data collection and analysis.

Phase 1
Pilot study: teacher intervention

Phase 2
How might student groupings affect the quality of exploratory dialogue?
Results discussed with TA, Educational Psychologist and SEN Manager
Review

Phase 3
How do the roles taken on by students in the group impact their writing?
Analysis

Phase 4
How might student groupings affect the quality of exploratory dialogue?
Intervention

Analysis

• Transcripts codified according to Exploratory Talk criteria
• Written assessments codified
• Observations recorded in personal reflective diary
• TA semi-structured interviews
• Student questionnaires
• Student focus group
• Student interviews

Initial Findings – Student Perspectives
"I felt more confident about my writing"
"Sharing ideas helped me to work out what I think and why"
"I like working with other people; their ideas are really helpful"
"It’s easier to ask your friends questions than a teacher"
"Talking before writing was much better because I knew how to start my work, but I wish I could have worked with my friends"

References

Initial Findings – Teachers’ Perspectives
"The students definitely wrote more than they ever have done and they explained all of their ideas using examples from their conversations. (Class TA)"
"I have seen such an improvement in their attitude towards written work”
(PGCE Student)

Initial Conclusions
Student questionnaires and TA interview suggest that the contribution Exploratory Talk makes to students’ writing lies not only in style and content, but also in more complex psychological factors.

Students reported having gained more confidence when approaching written tasks, as well as an increased belief in their abilities and eventual outcomes. The TA observed that, following intervention, students approached tasks with more enthusiasm and elaborated on points that had arisen in their discussions.

Further Questions
• How do the roles taken on by students in the group impact their writing?
• How might student groupings affect the quality of exploratory dialogue?

Initial Analysis – Comparing Writing and Dialogue:
Adapting 9 characteristics of Explanatory Talk from the work of Alexander (2004) and Barnes and Todd (1977), initial findings show that whilst there are more instances of Explanatory techniques in evidence during group discussions, students’ written work contains an impressive ratio of higher order skills (Exploratory) to lower order skills.

Collaborations

Next Steps
The data will now be analysed in partnership with the Educational Psychologist resident at the school. This review will be carried out with reference to the literature reviewed. The findings will then be shared with the Inclusion Team and with individual staff receiving coaching to move their teaching from Good to Outstanding.

In addition, findings will be shared in a whole school CPD training session and will form part of the ITT seminar programme in collaboration with Bristol University, The Open University and The University of the West of England.

It is intended that a larger scale action research project, based on this model, will be undertaken in the autumn by recently qualified staff as part of a peer coaching trio. The aim of this further study will be to explore how speaking and listening skills can be further embedded into the curriculum.

Evaluation

✓ Results discussed with Educational Psychologist
✓ Further questions asked
✓ Plan for additional data collection
✓ Revisit the literature

Analysis

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