Assessing Cinderella: a story of talk in schools

Alan Howe
I will cover...

- Some ancient history
- Some issues relating to assessing talk
- Some thoughts on what happens to the assessment of talk in schools
- A look to the future...
A short history test

Allocate each quotation to its date:

1921
1965
1975
1976
1988
2014

Bonus points for identifying the source in each case!
‘It seems to us far more reasonable to think in terms of appropriateness rather than absolute correctness…the aim is not to alienate the child from a form of language with which he has grown up and which serves him efficiently in the speech community of his neighbourhood. It is to enlarge his repertoire so that he can use language effectively in other speech situations and use standard forms when they are needed.’
‘Oracy comes from practice in specific situations, whether these occur naturally in the classroom or are created as a specific teaching device. It is helped by unconscious imitation, it is stimulated by the responses of others, and speech becomes clearer in the necessity for communication. The main job of the teacher is to provide situations which call forth increasing powers of utterance.’
Speech training must be undertaken from the outset. Teachers of infants sometimes complain that when the children come to school they can scarcely speak at all. They should regard this rather as an advantage. It is emphatically the business of the elementary school to teach all its pupils who either speak a definite dialect, or whose speech is disfigured with vulgarisms, to speak Standard English and to speak it clearly. The great difficulty of teachers in elementary schools in many districts is that they have to fight against evil habits of speech, contracted in home and street.
‘It is when the pupil is required to use language to grapple with new experience, or to order old experience in a new way, that he is most likely to find it necessary to use language differently.’
Spoken language underpins the development of reading and writing. The quality and variety of language that pupils hear and speak are vital for developing their vocabulary and grammar and their understanding for reading and writing. Teachers should therefore ensure the continual development of pupils’ confidence and competence in spoken language and listening skills. Pupils should develop a capacity to explain their understanding of books and other reading, and to prepare their ideas before they write.
‘A democratic society needs people who have the linguistic abilities which will enable them to discuss, evaluate, and make sense of what they are told, as well as being able to take effective action on the basis of their understanding...Otherwise there can be no genuine participation, but only the imposition of ideas of those who are linguistically capable.’
It is doubtful if children’s talk in school does much to improve their knowledge, for free discussion as a learning procedure at any age is notoriously unproductive.
Answers
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Newbold Report on Elementary Education 1921
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Prof. Andrew Wilkinson ‘Spoken English’ 1965
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A Language For Life  1975
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Stuart Froome: Note of Dissent’ to the Bullock Report 1975
‘It is when the pupil is required to use language to grapple with new experience, or to order old experience in a new way, that he is most likely to find it necessary to use language differently.’

Douglas Barnes ‘From Communication to Curriculum’ 1976
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Kingman Committee: Enquiry into English Language Teaching, 1988
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National Curriculum 2014
APU Oracy Surveys

3 The range of tasks illustrated

Task 1 **Recent Learning**: an individual pupil’s account of the most interesting thing learnt recently
Task 2 **Teenagers**: small group discussion on a social issue
Task 3 **Spiders**: relaying the content of a recorded talk with the help of pictures
Task 4 **Woodlice**: jointly planning a scientific experiment

4 The range of performance illustrated

Task 5 **Bridges**: describing pictures so that a listener can identify them
Task 6 **Jobs**: competitive argument over a pay rise
Task 7 **Map**: collaborative problem-solving; negotiating contradictions between two sets of information
APU Oracy Surveys: taxonomy

- Describing and specifying
- Informing/expounding
- Arguing/persuading
- Focussed questioning
- Collaborative discussion/problem-solving
- Speculating/advancing hypotheses
We acknowledge the problems in defining a linear sequence of language development...

Assessment should be a continuous process which reinforces teaching and learning...

Since the assessment of language competence is task-and context-dependent...the widest practicable range of types of task and settings should be used...

Assessment should pay attention to the process as well as the product of the talk

...should allow for the gradual growth of sophistication, rather than just the acquisition of additional skills...
National curriculum 1988

- Speaking (‘freely’)
- Responding/listening
- Presenting/describing
- Asking questions
- Discussion
- Using the telephone
- Give and receive instructions
Progression:

- Speaking and listening with increasingly larger groups of people:
  - 1:1;
  - small group;
  - the class;
  - a larger group of peers and adults
National Oracy Project

- 1987-1993
- SCDC then NCC
- 35 Local Authorities in England and Wales
- Local and school-based developments
- Huge evidence base of the place of talk in learning
- National publications:
  - Thinking Voices
  - Teaching, Talking and Learning at KS1,2,3 and 4
  - CPD file with video and audio examples
T: Look at this coin. These are all dirty.
C: Yes, because they’ve been underneath the sand.
T: Yeah, they’ve been under...these...this one has been underneath sand, you can see all the sand patterns on it, can’t ya?
C: This has been underneath sand, yeah, and it’s been right down, yeah...
T: I know, I know...
C: And there’ve been mud under there, right under sand, yeah? And that’s where it’s been, it’s been really precious to other people that they’ve lost it.
T: I know, it’s like...like...like, when, um...people die because they are very, very old, they die on the ground and then the tide comes in and washes another load...when they die, right?
C: Yeah, yeah, and all the water comes and it makes these things come out of their hands like one of these might’ve come out of their hand, yeah?
T: Now, guess what? Guess what? They died holding all these coins, right, on the seaside, and then the water came in and flushed another load of sand on top of them. Then people...then the tide came in... (C: That’s...) then the tide came in again and washed all the sand away and people found them. They didn’t find the people but they found the coins, yeah?!
Roman coins

Work in pairs:

1. How is the talk structured and organised?
2. Evidence of joint thinking?
3. How is this discussion helping learning?
4. What has the teacher done to promote this kind of talk?
5. What do we learn about Thomas and Christina?
Molluscs

1. What features of context are supporting the talking and listening?
2. Can you find any evidence of reading and writing feeding into the talk?
3. What aspects can you find of a distinctive spoken language grammar?
4. What are the implications for planning this kind of talk?
National curriculum 1993

- Communication (fluency, coherence and accuracy):
  - Explanations, narratives, descriptions, accounts
  - Using standard English (Level 3: ‘simple’; level 5: ‘basic’; level 8: ‘fluent and clear’; level 10: ‘consistently accurate’)

- Listening and responding (close listening, understanding and response):
  - In discussion, making contributions, showing understanding

  10 levels

  14 pages of statutory teaching and assessment
Current National Curriculum

- Speaking: increasing level of demand, range of situations; adapting talk to purposes and listeners
- Listening
- Discussion: understanding; contribution; evaluation of others’ ideas
- Standard English

8 levels + Exceptional performance
Single paragraph of assessment criteria for each level
APP (Assessing Pupils’ Performance)

- AF1 Talking to others
- AF2 Talking with others
- AF3 Talking within role play and drama
- AF4 Talking about talk

- QCDA/National Strategies 2010
Talk: some assessment issues

- Talk is transient – ‘capturing it’
- Most talk is interactive – ‘duetting’; untangling the individual contribution; constraints imposed by others
- The quiet attentive listener v. the performer
- The value of hesitancy; ‘deliberate inarticulacy’
- Communicative stress – the effect of slight changes in context
- Flat earth views of spoken language (‘debased form of writing’)
- Limiting assessment contexts to the easily observable and easily judged as a result
Talk: some assessment issues

‘Assessment of a language event is itself a language event rather than a mathematical one.’

In school practicalities:

- Time and numbers
- Classroom organisation and opportunity (range of contexts)
- Evidence: collection and recording
- Subject (talk) knowledge
Looking ahead....

National Curriculum 2014
Progression in talk

Years 1 and 2:
- Vocabulary
- Retelling stories
- Discussing reading
- Deal with pupils whose skills are ‘insufficiently developed’ (EYFS)

Years 3 and 4:
- Increase variety of situations, audiences and purposes
- Drama, formal presentations, debate

Years 5 and 6:
- Public speaking, performance and debate
- Discuss reading; ‘challenge courteously’; reasons and justifications
Key Stage 3

Pupils should be taught to:

◦ speak confidently and effectively, including through:
◦ using Standard English confidently in a range of formal and informal contexts, including classroom discussion
◦ giving short speeches and presentations, expressing their own ideas and keeping to the point
◦ participating in formal debates and structured discussions, summarising and/or building on what has been said
◦ improvising, rehearsing and performing play scripts and poetry in order to generate language and discuss language use and meaning, using role, intonation, tone, volume, mood, silence, stillness and action to add impact.
Planning is vital: don’t leave talk to chance

1. Manipulate group size and composition
2. Plan tasks that promote different kinds of talk: e.g. discussion; problem-solving; argument and opinion
3. Give different groups different aspects of a task to carry out to promote effective feedback sessions
4. Explain what you want pupils to do as speakers and listeners
5. Use tight time deadlines to promote focus
6. Think carefully about the questions you ask: use ‘chain’ questions to promote extended responses
7. Don’t always use questions: explain, recount, speculate, tell an anecdote…
8. Plan for short ‘guided’ sessions in order to ‘scaffold’ learning through dialogue
9. Provide pupils with opportunities to rehearse ideas in pairs before ‘going public’
10. Use the ‘wait time’ strategy in whole class discussion
Progression in talk

4 dimensions

Meaning: the quality of thinking and feeling
- Increasingly complex topics; greater objectivity and range of reference.

Interaction: talking and listening with others
- Increasing range of audiences and groupings, familiar and unfamiliar; widening range of roles; critical listening.

Language: vocabulary, grammar, organisation, vocal and non-verbal skills
- Increasing fluency, range and control; adaptation.

Awareness: knowing about the spoken language
- Increasing ability to self-monitor, evaluate talk and improve own ‘performance’.
Argument, sense and fancy