

Talking into Literacy in the Early Years

STUART BUTTON & PETER MILLWARD

Stuart Button is a lecturer in education at the School of Education, University of Durham.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking, listening and literacy

Whilst it is clear that the move towards literacy is one of the ways in which school experience is likely to affect the child's language, it is also evident that the pressure to help children become effective readers and writers can mean that we lose sight of the importance of talk, and the significance it has for the children's development as language users (DfES, 2003a). The recently issued guidelines, *Speaking, Listening, Learning* have been published by the DfES partly in response to teachers' concerns that speaking and listening have been neglected in the NLS (DfES, 2003a). It is not just that talk is such a pervasive feature of our lives, and not just that it is largely through talk that our social experience is constituted, but that talk is, as well, the basis of literacy, and literacy is developed out of peoples' experience of interacting through oral language. It is not possible to attend to the children's reading and writing (or their knowledge and understanding of, say, mathematics or history) without attending to their talk, and in attending to their talk we are able to cultivate their development as literate members of a society.

Children Talking Purposefully

Before we can use children's talk as a way into literacy, we have to provide opportunities for children to talk purposefully. The language of the classroom can easily be restricted for children and we have to find ways of helping children to use language effectively in the classroom. Moreover, we have a responsibility to take care of children's development as talkers and listeners which reaches beyond our concern to help them to become literate. Children come to school able to talk and to listen. They stand upon the threshold of a new world, and as they move from the home in which they use familiar language in familiar ways, they encounter new and strange forms of language which are constitutive of school experience.

Children Talking their Way into School

This is inevitable, for life in the classroom is presented through classroom language. However, children are quick, generally speaking, to appreciate what they can do and soon find ways of contributing to classroom talk. By and large, they get on with talking their way into school, though a few may have to depend on language to cope with the terrors of the day (Knight, 1992). Unfortunately, and for all children, the language experiences of the school may not necessarily be as rich as that of the home (Labov, 1994). Whilst the language patterns of the classroom clearly reflect the special demands put upon a teacher they also reflect the teaching context and the distinctive areas of knowledge explored through the curriculum. The provision

of the kinds of opportunities provided for children to talk purposefully in classrooms may not be an easy task. Children talk at home to get things done and they take responsibility for initiating topics and for developing these in ways which interest them. They come to school as experienced language users, used to talking and listening. They will have discovered that language works and that talking is effective.

Of course teachers have a responsibility to guide children into literacy, but their first task is to help the children to talk as effectively in school as they do at home, by 'giving a higher status to talk' in the classroom (DfES, 2003a). This is not just a matter of getting children to respond properly to the teacher's instructions and questions, but of helping them to use language in ways which allows them to express their interests and concerns and which enable them to take a positive and constructive part in the presentation of classroom experience.

It is important to show the children that we as teachers are interested in them and in their use of language. We should be finding out about the children's lives and about the language they use to make sense of their lives, and these should become topics of interest in the classroom (Corden, 2000). Teachers and children should be helping one another to understand and make good sense of being alive, and the point of contact lies in, and through, their talk. It is developed, for example, through their accounts, stories, discussions, conversations, and presentations. Engaging in talk based activities of this kind provide the context for literacy. Literacy is developed and made purposeful within a way of life, and that way of life is described as people talk and interact with one another.

Teachers Talking with Children

Teachers are bound to dominate the language structures of the classroom but the teacher's presence does not have to be an overbearing feature of the children's learning. If teachers are to provide children with the opportunities to engage in positive talk based experiences, they have to take an interest in the children's understanding of their experiences. Teachers have to want to know what children make of the world, they have to seek to understand the child's point of view.

A teacher, for example, exploring a child's attitude towards books through conferencing is helping the child to understand the nature of reading, to engage in reading activities and explore his or her reading of a particular book. The teacher is also providing an audience for the child's expression of reading. The conference is designed to describe a common interest within a shared in common experience (Barrs, et al 1988). Through the conference, the child and the teacher know more about each other

and more about the book they are discussing. Whilst their talk has helped them to understand the book, the book has become a topic for consideration in their talk. The relationship between talk and literacy is reflexive and each is developed through attention to the other. In exploring children's interests through our talk, we are encouraging children to take an explicitly active role, encouraging them to initiate, as well as to respond to, contributions.

Talking about Language and Literacy

Some children may have had little experience of literacy and many will have had few opportunities to talk and think about their language. These children will use language without a thought (but still, for the most part, in accordance with its conventions) and, as it appears, intuitively. It will serve them well in their day to day engagements, but it may not be helping them to become literate.

Children require teachers to develop their talk across a range of situations and through a variety of different forms. We should help them to talk thoughtfully, and we should help them to attend to the language they use. Through discussions and conversations, through accounts and presentations, through anecdotes and formal stories, and through reading, teachers can help young children get in touch with the literate forms of the language. This can be achieved through speaking and listening, as well as through reading and writing. Children should be provided with the opportunity and the encouragement to talk to good purpose, with listeners in mind. Children should also be helped to attend to the way they talk. These are the foundations of literacy. Literacy is a development of our experience of oral language forms, and we should keep this in mind when helping to develop children's literacy.

Children Talking their Way into Literacy

It is important to appreciate how oral language forms relate to literacy and why they are so important in developing the children's skills, knowledge and understanding with respect to reading and writing. On one level, the written or printed text is a representation of the language we speak. The words of our language have been encoded and preserved in written forms. Whilst this is a simple account of the text shared between readers and writers, it provides an explanation of written forms of language and points to a direct relationship between words as they are spoken and heard and words as they are written down and read. Our oral language is the stuff of our writing and though we are unlikely to be simply writing down words produced orally, we can always point to a word in a text and provide an oral version. There are secure relationships between words on the page and words in the air, and, whilst some forms of written text relate very closely to spoken language, all written forms of language connect with the spoken word. We feel that, historically and in terms of individual development, that oral language precedes written forms (DfES, 2003b).

Further, literacy forms can be identified in our talk, and children will be at an advantage in their quest for literacy if they have had experience of developing contexts through the structure of their talk. We should be able to appreciate, for example, that literacy implies reflecting on language, and we can think about our talk as well as about our writing. We should appreciate that literacy forms are developed from oral narratives, and that elements

of literacy are embedded in our sensitivity towards oral language (our ability to discriminate sounds in the aural register, for example). We know that talk can be directed towards a general audience even as literary texts may be directed towards individual readers, and we routinely produce worlds in our talk, as well as our writing, that exist beyond our immediate experience.

Children who are used to recounting events, are already engaged with literacy forms of the language. Recounting these events, producing narratives, enables children to present a context which is removed from the context of their talk and this requires a constructive approach to language which is characteristic of literacy. In a similar way, children who, through discussion and presentations, have been asked to think carefully about what they want to say and the ways they might say it, are choosing words with particular purposes and people in mind. They are constructing language in a way that is characteristic of much writing and they are thinking about their words even as they are speaking them. Children should be aware of literacy forms and be able to include elements of these forms in their language well before they can read or write.

They should also be thinking about the way language works, they should be reflecting on language as they talk and listen. Generally speaking, teachers use oral forms of language to introduce children to reading and writing. It is not just that they have to provide examples of literacy forms through their reading, but that they have to talk about the purposes of literacy and the ways in which the spoken word is represented in writing. Before they can do these things, children should have their attention drawn to the sounds of the language, to the rhythms and patterns in speech (DfES, 2003b). It is important that they can relate these patterns to the orthographic record in meaningful ways, but also to the language as part of the value and meaning of a text (Thompson & Millward, 1994). Attention to the form and structure of the language is the basis of an aesthetic attitude towards language and this is grounded in talk. It depends upon listening attentively and upon being tuned into the patterns in the language as well as to the meaning of the language. It means developing a metalanguage to talk about language (Thompson & Millward, 1994) and it means talking about the children's shared experience of language, the language they bring with them from home and set about extending and elaborating in school.

TALKING THROUGH NARRATIVE

Everyday Narratives: a familiar form to children

Of the range of literacy forms found in talk (attendance to the text; narrative form; reflective attitude, for example), we are going to focus upon narrative. This is because narrative is familiar to children and because it is the way we routinely present everyday and fictional experience and because narrative structures are found in so many fiction and non-fiction forms.

The stories which we tell in school are about the things that have happened to us and what we have done. Sometimes we tell them in quite formal ways but mostly they are shared in the form of anecdotes. Most of these stories are recounted in the hurly-burly of everyday life and they give a substance and a presence to that life. It seems like common sense to say that we use language to describe our lives. We have to appreciate that the act of storying shapes our lives.

Fictional Narratives: worlds in story

There is a shared fictional world presented and sustained through the language of stories and it abides only in that language. When we contemplate this fictional world through the formal stories of children's literature, we are made mindful of the power of story-making language and what can be achieved with words. Even so, we are inclined to think that any one of these fictional worlds has a kind of existence beyond the words which are used to present it. It is far from clear how we might describe that existence, but there is a feeling that we are using words to describe this fictional place and characters. We present our stories as if they were accounts of a real world. We could not present them as fictions and still be interested, and we have to suspend our disbelief. This also means that we have to be able to recognise the make-believe, managed quality of the fictional world presented through our stories. It is quite clear that this world is contained only in the language used to bring it to life and that it is dependent upon our ability to use language to create fictional realities (Carter, 2000).

However, we should look beyond the stories of children's literature if we are to appreciate their full significance of the story form. We should consider the stories which seem to be about our lives, for these everyday accounts of what has happened and our ability to structure our experience in story form can help us to understand the stories which describe fictional realities. We might wonder, for instance, how it can be that people manage so easily to use language in ways which can indicate worlds beyond their experience. We could expect this to be a remarkably difficult thing to do, and yet very young children are able to make sense of fictional, non-situated accounts, and use them to create worlds which they could not possibly have experienced directly. It is also remarkable that they seem to have so little difficulty in developing the fictional world of the story and in presenting fictional 'distanced' accounts of their own. It seems as if they are used to using language to bring the world into view and make it meaningful.

The stories and anecdotes which we tell, are the means by which we make our lives ordered, patterned and meaningful. It is through these story accounts that our lives are presented as ordered, patterned and meaningful and these are features of the story accounts and only recoverable from our lives in that we can (through language) tell the story of our lives. We find the events of our lives to be visible and explicable in so far as they are constructed through a developing narrative. Our lives depend upon our ability to present the events of our lives to ourselves and to each other, in a clear and coherent narrative. This narrative is a feature of literacy rather than of life. Barbara Hardy describes this as a 'primary act of mind transferred from life to art' and demonstrates vividly the centrality of narrative to human experience when she writes,

we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative (Hardy, 1977).

Whilst narrative might not be the earliest or the only 'primary act of mind' engaged by young children (Wilkinson, 1990), it is clearly at the heart of the child's experience of life. The scraps of stories which we share with one another are not simply about our lives, they are

the very stuff of our lives and children have learned to make stories by weaving the story of their lives. They have been called to account from the moment their actions were treated as intentional by demands that they show their actions to be explicable. They present them as explicable by showing that they can be woven into a life pattern and they do this by showing there is a story to be told.

Stories in School

Teachers have always recognised the engaging quality in stories which keeps children involved in a 'congenial and compelling medium' (Bruner, 1988). They have always appreciated that stories provide a commentary on life and the opportunity for groups of people to reflect on the business of living. It has always been accepted that stories enable us to share experiences, to come to terms with deeply felt and emotional aspects of our lives and to make sense of the inexplicable. The way in which stories can be used to explore human relationships and to deal with moral questions has always been understood. Teachers have known that stories provide models for language and literacy and the opportunity for children to reflect upon their language as well as upon their lives. Gordon Wells describes how, for all children, 'stories provide a real purpose for extending control over language' and that they are all the more effective because 'they also tap one of the child's most powerful ways of understanding, enlarging, and working on experience' (Wells, 1986). We seem to know that stories are a key link between speaking and listening and literacy.

It is through the language and actions of those involved that the everyday and fictional worlds are presented and made meaningful, and the ways in which people talk and act lead us to treat the presented reality as either everyday or make-believe (Millward, 1988). It is becoming clear that our lives are inextricably bound up with the stories of our lives, and there seems little point in seeking some mysterious existence which is really lived beyond our ability to account for our lives.

It is easy to treat storytelling or reading as an act of transmission. The storyteller passes on the story to the listener who may, subsequently, tell the story to others. Of course, the story will change in the telling: bits might be missed out or the sequence muddled. It is very unlikely that it will be remembered word for word and passed on as heard. Indeed, the new teller might willfully change aspects of the story. Nevertheless, this model always implies that there was some event, fictional or everyday, which the original story sought to describe and represent. It suggests that story telling is the act of matching words to events and relationships and that the teller's task is to find the most suitable words to describe these events and relationships. The reliability of the transmission depends upon the ability of the story teller to manage the match. The listener, within such a model, has to recreate the same events and relationships from the story and out of the words. Story tellers encode and story listeners decode using a shared in common language. Story tellers actively create stories and story listeners sit passively and receive them (Brown, 2001).

Everything changes, however, when the focus is put upon the story. The teller is using words to create events and relationships. The story is discovered in the telling and is characterised as much by the conventions of language

as by the conventions of everyday social engagement. The meaning is developed through the words and structures of the story (Ashworth, 1998), and not by reference to some real or imaginary world represented in the story. Bruner points out that,

The story's indifference to extra-linguistic reality underlines the fact that it has a structure that is internal to discourse. (Bruner, 1990)

The managed element in story telling and reading is apparent, and the storyteller is no longer presented as an earnest recorder striving to find the right words to describe a chain of events or pattern of relationships which existed before and beyond the telling. The storyteller is creating worlds out of words, whether the stories that he or she tells are true or make-believe.

But listening changes, too. The listeners make sense of the story as they take account of the flow of words and as they relate them to their experiences of language, literature and life. They are no longer seen as passive recipients of stories. The listeners are not hunting for some meaning behind the words but developing meaning out of the words. The story is not meaningful until the listeners make it so and every author, storyteller and story reader must remember that. The meaning of the story is developed collaboratively between tellers and listeners. They engage through the words to present a personal but shared in common story. The story is dependent upon the engagement developed through the language of the tellers and the listeners. The listeners may say nothing, but the teller has to be mindful of the listeners and take account of them, and the teller's words are spoken with the listeners in mind. The teller listens with the listeners and the listeners are a part of the telling.

Listeners are telling stories. They are producing stories out of the teller's words, they are creating narratives. The words are a part of the meaning making process and they provide indications. They are signs and pointers to a context, to what is going on, and there is always much more to the story than just the words. If the storyteller set out to describe in words every detail of an event there would be no end to the telling. This is not because life is endlessly complicated and that, to be accurate, a description would have to reflect that complexity, but because words are ever open to interpretation. If the story teller tried to wrap up the meaning in the story he or she would always need more words to account for the words already used. The meaning of words is not apparent and no amount of telling will make it so.

Teachers who appreciate the interactive involvement of tellers and listeners in producing stories approach story telling in a very different way from those who work with a transmission model in mind. They focus on the managed quality of the engagement and they treat the story as a process of shared meaning making. This contrasts with the storyteller who is concerned to pass on an everyday or fictional event through the medium of story and who will focus his or her attention on the subject of the story, on the selection of appropriate words and phrases and on the manner in which the story is delivered. For the storyteller, the meaning of the story is in the world the story describes and its meaning is discovered in the telling. It is important for the storyteller that the words carry this meaning and that the story is constructed and presented in a way which

reflects the world of the story and which passes on this world to the listeners. The story is successful in so far as the listeners can reproduce a world it seems to represent. Listeners listening to storytellers are encouraged to seek out the meaning in the words on the assumption that the teller has worked hard to produce an accurate description of the world behind the story. All that listeners need to recreate this world and make sense of the story is contained in the words of the story and in the experience of their lives. The meaning is with the text but it is created by the listeners in the listening.

Part of the meaning is with the text, but the text can never be sufficient. The words of the storyteller would fall on deaf ears if the listeners only heard them. Tellers create worlds through their stories. Listeners create worlds from the teller's words and no amount of hearing could do that. The worlds that the listeners create are indicated by the words of the story but they range beyond the story. They are created to make sense out of the words of the story. The storyteller's words are meaningful only in the world constructed by the listeners to make them meaningful. The words indicate contexts which the listeners develop and through which the words are found to be meaningful. They cannot stand on their own and every storyteller has to remember this.

We have to remember, as well, just how much work children have to do in order to make sense out of stories. Story telling demands the active involvement of listeners and tellers in the creation of meaningful contexts which can be shared in common though individually constructed. People can talk with one another about the stories they have shared and children 'may gain from others' responses while preserving their sense of uniqueness as readers' (Benton & Fox, 1985). There is 'the reader's inner reality and the outer reality of the words on the page', and 'different readers' responses to a story have enough in common to be shared while remaining highly individual' (Benton & Fox, 1985). It is in the classroom, in the company of others, that this sharing takes place. The outer reality is the point of contact, but each person's inner reality is changed through the engagement.

Stories and Literacy

Stories require children not only to 'think in the narrative mode but also to think about narrative as a means of interpreting and verbalising experience' (Verriour, 1990), and it is clear that stories are at the heart of young children's development as literate people. The contexts constructed by listeners and tellers are disembedded from the context of the storytelling, and stories depend upon children's ability to treat language as if it describes other worlds and other times. Stories require the listeners and tellers to take a reflective view of life and to experience what happens. They also focus attention on the language of the story, on the words and structures of the story and invite those involved to consider how words can be used to construct familiar events and relationships (DfES, 2003b).

Stories are the link between everyday language and literate forms of language. The story told in the classroom provides the link between the two. It is the link which gives stories the power to be meaningful as the literate form connects with everyday narratives, and the link which helps the child to engage in literate forms of language whilst barely being able to read or write. Stories are the

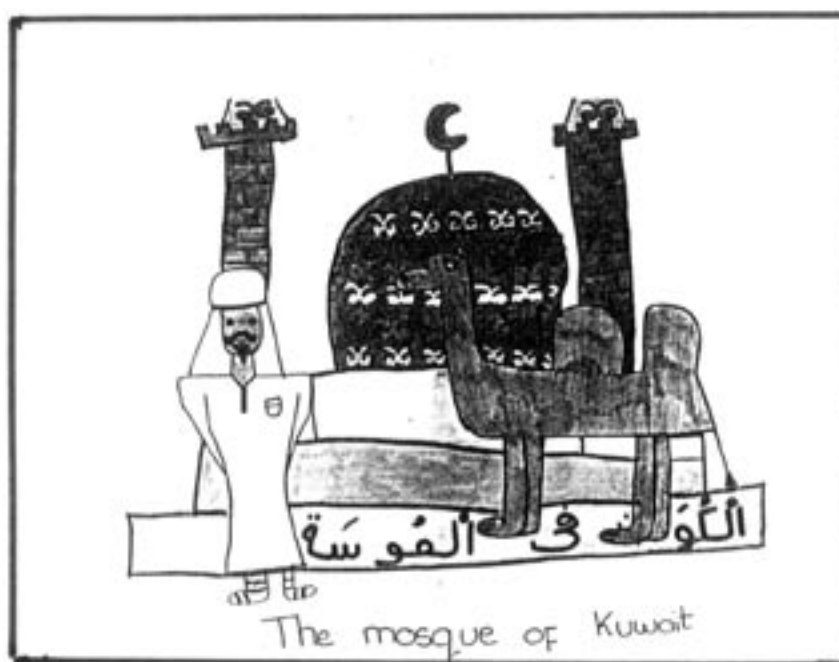
'bridge between the concreteness of the here-and-now and the abstraction of other ways of coming to know', they provide 'pathways to literacy' (Wray & Medwell, 1991). Literacy is more than reading and writing, for as children become more critical readers and writers they develop as critical thinkers and learners (Bruner, 2002).

Conclusion

In so far as we want young children to talk about stories we want them to talk in ways which are meaningful for them, and in ways which will enable them to talk about stories throughout their lives. To do this they need experience of stories and the chance to share their thoughts and feelings about stories with others. Stories are about talking and listening rather than about writing and reading. Children should be helped to develop a personal response to stories which can then be shared with others as they talk about the stories they know. Before they can respond to stories, they need experience of language and experience of literary and narrative conventions and the talking will grow out of that experience. The children's interest in the stories will generate talk about the stories and it is when the children are talking about the stories which they know, and have shared together, that the teacher can helpfully enter the conversation and help them to see more in the stories by sharing his or her response with them.

References.

- Ashworth, E. (1998) *Language Policy in the Primary School*. London: Croom Helm.
- Barrs, M. et al (1990) *Patterns of Learning: the primary language record and the national curriculum*. London: Centre for Language in Primary Education.
- Benton, M. & Fox, G. (1985) *Teaching Literature 9-14*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, A. (2001) *Respecting their Reading Language*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Bruner, J. (1988) Life As Narrative, in *Language Arts*, 65(6).
- Bruner, J. (1990) *Acts of Meaning*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. (2002) *Making Stories: law, literature, life*. Farrar Straus Giroux.
- Carter, D. (2000) *Teaching Fiction in the Primary School*. London: David Fulton.
- Corden, R. (2000) *Literacy and Learning Through Talk*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- DfES, (2003b) *Speaking, Listening, Learning: working with children in Key Stages 1 and 2. Handbook*. London: HMSO.
- DfES, (2003b) *Speaking, Listening, Learning: working with children in Key Stages 1 and 2. Teaching Objectives*. London: HMSO.
- Hardy, B. (1997) *Narratives as a Primary Act of Mind*, in M. Meek, et al (Eds) *The Cool Webb*. London: Bodley Head.
- Knight, A. (1992) Starting School: a painful process, in *Talk, Journal of the National Oracy Project*, No. 5.
- Labov, W. (1994) *Principles of Linguistic Change*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Millward, P. (1994) Making Sense in Standards in Reading, in *Evaluation and Research in Education*, Nos. 1 and 2.
- Thompson, L. & Millward, P. (1994) Children Talking about Poetry: changing classroom practice through teacher oriented research, in Hilary Constable, et al (Eds), *Change in Classroom Practice*. London: Falmer Press.
- Verriour, P. (1990) Story and Storytelling in Drama, *Language Arts*, 7(62).
- Wells, G. (1986) *The Meaning Makers: children learning language and using language to learn*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Wilkinson, A. (1990) Primary Acts of Minds, in A. Wilkinson et al, *Spoken English Illuminated*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Wray, D. & Medwell, J. (1991) *Literacy and Language in the Primary Years*. London: Routledge.



Jameelah. Age 6½