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How Can You Help Children to Communicate?

This chapter:

- considers the need to change our communication style if we are to encourage children to think and talk in the light of advice that four out of five comments from educators are negative (Wragg, 1994)
- explores how we can make a positive start to the above by questioning children in ways that do not require right or wrong answers
- recognises that children in school have varying abilities and backgrounds, and suggests that we need to present tasks that are suitable for a range of thinking and communicative levels
- shows that by understanding the nature of formal communication, which demands narrative thinking and structure, we can equip children to learn happily and successfully.

What do children need to help communication?

Life depends on our ability to communicate with other people. In class, therefore, our central concern should be how we communicate orally with children and how we facilitate this process of development. In reality, this is not so, as our main attention is given to reading and writing, although when children leave school, the focus will almost entirely be on speaking and listening. There are other probable reasons for our neglect of spoken communication. Can you think of some? Here are ideas that spring to mind:

- Communication is universal and ubiquitous (everywhere) and hard to capture and analyse.
- The results of communicating are not always apparent, as they affect the inner life of someone and appear intangible.

- Speech is here and gone, and is not as easily examinable as writing.
- Spoken communication is difficult to judge without extensive knowledge and training in a number of contributing medical, psychological and linguistic disciplines that enable precise evaluations of the manner, mode and movements that form verbal dynamics.

Thus, we are likely to believe that if spoken communication is neglected, no one will throw up their hands in horror! A few minutes in class proves the error of such an assumption, with pupils staring vacantly, behaving disruptively and performing poorly because of inappropriate and inadequate instruction. We think that since communication is natural, it will evolve effortlessly, but although a child has an in-built facility for this she needs opportunity to:

- Look, listen and reflect on good models of communication, in both informal and formal context.
- Imitate, try out and practise what is seen and heard.
- Clarify and control communication in interaction according to needs.
- Express feelings, ideas and views to develop thinking.
- Receive encouragement, coaching, sensitive correction and positive recognition for attempts.

If a child does not hear good models at home from parents who have intelligent, lively conversations and take an interest in the ability to understand and express, he will be either frustrated or inarticulate, unless the school assumes responsibility. Never has there been more need, as record numbers of children are arriving in school with inadequate communication, and research suggests that 75% of them are possibly at risk (Sage, 2000a).

There is an old saying that when a whole family is responsible for feeding the dog, it often goes hungry, and this is similar to the situation in schools. In a maths lesson, for example, the teacher may be too preoccupied with accuracy to worry about the way facts are presented, or how they are represented and related in a child's mind. Therefore, in addition to incidental work that might be possible, communication must be treated as a subject in its own right that is directly concerned with the pupil's interests and personality. The COGS, discussed in Chapter 1, follows this philosophy and some countries, such as Japan, have proved its importance by giving communication status, resulting in high levels of attainment.

If we do consider communication in school, generally it is superficially in relation to speech sounds, vocabulary or grammar performance, or in relation to speaking and listening components. There is nothing wrong with this, but it leaves areas of communicative experience untouched. In spite of advances in knowledge regarding teaching the 'whole child', we still devote most attention to the parts of a pupil that analyse and compute. The bits that feel, imagine, create and enjoy are given less importance, leading to split personalities. Therefore, we miss out on the integrating and unifying features of talk that employ body, brain, mind and spirit. The more opportunities and value we give

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to communication in classrooms, the more we are counteracting the disruptive tendencies in education, which treat facts separately from feelings and dish out bits of information in boxes. Under the National Curriculum, we are forced to think of subjects rather than children. Their needs and characteristics are off-timetable in today's world, but if we are to raise achievement, we must acknowledge the need for:

- adventure, fun and self-expression
- positive relationships that can inform, motivate, encourage and support
- positive and constructive feedback on performance
- communicating thoughts, feelings and views
- constant physical activity
- development of interaction, participation and social sense
- imagination and creation
- intellectual curiosity stimulated from rich experiences
- enjoyment of movement, rhythm, and repetition
- collection, making things and learning from active experience.

Education in communication (as in the COGS) satisfies these needs and helps expression through talk and oral games; physical activity through role-play; social sense through discussion; imagination through creative opportunities; intellectual curiosity through question-and-answer activities; movement and rhythm through choral speaking opportunities; and desire for adventure and active experience through news, storytelling and reporting. Communicating is thus the main factor in teaching the art of living, loving, belonging, knowing, believing and doing.

Classroom situations

What is the most essential thing for successful classroom learning? Surely, it is attitude of mind. Whatever aspect of education we take and whatever stage, the rapport between educators and learners is all-important. Communication is how we establish this relationship, and what is said and done, and how, are a reflection of the speaker's mind, feelings and imagination – the whole of his person in fact. We develop and demonstrate our personalities through talk. The adult most likely to succeed in helping children learn is the one who is interested in the lives, thoughts, feelings, responses and contributions of pupils. Such adults respect each child as an individual, showing positive value for the different personalities and talents in a group. They create an atmosphere that is comforting and comfortable, in which fluent speech can naturally grow.

Atmosphere defies definition, but one is immediately aware of its presence or absence. With it comes a sense of kindness, courtesy and friendly cooperation between adults and children, that is positive, promoting well-being and self-esteem. Classroom situations, however, are unreal for children, and if we want to produce effective responses from them, we need to resemble as far as possible the actual world we inhabit. We are likely to talk easily if we:

- do not feel constraint about using our voices to express
- converse with others on equal terms with chance to control the interaction
- engage, involve and share something that interests us
- want to hear what others have to say
- are not expected to talk for too long
- are not interrupted or put down by others
- are confident and competent about speaking in public
- are practised in the rules and moves of informal and formal communication.

However sympathetic adults try to be, they will remain something of an 'oracle' to pupils, who will generally be reticent about challenging the one who knows! It is important, therefore, to make every opportunity for children to talk among themselves and share their knowledge. The smaller the working group – down to a pair – the greater the relevance of the talk. The more experienced the class is in this way of working, the more useful consultation there is between groups and with adults in class.

The ignorance of a newcomer is the greatest stimulus for talk, so making chances for parents, friends and others to come and listen to presentations on trips or projects works wonders for developing narrative thinking and structure. This is common school practice in Japan, where they value communication above the curriculum. We do not normally tell something to someone who already knows, and too often children are asked to present familiar information, which results in a halting performance because of boredom. Let's consider how to help children become confident communicators.

Helping communication in class

In classrooms, educators see their major role as delivering new information to children, so that checking whether this has been assimilated is judged important. The following section makes suggestions to make the process more successful.

Questions and answers

It is surprising how seldom we analyse questioning activity, as it takes up a large amount of class time. How we frame questions is important for effective answers.

TASK 3.1A

HLTA 3.2.3 Monitor pupils' participation and progress, providing feedback to teachers, and giving constructive support to pupils as they learn.

Try asking children a questions such as *What animal barks?*

Then frame the question in a more open way: *What do we know about dogs?*

Record the range of answers, such as: *They are pets; There are lots of different types; We have a dog, Basil, at home; My favourite dog is a Jack Russell.*

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If we say, *What animal barks?* we shall get only the word 'dog' in reply. However, if we ask in a more open way, *What do we know about dogs?*, we are likely to achieve a range of answers. This type of question, therefore, facilitates a range of ideas, and encourages thinking. However, children must be able to *explain* in order to answer an *open* question. The use of a *closed* question demanding a one-word answer (*What is your favourite dog?*) focuses on a specific aspect of a situation and is appropriate for pupils who have limited communication. Such questions are judged right or wrong, and make children nervous about answering incorrectly.

It is important to regard questions as a whole-class situation, and not a one-to-one experience with the adult in charge. For this reason, we must encourage pupils to answer so that everyone can hear. Children will quickly get into the habit of speaking louder, slower and clearer if this is insisted upon. It helps them to achieve if an example is modelled and the response is coached as shown below.

TA: *Jo, I've shown you how to say: **The moon is round**, by moving the vowel and sounds in the words 'moon' and 'round', by slowing the 'oo' and the 'ou' down and building up sound. You have a try – creating a picture of what the words mean by the way you say them.*

Jo: *The moon is round.*

TA: *You really made the moon feel round with how you moved the 'oo' and 'ou' sounds. Try again to make your voice louder so that Mark in the back corner can hear you easily. Show that you really like telling us this fact!*

TASK 3.1B

Follow up the work above by modelling and encouraging effective communication of ideas to peers in a similar way to the above example.

What is the purpose of questions?

Reflecting on the purpose of questions is necessary because the ping-pong nature of the factual ones is more a test of memory than learning. If the aim is to check how much has been understood, it is more effective to achieve this indirectly through discussion, which allows judgement of how much information has been absorbed. And why not change places with pupils sometimes?

TASK 3.2

HLTA 3.2.2 They monitor pupils' responses to learning tasks and modify their approach accordingly.

Change places with the pupils. Get them to question you. Analyse the kind of questions they ask.

Children feel driven to remember facts, but if interested in a topic, they may be keen to know more. Questions asked by pupils will indicate how far we have succeeded in creating interest and enquiry, and will stimulate them to clarify thinking. Answering pupils' questions is an effective method of supplying just the right amount of information they need at a given time. Adults satisfy the curiosity of children and their desire to know and understand more about the world in which they live. The idea that school is a place where only educators question is contrary to the reality outside class where commonly children ask and adults provide answers. Obviously, this makes sense, as it is educators who should know the answers and children who need to question to gain information.

Children should also ask more questions of each other. In a talk where the speaker is hesitant, a question from another will prevent drying up and keep words flowing. When a group leader reports to the whole class what has been discussed, there must be chance for others to query. In true discussion, the children talk more than the adults, and their speech is directed to peers.

However, real discussion, where speakers are able to put forward a point of view with others confirming or contradicting it with evidence, is a sophisticated, advanced narrative thinking level. In a class/group situation, educators need constantly to produce experiences that tap into the whole range of thinking levels, because varying pupil ages and stages will mean they operate at different points on the cognitive and linguistic continuum. The following section presents some examples of what can be done to facilitate the range of narrative thinking stages.

Level 1: record: producing ideas

Unless we easily produce a range of ideas about something, it is difficult to develop any sense of their arrangement or make a judgement about them. Therefore, continually encouraging the expression of attributes kick-starts thinking. Ability to describe is essential to talking formally, as in giving a set of instructions, an explanation or telling or retelling of experiences. It is also the process that takes you into writing, as the following comparison of speech and written text indicates.

Informal speaking: Context – Rosie and Helen are doing a last-minute wander before their garden is open under the National Gardens Scheme.

Rosie (speaking to Helen): *They're the size of dinner plates!*

Formal writing: Rosie and Helen are in the garden looking at some giant sunflowers, which they have grown from seed. Both are amazed at the size of the blooms, and Rosie remarks, *They're the size of dinner plates!*

The written account makes up for the fact that anyone reading it cannot see events, so the place, people and actions have to be described and pictured to be understood. However, much information is missing, such as the age, size,

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physical appearance, relationship, personality, and mood of Rosie and Helen; the house and garden layout; the locality (urban or rural); the weather; the time of day and year; and the wider context – are there others present? – is it a casual occasion or is the garden open for charity/etc. If the context is not present, as in formal speech or writing, the audience has to make up for information and opinion gaps by using inference that allows them to bring both the context and events together to make sense. Imagination and experience are required in huge measure because meaning lies behind, rather than in, words themselves.

This process of informal to formal communication operates as a continuous activity of both cognitive and linguistic development known as narrative thinking and structure. This needs to be understood and addressed specifically and developmentally in teaching routines for children to move effortlessly from speaking to writing. Some ideas for helping this process are listed here.

- If you are introducing a learning topic (such as **Healthy food**), have actual examples present and ask pupils to select one from those supplied. Pass the object around so all can see and feel, and ask everyone to say one thing about it. If working with a small group, you can go round repeatedly for as long as pupils can bring up ideas. It is useful to nominate one child to keep a tally of ideas expressed (the most I have totalled is 309 in response to a hologram disc I bought at Universal Studios, Hollywood!). When the responses started to resemble ideas already expressed – I would liven up the process with a comment: *I think the hologram would make me a lovely earring*, starting off a completely new train of thought with the group! The number of ideas can be recorded and compared in a graph with similar activities. Communication switches constantly between speaking, listening, reading and writing, and all modes should be considered together if possible. As literacy and numeracy are secondary language activities, expressing information in graphics and numerics instead of phonemes (word sounds), they need to be introduced in contexts that are meaningful, so that children can understand their application. This is important because Ewers-Rogers (1992) has shown that children have problems in applying numbers in real situations because they have not been introduced in meaningful ways.
- If you are introducing or reinforcing a topic, prime children before and encourage them to bring into school anything they might have to illustrate this. Ask for small objects that can go in a box. If working with a whole class, divide it into groups of about 6-8 and have a box for each group in which to place the objects they have brought. Play music (a pupil can be put in charge) and pass the box around the circle. When the music stops, the child with the box has to take out an object (not their own) and say what they can about it in 30 seconds (another child can be in charge of timing). The adult's role is to observe child responses and identify those who have difficulty expressing a range of attributes. This is the fundamental level of narrative thinking, and no child can progress without this intact. This game is popular with all ages.

- Make creative thinking a regular class/group/individual challenge. Take something that cannot be obviously named, such as a *black blob*, and ask participants to come up with ideas of what they think it is. Keep the score on the door, and at the term's end the group/child with the most points for these challenges is awarded a prize (a yard of chocolate, with eight bars is popular and can be equally shared). This imaginative ability has to be fostered and the pay-offs are pupils who can produce ideas effortlessly to take into writing.

Level 2: recite: arrange ideas in a limited way, but not in time sequence

When children can produce a range of ideas about something, they naturally start to structure them in some way. Using the previous topic, (**Healthy foods**), produce a shopping basket with the following items:

apple, cheese, salmon (tin), porridge, carrot, honey, lemon, sardines (tin), baked beans (tin), eggs, butter, banana, potato, tuna (tin), orange, onion, milk, bread and nuts.

The activity can be done as an individual, group or class exercise. Children should be encouraged to discover their own categories in which to slot objects. If this is done as an individual exercise, follow up with a paired one so children can discuss and compare choices more widely. Then one pair can be put with another to extend comparisons.

Possible groups may be *fruit, vegetables, fish, sweet things, things coming from cows, breakfast foods, snack foods, and things liked or disliked.*

Categorising the goods will produce discussion and possible dissension, but if this is done as a group exercise, it encourages negotiation and decision. In the review, pupils should share reflections and, if there is time, choose their favourite food, and mime it for others to guess. This reinforces non-verbal communication and helps to develop powers of inference for understanding formal talk or text.

In most teaching, categorising plays a part, so devising activities that highlight this continually and continuously sharpens judgement. Giving children a chance to express choices develops meta-cognition. It is a difficult concept, but it means ability to reflect on behaviour and awareness of what is involved in doing something. This high-level ability is necessary for advanced learning and monitoring one's own performance.

Level 3: refer: compare ideas

Once children can sort ideas according to criteria, they can proceed to making comparisons of similarity and difference in a more advanced way. Here are some suggestions.

- Put children in pairs, back to back, and have each paired child in turn report on what the other is wearing, so that they have to recall through visualisation. Then get them to discuss similarities and differences between the

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clothing sets because, even though they might be in uniform, there will be differences in size, colour, style or material to identify.

- Ask children to discuss things that make them happy or sad, and compare group choices to discover similarities and differences. These can be expressed graphically and numerically, since part of interactive communication is teamwork – planning and producing results that can be expressed in spoken or written forms. Every opportunity should be taken to reinforce these broader notions of communication, known as key skills, although *skill* is a misnomer, as cognitive *process* is the accurate representation of what is involved. *Process* is a connected, continuous natural action, whereas *skill* is doing something well. Therefore, *process* defines the phenomenon and *skill* the way it is performed. For example, reading is a process in which we are skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled. If we reduce process to skill in our minds, we fail to understand the nature of the set of continuous events, by just focusing on performance. The shift is from informal to formal speaking and then into writing. Since this oracy-to-literacy move is not viewed as continuous, children are thrust into written activities before they have acquired informal and formal speaking. This happens regularly in today's education system. Children are asked to perform written tasks that are beyond thinking and speaking levels (case studies in Sage, 2000a).
- If you establish a review period after an activity, you have an opportunity to compare facts and opinions, with pupils encouraged to sum up what has been expressed in terms of these criteria. Facts and opinions form the basis of evaluation, and it is difficult to encourage children to do this at higher levels, suggesting that the narrative process has not been specifically taught and regularly practised for conscious and confident reflection.

Level 4: replay: sequence ideas in time

This level is often a sticking point for children who have learning problems because they find it difficult to move thinking from present to past and future time. Luria and Yudovich (1968) have called this problem *synpraxia*, and it is common in primary pupils. It will be witnessed in child language if the past or future tense is not signalled and events are expressed in present tense only. Here is an example of a 6-year-old boy, Mark, talking about his trip to his grandparents on the previous day:

*I go Gramp's and Gran's house. (3) I see Rory and Ralph (cousins). (2)
We go to park. (5) I watch football match and eat dinner. (4) I dig holes
and plant seeds. They're sunflowers. (1)*

The authenticity of events was checked with Mark's mum. The seed planting happened first, followed by seeing the cousins, who dropped by on their way shopping. The visit to the grandparents happened at 2.30 pm, and as Liverpool (Gramp's favourite team) was playing, they had lunch watching the match followed by a play on the swings in the park nearby.

Mark has chosen from a range of events that had happened the day before, but he has not presented these in the correct time frame. His language gives a clue to his lack of awareness of time space, as all five events are expressed in present tense. When Mark's performance was investigated further, it appeared that he was not adept at sorting or comparing things, so this was reinforced in level 2 and 3 activities within a weekly COGS group in school. It is logical that children must have a well-developed ability to compare attributes if they are to move from area to time space easily. Once this narrative level was established for Mark, it was much easier to work on the concept of time within the framework of a day – selecting one thing at breakfast, one at lunch and one at bedtime as reference points. The expression of these events in the past tense was established before considering the same exercise in a future event such as tomorrow. The relation of cognitive and linguistic competence is clearly illustrated, and the importance of considering these together is fully established.

This activity may be varied according to requirements. Children can be asked in class/group one thing they did well yesterday, one today and one they hope to do tomorrow, so the concept of events outside present time can be reinforced.

Level 5: recount: explain ideas – how? why?

This level flows naturally from the last, but comprehending the order of events and how they fit to achieve a goal takes the thinking a step further. Explaining how to make a sandwich, or a cup of tea, or to clean a pair of shoes, depends on understanding how and why events occur. You cannot make tea if the articles needed have not been gathered and tasks ordered correctly. For example, the kettle must be filled with cold water before it is boiled. A child will have grasped cause and effect to achieve a correct sequence at this level. At stage 4, the preservation of exact order is not necessary to retell the events of a day, a trip, an experience, etc. These steps in narrative thinking are important not only to consider but also to fully comprehend and implement within classroom practice.

The fact that some school leavers have not achieved this narrative level is reported in the literature and by the Confederation of British Industry website. Inability to give instructions is a familiar complaint about employees and evidence that these higher-thinking levels have not been grasped.

Give pupils the opportunity to explain how to do things. Instead of doing this yourself, as the adult in charge, allow them to give familiar instructions about lining up for assembly or catching a bus for swimming lessons. They do this in Japan, and if you give pupils control they not only behave well, but also rise to the occasion.

TASK 3.3

HLTA 3.3.1 Using clearly structured teaching and learning activities, they interest and motivate pupils, and advance their learning.

Design an opportunity to enable pupils to give others instructions in a meaningful context. Make time to discuss afterwards how improvements can be made.

Level 6 : report: discuss ideas – giving an opinion

In giving a report, the importance of descriptive language comes into its own, as visualising to retain and recall information is reinforced. When an event has been described so that it can be seen in the mind's eye, you then can give opinion and reflection. This depends upon being objective about the situation and demonstrating different points of view before drawing conclusions based on attitudes, values and experience. Start off by encouraging visualisation to conjure up detail. Bell (1991) and Sage (2003) both stress the importance of picturing something to make the information meaningful in order to remember it. Both researchers suggest that children who fail to learn have limited visualisation abilities.

- Ask pupils to close their eyes for a minute and imagine a white screen on their foreheads. Instruct them to concentrate hard and see what pops onto the screen, raising their hands when they have a picture. Pupils can swap descriptions in pairs. In the whole-class group, suggest that two or three pupils share their pictures. This focuses on the descriptive process, which can be recorded in a picture, words, or whatever way pupils choose.
- Mock television reports are often a popular way to improve reporting abilities if there is a video camera at hand. Pupils can be put in groups with roles of camera operator, producer, producer's assistant, presenter, etc., and asked to organise a report lasting two minutes on something that interests them or a topic of study. They must provide a brief description, giving a comment that reflects a range of views before establishing their own opinion. Using video gives feedback, so that pupils can see themselves in action and assess the pros and cons of their performances.
- Although debates may be better left to secondary schools, when children have established an ability to be objective and decisive, there is advantage in posing questions on issues such as *Keeping animals as pets* in order to help children understand different points of view and establish their own position within the range of arguments. Children often try to score points rather than seek the truth, and this must be discussed so that everyone can understand the benefits of listening respectfully and seriously to what others say.

Level 7: relate: tell a story with setting, events, actions, reactions, conclusions and reflections

This level puts together all the narrative components honed to perfection on previous ones! Retelling stories is regarded by many as a ghastly ritual, but it is a reliable guide to a child's cognitive and linguistic competence and should be treated imaginatively. Ask for the class to vote for a favourite story and then in groups of six be responsible for a specific episode to present. For example, if the story is *Cinderella*, tell it to the children first to establish the storyline and then structure the parts that make up the whole narrative:

1. **The setting:** Cinderella's home and her ugly sisters
2. **Events:** the invitation to the prince's ball and preparations to attend
3. **Actions:** the fairy godmother, dress and coach; the ball, and the prince dancing with Cinderella
4. **Reactions:** midnight and Cinderella's flight; the prince's search
5. **Conclusion:** the prince finds Cinderella
6. **Reflections:** bad situations can get better!

Children have fun putting together a performance and should be encouraged to use the above or a similar format. This helps them understand the unity of events and how they fit together and take apart. Very shy children or those with a communication problem can be paired and assigned a non-speaking role. Once pupils have decided on the content for their section, they can produce props to enliven the performance.

This teaches children the way in which a continuous narrative is composed and ensures that all are aware of what is expected of them. The actual telling, however, should be in the children's own words and in the way they want to express these.

Another approach is to vary the length of a story already presented to children by contracting or expanding the narrative. So, the group could take *Cinderella* and work out how to tell the 10-minute story in three minutes. Here is an example of a traditional tale that children have enjoyed expanding:

Zut was a boy who lived in Zulu with his father and mother, the king and queen. They were happy except for one thing: Zut would pull faces. Everyone told him that his face would get stuck and it did. Wizards, witches, doctors and dentists tried to straighten Zut's face but all failed. One clever man said the only cure was to see a face as ugly as his own. The king offered a reward and everyone hurried to the palace to make an ugly face, but no one was quite as ugly as Zut. Then one day, he was walking sadly in the garden and looked into a pool. There, Zut saw a face as ugly as his. He was cured instantly and never pulled an ugly face again.

Pupils are given a few minutes to think how they would tell the story, and then four are sent out of class. They return one by one and tell their own version supplying what details they choose. The attention is kept because the stories are all so different, and the class can discuss this in the review part of the lesson.

Another variation is to tell an old, familiar story. Most children in the Midlands have heard of Robin Hood and his merry band who robbed the rich to give to the poor. In our rich, celebrity culture with an opposing underclass, the story has a modern ring.

Select children to be Robin Hood, Maid Marion, Friar Tuck and Little John, who are the main characters in the narrative. Robin tells Friar Tuck to call his followers (the class group) to a clearing in the forest (the centre of the room). Robin addresses them, saying they are going to hear about events that have happened to the outlaw band. He asks for a volunteer as the first storyteller. The

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children then can come forward in turn and create or re-create the many tales told about Robin Hood and his merry band, and all can be actively involved in the telling. The more that they can enter into the spirit of the scenes and act the part of creative listeners, the more successful the storytelling.

Developing narrative thinking through discussion

It is important to be aware that there are many narrative levels – in our model, seven have been identified. Understanding that narrative thinking and structure are continuous processes helps us to select activities for children that are appropriate to their own stage of development. Normally children fail because they are given tasks that are beyond their cognitive and linguistic capacity. In the next section, we reflect in more detail about discussion, because this is the teaching style to implement for facilitating thinking, communicating and learning, but it needs careful handling to be successful.

A good discussion depends on conversation, which is a neglected art. In schools, educators talk to children, who might occasionally reply, but this cannot accurately be described as proper discourse, as adults dominate and control the action. As Pooh Bear complained, *That isn't conversing – not first one and then the other!* but this kind of talking is common in many contexts. Good conversation is a situation where there is equal control between participants, and the topic is taken up, commented on and extended, so that all benefit from a true exploration of ideas and different viewpoints are expressed.

Discussion

Discussion is the most important communication activity for learning, as it:

- creates a lively interest by airing a range of contrasting views
- enlarges knowledge by sharing and reflecting on information
- helps children to know others and their interests and to consider the environment
- teaches respect and consideration for the views of others
- trains the clear thinking and coherent expression needed for the development of narrative thinking and structure.

Discussion also provides training for the *middle* language that is halfway between playground slang and bookish English – the type of formal language needed for learning. The best discussions arise spontaneously from current events – just after a trip out, on hearing local news, or at the announcement of something exciting such as the circus coming to town! The children's natural excitement fires up their minds. However, one can arouse a similar feeling by subjects such as history or geography, as dialogue can be used to collect information and provide insight into pupils' personalities and opinions while checking on what has been assimilated.

Discussion takes two forms: whole-class discussion under adult direction, and the group type when small sets of pupils work simultaneously on the same

thing or on different topics in either different or mixed ability forums. It is useful in small-group discussions to arrange a whole-class plenary and elect a leader to present a summary of the consensus. This allows an enormous amount of information to be shared and reviewed.

Whole-class discussion

This is a good starting point, as it enables an adult to model good practice and set the pattern for small-group activities. They can create an atmosphere, that will produce lively but serious talk. The over-talkative child can be restrained, and the shy, hesitant one encouraged. In order to make discussion work, it is essential to:

1. be clear about what is being discussed
2. limit the ground to be covered.

For example, if we ask children what they think about the video they have just seen on the tsunami disaster, they are likely to answer: *Bad, Upsetting, Scary*. These do not reinforce an impression or increase a pupil's ability to express views. As an alternative, suppose we take one aspect at a time:

- **setting:** Asia; coastal regions; climate; types of dwellings
- **story:** eruption of giant plates; massive wave; devastation; rescue activities
- **people:** adults; children; tourists; things that happened to them; how they coped; the problems experienced; the population's work, dress, future, etc.
- **our reactions:** feelings, views, knowledge of the area; handling disasters; what we can learn from the experience; comparisons with other world events.

This allows children to focus minds, relive the experience, and bring into play their feelings and imagination. When they speak, they will have many things to talk about, which will be ordered and relayed with animation. This does mean some preparation by the adult in charge, who must decide the headings for discussion – although it might be possible to draw these out from the class and get them to set the agenda. At the very least, the adult needs to create the scene and provide a few signposts that set pupils on their way. Getting the class, for example, to recall and describe something awful that has happened, in order to draw out general points about coping helps orientate minds to disasters. We have all had some experience of them. The children could be put in groups briefly to think up questions that they want answered, such as *What would you do if your house was smashed to bits?* or *What do you need to survive when you have lost everything?* Having decided the field for discussion, the whole class, will then consider points one by one. The adult's role is to provide a summary of what has been said. After practice in the class group, children should be ready to tackle discussion in smaller forums.

Group discussion of a topic

This has strong advantages as more ground can be covered in the same time and individuals have more chance to talk. This is the perfect format to develop leadership and examine roles and relationships in the group. Nominating one or two children to observe group behaviour is essential in order to draw attention to aspects of effective working. Notice who did the most talking, who was missed out of the dialogue, how problems were resolved; how ideas progressed, etc.

The procedure is as follows. Begin with whole-class talk after you have introduced the topic. Have the class briefly comment, and select headings for detailed discussion with support. For example: *Our class is having a day for parents and friends to see what we do.* Headings may emerge as follows:

1. When is it best to have the day?
2. What sort of events should we offer?
3. How would we display our class activities?
4. Do we need refreshments? If so what, when and how would we prepare them?
5. If children come, how could we keep them happy and entertained?
6. What are the jobs to be done and how do we decide roles?

Six headings would generate topics for six groups of 5–6 pupils, with one elected as leader. They should be asked to set rules for discussion, and the leader's role must be clarified. Make sure all have a chance to speak, keep order, review what has been said, and summarise final results and reactions.

Contrary to expectation, discipline problems seldom arise if pupils are responsible for their own actions. The more engaged they are, the less noise they will make, although animated talk creates a working buzz!

The adult/s should move from group to group, checking that the leader is encouraging everyone to take part and answering questions that arise. At first, a natural leader will emerge in the group, but, gradually all children should be helped to accept this role. The discussion lasts for around five minutes, allowing a great deal of talk. Then the leaders report on their group's findings, standing up so that their voice carries to the whole class. The leaders need to be reminded that they are addressing other groups, and not the teacher, who may need to move behind the furthest-away child to discourage this tendency.

After the leader has spoken, other members should add comments, with the class free to question and comment. Finally, the adult summarises and adds appropriate reflections.

In Japan, group discussions are part of all lessons, and the final review sees every child making a comment on what they feel about the experience. Although, this is less of a tradition in England, it should be encouraged if we really want to deepen thinking and expression and raise pupil standards.

Discussion begins to work after about 3–4 trials and must become a regular feature of classroom practice if one is to reap results in improved pupil performance.

TASK 3.4

HLTA 3.3.5 Advance pupils' learning in a range of classroom settings, including working with individuals, small groups and whole classes where the assigned teacher is not present.

Initiate a discussion using one of the models above. Show how you have planned, before hand, some specific aspects related to the topic to help children focus. If possible, compare the outcomes, the quality of talk, and the level of motivation and enthusiasm with a discussion that was not so structured.

Group discussion on different topic dimensions

Once the class is familiar with discussion as a way to learn, the format can be varied. After setting the scene with a brief introduction, the six headings are decided, but instead of discussing the *whole* subject, each group discusses *one* of the six aspects. It works best if children join the group that is talking about the dimension of greatest interest to them. This approach saves time and makes it possible to tackle aspects in depth, leading to less overlapping in reporting back.

It is useful to suggest the continuation of the discussion at home and ask pupils to bring back parents' views for a later lesson. This helps to create a bond between home and school and establish this type of talk outside the four walls of the classroom. *Should everyone help with home chores?* is a good topic.

Discussing with support staff

Often support staff take groups for specific purposes, such as extra reinforcement for a lesson recently taught, but the rules for discussion can still be used to conduct effective talk. Some children will not have achieved conversational skills and need to be placed in pair situations in order to develop listening and responding. Maybe they will be unable to discuss without props to prompt ideas. So, if they are asked to talk about making a list of things needed for survival – a picture of a devastating scene will aid thinking and a number of objects such as a bottle of water, a blanket, plasters, etc., will give them things to touch that can activate memories.

Discovery groups

This variation begins with six speakers who give a 2-minute talk on something that interests them. The adult checks that topics are not the same to ensure a varied programme. After the talks, six groups are formed, with the speaker hot-seating – answering questions from the rest. It is obviously sensible for children to join the group that most appeals. The session ends with another group member providing a review of the gathered information for the whole class. As children should be assessed for oral as well as written performance, the class can draw up two aspects of a good presentation (*clear facts; performance that keeps everyone listening*) and an effective working group (*all said something; task completed*). Pupils are encouraged to rank performances from

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5 = excellent through to 1 = could do better. The small groups mark for effective working while the whole class assesses the presentations. Marks are totalled by pupils, and means are recorded. When children assess themselves, they learn to understand expected standards and gain a better appreciation of how to achieve them.

TASK 3.5

HLTA 3.3.3 Promote and support the inclusion of all pupils in the learning activities in which they are involved.

Design an opportunity for pupils to engage in assessing each other.

Project groups

These work well for children who are over 7 years old, as the work extends over several periods, requiring the ability to keep ideas in mind over time. A theme arises out of a visit, discussion or lesson, and after class review, all children conduct their own research on an aspect that interests them. After two sessions, the teacher assesses progress in a lesson where everyone has a minute to speak about the collected information. This gives an opportunity to group those with similar interests with a brief for a public presentation after another 6–8 lessons.

This approach is common in Japan, where pupils are given great freedom to work where and how they like (library, outside, other free space, etc.), resulting in their communicating ideas, planning and working together, and producing a team effort, and this fosters community and pride. It provides a natural format for the contextual use of both spoken and written components of communication, and because work is under the children's control, there is more motivation and enthusiasm to succeed. Class unity, accompanied by the right attitudes and techniques for discussion, is an essential aspect of the success of this method. Children today often come to school with no conversational abilities – no notion of turn taking, listening to others, or following a topic thread – so that discussions may take time to become established and be effective. They are worth pursuing through the pain barrier, however, as they are the key to engaged and enhanced performances by pupils.

Teaching communication to children

In subject lessons, coaching in communication is largely incidental. We can, however, achieve results as long as we believe the child is more important than the subject, and every chance is given for pupil-talk in pairs, in groups and to the whole class. There are also many opportunities available in the social life of school, where children can show visitors around, take messages, retain registers to the office, announce on the public address system, organise fund raising, arrange book clubs, talk at assemblies, etc. This incidental work, however, is not sufficient. The problem with subject teaching is that educators are

listening for evidence of correct information, and pupils are asked to talk about something they have only just heard about and not fully assimilated. In social activity, the emphasis is on action, and not the quality of the talk, so neither of these two experiences is enough to develop the communication process that is needed to sustain high personal and academic standards.

It is therefore important to have a time each week when topics of general or strong personal interest can be concentrated on for effective expression and communication, and the format of the COGS is strongly recommended for this, as it is based on the development of ideas (narrative thinking) and how they are expressed (narrative structure), so that children have the best chance to match cognitive and linguistic progress. Unless pupils have the opportunity for specific teaching and coaching in communication that can lay stronger foundations for secondary language developments, we will continue to wrestle with the problem of raising standards. The next chapter looks at developing specific speaking techniques that help effectiveness.

Key Points

- Spoken communication is the way we conduct life's business, but it takes second place to literacy in educational practice.
- Children need time to talk in order to develop thinking and expression.
- When working with children, we need to be aware of their different thinking and communication stages.
- A model of narrative thinking and structure successfully differentiates tasks for children and allows them to work at a level at which they can achieve success as well as having the opportunity to observe activities at further points along the continuum.
- Equal opportunity for children and adults to express ideas and opinions is the classroom style that achieves success, but this needs a guided approach, as many children have limited conversational skills.
- TAs can develop their role of helping children access learning by becoming aware of the communicative process and how to facilitate this both informally and formally.