

Doc #3 (Note: There are two docs with this headline, but they are different from each other).

## **CLASSROOM DISCOURSE: THE PROMISE AND COMPLEXITY OF DIALOGIC PRACTICE<sup>1</sup>**

ADAM LEFSTEIN AND JULIA SNELL, *Institute of Education, University of London*

We estimate that the average English primary teacher poses over 60,000 questions and follows up pupil responses with over 30,000 evaluations in every year of classroom lessons. This talk is shaped by deeply ingrained habits, resulting in part from an estimated 13,000 hours spent as a pupil watching others' teaching practice (Lortie, 1975). However, a recent resurgence of interest in classroom discourse among educational researchers and policy-makers is focussing attention on patterns of teacher talk. This attention, in turn, is placing demands upon teachers that they transform their talk, making conscious and informed choices about what had heretofore normally been second nature.

How should teachers and teacher educators respond to these demands? What do they need to know and understand about classroom discourse? In addressing these questions we review a broad consensus emerging from three decades of research on the topic, according to which (i) the way teachers and pupils talk in the classroom is crucially important, but (ii) the dominant pattern of classroom discourse is problematically monologic, so (iii) it should be replaced with more dialogic models. While we find much merit in this conventional wisdom, in this chapter we also show its limitations, arguing that teaching and classroom interaction are far more complicated and problematic than is typically captured by descriptions of and prescriptions for dialogue.

One note about the scope of our discussion: Pupils and teachers talk in multiple classroom settings and configurations, including, for example, whole class lecture or discussion, pupils talking in pairs, one-on-one teacher-pupil conferencing, and small group work (with and without teacher guidance). Here we focus primarily on discourse in the whole class setting, partly on account of space limitations, but also because the complexities we examine are most pronounced in this configuration. We caution, however, that this focus should not be interpreted as in any way detracting from the importance of alternative settings; indeed, good pedagogy draws upon a broad repertoire of teacher and pupil discourse and interactive forms (Alexander, 2005).

### **Classroom talk matters**

Intuitively, how teachers and pupils communicate must be important: after all, talk is central to most of what happens in classrooms. Through talk, for example, concepts are explained, tasks demonstrated, questions posed, and ideas discussed; indeed, one is hard-pressed to think of any significant school activities that do not involve talk in some way. But talk's ubiquity in classrooms is a rather weak argument for its importance. Perhaps children would be better served by lessons with less talk, thereby allowing each to get on with their own work, individually, without the distractions of teacher guidance, pupil chatter and other noise. However, a strong argument ties talk and language to pupil thinking, learning and development. In a famous passage, Vygotsky asserts the primacy of social interaction in human development:

---

<sup>1</sup> Pre-publication copy of chapter included in Ellis, S., McCartney, E. & J. Bourne (eds.) (2011). *Applied Linguistics and Primary School Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 165-185.

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, *between* people (*interpsychological*) and then inside the child (*intrapsychological*)... All the higher mental functions originate as actual relations between people. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57)

Vygotsky argues that thinking originates in social interaction – that discourse between people is internalised as individual cognition. There are at least three ways in which internalised talk can advance thinking. First, language is a cognitive resource: by being exposed to and participating in certain ways of using language, one becomes a “fluent speaker” of that language, able to use and understand its key concepts and expressions (cf. Lemke, 1990). Second, through talk participants are exposed to alternative voices and perspectives that challenge or elaborate their own world-view. Third, habitual interactional patterns – e.g. providing all participants opportunity to voice their views, demanding and providing justification for arguments, questioning assumptions, clarifying concepts, and so on – are internalised as habitual ways of thinking. Indeed, Sfard (2008) argues that the similarities between interpersonal communication and individual cognition are such that they can usefully be thought of as different manifestations of the same processes.

In short, the ways of talking into which we are socialised shape both the cognitive tools at our disposal and the habits of mind whereby we put those tools to use. This idea is supported by numerous studies of the relationship between classroom talk and pupil learning (see Mercer [2008] for a succinct review). This raises the question: What ways of talking do children most commonly encounter in classrooms?

### **Conventional patterns of classroom talk**

It is difficult to generalise about classroom talk, since different classroom cultures have developed in different national contexts (cf. Alexander, 2001); schools, teachers and pupils differ within contexts; and indeed patterns of talk in the same class may vary with changing topics, aims and activities. Nevertheless, over three decades of research in a wide variety of Anglo-American schools have found relatively consistent patterns in the whole class teaching observed (e.g. Cazden 2001; Edwards & Westgate 1994; Galton, Hargreaves, Comber and Pell, 1999; Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Smith, Hardman, Wall & Mroz, 2004). Teachers dominate classroom interaction, talking most of the time, controlling topics and allocation of turns, judging the acceptability of pupil contributions, and policing inappropriate behaviour. Pupils talk much less than the teacher, for shorter durations and in most cases only in response to teacher prompts. Whole class discourse is typically structured in Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) cycles: teachers *initiate* topics, primarily by asking predictable, closed questions that test pupils' recall of previously transmitted information; pupils *respond* with brief answers; and teachers *evaluate* pupil responses, praising correct answers (“well done!”) and/or censuring error (“you haven't been paying attention!”). (Some researchers prefer IRF [Initiation-Response-Feedback] to IRE, thereby signalling the multiple functions that can be performed in the third move [Wells, 1993]. However, given the actual frequency of evaluation, we find IRE to be a more fitting description.)

To illustrate these patterns, consider the segment in Extract #1, which was recorded during a Year 5 lesson (pupils aged 9 to 10 years) on apostrophes in Southern England in April 2004 (for details about the study from which this episode was extracted see Lefstein, 2005, 2008). Prior to this segment the pupils completed a worksheet of exercises involving placement of missing apostrophes. The teacher, Ms. Goodwin, then orally reviewed their answers sentence-by-sentence.

### *Extract #1 – “Hundreds of animals bones”*

1 Ms. Goodwin: next sentence  
2 sh:h (2)  
3 “Its made (.) of hundreds (.) of animals (.) bones” (.)  
4 lots of “s”-es in there (.)  
5 Drew  
6 Drew: bones  
7 (2)  
8 Ms. Goodwin: is it just telling you  
9 there’s more than one bone  
10 or is it telling you that  
11 something belongs to those bones?  
12 (7)  
13 Ms. Goodwin: does anything belong to those bones?  
14 Drew: no  
15 Ms. Goodwin: no (.)  
16 it’s not one  
17 that’s just an “s” to show  
18 that it’s more than one (.)  
19 Beatrice  
20 Beatrice: its  
21 Ms. Goodwin: its is the first one  
22 which is short for (.)  
23 Pupil: it is  
24 Ms. Goodwin: it is made (.) of hundreds (.) of animals (.) bones  
25 Keith  
26 Keith: hundreds  
27 (1)  
28 Keith: no  
29 Ms. Goodwin: what belongs to the hundreds?  
30 Keith: no (.) animals  
31 Ms. Goodwin: animals (.) good

Ms. Goodwin introduces the problem by restating the sentence, “Its made of hundreds of animals bones” (line 3). Since the class have already reviewed a number of similar exercises, this restatement of the problem is understood by the pupils as a prompt to provide the answer. This initiation elicits three responses, each of which is further probed by Ms. Goodwin. See Figure 16.1 for a schematic summary of the segment’s structure.

Response #1: Drew responds with “bones”, which is incorrect. Ms. Goodwin does not explicitly evaluate this response, though her rejection of his answer is palpable in the two second pause in line 7 – correct responses in Ms. Goodwin’s classroom are immediately accepted – and in her probing of his answer (in lines 8-13). In following up Drew’s response, Ms. Goodwin questions whether the “s” in bones signifies the plural form or possession (lines 8-11). This initiation is met with seven seconds of silence, after which she reformulates her question with the more straightforward “does anything belong to those bones?” (line 13). Drew responds, “no”, which Ms. Goodwin confirms by repeating it (line 15). She then draws out the implication – “[bones] is not one [of the correct answers]” (line 16) – and then elaborates upon his one-word answer by explaining the function of the “s” that presumably confused him (lines 17-18).

Response #2: Since Drew’s response has been rejected, the floor is now open to other guesses. Beatrice responds with “it’s”, which is positively evaluated by her teacher (in line 21). Ms. Goodwin then follows up with a new initiation, asking what “it’s” is short for (line 22). An unidentified pupil offers the correct response, which is also positively evaluated through repetition of the sentence with the contraction spelled out.

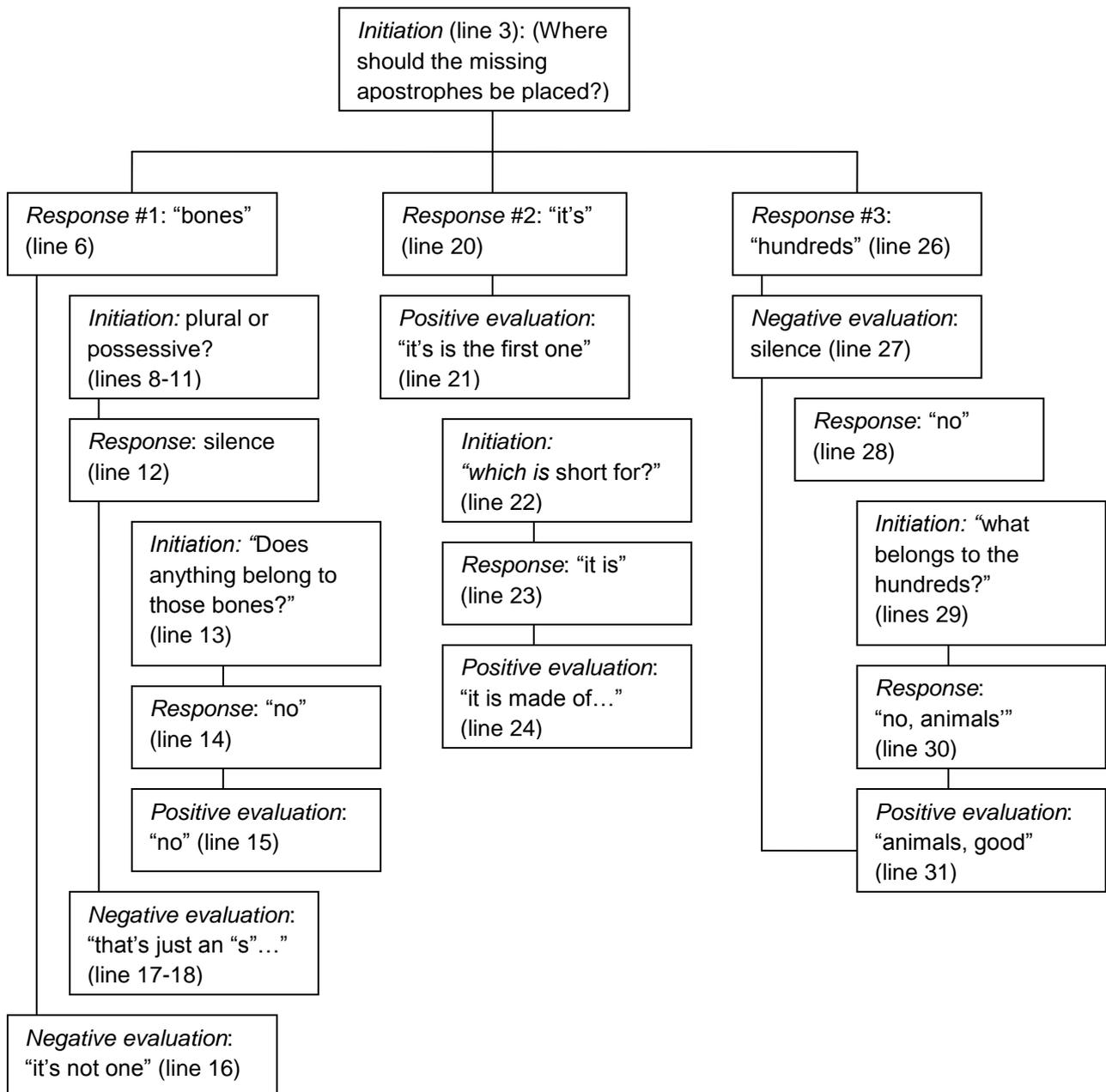


Figure 16.1: Schematic structure of Extract #1

Response #3: For each of these problems two apostrophes were missing, so, now that the first one has been located, the (unstated) question is where the second apostrophe should be placed. In line 26 Keith offers “hundreds”, but then retracts this answer one second later, after it was not ratified as correct. Ms. Goodwin begins to probe his response (in line 29) – an additional sign that it is incorrect – and Keith changes his response to “animals” (line 30), which is indeed praised as correct (in line 31).

In addition to the IRE structure, the segment exhibits the other discourse features reviewed above: the teacher controls the topic, allocates turns, and talks more often and for longer durations than the pupils, who respond with one or two word answers. Ms. Goodwin poses “closed questions”, i.e. questions for which the teacher has one correct answer in mind. Repeated investigations have found a much higher rate of closed than open questions in teacher discourse. For example, in a major study of classroom interaction in English classrooms, Galton and colleagues (1999) found

that 59.3% of all teacher questions were closed questions, either requiring a factual answer or one correct solution to a problem, while only 9.9% were open questions, in which more than one response was acceptable; the remaining 30.8% of questions posed were concerned with task supervision and classroom routine (see Galton, Croll & Simon [1980], Alexander [1995] and Smith and colleagues [2004] for other studies yielding very similar results with different groups of English primary teachers and at different historical moments).

This high rate of closed questioning, and the IRE structure of which it is a part, have been widely criticised as detrimental to pupil independent thinking and learning. First, the structure positions teachers (and textbooks) as the sole legitimate sources of knowledge; the pupils' role is to recall and recite for evaluation what they have previously read or been told. Second, the structure tends to produce a rather disjointed lesson overall, with teachers moving from topic to topic with little or no clear line of reasoning. A third criticism is that, to the extent that participants do engage in more demanding cognitive activities (e.g. explaining concepts, relating ideas to one another, challenging and/or justifying positions), the bulk of the work is performed by the teacher.