



Can we improve the standard of speaking and listening during group work?

Kirsty Bilsbrough, Louise Hawes
and Lindsey Dixon
Shelthorpe Community School, Loughborough

Can we improve the standard of speaking and listening during group work?

Aims of the project

The aims of our project were to improve the overall standard of speaking and listening in the classroom, enabling the children to share their ideas. We particularly wanted to improve their listening skills, to encourage the children to listen carefully to others. Our third aim was to improve on the children's abilities to engage in conversation and be able to comment and extend on other children's ideas.

Dimensions of the study

The study took place in a primary school, consisting of 290 pupils and situated in a socially deprived council estate on the outside of a market town. The school has a wide range of pupils with a large specialist unit catering for pupils with moderate and severe learning difficulties.

Within the main school population the proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and statements of special educational needs is much higher than average, as is the proportion entitled to free school meals. The pupils attending the school are mainly from white British backgrounds.

Our study consisted of small groups of mixed ability of children in Years 1, 2 and 4.

Summary of main findings

Our initial observations showed that all groups shared many of the same weaknesses. This led us to develop a series of 'I can' statements – a framework of 'competences' necessary for effective decision making in small groups. These statements facilitated real improvements to the quality of the speaking and listening within the groups.

Further, our observations suggested that:

- size of group is a significant factor – small groups of four seem to work best as groups that are any larger do not give all children the opportunity to talk and to be heard
- group structure is very important in order to create an environment in which less confident children will speak

Background and context

Within our school we recognised that a lack of social interaction often hindered our pupils' ability to develop their speaking and listening skills in a satisfactory way, therefore impacting on all areas of their learning. We felt that for the children to progress in their learning, they needed to be explicitly taught the skills to speak and listen effectively in groups.

Teaching processes and strategies

The children were introduced to a range of teaching processes and strategies that we developed specifically for this study.

- A list of 'I can' statements was generated and shared with the class, to demonstrate what good speaking and listening might look like
- A poster with the 'I can' statements on was devised and placed in a prominent position for the teacher and the children
- The teacher used an observation tick chart to monitor the children's progress, which was based on the 'I can' statements displayed and included a box for any other comments

We used our observations to identify how the group needed to develop their group work skills. From these a set of ground rules was devised for speaking and listening in group work. This was then shared with the children on the next group work activity. Each time there was an opportunity for group work, the ground rules for speaking and listening were shared with the children as a reminder.

The tasks were developmental. The Year 1 and 2 tasks were as follows:

- 1 PSHE lesson – generating ideas for 'What can we do if we get stuck on our work'
- 2 Literacy lesson focusing on toys – children had to design and make a poster in groups, gathering information and presenting it
- 3 Planning a party, with choices to make within the group and to agree on
- 4 PSHE lesson – why is it good to be them

In Year 4, the tasks were similarly developmental, working within the SEAL programme.

- 1 PSHE Lesson – what makes a good friend? Children worked in groups to develop an ideal friend
- 2 PSHE lesson – creating a list of indicators as to when a child might be about to lose their temper and what it entails to lose their temper

3 PSHE lesson – creating poster with recommendations on how to stay calm and the best thing to do when tempers flare

4 PSHE lesson – groups worked to create an ideal reward for the class if they managed to maintain good friendships throughout the week

After each observation by the teacher the areas of strengths and weaknesses were noted so that subsequent tasks could build on identified areas. Four observations were carried out in total for each of the different year groups taking part.

The findings

Our observations showed that the children improved the quality and quantity of speaking and listening in their groups as they grew in confidence in their own abilities and expectations.

The reinforcement of the 'I can' statement 'I can take turns' reminded the children of the importance of listening to one another rather than talking over each other. The Year 4 group particularly valued this idea and members of the group regulated others. This area was crucial in improving the quality of listening within the groups.

Partly as a result of the groups developing abilities to take turns, we found that they started to show that they were also very good at listening to each other. The groups demonstrated active listening, both through body language and responses to each other. The 'I can' statement 'I can listen to others' was fundamental to each group's ability to reach a consensus.

The children's abilities to respond in an effective way to answer questions dramatically improved during the course of the study. Initially it appeared that some children were not listening, responding instead with inappropriate or odd comments but as the groups worked together throughout the study the incidences of this reduced. Children considered their answers a lot more as they developed in confidence. However, many of the responses were limited to one word responses and children found it difficult to elaborate on their ideas and this was highlighted as an area for further development.

The confidence of all the children involved in the study grew during its duration. Confidence was a key determinant of the contributions made to the group. Some children tended to dominate the group; however, on occasions this supported the group in achieving its ultimate goal of reaching a decision but the decision did not necessarily reflect the whole group's feelings.

It was also observed that within groups larger than four, sub-groups began to form. This resulted in the group fragmenting and struggling to reach a consensus. It was agreed that for effective group speaking and listening activities smaller groups are beneficial.

Research methods

We began our research by providing an opportunity for the children to work as a group. Each time an observation was made we observed the same group of children, so we could identify patterns and improvements. This first observation was to observe how the children worked as a group, with no intervention from the class teacher. Whilst observing the children during this time an observation table was completed by the class teacher in the form of a tick sheet against the following 'I can' statements:



- I can take a turn
- I can answer a question that's been asked
- I can explain my answer
- I can ask a question about what we are talking about
- I can listen to others
- I can look at the person who is talking to me in a friendly way
- I can listen to everyone's ideas
- We can make a decision!

We also looked at the group dynamics. The focus for the group work depended on 'how the children needed to develop' from the previous observation. Each time there was a group work activity we collected data using the same observation table based on the 'I can' statements.

At the end of each group work activity, the observation table was studied to see where children had performed well as a group, what their weaknesses were and where we needed to focus next time.

Conclusion

Implications of our findings:

- Sizes of group - Small groups of 4 are needed as groups that are any larger do not give children the opportunity to talk and to be heard
- Mixed personalities within the group – children need to be in a group where they feel confident to talk. Children who are more confident are more likely to dominate the conversation away from the quieter children
- Speaking and listening needs to be embedded in all subjects and used regularly, so that children feel confident to speak in front of others and more importantly can listen to others and comment on what they have heard

- There needs to be opportunities for children to work collaboratively on different activities on a weekly basis. If children are not given these opportunities they are more likely to find group work difficult
- A key area for development which would lead to more thorough and considered group work is the ability to probe deeper into ideas by asking each other relevant questions. To do this, children need to have a sound understanding of the context of what is said and also the activity itself. They also need to be interested and attentive; these are all areas that may improve with further practice
- Children also need to support others in the group with their body language. An area of difficulty for all three age groups was 'I can look at the person who is talking to me in a friendly way'. Often children did not seem to be interested or involved in the activity and the children in the group will pick up on this subconsciously. The children need to be made more aware of the importance of body language, e.g. through SEAL work, to ensure a supportive group dynamic is developed
- Creating a bank of speaking and listening activities provides a ready source of ideas for classroom use

References

GTC Research of the Month (2006). *Effective talk in the primary classroom*. The research summarised identified several features likely to increase pupils' participation in classroom talk and showed how teachers developed strategies to use them more often. Summary available at: http://www.gtce.org.uk/research/romtopics/rom_teachingandlearning/effective_talk_sep06/

Mercer, Neil, Wegerif, Rupert and Sams, Clare (2004) Reasoning as a scientist: ways of helping children to use language to learn science. *British Education Research Journal* (2004) 30 (3) pp. 339-377. Summary available at: http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/science/language_science/

Wegerif, R., Littleton, K., Dawes, L., Mercer, N. & Rowe, D. (2004) Widening access to educational opportunities through teaching children how to reason together. *Westminster Studies in Education* 27 (2) pp. 143-156. Summary available at: www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/speakandlisten/wegerif_access/

Authors' contact details

Kirsty Billsbrough,

Louise Hawes and

Lindsey Dixon

Shelthorpe Community School

Woodthorpe Road

Loughborough

Leicestershire

LE11 2NF



This summary was commissioned by the National Teacher Research Panel for the Teacher Research Conference 2008, which explored and celebrated teacher engagement in and with research.

All conference materials are available at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp

This publication has been supported by the DCSF Gender Agenda.

To find out more please email: research.summaries@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk