- For primary teachers building reasoning talk in groups

ORACY AND EXPLORATORY TALK

Teach them to say “because”

One of the founding studies behind today’s whole-class talk and oracy programmes, tested in ordinary UK primary classrooms.

Teach learners to always give a reason and expect one back: a ten-week UK primary programme built these habits through seven explicit ground rules, and learners’ reasoning-linked talk nearly quadrupled, with a significant gain in individual test scores over a matched class, though the language count rested on very few groups and the class-level test gain fell short of significance.

●●○ **Evidence: Promising**

Independent replications using two-tailed analyses and complete recordings across larger classroom samples, including consistent gains on Raven's measures.

Mercer, N., Wegerif, R., & Dawes, L. (1999). ‘Children’s Talk and the Development of Reasoning in the Classroom.’ British Educational Research Journal, 25(1), 95-111. doi.org/10.1080/0141192990250107

WHAT HAPPENED

Reasoning talk nearly quadrupled after ten weeks of ground rules

Sixty Year 5 learners (aged 9-10) in three Milton Keynes primary schools took nine structured lessons over ten weeks, learning seven explicit ground rules for talking together: share information, expect a reason, welcome challenge, agree before deciding. A matched group of 64 learners in similar schools carried on as usual. Researchers counted how often each group used reasoning language while working on a test together, and compared reasoning scores before and after.

Count of reasoning-linked words ('because', 'I think', 'do you agree?') in group talk while tackling a reasoning test, before and after the ten-week programme. Mercer, Wegerif & Dawes (1999), Table IIa, p.106. Only 3 of the 4 target/control group pairs could be analysed for this count; one pair's recording was lost when group members were absent on the day.

The moves the programme taught

1

One fixed question, every time

"What do you think, and why do you think that?", drilled with cue cards until it was automatic. Asking for a reason every time stops learners settling for a bare assertion.

2

Reasons expected, challenges accepted

Two of the seven ground rules named what good talk meant, rather than leaving learners to infer it. Naming the expectation gives a group something to hold each other to.

3

The class's own poster, not just the researchers'

Each class rewrote the ground rules in its own words and displayed them. Writing a rule yourself builds ownership of it, not just compliance.

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MAKE IT YOURS

Across your subjects and classes

This was one nine-lesson programme, run in ordinary UK primary classrooms in the late 1990s. What follows are sensible ways the same ground rules and question routine could work in your classroom today: worth trying, not separately proven for your subject or key stage.

Subject	How the ground rules could translate
Maths	Before a pair moves on from a reasoning problem, ask for "because..."; use the fixed question during paired or group problem-solving, not only in teacher-led discussion.
Science	Ask learners to justify a prediction before they test it, "I think X will happen because Y", and build the "why" question into practical write-ups as well as verbal answers.
English / reading	When a learner infers something about a character or a plot, ask for the textual evidence, "because it says..."; use the challenge ground rule to invite a partner to disagree with a reason.
Humanities	Structure debate or source-analysis talk around the seven ground rules; require every opinion to come with a reason before the group reaches a decision.
MFL	Introduce a simple target-language version of "why do you think that?" for paired talk tasks, so reasoning becomes a habit in the target language too, not only in English.

Adapt it to the class in front of you

Classes who rush to an answer

Lean on the cue-card question and a visible tally of how many times it's asked, the study's own scaffold for building the habit before removing it.

Quiet or reluctant talkers

The ground rule that everyone is encouraged to speak by other group members puts the responsibility on the group, not just the teacher, to draw quieter learners in.

Mixed-attainment or SEND-inclusive classes

Let the class write its own poster in its own words; a rule learners have written for themselves is easier to act on than one just handed to them.

EAL learners

Sentence starters modelling "I think... because..." scaffold the reasoning language itself, separately from the subject content being discussed.

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HOW SOLID IS THIS?

Real classroom gains, from a small, one-tailed study

Developing

This rates the evidence's firmness, not our endorsement of the approach. A matched-control study in real UK classrooms is good design for classroom research, but its most quoted number rests on very few groups, and not every measure reached significance.

- The striking "nearly quadrupled" figure (110 to 411 mentions) comes from a language count of just three matched group pairs; one of the original four pairs was lost when group members were absent on the recording day, a small base for a headline number.
- Every significance test in the study was one-tailed, a less conservative statistical choice than the two-tailed tests many trials now treat as standard, which makes "significant" somewhat easier to reach.
- Not every measure moved the same way: learners' individual reasoning-test scores improved significantly more in the taught classes, but the class-level group-score gain did not reach significance, an effect the authors themselves had predicted and said "did not materialise."

What that means for you: treat the ground rules and the fixed question as a well-observed, classroom-tested starting point for building reasoning talk, not as a guaranteed lift to every learner's test score, and read "nearly quadrupled" as a striking but small-sample number rather than a precise, robust one.

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TRY IT THIS WEEK

Your first small step

THIS WEEK

Pick one ground rule, reasons are expected, and one fixed question, "what do you think, and why do you think that?", and drill it with a simple cue card in one group-talk activity this week. Don't try to introduce all seven ground rules at once.

Try it and watch: notice who says "because" without being asked, especially the learners who don't usually offer a reason unprompted. That's your own evidence, not ours.

Go deeper

Our oracy and classroom dialogue guide · structural-learning.com/post/the-importance-of-oracy-in-language-development

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Structural Learning · evidence without the hype.

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