

- For primary teachers, especially Years 5 and 6

CLASSROOM TALK

Talk That Builds On Ideas

A large, government-funded study analysing 144 videoed lessons in English primary classrooms.

When a learner disagrees with a classmate's answer, or is invited to build on it, what happens to the rest of the lesson?

In this large England study, classes where teachers and learners built on and questioned each other's ideas scored higher on maths and grammar tests, so long as most learners were talking too; the pattern was weaker for reading, and there was no link at all to science or reasoning scores.

● ● ● Evidence: Promising

An independently replicated randomised classroom trial testing building-upon talk across literacy, science and reasoning outcomes would resolve the current interaction-only, partly negative pattern.



WHAT HAPPENED

Building-on talk helped, but only when everyone talked

Researchers at Cambridge video-recorded two lessons each in 72 English primary classrooms (48 schools, mostly Year 6), covering maths, literacy and science. They coded every turn of teacher-learner talk, then matched the patterns against learners' scores on national tests months later, allowing for prior attainment and other classroom factors. Classes scored higher on maths and grammar tests when talk built on and questioned previous contributions, but only in classes where a wide range of learners were actually taking part.

A verbatim example from a high-scoring class, discussing Shackleton’s decision to shoot the expedition dogs

Teacher: Okay, okay, thank you for your point. Who would like to add or build on what Saleem's just said?

Malika: Building on what Saleem's said, I disagree because they have guard dogs...

Teacher: [after four more turns] Who would like to build on from what Malika's just said?

Lots of building-on talk + lots of learners talking	107.68
Lots of building-on talk + few learners talking	104.57
Not much building-on talk + lots of learners talking	103.64
Not much building-on talk + few learners talking	104.81

Average maths test scores across 61 English primary classes, grouped by how much talk built on and questioned ideas, and how many different learners took part (Howe et al., 2019, Table 6). Only the combination of both was significantly higher than the rest ($F(3,1061)=11.88, p<.001$). The same pattern held for grammar and spelling scores; a weaker version held for reading; there was no significant link to science or reasoning scores.

The moves she used

1

Invite building on
Ask who would like to add to, agree with, or build on what a classmate just said, instead of moving straight to the next question.

2

Make room to disagree
Let learners voice doubt or partial disagreement with a statement, rather than only accepting agreement.

Across your subjects and classes

This is one study of Year 5 and 6 classrooms in England, tested in maths, literacy and science lessons. These are sensible ways the same two moves could work across your school: worth trying, not separately proven for your subject or your class.

Subject	How the pattern could apply
Maths	After a learner explains their method, ask who would like to build on it or try it a different way, before moving to a new example.
Literacy / English	When a learner offers a reading of a text, invite another learner to add to it or question it, rather than confirming right or wrong straight away.
Science	This study found no significant link to the science test, possibly because learners found that particular test very hard rather than because the talk moves failed. Still worth trying: ask who agrees, disagrees, or can add a reason, before revealing the answer.

Adapting by class

Quieter classes

Start with a direct, low-stakes invitation to one named learner, rather than opening it to the whole room at once.

Mixed prior attainment

The study statistically allowed for learners' starting maths and reading scores, so this isn't just a benefit for your highest attainers.

Livelier classes

Use "do you agree, or see it differently?" to channel energy into one voice at a time, rather than general chatter.

EAL / additional needs

Keep the invitation short and concrete: "What would you add to that?" gives a clear opening without demanding a long answer.

Start with one: next lesson, after a learner gives a good answer, ask "Who'd like to build on that, or does anyone see it differently?", then wait for at least one more voice before moving on.

A big, careful study, not a randomised trial

Developing

This rates the evidence's firmness, not our endorsement. A large, well-controlled classroom study, but a correlational one: no random assignment, and the pattern held for only some of the six outcomes measured.

- This is one large study, not a stack of them, and it observed lessons as they naturally happened rather than running a trial. Teachers weren't randomly assigned to talk this way, so we can't be completely sure the talk caused the higher scores rather than reflecting classes that were already doing well.
- It showed up clearly for maths and grammar/spelling tests, more weakly for reading, and not at all for the science or reasoning tests in this particular study.
- The benefit only appeared in classes where a wide range of learners were actually talking. The same building-on talk in a class where only a few learners spoke showed no advantage here.
- It comes from Year 5 and 6 classrooms in England. Adapting it for other ages or countries is a reasonable step, not a tested one, see p.3.

What that means for you: worth building as a low-cost habit in maths and literacy lessons, alongside a real effort to widen who's talking. Treat it as a promising pattern to test in your own classroom, not a guaranteed fix, and not yet evidence for science or reasoning outcomes specifically.

TRY IT THIS WEEK

Your first small step

THIS WEEK

Once after a learner gives a good answer, ask "Who'd like to build on that, or does anyone see it differently?", then wait for at least one more learner to respond before you move on.

Try it and watch: notice who speaks up who usually doesn't, once building on and questioning ideas becomes a normal part of the lesson. That's your own evidence, not ours.

Go deeper

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