

Why **talk** builds thinking

What the research says about exploratory talk, dialogic teaching and oracy, and what it means for the next discussion you run.

**1**

The big idea, in plain English

2

Six findings, each with its study

3

What it means in a classroom

4

How Say It puts it to work

5

Every reference, checked

The big idea

Talk is not only how learners show what they already know. For a class, it is where a great deal of the thinking gets done. When one learner offers an idea, a second asks why, and a third adds a reason neither of them had, the group has reasoned its way somewhere no one would have reached alone.

Neil Mercer and his colleagues call this exploratory talk: “that in which partners engage critically but constructively with each other’s ideas”. In their studies it did not simply happen. It had to be taught.

The research is consistent on the fix. Talk improves when it is taught: when a class agrees how it will talk, expects a reason with every idea, and has a teacher who builds on what learners say rather than moving straight to the next question. Robin Alexander calls the wider approach dialogic teaching, and sets it out for teachers in *A Dialogic Teaching Companion* (2020).

+6

months of additional progress, on average, from oral language approaches (EEF)

76

primary schools in an EEF trial of dialogic teaching, 38 of them in the programme

72

classrooms filmed to test which kinds of teacher talk go with better results

How to read the findings

Each finding is labelled with the kind of study behind it, because a single experiment and a review of 50 studies deserve different weight.

Meta-analysis	Pools the results of many studies. The broadest view, but it mixes settings and methods.
Trial or experiment	Compares a group that got the approach with one that did not. Stronger on cause and effect, narrower in reach.
Observational study	Measures what already happens in classrooms and looks for links. Shows a pattern, not a cause.
Review or theory	Draws the evidence together into an explanation that the other studies can test.

What the research found

1**● CLASSROOM EXPERIMENT****Teach the ground rules, and the reasoning changes**

Sixty children aged 9 and 10 learned ground rules for talking together, such as giving reasons and inviting everyone in. Their talk shifted in the way the programme intended, the authors report “a fourfold increase in the incidence of key linguistic features”, and their individual scores on a non-verbal reasoning test improved against matched classes. It is a small study, and an early one.

Source: Mercer, Wegerif and Dawes (1999)

2**● CLASSROOM EXPERIMENT****Talk is a tool for learning science**

A follow-up programme in British primary schools taught children to talk and reason together and to use those skills in science. The authors conclude that children can be enabled to use talk more effectively as a tool for reasoning, and that talk-based activities can scaffold the development of reasoning and scientific understanding.

Source: Mercer, Dawes, Wegerif and Sams (2004)

3**● LARGE OBSERVATIONAL STUDY****What the teacher does with an answer matters**

Lessons in 72 classrooms of 10 and 11 year olds were filmed and compared with learners' results. So long as most learners took part, teachers and learners elaborating on and querying earlier contributions went with better curriculum results. The condition was participation: the link held where learners took part extensively.

Source: Howe, Hennessey, Mercer, Vrikki and Wheatley (2019)

What the research found, continued

4

- EFFICACY TRIAL

Dialogic teaching in a large trial

In an efficacy trial of a dialogic teaching programme across 76 primary schools, Year 5 children made two months' additional progress in English and science and one in maths, on average, against control schools. Most teachers felt two terms was not long enough to embed the approach, so the evaluators suggest the effect may be an underestimate.

Source: Jay et al. (2017), for the Education Endowment Foundation

5

- EVIDENCE REVIEW

Oral language approaches: high impact, very low cost

The Education Endowment Foundation's Toolkit rates oral language approaches at an average of six months' additional progress, based on extensive evidence and at very low cost. Its own caution: the evidence is about purposeful dialogue for learning, and formal public speaking is not the focus of it.

Source: Education Endowment Foundation, Teaching and Learning Toolkit

6

- RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Oracy can be described, taught and assessed

A Cambridge team built an assessment toolkit for the spoken language of 11 and 12 year olds, with a skills framework of four strands: physical, linguistic, cognitive, and social and emotional. In 2024 the Oracy Education Commission argued that "oracy should become the fourth "R" of education".

Source: Mercer, Warwick and Ahmed (2017); Oracy Education Commission (2024)

What it means in a **classroom**

- 1 Agree the talk rules with the class.** Start with a short set (reasons are expected, everyone is invited in, challenges are about ideas) and let the class keep, drop or add to them.
- 2 Make “because” the price of an idea.** Ask for the reason every time, and teach learners to ask each other: what do you think, and why?
- 3 Build on the answer before moving on.** Ask another learner to add to it, question it or say it back in their own words.
- 4 Spread the talk.** The link with results held when most learners took part. Pairs, roles and hands down do more than a whole-class question to the keenest.

How Say It puts it to work

Say It turns these findings into a talk routine you can run in any lesson.

Talk rules the class agrees.

Before the first routine the class keeps or drops a starter set and adds its own. Every activity opens by reminding the class of them.

A way in for every learner.

Roles such as Starter, Builder and Challenger, with sentence stems on the board, so a quiet learner knows what to say first.

Two kinds of talk, named.

Eight routines: some for working something out, some for making it clear. The Talk Tactics sheet ends in writing: “I used to think, now I think, this changed because”.

Our own evidence

Make It Count, the University of East Anglia’s Year 7 programme, was built on the Thinking Framework: over eight workshops learners tried talk tactics, graphic organisers and the blocks. Across four schools, the share of learners answering “I can” on the skills statements rose from **52% to 83%** (23 learners surveyed, 2024/25). The evaluators call the result indicative, because the group was small. It is a small study, and it did not test Say It on its own.

Source: the University of East Anglia’s evaluation of Make It Count, 2024/25.

Read more, free: **Talk that builds on ideas** structural-learning.com/research-briefings/talk-that-builds-on-ideas · **Teach them to say “because”** structural-learning.com/research-briefings/teach-them-to-say-because · **The four strands of oracy** structural-learning.com/research-briefings/the-four-strands-of-oracy · **Wait time and the quality of classroom talk** structural-learning.com/research-briefings/wait-time-three-seconds

Limits, and the references

What this summary does not show

None of the studies in this summary tests Say It. Several of the best-known classroom studies are small, the large trial measured two terms of a different programme, and the strongest link between talk and results depended on most of the class taking part. We have no controlled study of our own yet, and we say so.

References

- Alexander, R. (2020). *A dialogic teaching companion*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351040143>
- Education Endowment Foundation (n.d.). *Oral language interventions*. Teaching and Learning Toolkit. educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk (read 23 September 2026)
- Howe, C., Hennessy, S., Mercer, N., Vrikki, M., & Wheatley, L. (2019). Teacher–student dialogue during classroom teaching: Does it really impact upon student outcomes? *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 28(4–5), 462–512. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2019.1573730>
- Jay, T., Willis, B., Thomas, P., Taylor, R., Moore, N., Burnett, C., Merchant, G., & Stevens, A. (2017). *Dialogic teaching: Evaluation report and executive summary*. Education Endowment Foundation.
- Mercer, N., Dawes, L., Wegerif, R., & Sams, C. (2004). Reasoning as a scientist: Ways of helping children to use language to learn science. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(3), 359–377. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920410001689689>
- Mercer, N., Warwick, P., & Ahmed, A. (2017). An oracy assessment toolkit: Linking research and development in the assessment of students' spoken language skills at age 11–12. *Learning and Instruction*, 48, 51–60. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2016.10.005>
- 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. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192990250107>
- Oracy Education Commission (2024). *We need to talk*. oracyeducationcommission.co.uk

How we checked: every DOI above was resolved at doi.org and matched on Crossref for author and year on 23 September 2026. Every figure quoted comes from the paper's own abstract or from our full-text reading of it. Reports and web pages were read at source the same day, and books are cited by publisher.