



TALKING – THE TEACHER’S TOOL

Teachers spend a lot of time at school, both in and out of the classroom, engaged in talking. Talking is the “tool for teaching”. But think for a moment in more detail about the use language is put to when teachers talk.

*to greet, to gain students’ attention, to encourage, to reassure, to ask questions,
to remind, to recount events, to tell a story, to negotiate, to explain, to summarize,
to persuade, to direct, to answer, to describe, to report, to evaluate, to comment*

Perhaps some of these uses came to mind. The list is by no means exhaustive. Communication through spoken language is usually automatic and unconscious. In other words, we usually “just talk” - without thinking about why we are using language, which words we choose or how we phrase our sentences and make our talking coherent.

Becoming ‘Language Detectives’

Teachers who realize the importance of their own talking in the classroom and the impact it has on students’ learning must go a step further. They must think consciously about language – its components, its uses, its role in literacy learning, its influence on students’ learning and behaviour. This is a special language skill called **metalinguistic awareness** – the conscious attention to and reflection on language. To put it another way, teachers must become **‘language detectives’** if they are to make the best use of their own talking in the classroom.

The need for tangible resources

To “study” something that is naturally automatic and unconscious is difficult - particularly if teacher training has not emphasized it. Teachers can help themselves by using **tangible resources** to remind themselves to address key language issues. Just as a real detective is equipped with tools such as a magnifying glass or finger print powder, the “language detective” needs tools. Slowly resources are coming into the market place but many can be hand-produced both quickly and cheaply.

What do we really say?

Audio/video taping a teaching session is an important tool for the 'language detective'. It may take courage to do this – nobody seems to like the sound of their own voice. Make sure that you have some goals in mind when you listen to the tape. For example – the number of questions you ask, the types of questions, how long you wait after answering a question, the length of instructions, your response to 'interruptions' etc. Make notes on the recording, set teaching goals and then re-assess the same points on another occasion.

KEY LANGUAGE REMINDERS

Language Genres

There are some commonly recognized 'types' of language – e.g. Language used for giving instructions, for telling a story, for giving a report or presenting an argument. These are sometimes called **genres**. Each genre has a purpose, a particular organization and also characteristic language features.

e.g. **recount** – Purpose: to tell what happened /to record events in order

Organization: Orientation – who, when where

Sequence of events in order of time

Conclusion – personal comments optional

Language features: past tense verbs e.g. saw, travelled

time connectors e.g. then, after, next

adverbial phrases e.g. in a rush, along the freeway,

third person pronouns e.g. she,

passive voice e.g. He was directed by the taxi driver ...

It must be remembered that these genres occur in spoken as well as written language. Students must be given opportunities in both. The 'language detective' must be familiar with the essential elements of the important genres. Only then can this knowledge be imparted to the students.

SOME RESOURCES:

Targeting Text by Blake Education www.blake.com.au Three workbooks at each level (lower, middle and upper) targeting narrative, poetry and drama, recount, procedure, exposition, information report, explanation, discussion. There is also an excellent Targeting Text Poster Pack – wall charts outlining the key features of the genres.

Text Types by Oxford University Press www.oup.com.au This series of workbooks (starter book and six levels) provide worksheets with clearly set out tasks in a range of genres. Many activities can be adapted for use as a spoken task.

Teachers need to **provide oral language activities** regularly that will enhance students' understanding and use of the genres. It is important that these are made into lasting resources and stored in an obvious place to remind both teachers and students that they are a regular part of what goes on in the classroom. Pages that can be photocopied from resource books can be enlarged, coloured, made into cards etc and stored in bright boxes or folders. It is important that the games are named clearly. The label can include the aim

of the activity and suggestions of how to 'play'. Students need to be aware of why they are doing the activities.

Example:

<p style="text-align: center;">Witch's Brew for Super Slime</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>INSTRUCTIONS</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Aims:</i> - identify materials</p> <p style="text-align: center;">- use specific verbs for cooking</p> <p style="text-align: center;">- give directions for making a recipe</p>

COLLECT!

Just as the detective collects items and photos from the scene, the 'language detective' in the classroom should be on constant lookout for things to collect. Real objects, perhaps stored in an interesting case or box, will stimulate personal recounting and interaction as well as question asking and vocabulary discussion. This will work best if the objects have an unusual feature – e.g. the dog's leather collar has broken, or if they relate to the students' younger life or interests or to recent news events. E.g. a teddy, a football record, an old trophy. Select photographs from magazines, calendars, newspapers or 'junk' mail – especially those that are unusual and seem to cry out for comment, question or discussion.

Make sure that you laminate them before storing them in your "talking area"!

Oral language is the underpinning of success with written literacy and with performance in the classroom. Teachers who are 'language detectives' will understand this and ensure that their teaching programs address oral language in a practical and systematic way. The classrooms of these teachers will display 'reminders' about important concepts and will house appealing and engaging, ready to use talking activities. The students in these classrooms and their parents will understand why there is such an emphasis on oral skills and will value progress made.

ORAL LANGUAGE RESOURCES (available through Pelican Talk) :

Chatterbox 72 'conversation starters' providing topics for explanation, giving opinions, justifying point of view, persuading etc.

Spot on Speaking

Language Spinners Eight disc overlays on a playboard with a spinner – 2 each for narrative, vocabulary, expository text and person/social issues. Each disc has 8 segments/activities.

Language Bites , Language MINI Bites Both of these Language Packs contain ready to use activity cards in the four areas of – questions, vocabulary, thinking skills and active listening. Visit website to see samples.

Daisy Dog's Days – a great language pack with a focus on recount.

This newsletter was originally written and published by Sue Reilly and Elizabeth Love in November 2004. It was re-formatted with slight changes by Lucia Smith in May 2012.