

# Learning Through Talk in the Early Years

Practical Activities for the Classroom



Elizabeth Sharp

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I would also like to acknowledge and thank all the authors, illustrators, publishers, and organisations mentioned in this book. They have contributed indirectly over the years to my classroom practice and in doing so have helped me deliver lessons that I believe have inspired and motivated many children.



## How to use this book

The aim of this book is to provide a practical guide to activities that require children to use language in a variety of situations. It is by providing lots of opportunities for speaking and listening that children, hopefully, can develop and extend their language skills.

The QCA 1999 *Guidance for Teaching Speaking and Listening Skills in Key Stages 1 and 2* mentions, in the Introduction, the importance of children's ability to speak and listen to their language development and learning in school. It goes on to say, 'Most children come into school with some ability to hold a conversation, persuade, argue and entertain others. School provides new contexts for talk that demand new and greater oral skills.'

If children have not yet developed the vocabulary or had the life experiences that will help them to access the language used in school, learning will be a challenge. Most of us have experienced situations where children have not known the meaning of a word that we took for granted they would know, such as the Year 3 teacher who found not one child in her class could define what a hedge was.

By being aware of this and providing opportunities for children to use and develop their language skills it is possible for teachers and other practitioners to make a real difference to children's learning. Children's attainment can be raised through speaking and listening activities and lessons that incorporate speaking and listening. This in turn can help to raise self-esteem and confidence. I have found that the activities included in this book have really helped children to enjoy their work, to learn and also have fun at the same time – a real boost for self-esteem! I hope other practitioners will find the same.

The book is not intended as a definitive guide to all the ideas and resources there are, neither is it an academic book. It is an account of lessons and activities that have worked well for colleagues and me. The views and opinions expressed are solely mine, based on my experience in teaching and because of this I have not attempted to justify them with examples of academic research.

All the activities can be carried out in a school setting, either in the classroom or the hall. My own experience has been with children from Foundation Stage to Year 3 and so the

way the activities are approached changes, depending on the age and ability of the children. I see no reason why they cannot also be adapted and changed to benefit older children and I have indicated which activities might work particularly well in Key Stage 2. Teachers can adapt the activities to suit their children and their own settings.

I have tried to organise the book so that it is clear and easy to use. The DfES/QCA recent guidance for schools: *Speaking, Listening, Learning: Working with Children in Key Stages 1 and 2* (2003) mentions techniques that some of the activities I have used come under. Schools should have received this pack, which gives examples of how speaking and listening can fit across the curriculum. It includes teaching objectives for Years 1 to 6, covering the four strands of the National Curriculum for speaking and listening. It also shows some links to the NLS (National Literacy Strategy).

I have included some of the objectives from that guidance; the objective number shown is the same as that in the guidance. Some NLS objectives are also included, plus some of the relevant stepping stones from the *Guidance for the Foundation Stage*. These are only suggestions as to which objectives I think best fit the activities; you may think of some others. Much of the word-level work from the NLS should be covered through ongoing phonics teaching and so I have only included word-level objectives if they are particularly relevant to an activity. Where appropriate, reference is made to the Primary National Strategy (PNS) objectives. If there are no objectives for a particular year group ascribed to an activity, this does not mean you cannot use that activity with that year group. All these activities are good for developing language whatever the age of the children. How you approach them will vary. The 'aims' in each section relate, in general, to the National Curriculum objectives in the programme of study for speaking and listening. However, I have added some aims of my own where appropriate.

I have mentioned opportunities for assessment with some of the activities. Most of the activities described here involve speaking and listening as part of a lesson; it is up to individual teachers what the focus of the lesson is. If the focus is speaking or listening then the children will need to be given a clear speaking or listening – learning intention, with success criteria from which assessment can be made.

The book is arranged in chapters describing and explaining the activities. Some sections include photocopiable materials if relevant and they all show cross-curricular links and ideas for planning when the activities can be carried out. In the cross-curricular section I have, in some cases, indicated precisely how the activity might fit in across the curriculum. There is a list of resources required although some of the activities do not need any. By arranging the book in this way, everything required for a particular activity can be found in one place. Practitioners can turn to the activity they wish and 'lift' the whole section, which should include all the information they need. A section is included in the reference section at the end of the book naming titles of books and resources that I have found particularly helpful and that children have responded to really well. These are only suggestions and do not have to be used. Some suggestions of how teaching assistants might be deployed are also included.

There is no recommended order for these activities to be carried out. If they are being planned as a unit of work in the literacy hour, some activities may need to precede others as a means of introduction to the following work. I will mention this when necessary. I would suggest that the best way to start is to choose an activity that does not appear too daunting and have a go. Do not worry at the start about tying it into the curriculum. You will need to do this eventually but it is important to build your confidence first. Be positive and have confidence in yourself. Children are very forgiving and although you might think you are making a complete fool of yourself when you are in 'role', or with a puppet on your arm, your average 5- and 6-year-olds will think it's great!

I am aware that many teachers have a bank of activities that work well for them and are confident to use them, in which case I hope they might find at least one or two ideas here that they have not tried before! For those who are less confident and are unsure about implementing activities that include speaking and listening, I hope they will be encouraged and inspired to try some of those mentioned in this book.

I once heard it said 'a silent classroom is not natural'. When I think of the learning and progress I have seen when children are engaged in meaningful discourse and language activities, I have to agree!

