2 | *Speaking and listening in RE*

> **Aims**
>
> - *To identify the range and contexts for speaking and listening in RE*
> - *To identify the speaking and listening skills which help pupils make progress in RE*
> - *To provide practical ideas for managing talk in RE lessons*

2.1   Introduction

Consider this quotation from *Words and Minds: How we use language to think together* (Mercer, 2000).

> *Exploratory talk* is that in which partners engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas. Relevant information is offered for joint consideration … Knowledge is made publicly accountable and reasoning is visible in the talk …
>
> It is an effective way of using language to think … the process of education should ensure that every child is aware of its value and able to use it effectively.
>
> However, observational research evidence suggests that very little of it naturally occurs in classrooms when children work together in groups.

Talk can be difficult to plan for and manage and is, by definition, ephemeral. However, by thinking carefully about the reasons for talk and when it can be planned in; it becomes easier to manage, especially when there is a concern that it is likely to result in heated debate or prejudiced statements.

In RE we talk about:

- ethical values and moral dilemmas (e.g. abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, equality, racism)
- what we need to know, how we will find out and report it to others (e.g. research activities, talking to members of faith communities)
- ultimate meanings through exploring ultimate questions (e.g. the nature of God, suffering, nature/nurture, good and evil).

In RE we talk in order to:

- explore and share ideas
- clarify thinking and justify ideas
- hypothesise and work towards possible solutions or answers
- challenge thinking
- agree a consensus, even if that is to agree to differ
- listen to others and take account of their points of view
- understand others and take account of their culture and faith.

How we talk in RE:

- reflectively: thinking around issues and abstract concepts; exploring feelings
- in a spirit of enquiry: asking appropriate questions to find specific answers asking open-ended questions in discussing big ideas
- reasonably, in every sense of the word: supporting ideas with sound reasons and evidence; following a logical line of argument; listening to others and accepting difference
- analytically: weighing up evidence; making informed choices and explaining the implications of those choices
- quietly and taking account of others: ensuring that our own beliefs do not predominate a discussion, nor are they used to belittle others.

We learn through being able to talk about our ideas; and develop our thinking by listening and responding to the ideas and thoughts of others. Speaking and listening activities need to be planned for, organised and supported so that they extend pupils' knowledge and understanding in RE.

2.2 Managing group talk

One of the problems for teachers is organising groups for speaking and listening. It can take valuable time to move pupils into teacher-selected groups. It is, however, worth considering grouping pupils for learning.

The following grid shows how different group sizes suit particular purposes and bring different benefits and limitations.

Group size	Appropriate purposes for talk	Benefits	Limitations
Individuals	Where pupils are answering questions in class. They gain time to think/prepare an answer in their head: internal dialogue.	It can be used for assessment purposes, i.e. it's all their own work. Gives pupil time to prepare an answer as he or she is not as exposed in a group.	Being isolated within his or her own experience and knowledge may make a pupil insecure.
Pair	When discussing prior knowledge, e.g. in a starter session, or discussing sensitive or personal topics. Pupils gain time (as above) to prepare a response.	Pupils are obliged to talk. The process is secure, non-threatening, quick. There is no need to move desks.	There is little challenge from different viewpoints. Allocating loners might prove problematic.
Small groups: 3–4 members	When discussing topics where there might be a difference of opinion but the group size remains non-threatening.	Turning one pair round to face another can be quick.	Moving furniture may cause management difficulties. Social pressures begin to set in, e.g. 'Do we have to work with boys?' It is possible for some pupils to remain quiet or dominate.
Larger groups: 5–7 members	When a wider diversity of ideas is needed to challenge thinking. In some role-play situations.	It bridges the gap between small groups and whole-class discussion: it helps build pupils' confidence when in a larger group.	Desks have to be moved. There is a risk that some pupils remain silent whilst others dominate.
Whole class	Where you want all the pupils to gain the same range of views and experience. Useful in formal debates or role-play, particularly where the formality is needed to manage contentious issues.	You can monitor the talk and control responses. You can monitor pupils' contributions for assessment purposes or to estimate social development.	More pupils remain silent. The process can be difficult to manage, especially when dealing with highly charged topics. Pupils may become frustrated at having to wait a turn to contribute.

The more teachers make decisions about, and manage, groupings; the more pupils will become accustomed to participating in a wide range of situations with a wide range of people.

2.3   *Video sequence: Managing talk for learning*

For this section you will need to watch video sequence 1, which is included on this CD. It illustrates how teachers can reinforce pupils' speaking and listening skills and can structure talk to support learning in RE. The video sequence shows pupils working in a range of group sizes. In watching it, you will be able to make judgements about the benefits of ensuring that pupils work in a range of groupings at different stages in a sequence of teaching.

Ed Pawson, at The King's School, Ottery St Mary, Devon, is taking a Year 7 class. The class has reached a point in their unit of work on Islam where they discuss the faith with members of the community. The lesson aims to develop pupils' understanding of the impact of Muslim beliefs on daily life, enabling them to recognise Muslim values.

They use talk to:

■ raise questions

■ clarify their ideas

■ modify their opinions in the light of what others say

■ report and discuss findings.

The video includes episodes from the previous lesson when pupils were preparing for the visit: they created a concept map of what they had learned so far as a starting point for framing questions; they were taught about open and closed questions and how to engage in a discussion; and they discussed how to make visitors feel welcome.

As you watch the video, consider the following points

> ■ *How do preparations for meeting members of the faith community enhance the conversations the pupils engage in?*
>
> ■ *How does the management of speaking and listening in the lesson enable pupils to question, reflect, reason, analyse, listen and consider the significance of what they learned from their conversations?*
>
> ■ *How does the development of speaking and listening skills enhance learning in RE?*

While you were watching the video, did you notice the following?

■ There are explicit links to previous learning, building on prior knowledge.

■ The teacher clarifies the purposes of talk at different stages.

■ The teacher explicitly teaches questioning and discussion skills.

■ The classroom layout is altered to support speaking and listening for the range of planned purposes.

■ The teacher challenges pupils to formulate their own questions from their interaction with the area of study.

- The discussions that pupils have with members of the faith community are designed to enable pupils to go beyond item knowledge to deepen their understanding of underlying philosophical implications.
- The structure of the visit maximises the contact with a practising member of a faith community.

See also *Literacy across the curriculum* (DfEE 0235/2001) Module 7, which contains further ideas for managing group talk.

2.4 *Planning speaking and listening*

This material has an appendix which contains the objectives from the *Framework for teaching English, Years 7, 8 and 9*. Look at the speaking and listening objectives in Year 7 and consider how they would help when planning for speaking and listening in one of your Year 7 units of work.

- Using the objectives helps to clarify what needs to be taught: if pupils are to use talk as a tool for clarifying ideas, e.g. by articulating problems or asking pertinent questions, then they need to be taught what that means and how to do it.
- The same objectives apply across the curriculum to each subject as appropriate so the whole school can focus on an aspect to support pupils' learning and raise attainment.

2.5 *Conclusion*

Productive talk behaviours

- *Making suggestions or introducing new ideas*
- *Supporting others' suggestions by building upon, clarifying or modifying them*
- *Challenging ideas so that others reflect upon their validity*
- *Reasoning or justifying ideas*
- *Asking questions to seek clarification and elaboration*
- *Summarising to move the discussion on*
- *Analysing and evaluating to make explicit the strengths and weaknesses of one's own and others' ideas*

These behaviours link very closely with the range of skills (identified in section 1) which feature in many RE agreed syllabuses; these behaviours are determining factors in ensuring progression in RE.

Here are some more examples of strategies for managing group talk in the classroom.

Strategies for organising group talk

Pair talk

Easy to organise even in cramped classrooms. Ideal to promote high levels of participation and to ensure that the discussions are highly focused, especially if allied to tight deadlines. Use in the early stages of learning for pupils to recall work from a previous lesson, generate questions, work together to plan a piece of writing or to take turns to tell a story. Use pairs to promote 'response partners' during the drafting process, and to work as reading partners with an unfamiliar text. Ideal for quick-fire reflection and review and for rehearsal of ideas before presenting them in the whole class.

Pairs to fours

Pupils work together in pairs – for example friendship or possibly boy-girl pairs.
Each pair then joins up with another pair to explain and compare ideas.

Listening triads

Pupils work in groups of three. Each pupil takes on the role of talker, questioner or recorder. The talker either explains something, comments on an issue or expresses opinions. The questioner prompts and seeks clarification. The recorder makes notes and gives a report at the end of the conversation. Next time, roles are changed.

Envoys

Once groups have carried out a task, one person from each group is selected as an 'envoy' and moves to a new group to explain and summarise, and to find out what the new group thought, decided or achieved. The envoy then returns to the original group to report back. This is an effective way of avoiding tedious and repetitive 'reporting back' sessions. It also puts a 'press' on the envoy's use of language and creates groups of active listeners.

Snowball

Pairs discuss an issue or brainstorm some initial ideas, then double up to fours and continue the process, then form into groups of eight in order to compare ideas and sort out the best, or to agree on a course of action. Finally, the whole class is drawn together and spokespersons from each group of eight feed back ideas. A useful strategy to promote more public discussion and debate.

Rainbow groups

A way of ensuring that pupils are regrouped and learn to work with a range of others. After small groups have discussed together, pupils are given a number or colour. Pupils with the same number or colour join up, making groups comprising representatives of each original group. In their new group pupils take turns to report back on their original group's work and perhaps begin to work on a new, combined task.

(continued)

Jigsaw

A topic is divided into sections. In 'home' groups of four or five, pupils allocate a section each; and then regroup into 'expert' groups. In these groups, experts work together on their chosen area, then return to the original 'home' groups to report back on their area of expertise. The 'home' group is then set a task that requires the pupils to use the different areas of expertise for a joint outcome. This strategy requires advance planning, but it is a very effective speaking and listening strategy because it ensures the participation of all pupils.

Spokesperson

Each group appoints a spokesperson. The risks of repetition can be avoided if one of the following methods is used.

- One group gives their feedback in full, and others offer only points that have not been covered.
- Each group is asked to turn to offer one new point until every group 'passes'.
- Groups are asked to summarise their findings on A3 sheets, which are then displayed. The class is invited to compare them and comment.

See also:

- *Literacy across the curriculum* (DfEE 0235/2001) Module 7, which contains further ideas for managing group talk; and Module 8, which is about listening
- *Training materials for the foundation subjects* (DfES 0350/2002), Module 4: Questioning, Module 5: Explaining, and Module 12: Thinking together.