Developing exploratory talk within the classroom

Research Journal Volume 2: 2023-2024

Abbey Multi Academy Trust
Proud to be a talk-rich Trust

The Project Rationale

Throughout 2023 and 2024, the Trust Oracy Network investigated the relationship between vocabulary acquisition and exploratory talk. The intention was to evidence whether creating structured discussion opportunities within the classroom supported pupils' confidence and the likelihood of them mastering tier 2 and 3 vocabularies. Hence, narrowing the word gap over time for pupils.

This research generated convincing evidence that the explicit pre-teach of vocabulary following a sequence of oracy teaching at word input and output stages, did indeed contribute to pupils using these words within the lesson. However, it was also evident that pupils were more likely to 'own' these words longer term if the teacher provided talk opportunities within the lesson (commonly exploratory talk). Therefore, the focus of the project this year was to use both the pre-teach of vocabulary followed by an exploratory talk activity, Harkness, to see whether this made it more likely that pupils would master disciplinary vocabulary effectively.

Harkness: A strategy to develop exploratory talk

"What I have in mind is a classroom where students could sit around a table with a teacher who would talk with them and instruct them by a sort of tutorial or conference method, where each student would feel encouraged to speak up. This would be a real revolution in methods."
-Edward Harkness, 1930

Exploratory talk, if planned and delivered effectively, can offer pupils an environment where they feel at ease to share ideas and develop understanding, whilst working alongside their peers. Barnes (2008) describes exploratory talk as an opportunity for a speaker to 'sort out their thoughts and ideas, see how they sound, receive feedback and arrange these pieces of information and ideas into different formats'. Often exploratory talk can be cautious and fragmented, however if pupils apply the given question to their own previous knowledge and understanding then they can potentially arrive at an insightful and meaningful conclusion.

In order for exploratory talk to be implemented effectively there needs to be certain classroom conditions and Harkness provides this framework. The Harkness framework mitigates against the risks of ineffectively planned and implemented 'talk' in classrooms which Grigg (2014) argues can result in lessons becoming erratic and the talk not being meaningful (he cites passive learning as a key risk of group talk, with certain pupils dominating discussion and therefore excluding other pupils from the knowledge making process).

In relation to our own trust's evidence base, Barns' quote supports what we were setting out to test in relation to pupils taking risks through experimenting using new vocabulary, in a low stakes environment thus gaining confidence with their new vocabulary and wider talk.

Using Harkness, the teacher's role as a subject authority is changed as the discussion does not belong to them. As the teacher no longer holds a central position it is the pupils who ask each other questions. The teacher's role involves:

- Planning: e.g. sourcing and differentiating the text(s) given to the students in advance of the discussion.
- Tracking: this can be completed by the teacher or, if students are tracking, the teacher can note the content of the discussion (e.g. to help plan an essay).

- Reflecting: at the end of the discussion, the teacher can encourage students to reflect on the discussion and their individual contributions. The discussion may feed in to a piece of extended writing - evidence suggests that Harkness is a useful tool for developing students' extended writing skills.

Enquiry question:

Does delivering a sequence of learning using Harkness lead to pupils having greater mastery of new vocabulary?

Academies within our Trust implemented this intervention with a group of pupils over a planned sequence of learning and presented their findings to the oracy cohort in July, 2024.

Summary of findings:

7 academies reported back the findings from the research project. From this, in all but one academy, it was evidenced that there was much greater pupil participation in lessons. There was a clear consensus from oracy leads that one of the clear gains in learning through exploratory talk was within the cognitive oracy framework strand, with pupils able to think at a deeper and more complex level about the knowledge they had been given. Greatest success came from academies where the use of talk tactics were already well-embedded, as these talk protocols facilitated the pupils talking at greater length and in deeper complexity about their opinions and ideas.

The impact of Harkness on increased language acquisition was dependent upon the quality of the pre-teach of vocabulary. Where pre-teach was effective through using oracy strategies at the beginning of the sequence of learning, pupils indeed used these words both within their discussion and/ or in the written work that followed. Where this critical part of the learning sequence was not as explicit, the gains of Harkness were less clear around whether it made a positive difference to pupils' word ownership.

Teachers involved in the project gained confidence through using Harkness and this was mirrored in staff voice. In more than one academy, the use of exploratory talk increased by almost 90% after the controlled research project had taken place. This was in both secondary and primary settings.

In more than one academy, teachers who used Harkness noted greater confidence with talk and social and emotional benefits of learning through exploratory talk.

Next Steps:

The pre-teach of key tier 2 vocabulary as explored in the Narrowing the Word Gap project has led to a cohesive approach to teaching vocabulary across all 8 academies in the Trust, following our 100-word model and or/ Subject 30/60. This continues to be embedded and evaluated within academies.
Regarding exploratory talk, all 7 academies now wish to include Harkness as a key talk strategy, growing our Trust's talk toolkit which will now consists of:

- Frayer model for pre-teaching vocabulary (100 words)
- Talk tactics to scaffold exploratory talk
- The Listening ladder to teach talk protocols
- Concept cartoons
- Harkness

Oracy Leads within each academy will oversee training for new staff on Harkness and continue to share best practice, monitoring its use in lessons as part of an oracy rich curriculum.

When Harkness is used it is important that vocabulary is pre-taught at the start of the sequence of learning and that the teacher provides feedback on its use in the correct (or incorrect) context.

All oracy leads have agreed that there is still inconsistency around 'learning to talk' with teachers explicitly referring to the oracy framework and having clear talk outcomes for pupils which can be reflected upon. This can also be triangulated through the Listening walks and student voice. As a result of this, the intervention next year will be based upon explicit intervention on 'teaching to talk', linked to ambitious talk outcomes.

Summary of findings from each academy:

Abbey Grange CofE Academy

Hypothesis: To determine the effectiveness of the Harkness model and if it supports the retention of key words.

Implementation:
Over a period of ten lessons teachers explicitly taught the definition of command words to two classes and followed this with Harkness discussion. Teachers had two groups, one of which used Harkness following the pre-teach of vocabulary and one which did not.

All pupils completed an initial assessment (raw data) and then an assessment at the end of the teaching of the command words to gauge impact.

Impact:

	Student number	Raw Q1 /5 average	Raw Q2 / 5 average	Raw Q3 /5 average	Raw total	Post Q1	Post Q2	Post Q3	Post total	Change
Year 7 Harkness	24	4	2.2	3.8	10	4.5	4.2	4.3	13	3
Year 7 Non-Harkness	24	4.1	2	3.6	9.7	4.3	3.4	3.8	11.5	1.8
Year 8 Harkness	27	4.3	2.8	4	11.1	4.8	4.1	4.3	13.2	2.1
Year 8 Non- Harkness	27	4.5	2.9	4.1	11.5	5	3.8	4.3	13.1	1.6
Year 9 Harkness	25	4.9	3.4	3.8	12.1	5	4.7	4.1	13.8	1.7

Year 9 Non-Harkness	25	5	3	2.9	10.9	5	4.1	3.4	12.5	1.6
Year 10 Harkness	15	4	2.1	2.2	8.3	4.3	2.9	3	10.2	1.9
Year 10 Non-Harkness	15	4	2.4	2.4	8.8	4.5	3.4	2.5	10.4	1.6

The explicit teaching of words supported student understanding – with or without Harkness.

However, it is clear that oracy has a positive impact on learning and retention or words.

It is unclear if the Harkness model is pivotal to this although it is clear it encourages discussion – perhaps insisting all students speak at least three times was more important – but Harkness is really useful in monitoring that and developing the voice of the 'hidden child'.

Bishop Young CofE Academy

Hypothesis: What impact does using Harkness have on pupils' use of vocabulary?

Implementation:
Step One: Introduced the model to staff during a Teaching & Learning Briefing.
Step Two: Centralised Resources
Step Three: Links to Current Schemes of Learning
Step Four: Listening Walks to monitor impact and staff and student voice

Impact:
Staff Voice: (32 members of teaching staff)

- Before the Spring Term I used the Harkness Model in my lessons frequently. (94% of staff didn't use it at all)
- Since the oracy project I have increased my use of the Harkness Model in my lessons. (95% increase in use)
- I have seen progress in the quality of student discussions since using the Harkness Model (84% agree or strongly agree)
- 'It encourages more students to be involved in the discussions. Shy students started off being the one to track the conversation, then moved to making verbal contributions once the routine and trust was established.'
- 'Students are able to lead parts of the lesson whilst still being engaged. It is an opportunity to use keywords and display their knowledge of oracy in low stakes questioning settings.'

- ‘Every student in my class now makes a contribution to discussion.’

Student Voice: 155 students from years 7-10

- I participate in group discussions more frequently since using the Harkness Model. (63% agree)
- My confidence has improved in group discussions. (65 % agree)
- I am able to listen to other peoples' opinions and build on them. (90% agree)

- ‘Listening to others’ opinions on a certain question and expanding the answer is really helpful in lessons’
- ‘Harkness Models are a great way to make students more social especially when they have a very shy or closed off character’
- ‘You can keep track of the conversation, and no one will take over’
- ‘Building bonds through communication with peers, opportunity to share opinions with others, encouraging quieter peers to communicate, building confidence’

Lightcliffe Academy

Hypothesis: What impact does using Harkness have on pupils' use of vocabulary in Core RE?

Implementation:
Across a sequence of lessons, Year 10 Core RE students were asked to use the Harness model to scaffold exploratory talk on a big question.

Impact:
<u>Positives:</u>

Pupils were much more likely to engage in group discussion as part of the lower stakes environment. Even pupils least likely to contribute, had the confidence to add points to the discussion.

There was an improved attempt by the class at a 12-mark question, which should partly be attributed to the deeper level of conversations taking place around the questions answered.

<u>Points to note:</u>

Although there was an increase in engagement and depth of understanding by some pupils, it did not have a significant impact on the use of tier 3 vocabulary. This may have been a result of this language not being explicitly pre-taught prior to the Harkness activity taking place.

Christ Church Upper Armley CE Primary School

Hypothesis: Does the use of the Harkness model would support in narrowing the word gap across school?

Implementation:

- CPD – Staff meeting
- Staff watched videos (Voice 21) and practises the Harkness model together
- Some discussion about whether this model was suitable for Primary children
- Oracy lead planned how Harkness could be used in our setting and designed a format for staff
- Harkness was lunched throughout school (2 year groups have not engaged and will need support in Summer 2)

Impact:
Children were empowered to learn through talk and to take control of their learning

The social and emotional strand of the oracy framework was evidence as pupils were working collaboratively in small groups

Pupils were beginning to give concise feedback (developing)

Discussion with staff implied that although Harkness develops many skills it is not considered the best tool to develop vocabulary. It was considered that concept cartoons and Talk Tactics are better to introduce and use new vocabulary. This enables the teacher to model and assess the use of key vocabulary.

Lightcliffe CofE Primary School

Hypothesis: To see if the use of the Harkness model would support in narrowing the word gap across school.

Implementation:
We introduced the Harkness model in a staff meeting at the beginning of the Spring term. We shared resources and discussed how this could look across school (using string to help in Key Stage 1). Classes in Lower Key Stage 2 trialled this first, linking to their topics.

Children were given 'talk tactics' as we progressed with this to encourage them to build, clarify and challenge other ideas.

Impact:
When we first introduced the Harkness model with our classes in LKS2, it was clear that children (most confident) would dominate discussions. After a short period of time, children were able to analyse and recognise that some children didn't participate as much as others. Talk tactics helped some children on how to add to the group discussion.

More recently, all children now participate in a Harkness discussion. Children who before felt shy or insecure in asking questions or adding to a discussion, now feel confident in exploring their ideas. It is evident from a couple of girls in my class that their confidence increased in group discussions and the children who dominated discussions were encouraged to listen and analyse other contributions.

Harkness has been crucial in children developing their critical thinking skills regardless of the content or topic.

Children have been encouraged, using Harkness, to collaborate and come to an agreement. Children have been encouraged to listen and unpick their point of view

Holy Trinity CofE Primary Academy

Hypothesis: Does the use of Harkness have a positive impact on pupil engagement in the learning, using subject terminology?

Implementation:

- Year 2
- Initial focus on turn taking and sharing ideas based on a key question.
- Moved onto including specific vocabulary as part of the discussion.
- A group of children (17 in a reading group) were given 'talktactics'. With these roles in mind, they attempted to build on and challenge ideas shared.

Impact:

- More able/confident children dominated discussions. After 'roles' were given to certain children, other children joined in more.
- SEN children struggled but joined in with adult support. SEN children struggled to use the vocab and take turns.
- We started out practically using a ball of wool to track the conversation. Behaviour management was difficult to begin with.
- Felt there were more effective ways of introducing and reinforcing vocabulary using oracy.

St Chad's CofE Primary Academy

Hypothesis: To see if the use of the Harkness model would support in narrowing the word gap across school.

Implementation:

- Launched initially in Year 5 as a whole class.
- Boy heavy cohort with difficulties with friendships.
- Modelled as a wider group with a 'fishbowl' effect, and then narrowed down further into small groups using newly taught vocabulary.

Impact:

- Engagement was high – some children enjoyed it as an activity, however children who were quieter found it difficult to engage and were dominated.
- Tried to give them the role as tracker, but they found this challenging
- Unsure how impactful it was with using specific vocabulary – feel there may be more effective techniques to be used such as Pam Hook Hexagons.
- It was useful as a discussion tool to allow for further exploratory talk and debates, but children found it difficult to focus on both talk roles and tactics as well as using vocabulary effectively and accurately.
  Data: Pupil voice, staff voice and writing did not reflect the vocabulary uses.

Resources:

Harkness training slide deck

Harkness template

Talk Detective

Student Talk Tactics

Further Reading:

The role of exploratory talk in classroom (Simon Knight & Neil Mercer, 2015)

Discussion-based learning in a Harkness-based mathematics classroom
(M Sterelyukhin – 2016)

Oracy education supports reluctant speakers to participate in exploratory talk (Helen Hillman, 2024) Voice 21: The Talking Point