

Talking to learn

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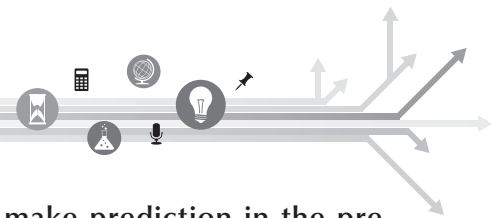
The place of talking in learning

The importance of talking in learning has long been recognized by psychologists and educationalists. Vygotsky (1978) believed that speech and thought combine to create a powerful cognitive tool for human development. In Vygotsky's theory of learning, the child's interaction with a more knowledgeable other (which may be a peer or an adult) plays a significant role in **linguistic and cognitive development**. Bruner (1971), like Vygotsky, proposed that speech is a primary instrument of thought and process of talking through ideas is an essential part of children's ability to handle information and make sense of new ideas and concepts.

According to Wells (1992), there are two kinds of talk in the classroom: Transmission talk and interpretative talk. **Transmission talk** requires minimal cognitive processing. Great emphasis has been placed on pupil's ability to reproduce information accurately. In the English lesson, this kind of talk conducted in the form of information gap, structured talk/interview, language games and practice, has always been used as a means to internalize vocabulary and sentence structures. **Interpretative talk**, influenced by theories of Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1971), promotes active thinking in the learning process. It recognizes the importance of students' prior knowledge, and encourages learners to engage with, interpret and actively evaluate information. It is observed that, in most language lessons, considerable amount of teaching time has been spent on transmission talk. Interpretative talk has not been regarded as of equal value in the teaching process. Given the significance of interpretative talk in the learning process, its value and relationship with other skill development, particularly in KS2, should be explored more fully.

In this presentation, teachers from two different schools will share with participants how they have used interpretative talk to engage learners in the cognitive process. In the first case, interpretative talk has been used to draw out prior knowledge and to make prediction in the listening lessons. In the second case, talking has been used to clarify thinking and promote understanding in the reading lessons. Though the purposes of interpretative talk in these two cases are different, its nature is the same. **Interpretative talk is exploratory. It is often hesitant and incomplete; it enables the speakers to try out ideas, to hear how they sound, to see what others make of them, to arrange information and ideas into different patterns (Barnes, 1976).** When students work in pairs to conduct interpretative talk, communication is not the prime focus; rather, learners are encouraged to construct and reconstruct meaning in the talking process.





Case 1: Using interpretative talk to elicit prior knowledge and to make prediction in the pre-listening stage (KS2)

Teachers at *Our Lady of China Catholic Primary School* found that senior students relied a lot on bottom-up processing whilst doing listening comprehension. They focused very much on sounds, words, intonation and grammatical structures to decode speech. And because of that, students panicked when they came across unfamiliar vocabulary or structures. Teachers believed that students need to adopt a more holistic approach in tackling listening tasks. They need to master **top-down processing skills** as well. These skills include: Understanding the connection between ideas; inferring the meaning of words and phrases from context; and making use of personal experiences, context and knowledge of the world to guess the likely development of the listening text.

In the listening lesson, a ‘talking before listening’ approach has been adopted. Before listening, teachers introduce the theme and text type. Through explicit ‘think-aloud’ method, teachers demonstrate how listeners can make use of the rubrics, multiple choice questions (stems & distractors), pictorial and contextual clues in the listening exercise to elicit prior knowledge, make connections between ideas and guess possible development of the text (see Appendix A for detailed illustration). Then students work in pairs to conduct interpretative talk. Individual students can have different prediction of the text. After listening to the CDs, students reflect on how far they confirm, reject or modify their predictions.

Teachers found that **interpretative talk in the pre-listening stage can increase students’ awareness of connection between ideas and their confidence in guessing word meanings**. However, when it comes to increasing students’ listening comprehension of the overall text, there are certain limitations. These limitations have been caused by text types and design of the listening exercise. **Narrative texts like stories, personal recounts, diaries are found to be more effective in developing this kind of macro listening skills than other text types, particularly conversations and poems**. Moreover, beeping sound which has been used commonly to divide continuous texts into various segments may dissuade learners from practising this kind of global skill.

Case 2: Using interpretative talk to clarify thinking and promote understanding in the post-reading stage (KS2)

S.K.H. Tin Wan Chi Nam Primary School has joined the ‘Learning to Learn’ English Language Programme (Key Stage 2) developed by CECES for a number of years. This programme has encouraged teachers to use retelling (Brown & Cambourne, 1990) as a post-reading activity. In this presentation, **retelling is regarded as a kind of interpretative talk**. Different from the first case in which interpretative talk has been used before listening to promote prediction, the current case has used talking, in the post-reading stage, to develop comprehension, to clarify and to sort out information, ideas and concepts.



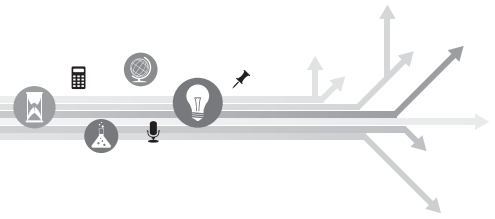
In Brown and Cambourne's Read and Retell model, retelling involves four stages. In the first stage, based on the title, each student is asked to write one or two sentences on what a story with such a title might be about (prediction). The second stage is the reading process. Depending on the level of the students, the teacher may choose to read aloud the text while the students listen or teacher reads as the students follow along or, if appropriate, students take turns reading aloud. At this stage, teacher may highlight certain key words or structures to explain, clarify ideas and elicit responses. In the third stage (retelling), students can read and reread the text as many times as they need to. Students need to understand that the aim of retelling is not to rote memorize; the aim is to understand. Students then have to write down in their own words the text (without looking at the text). In the final stage, students need to read aloud their written journal retellings to their partners. They need to share and compare to find out the difference and similarities.

Through this kind of interpretative talk (i.e. retelling), reading has become a social and interactive activity. Students share texts they have read and use the meanings that others derive from text to re-construct their own meanings. In the 'talking' process, readers do not copy directly from the text, they use their own background knowledge or schemata as well as their knowledge of language to reinterpret the text. Also, they make judgments about which reading cues (syntactic, semantic and/or graphophonic) they use to compose the talk and to make meaning. In other words, they transact with the text.

Teachers have made some changes based on the Read and Retell model. These are caused by contextual factors like lesson time, students' abilities and instructional materials. Also they have introduced pictorial clues and graphic organizers like timelines, story grammar and tables to model and scaffold the retelling process. Brown and Cambourne (1990) proposed that children, through retelling, internalize textual features in their speech and writing. They called this '**linguistic spillover**'. Teachers reported that evidence of linguistic spillover could be found in students' output, particularly in writing. Moreover, they reflected that retelling is more than an active teaching and learning strategy, it is a means to build up students' confidence and develop their metacognitive strategies to tell a story orally. This is found to be an effective way to prepare students for the TSA oral assessment (in the presentation part, sometimes students are asked to tell a story based on the picture card).

In both cases, interpretative talk has been used to promote active thinking. Despite the difference in area (listening Vs reading) and pedagogical stage (one in the pre-listening stage and the other in the post-reading stage), its nature is basically the same. Its exploratory nature allows individual students' voices to be heard and appreciated. On reflection, teachers in both schools agreed that task design, explicit demonstration and scaffolding are important means to successful use of this strategy. Moreover, when conducting interpretative talk, it is important to create a non-threatening environment in which students feel safe to take risks, to clarify ideas and to develop comprehension at their own pace.





Appendix A

For copyright reason, the example used in the presentation is not printed here. This example is taken from 2010 TSA 6EL2 Part 3.

Mary's teacher, Miss Yip, is telling a story to her class.

Listen to the story.

Choose the best answer by blackening the circle.

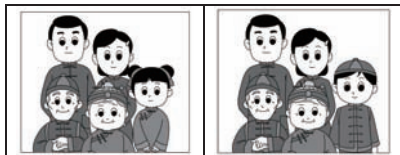
1. Which of the following is true about Mr and Mrs Chan?

- ☐ A. They sell metal.
- ☐ B. They have a big shop.
- ☐ C. They work every day.
- ☐ D. Their shop closes at 8 p.m.

2. Mrs Wong went to their shop at _____.

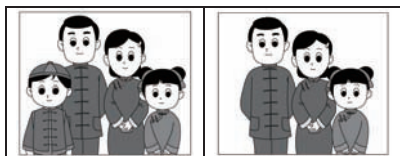
- ☐ A. 7:10 p.m.
- ☐ B. 7:15 p.m.
- ☐ C. 7:30 p.m.
- ☐ D. 7:50 p.m.

3. Which of the following photos belongs to Mrs Wong?



☐ A.

☐ B.



☐ C.

☐ D.

4. Why was Mrs Wong carrying the photo with her?

- ☐ A. sell it
- ☐ B. make a copy of it
- ☐ C. show it to her grandson
- ☐ D. give it to Mr and Mrs Chan

5. What did Mr and Mrs Chan do with the photo?

- ☐ A. They threw it away.
- ☐ B. They gave it to the police.
- ☐ C. They sent it back to the owner.
- ☐ D. They put a copy up in the shop.

6. How did Mrs Wong feel when she saw the picture?



☐ A.

☐ B.



☐ C.

☐ D.

7. Which of the following is true about Mrs Wong?

- ☐ A. She was sick.
- ☐ B. She was on holiday.
- ☐ C. She hurt her leg badly in a car accident.
- ☐ D. She stayed in Guangzhou for two months.

8. What do you think Mrs Wong did when she visited her grandson?



☐ A.

☐ B.

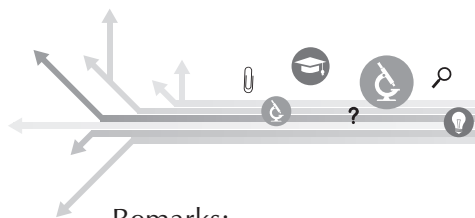


☐ C.

☐ D.

9. How did Mrs Wong thank Mr and Mrs Chan?

- ☐ A. She bought many things from them.
- ☐ B. She sent them a thank-you card.
- ☐ C. She gave them some money.
- ☐ D. She took a photo with them.



Remarks:

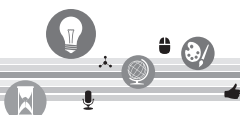
- Before listening, teachers point out to students what they are going to hear. If it is a story, teachers may brainstorm elements of a story: character(s), setting (time and place), problem and solution.
- Teachers ask students to browse all questions (stems and distractors) and pictorial clues to guess the story elements. Using the top-down processing skills like guessing, inferencing and making connections between ideas, students may be able to gather information like this:

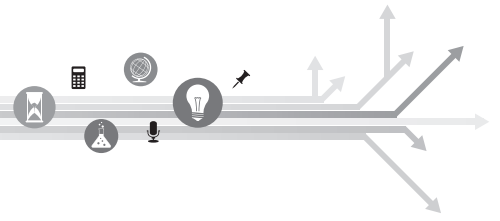
Story Structure	
Character(s)	<i>Mr & Mrs Chan</i> <i>Mrs Wong</i>
Setting (Time & Place)	<i>Their shop (Mr & Mrs Chan's shop?)</i> <i>p.m. (in the afternoon)</i>
Development	<i>Mrs Wong carried a photo.</i> <i>Mrs Wong visited her grandson.</i>
Solution	<i>Mrs Wong thanked Mr & Mrs Chan.</i>

- Based on the above information, students may infer that:
Mr & Mrs Chan owned a shop, they did something to help Mrs Wong. Mrs Wong thanked them in the end.
- Students then work in pairs and talk about the possible development of the story. Prompts will be given to assist talking:

<i>Mr and Mrs Chan (sell metal/have a big shop/work every day/ closes shop at 8 p.m.)</i>
<i>Mrs Wong went to their shop at (7:10, 7:15, 7:30, 7:50) p.m.</i>
<i>Mrs Wong was carrying the photo with her. She wanted to (sell it/make a copy of it/show it to her grandson/give it to Mr and Mrs Chan).</i>
<i>Mr and Mrs Chan (threw away the photo/gave the photo to the police/sent the photo back to the owner/put a copy up in the shop).</i>
<i>Mrs Wong felt _____ when she saw the picture.</i>
<i>When Mrs Wong visited her grandson, she (was sick/was on holiday/ hurt her leg badly in a car accident/stayed in Guangzhou for two months).</i>

- Teachers may brainstorm with students vocabulary needed to complete the talk. For example, in question 6, words like “tired/exhausted/sleepy/bored, puzzled, pleased/happy/glad, relaxed/ comfortable” may be elicited.
- Interpretative talk is used as a means to activate individual students’ schemata and associated vocabulary; and to promote top-down processing. These skills are found to be useful when listening texts are demanding (with difficult vocabulary and many details) and continuous (with no beeping sounds).





References

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