

# **Discourse:**

## **The Importance of Talk in the Balanced Literacy Classroom**

Margaret Mary PolICASTRO  
*Roosevelt University*  
*Chicago, Illinois*

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During a classroom book club discussion in our university summer reading clinic, the students we were observing had just moved their chairs into a circle to discuss *The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963* and, even before they were in place, the students were eagerly discussing the book. In this open forum discussion, they were saying “I can’t believe this happened . . .,” “I was so sad when I read . . .,” and “I thought it was so funny when . . . .” Even class conversation outside of the book club seemed to be connected to the book—for example, “My dad did this funny thing last night, and it reminded me of the Watsons . . . .” The students were eager to share and respond to each other about funny events, sad events, and much more. Parents also commented on how the children were discussing the book at home.

School conversations are constantly happening in classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, and the playground. The rich talk, dialogs, and social discourse are valuable aspects of language in schools. Scott (2009) makes the point that classrooms are full of talk for a range of different purposes—students want to talk, and they have much to talk about. As Fisher and Frey (2014) assert, “Students love to talk. So do teachers. When there’s a balance in the classroom between student and teacher discourse, good things happen” (p. 19). As teachers, we need to learn

how to lean into the conversations students are having; listen more and talk less as they explore and make meaning out of their lives. Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (2016) argue “that true discussion occurs when students get to talk to one another without the teacher always being the intermediary” (p. 89).

Listening to children spontaneously talk to each other about their lives and the world around them is an opportunity to see and hear language unfold. In the classroom, the children are often in special teacher-directed conversations and interactions that have been elicited through balanced literacy instruction (read-alouds, guided reading, language and literacy centers, and independent reading and writing), and the teacher now steps back to allow the classroom discourse to unfold naturally (PolICASTRO, 2015). Often, classroom discussions are based on questions that ask the students to find evidence from the text and to develop arguments, opinions, and other higher-order thinking and critical questioning techniques.

Research shows that talk is humankind’s primary means of communication, and talk of the dialogic type is indispensable to the development of thinking and understanding (Alexander, 2006). Most recently, Turkle (2016) states that “face to face conversation is the most human and humanizing thing we can do” (p. 3). Making the point that this kind of listening is how we learn to be present and develop empathy. Her research shows that children today would rather text than talk and that we are in a conversation and empathy crisis. There is much concern that technology has hindered the development of face-to-face conversations for teenagers (Denby, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this article is threefold:

1. To define the nature of discourse and shared talk within language and the roles of talking and listening within the classroom.

2. To explore the importance of shared talking and listening within a balanced literacy classroom that includes activities for read-alouds, guided reading, language and literacy centers, and independent reading and writing.
3. To create a culture of classroom discourse that includes the environment and management of activities that elicit rigorous conversation within the tenets of balanced literacy.

### The Nature of Classroom Discourse

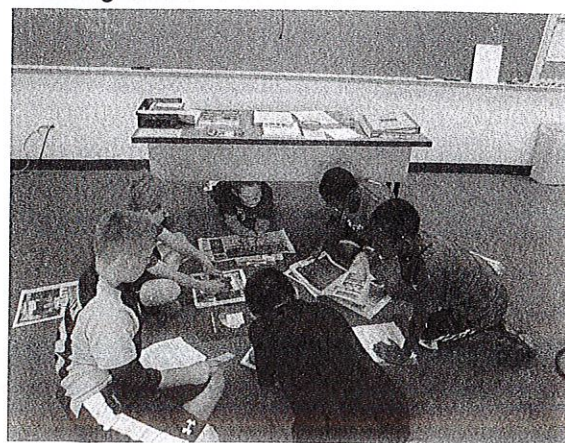
Although classroom discourse includes both written and spoken language, this article will focus on spoken language: talking, listening, and conversation. The term *discourse* is seen prominently in the academic language portion of the Common Core instructional shifts. Unfortunately, practicing teachers have had little preparation for this concept and are often unclear about the implementation of discourse into instruction (PolICASTRO, McTAGUE, & MAZESKI, 2016). Gee (2001) defines *discourses* as ways of combining and coordinating words, deeds, thoughts, values, bodies, objects, tools, technologies, and other people so as to enact and recognize specific socially situated identities and activities. Classroom discourse typically refers to the language that students and teachers use to communicate with each other, including talking, discussions, conversations, and debates. Further, classroom discourse is defined by Behnam and Yassamin (2009) as a special kind of discourse and highlights the “unequal power relationships, turn-taking at speaking, patterns of interaction and more” (p. 118).

This discourse is different from other forms due to the social roles which teachers and children carry out. Moore and Hoffman (2012) describe discourse as language interactions among students and teachers that structures the way they both create meaning and further

their understandings. Although this is a complex term to understand and put into classroom use, Rudell and Unrau (2004) explain that classroom discourse is about creating an abundance of oral texts that the students and the teacher interpret. This interpretation of how to comprehend the message, the source of the message, and the truth or correctness of the message is central to classroom discourse. As you can imagine, these forms of discourse take on many different formats within the classroom setting, such as large- and small-group instruction or students working in pairs and on teams, and are paramount to all classroom conversations. Inherent within classroom discourse is the built-in opportunity for authentic formative assessment to emerge. During classroom discourse, teachers can listen into conversations and responses and use this time to collect valuable data about students.

In Figure 1, a group of boys in the Summer Reading Clinic established a daily morning routine in which they would gather in a circle on the floor and read the sports section of the local newspaper, having interesting conversations about the topics of the day. Each took turns sharing and pointing out different facts, statistics, and ideas about the teams about which they were reading, debating who would win next and why. Much enthusiasm prevailed as they discussed these topics authentically;

**Figure 1. Group of Boys from Summer Reading Clinic**



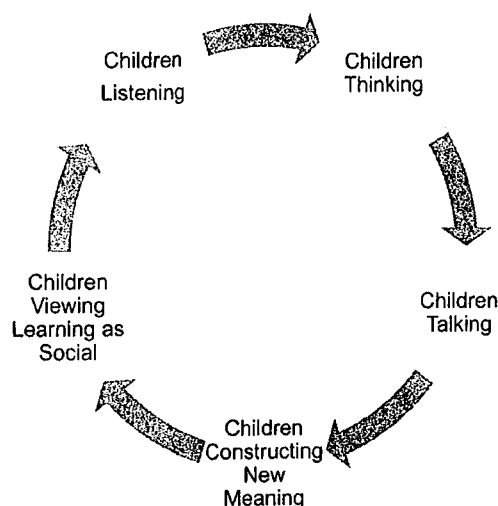
and they looked forward to this on a daily basis. The need for school and classroom talk is both critical and essential as we seek ways to expand and find room for face-to-face conversations and for students' voices to be heard. Important here is the notion that a culture of talk needs to be developed within classrooms, preparing students for the world of talk that is ahead of them.

## The Importance of Shared Talk

Talk is an important aspect in the development of language and literacy skills for children. *Sharing* is an inherent characteristic within talk as it requires both the speaker and the listener to jointly contribute and participate. Unlike self-talk, *shared talk* requires a listener(s) and a speaker(s). Talk requires listening, thinking, or cognitive skills to say something or respond to someone (Figure 2 represents this process). To talk, the speaker must retrieve words and thoughts from his or her memory to express or share them. Listening in conversations requires the listener to store the information being processed while thinking and making meaning. As we talk and listen, we are constantly constructing meaning and thinking about how to respond (Policastro, 2017).

There is no question that talking and listening are both critical dimensions to language and literacy development. According to Fisher and Frey (2014), "It matters who's talking in class because the amount of talk that students do is correlated with their achievement" (p. 19). Language is a thinking or cognitive process in which we communicate our thoughts, process information, and make meaning. Language by nature encompasses both receptive and expressive language processes. *Receptive language* is language that we receive and cognitively process through listening and reading. *Expressive language* takes place through the processes of speaking and writing. Much classroom instruction is focused on reading and writing which

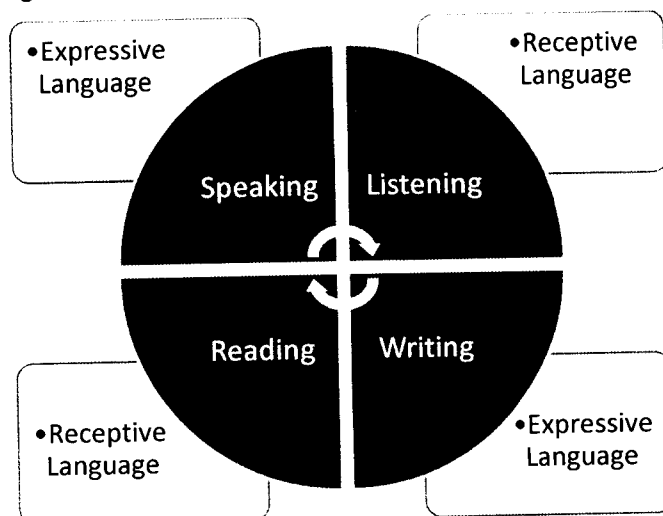
**Figure 2. Shared Talk Process**



captures both receptive and expressive language. However, in Figure 3, with the focus on high-stakes assessments in reading and writing, much of language and language development is missed:

*Most states include speaking and listening skills as part of mandated content standards. Speaking and listening skills, however, are difficult to test, especially in a standardized and state wide manner. As a consequence, these essential skills are too often ignored at great cost to students and society. (Shuster, 2012)*

**Figure 3. Language Development**



**Table 1. Discourse Type and Balanced Literacy Activity**

Discourse Instruction Type	Tenets of Balanced Literacy	Classroom Activity
Whole-group instruction	Read-aloud	Interactive read-aloud with white boards
Small-group instruction	Guided reading	Group exit slips
Teams working collaboratively	Language and literacy centers	Debate center
Self-talk discourse	Independent reading and writing	Private talk to shared talk

Throughout the tenets of balanced literacy, classroom discourse is seen as a way in which to engage children in conversations, discussions, and classroom talk. Balanced literacy classrooms provide the optimal opportunity for children to learn about talking. They learn by talking and through talking, trying out ideas, and listening to others. Learning how to participate in this important classroom context allows them to understand themselves and the world (Pantaleo, 2007). Classroom discourse is about shared talking that happens during the tenets of balanced literacy. It is a natural part of classroom discourse which includes rich conversations and discussions. The language grows and evolves within the conversation of the lesson, forever changing and transitioning into the next level of discourse.

### **Balanced Literacy and Shared Talking**

The notions of shared talking are illuminated in a balanced literacy classroom as children are interacting with one another and having stimulating discussions around the topics of instruction. This talking and listening is not only respected within the classroom culture but encouraged as an important component of the lesson. Godinho (2007) states that discussions are collaborative and not competitive and that they are reciprocal and purposeful as well. This strategy does require the teacher to step back and allow the students to do the talking while the teacher facilitates and observes, collecting important information and data from the students. A natural part of classroom discourse is shared talking (Policastro et al., 2016).

This shared talking happens before, during, and after the interactive read-alouds. It occurs during guided reading while the teacher facilitates shared talk before, during, and after work with the reading selection.

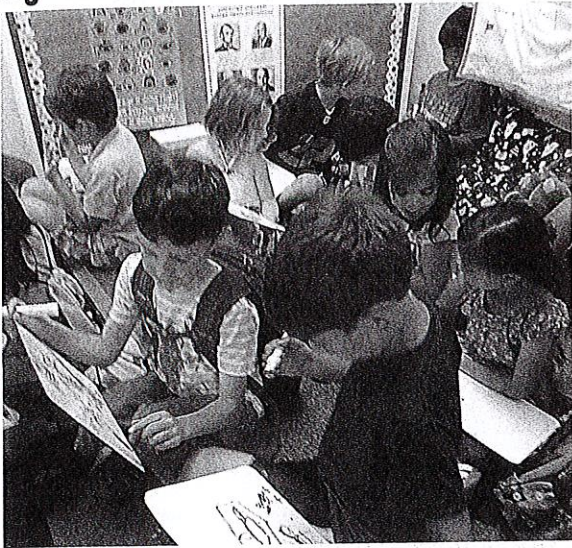
During language and literacy center time, students have opportunities to solve problems and work on projects with peers for which shared talk is expected and respected in the community. During independent reading and writing, students have opportunities to discuss what they are reading and writing with their classmates. During these times, they have an opportunity to learn how to talk about literature and their responses to it.

In Table 1, classroom discourse is broken down into the types of instruction within balanced literacy, going from whole-group instruction to students developing the self-talk needed to form responses publicly with others. The nature of the instruction is important here as children have the opportunity to experience all forms of discourse throughout the literacy block or routine. This framework captures opportunities for the shared talking to grow, develop, and be enhanced through each of the literacy lessons.

### **Whole-Group Discourse: Interactive Read-Alouds**

Reading aloud to the whole class is the perfect venue for children to experience shared talk from a large group perspective. Hearing everyone's ideas and having an opportunity to share is very important. Using white boards to make the read-aloud interactive with students

**Figure 4. Shared Reading Experience**



provides an opportunity for the listener to respond with pictures or text and participate in creative ways, building language and classroom discourse all along. Barrentine (1996) discusses interactive read-alouds as the teacher posing questions during the reading that enhance meaning construction and models how the students can glean meaning from the text. Moreover, Maloch and Beutel (2010) state that when children are engaged in interactive read-alouds, the discussions function as occasions for “students to be apprenticed into literacy.” That is, they learn how to construct meaning from texts. In Figure 4, students have just responded to a question posed by the teacher, and they are now sharing with each other what is on the white boards. This activity goes beyond “turn and talk” as the children are interacting with the white board responses. As the children exchange their ideas, the teacher has the opportunity to collect important formative assessment data on the students.

Discourse and dialogue during read-alouds also allow for scaffolding and support for students as they construct their own meaning and draw upon their own background knowledge and experiences. Balanced literacy is informed by social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1986) in which language plays a dominate role in the

construction of knowledge. Inherent within the interactive read-aloud is the notion of language, classroom discourse, and specific talk. This talk is important before, during, and after the read-aloud. Pantaleo (2007) discusses how talk is critical to our construction of understanding and knowledge. Mercer (1995) discusses how talk is used to think collectively and to engage with others through oral language. The language that manifests itself in classroom discourse plays an instrumental role in formative assessment by allowing the teacher to document and value the learning as it is formulating the construction of knowledge.

### **Small-Group Discourse: Guided Reading Group Exit Slips**

Guided reading lessons are the perfect venue for small-group classroom discourse and shared talk to shine and come alive. Balanced literacy emphasizes language as a key component to instruction and, therefore, it can be thought of as guiding language into reading. Halliday’s (1993) language-based theory of learning captures the idea of making meaning as a semiotic process and that the learning of language for children happens simultaneously as they learn about language and through language. The resource for making meaning is language. From this perspective, his general theory of learning is interpreted as “learning through language.”

Language takes on many different forms (Policastro & McTague, 2015). Swain (2010) explains that conversations during guided reading are centered on text and support students in “viewing texts from a more critical and reflective stance” (p. 135). During this time, students have the space to shape their ideas and reach new meanings. Teachers will need to provide more time for students to have conversations and to offer the appropriate scaffolding for them to do so.

One way to elicit rich and rigorous conversations within the lesson are with guided reading

group exit slips. Group exit discussion allows for everyone to hear and share their thoughts about the lesson just completed. In Figure 5, the students had read an informational text selection on technology jobs in Africa. The group exit slip allowed them to review the purpose of the lesson and what they learned. Listening to fellow 4th and 5th graders seriously discuss the topics of an indigenous workforce within Africa and the questions they raised contributed to high levels of classroom discourse. They had so many more questions after the reading and discussion, and they wanted to know why there were so few tech companies in Africa, why Africans lack technology skills, and more. Group exit slips allow the teacher to collect data on each student's self-monitoring. When students openly discuss what they have learned, what they don't understand, and what they want to know more about, teachers can collect valuable formative assessment data. This rich data allows for the teacher to provide feedback to move the students forward in their learning.

**Figure 5. Guided Reading Group Exit Slip**

Formative Assessment: Group Self-Monitoring

**R**

**Group Exit  
Guided Reading**

Title: Tech Jobs in Africa

Purpose of the lesson:  
Reading for understanding and  
write a learning reflection

Today we learned:

- not enough tech jobs in Africa
- not a lot of tech companies there
- Africans lack tech skills

We still have some questions:

- Why doesn't Africa have more money?
- Why do Africans lack tech skills?

We weren't sure about:

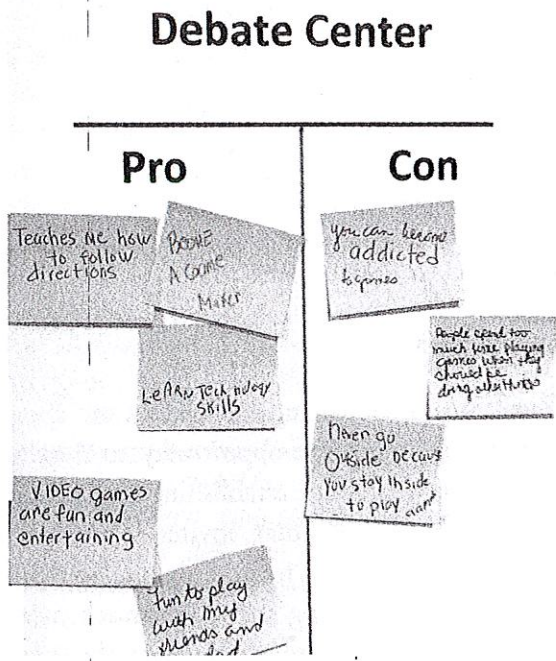
the history of Africa

## Team Discourse: The Debate Center

Language and literacy centers are placed in the classroom environment in strategic locations that provide students with the ultimate space to work individually, with peers, and on teams. Team discourse poses a special type of shared talk during which students are purposefully solving problems and finding evidence from the text in order to build an argument for debate. Purposes and clear directions are always set for the centers and identified for the students. Diller (2003) defines literacy centers as small areas within the classroom where students work alone or in small groups to explore literacy activities. Language and literacy centers are a necessary element to the balanced literacy classroom and provide ideal settings for discourse and shared talking to unfold naturally. Falk-Ross (2011) describes the functions of centers as "a place for practicing with reading elements, experimenting with reading strategies, activating independent monitoring and problem solving, providing extended time for reading, initiating reading response through writing, and allowing time for peer conferences."

The debate center is one strategy through which to promote argument and debate. This center can remain up all year in classrooms, with the topic of debate being replaced on a weekly basis. In Figure 6, students were debating the pros and cons of video games. They watched a YouTube video of students at the center to learn how to argue and debate. This video guided them into what a debate is all about and how it is done. The teacher had selected informational text for them to read about the topic. The informational text included both the positive and negative influences of video games. As they read, they discussed with team members ideas and then those ideas were put on sticky notes. Students were on teams to develop opinions and then develop arguments to debate. The children engaged in rigorous conversations based both on the readings and their

**Figure 6. Debate Center Board**



own personal experiences. The children were quite eager to take a stance, make points, and argue their reasons. The debate center is easy to manage, and students work well on teams and with peers.

### **Self-Talk Discourse: Private Talk to Shared Talk During Independent Reading and Writing**

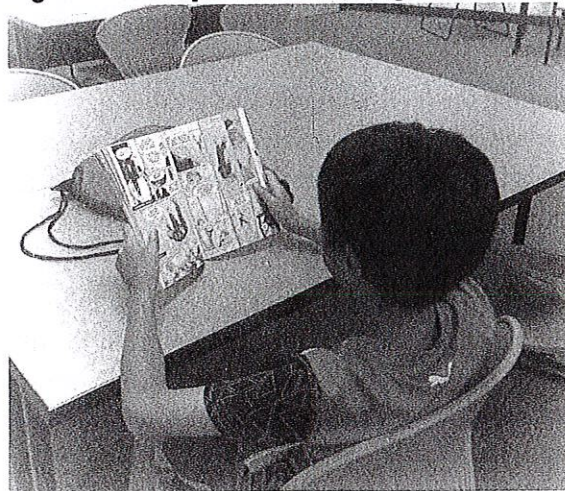
Allowing time for students to reflect on and self-monitor their own learning during independent reading and writing is essential as it helps to develop the metacognitive habits of good readers and writers. During independent reading and writing time, students self-monitor, self-question, self-observe, and self-coach. These are all forms of private talk or inner language that is often referred to as *self-talk* (Manning & Payne, 1996; Purkey, 2002; Spencer, 2001). Fisher and Frey (2008) refer to self-talk as purposeful student talk that is an independent act.

Private time is needed for students to develop the talk they will share with others in the classroom. Children need time to think deeply about what they are reading and writing

to form opinions, develop ideas, solve problems, and construct new meaning about the world. In Figure 7, the student is engaged in reading independently, allowing time for private thoughts to develop. After having the time to read independently, the student had a conference with the teacher and shared his thoughts about the book.

As students read and write independently, they develop their thoughts to share with others. This sharing can take place as part of the reading and writing workshop where students conference with peers and the teacher. Modeling self-talk during reading and writing by the teacher is an important way for students to see this firsthand. The teacher can say, "While I was reading the book, I thought to myself . . ." and "When I was writing in my journal, I thought to myself . . ." Sharing publicly what we have read or written is an important part of classroom discourse. Literacy lessons need to include specified time for students to develop their self-talking skills.

**Figure 7. Independent Reading Time**



### **Creating a Culture of Discourse and Shared Talk**

Creating a discourse culture of shared talk requires a classroom environment that is safe and encourages students to take risks. Students need to know that what they say will be valued

by all in the classroom. Talk is promoted in such a manner that it is always respected, encouraged, and developed within a zone where children explore new ideas. Feedback is provided in “real time” to students to move their thinking forward as they formulate ideas, opinions, arguments, and debates (Policastro et al., 2016). Feedback also is provided from the teacher in both written and oral modes. Student-to-student feedback is provided as well.

How the classroom is physically arranged will influence and inform classroom discourse. The environment needs to be arranged in a way that maximizes the opportunities for interaction (see below).

#### Classroom Environment & Arrangement Checklist

- Seating arrangement
- Eye contact
- Noise levels
- Quiet spaces

In a balanced literacy classroom, noise levels will vary depending on the activity in progress. One successful management strategy is when teachers use a green, yellow, and red system for gauging the levels of noise. The teacher has these circles visible for the class to see. When the green circle is up, the noise level is good; yellow means caution, indicating that the noise level is increasing; and red means that the level of noise must come down immediately. Students get used to this system, and there is little time taken for the adjustments to the levels when it is in place. Noise levels are established as a class and cover the following: working with a partner, working independently, working in a small group, and working with the teacher.

How to deal with students who do not talk much within the classroom discourse is an important aspect of classroom management. Quebec Fuentes (2013) talks about the nonparticipatory student as falling into two categories: (1) the student who struggles with a learning

topic and could benefit from peer support and (2) the student who is able to complete the learning tasks but does not share his or her ideas with class members. Teachers need to identify those students who, for whatever reasons, do not participate. Finding the right discourse type for them will take time, and this again contributes to a culture that promotes shared talk.

## Conclusion

Classroom discourse and shared talk are about every child having the opportunity to develop their voice. It is about establishing a classroom culture and climate that invites students to share their thoughts, form opinions, develop argument and debating skills, and much more. The format of discourse varies within the tenets of balanced literacy and allows for large-group discussions during read-alouds, small-group discussions during guided reading, team discourse during language and literacy centers, and the development of private self-talk discourse during independent reading and writing. Classroom discourse from this perspective will bring forth dynamic experiences that will no doubt develop highly engaged and invested students, improving performance in all areas of language.

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## About the Author

Margaret Mary Policastro is a professor of language and literacy at Roosevelt University where she directs the Language and Literacy Program and is the founding director of the Summer Reading Clinic. Margaret teaches both undergraduate classes in Language and Literacy and graduate classes in Teacher Leadership. She has worked on grant-funded projects for over ten years in the Chicago Public Schools and Archdiocese of Chicago and currently is the principal investigator for the Improving Teacher Quality (ITQ) grant from the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE).