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Improving Children's Oracy Skills: A Qualitative Study Highlighting the Student's Voice Towards Different Dialogic Teaching Strategies Used in The Classroom within One U.K. Primary School

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Abstract

Throughout the past 50 years, dialogic teaching techniques have experienced ups and downs. The benefits of dialogic interactions for children's oracy abilities are widely documented in the literature (Maxwell *et al.*, 2015), however the child's perspective is not often highlighted. The current study aims to determine children's perceptions of a sample of dialogic teaching strategies used in one primary setting, as well as how these impact children's self-confidence and participatory processes to engage in educational dialogue. The study focuses on children who face significant socio-economic deprivation because it has previously been discovered that their language development is underdeveloped compared to their more advantaged peers (Millard & Menzies, 2016). The study utilised a semi-structured interviewing technique in an inner-city primary academy in a city located in the southwest of the UK. Eight children aged 9 to 10 and one primary classroom teacher contextualised their experiences during 20-minute semi-structured interviews. Four key themes were extrapolated using thematic analysis. Theme One is an examination of a primary school's overall oracy metacognitive strategy. Theme Two is how this strategy contributes to the development of a dialogic classroom culture. Children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds can directly benefit from Themes Three (Physicality of Talk) and Four (Visual Indicators), which are prominent and recurrent strategies to boost confidence and involvement. The "Physicality of Talk" theme showed novelty in the field of study because there is a paucity of research on how standing to speak affects a child's perception and increases their confidence to participate in educational discourse. The study has several implications for educational policy, teaching practice, and the use of specific research tools to elicit children's voices.

Keywords: dialogic teaching, educational dialogue, oracy, participatory processes, socio-economic background

Introduction

The social isolation young children have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic has been shown to have a damaging impact on their socioemotional well-being and demotivated interests in speaking with others (Urbina-Garcia, 2019). This is because of the extended period of social detachment from community involvement, institutional relationships, or social networks that have been cultivated over many years (Pantell *et al.*, 2013). For example, Larsen *et al.* (2021) investigated various COVID-19 affecting variables and their relationships to children's emotional, cognitive, and concern reactions. Larsen *et al.*'s secondary data analysis of 442 students revealed that homeschooling had significant cognitive-related influences and that being socially isolated from peers had a negative impact on mental health and communication. Therefore, the effects of prolonged social withdrawal and isolation from others have shown a connection between the rise in children's mental health issues and their ability to verbally express themselves in a range of social and educational contexts (Joseph, 2020).

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Development

Vygotsky (1978; 1987; 2012) posited that social interaction is vital for thinking and reasoning, mediating mental processes via cultural tools developed through interpersonal communication (Kozulin *et al.*, 2003). Nonetheless, some scholars criticise Vygotsky's theory for its unpredictability and limited scientific applicability (Sawyer, 2002) and its reduction of intra-psychological phenomena to an unstructured array of everyday events (Valsiner, 1991). Although Vygotsky's theory lacks empirical support, recent research has begun illuminating its understanding of cognitive development (Mercer & Littleton, 2007). Sociocultural theory forms a foundation for comprehending how language interaction in educational settings facilitates cognitive growth. Gathering children's perspectives on specific classroom dialogic strategies is essential for constructing shared meaning and culture (Arnott, 2014). Therefore, educators must thoughtfully integrate social interactions into their dialogic practices to avoid superficial discourse (Alexander, 2020).

Dialogic Teaching Practices in Context

Jay *et al.* (2017) defines '*dialogic teaching*' as a professional practice that emphasises developing pupils' skills in discussion, argumentation, and explanation to promote higher order thinking and articulate expression of views. Their research found that children who receive free school meals (FSM) and are immersed in dialogic teaching made four additional months of progress in all subjects. FSMs are an indicator of socio-economic disadvantage across the education sector, and Jay *et al.*'s findings suggest a potentially relatable approach for children who experience socio-economic disadvantage. However, teacher reports indicate that dialogic teaching practices require a more extended period to embed to show a considerable impact, and thus, meaningful conclusions drawn by Jay and colleagues may be superficial.

Robin Alexander's work on the value of oracy and dialogic teaching practices in a contemporary society emphasises that dialogic pedagogy should be collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative, and purposeful (Phillipson, 2020). These criteria demonstrate the multi-faceted aims for successful communication and dialogue within the classroom. Alexander (2020) argues that dialogic teaching should encompass an experience of learning to talk and talking to learn, where teachers carefully curate learning episodes to focus on speech structures to develop the ability to talk and provide prospects for children to build knowledge and understanding through educational dialogue. Improving the quality and quantity of dialogic talk practices in the classroom is often perceived as key for enhancing learning and engagement within education (Eke & Lee, 2008). However, Howe and Abedin's (2013) review argues that much of the research into dialogic teaching practices focuses on organisational elements of introducing dialogue into the classroom and not the benefits that particular strategies have on learners. This emphasises the need to understand the direct experiences of children in dialogic teaching practices.

Finally, developing oracy skills through engaging in dialogue should be recognised as a newly important skill for the 21st century, which educators must support for effective communication and feelings of success (Hill, 2021; Mercer, 2018a; Silva, 2009; Teo, 2019). Hence, obtaining children's voices regarding these contemporary strategies and how they are influencing their oracy development from their perspective is a salient research endeavor. However, further research is needed to understand the specific benefits of different dialogic teaching strategies on learners' development.

Socio-economic Status and its link to Educational Deprivation of Language Development

Children's ability to communicate and symbolise their experiences through language is crucial for both their cognitive and social development (Eke & Lee, 2008). Early disadvantages can significantly hinder cognitive development and educational achievement (Sammons *et al.*, 2013). Research demonstrates that children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds often enter nursery school with markedly underdeveloped spoken language skills compared to their more privileged peers (Hart & Risley, 1995; Locke *et al.*, 2002; Waldfogel & Washbrook, 2010). A systematic review conducted by Roulstone and colleagues (2011) established a causal association between a child's language development at school entry and their future literacy learning and achievement, underscoring the importance of addressing socio-economic disparities in education that impede children's ability to interact and express themselves confidently.

Furthermore, Locke *et al.* (2002) discovered that 50% of children residing in areas of high social and economic deprivation are at a greater risk of experiencing speech, language, and communication difficulties, significantly impacting their educational outcomes (Law *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, without targeted intervention and the promotion of educational dialogue across the curriculum, these socio-economic disadvantages will persist, perpetuating the gap between these children and their more advantaged peers (Voice21, 2020).

Purpose of the Present Study

This study aims to investigate the connection between low socio-economic status and children's perceived proficiency in dialogic skills within primary educational settings. It recognises the challenge of incorporating children's perspectives, highlighting the scarcity of such insights in existing dialogic research (Gripton, 2019; Phelps *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, the study seeks to gain insight into students' perspectives regarding dialogic teaching techniques employed in the classroom and their impact on social and cognitive development. It's important to note that all research gathering students' viewpoints is influenced by the researcher's subjective beliefs and values (Conrad *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, this study strives to maintain the integrity of the children's perspectives, faithfully representing their understanding of how dialogic teaching strategies give meaning within their context.

Although limited research has explored children's voices and perspectives during dialogic activities, none, to the researchers' knowledge, have specifically addressed classroom-based dialogic teaching strategies (Phelps *et al.*, 2014). This leads to the formulation of the primary research question, which will be addressed through empirical data collection and rigorous analysis: *"How do primary school-aged children from low socio-economic backgrounds perceive classroom-based dialogic teaching strategies in terms of promoting confidence and participation in educational dialogue?"*

Method

Sample

The study conducted interviews with nine participants, comprising eight children aged 9 and/or 10 and one teacher from an inner-city primary academy. The choice of this academy was influenced by its high level of socioeconomic disadvantage and the researcher's prior connections. Additionally, the lead researcher had previously worked within the same Multi-Academy Trust, and this particular academy was selected due to its emphasis on oracy as part of its improvement plan.

The group consisted of one White-British teacher, one White-British child, and a homogenous group of seven children from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds with English as an additional language (EAL). All child participants hailed from families residing in one of the most socio-economically deprived areas in the Southwest region of Bristol (MHCLG, 2019). They voluntarily participated with the permission of their parents and/or guardians. It is worth noting that JSNA (2020/21) highlights that 17,200 children living in this ward belong to the 10% decile of significantly income-deprived households. Poignantly, this underscores the imperative of ensuring these children receive equitable educational opportunities (Hart & Risley, 1995; Locke *et al.*, 2002; Waldfogel & Washbrook, 2010).

For participant selection, a convenience sampling method was employed due to the specific nature of the investigation. The lead researcher leveraged their educational networks to identify participants meeting the research question's specific criteria. While convenience sampling is not ideal for qualitative research due to its broad sample universe, this study focused on a demographically and geographically specific locale, which enhances the potential for generalisations within that locale and target population, as suggested by Robinson (2014) and Johnson & Christensen (2019).

Instrument

The interview protocol for the class teacher consisted of eight open-ended questions aimed at eliciting insights on current dialogic practices, key strategies used (see Table 1), and the teacher's perceived value of promoting speaking within education and their academy. This approach aimed to obtain potentially insightful data on how schools embed talking cultures through an initiative-based approach to improving educational outcomes. Based on the perceptions and strategies expressed by the teacher, a child interview protocol was formulated (see Table 1). Although this study relied on participants' subjective accounts rather than a generic world description, a reflexive approach to the interview was ensured to maintain rigor and integrity (Barrett *et al.*, 2020).

Figure 1

Supporting images used during the interview protocol as visual reminders for the children

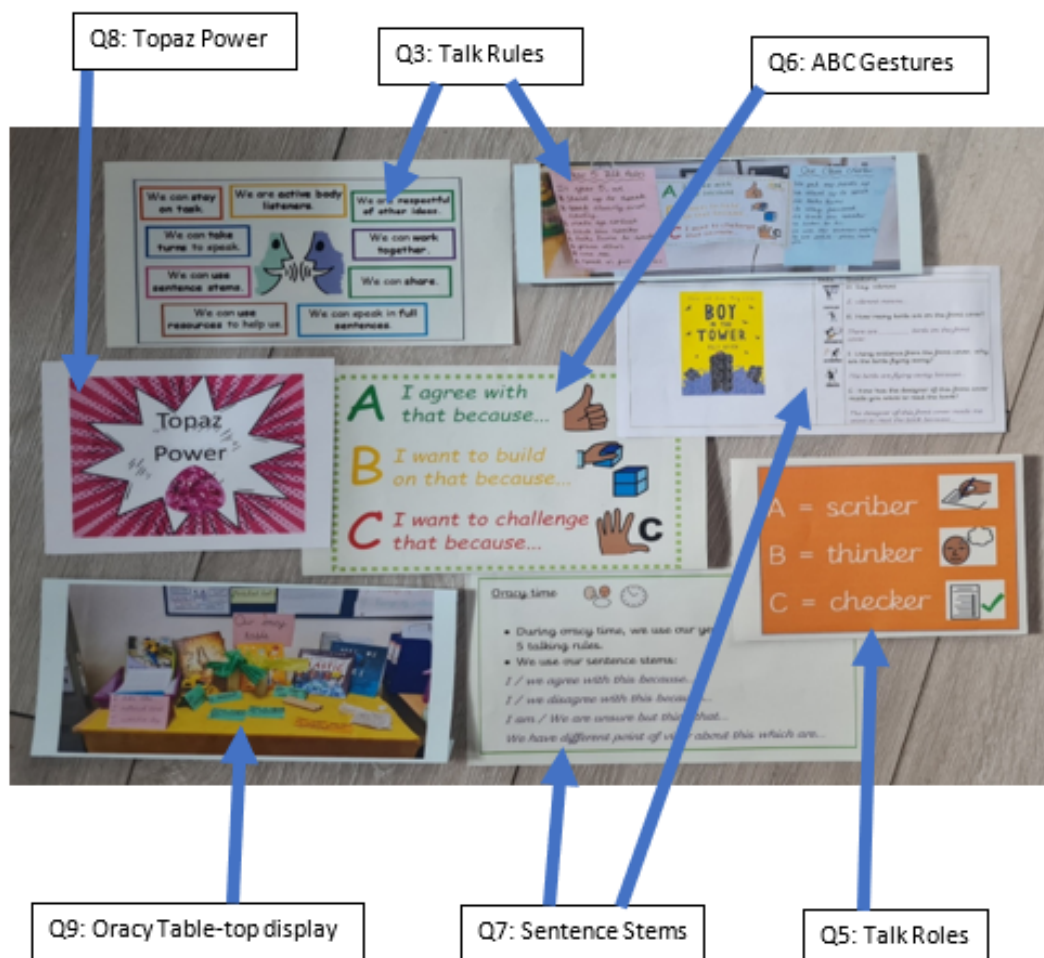


Figure 1 depicts images of each dialogic teaching strategy used in the primary academy's classroom, as identified and provided by the teacher, along with the corresponding interview questions (see Table 1). The images served as prompts for questions 3 to 8 and were shown to each child participant to enhance clarity and contextualisation of responses. The study employed a one-to-one semi-structured interview technique to capture the children's perceived experiences and personal interactions with the dialogic teaching strategies identified. This approach was selected to elicit individual accounts, as it is well-suited to capturing personal experiences and contextual understanding (Koller & San Juan, 2015; Northard et al., 2015; O'Rourke et al., 2017; Urbina-Garcia, 2019).

Table 1

Descriptions of the strategies identified by the teacher interviewed and then subsequent questions asked to the child participants to elicit their views

Strategy	Description	Questions
Talk Rules	Talk rules are a set of collaboratively constructed rules that children understand and follow during educational discussions.	Interview Question: Can you describe to me what the talk rules are? Follow-up Questions: How do talk rules help you to be brave enough to take part in a class discussion? Why might your teacher have created talk rules with you?
Talk Groups	Talk groups are various grouping configurations for educational discussion. Pair conversation involves two children, trios involve three children discussing, and quads involve four children conversing.	Interview Question: Can you describe to me what talk groups are? Follow-up Questions: How does your talk group help you to be brave enough to give feedback to the rest of the class? How does your talk group help you to join in with a discussion?
Talking Roles	These are distinctive roles that children play during an educational discussion. In a trio grouping, for example, one child may initiate the talk, another may raise questions and challenge what is being said, and the third may summarise the discussion at the conclusion.	Interview Question: Can you describe to me what talking roles are? Follow-up Questions: How do talking roles help you be brave enough to take part in a discussion with your group? How do talking roles help you to explain yourself in your talking group?
ABC Gestures	ABC Gestures are physical hand signs taught to children when someone in the classroom expresses their opinion. 'A' indicates agreement, 'B' stands for building on the idea, and 'C' stands for challenging what has been said.	Interview Question: Can you describe to me what ABC Gestures are? Follow-up Questions: How do ABC gestures help you to be brave enough to join in with a whole-class discussion? How do ABC gestures help you to explain your thinking, build on or challenge others?
Sentence Stems	Sentence stems are the beginnings of sentences that are printed or projected on the interactive whiteboard for children to read and use in order for them to speak in full sentences.	Interview Question: Can you describe to me what sentence stems are? Follow-up Questions: Why do you use sentence stems? How do sentence stems help you to join in with your talking group or a whole-class discussion? How do sentence stems help you build your thinking?

Topaz Power	Topaz power is a component of the Gem Powers approach, a metacognitive method. Topaz power reflects a child's oracy skills in this context, while different gems represent different learning behaviours.	<p>Interview Question: Can you describe to me what topaz power is?</p> <p>Follow-up Questions: Why is it important to improve your topaz power? How do you show your topaz power in the classroom?</p>
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Data Analysis

The use of Thematic Analysis (TA) was appropriate for the qualitative data, as it enabled a data-driven understanding of personal accounts and allowed for the identification of themes and categories in an objective and replicable way (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Although research biases may have influenced the interactions, behaviours and constructions of language, TA provided a robust method for capturing the essence of participants' experiences, while remaining objective in the coding phase (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Willig, 2013).

The study's interpretivist researchers understood their own subjectivity as a resource when interacting with latent codes, and although there was a risk of reductionism, TA enabled a pragmatic framework for managing the complex communicative interactions (Braun *et al.*, 2019; Cohen *et al.*, 2018). This approach aimed to provide a collective reality of a small sample size to evaluate the effectiveness of dialogic teaching strategies while focusing on the perspectives of direct recipients of educational initiatives (Johnson & Christensen, 2019).

Results

Close analysis reveals a hierarchical effect (see Figure 2) extending from the wider school framework to individual experiences within a dialogic classroom culture. This effect is initiated by the school's purposeful encouragement of critical learning behaviours, with topaz power key to oracy culture. The interaction of primary themes demonstrates how strategic choices foster a positive perception of effective speaking. Teaching strategies can only be maximised in a dialogic atmosphere that emphasises speaking and listening. Two significant impacts are visible: dialogic teaching increases self-confidence and participation, and physical and visual strategies enhance confidence and participation in educational dialogue.

Figure 2

Hierarchical relationship between primary themes

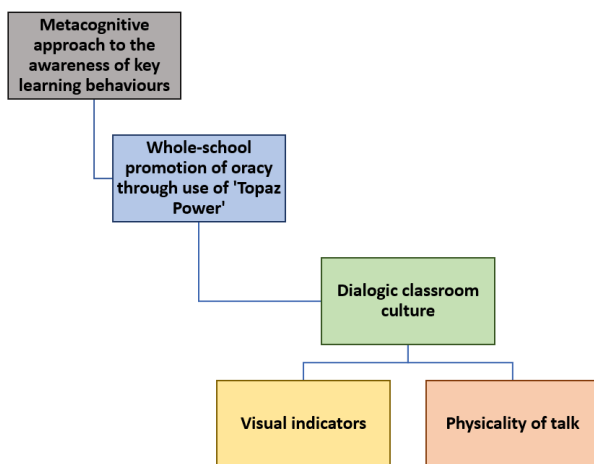


Table 2

Themes and subthemes identifying children's perspectives on classroom-based oracy strategies and how they support their personal constructs of self-confidence and participation

Themes	Sub-themes	Examples of codes
Whole-school promotion of oracy	Experience of an embedded whole-school metacognitive approach to understanding and promoting oracy skills	Metacognitive promotion of oracy Support confidence to participate Awareness of oracy skills Structures idea formation Promotion of core school values
	Experience of reward to understand and motivate oracy-related behaviours	Physical reward for oracy skills Motivator Reward for different behaviours
Dialogic classroom culture	Experience of high expectations of speaking in the classroom	Expectation setting for talk Reinforcement of expectations Expectation of a full sentence Responsibility to participate
	Experiences of knowing the value of listening during dialogue	Value of listening Supports listening skills Foster mutual respect
Physicality of talk	Experience of using physicality in vocal production	Physical movement Physicality which builds confidence Productive use of voice Hand movements
Visual Indicators	Experience of the use of colour to remind child to participate	Colour indicates talk Visual aids remembering Making voices heard visually Visual indicator of participation Visual cue

Theme 1: Whole-school Promotion of Oracy

Participants expressed the use of a whole-school metacognitive approach adopted to support key learning behaviours called the 'Gem Powers Approach' (GPA). The GPA was described as a self-awareness strategy which supports children's understanding about the choices they make and the behaviours they demonstrate. The teacher expressed how the promotion of oracy is integrated within the GPA.

"We also use gem powers in our school which links to metacognitive learning for children...we have a focus on oracy in our 'topaz gem' which is all about speaking in full sentences, standing to speak...projecting our voice – so making sure our voice is heard across the classroom and also making eye-contact with the speaker." (Class Teacher)

The above quote highlights how embedding oracy within a school's values enables a greater visibility for oracy and the value of learning through dialogic interaction within the school setting. Consequently, this was reciprocated in the children's responses in boosting feelings of self-confidence to use oracy-related skills. For example, descriptions of topaz power highlight how children are made aware of the importance of growing these learning powers and demonstrating oracy-related behaviours:

"Topaz power is all about oracy and standing up to speak." (P1)

“It’s important because if you like don’t use your topaz power, you just don’t like...you will not like do it confidently...you would just be like quiet.” (P3)

“Topaz power is about oracy and speaking loudly and clearly and other children tracking the speaker.” (P6)

Therefore, this demonstrates that the GPA underpins how the children value and feel responsible for engaging in dialogic talk in the classroom through having a common language and visual reminder about how to physically demonstrate their oracy skills. Thus, increasing feelings of self-confidence and increased participation when having an educational discussion as a class or in small groups. Supporting this awareness, the GPA adopted within this school setting forms part of the reward culture also. As this is part of a whole-school strategy, when children participate in educational discussions, it has been shown that oracy is celebrated at the whole-school level and the value of speaking is recognised. For instance:

“Topaz power is when you make your voice louder and you get a certificate for using it” (P2)

“Yeah, you get an award.” [What in assembly?] “Sometimes yeah. Aww, yeah and sometimes you do really good and you do more of it sometimes the headteacher might ask you like...you’ve got like gem certificates where you get and parents might be happy.” (P8)

Overall, embedding oracy in a school’s strategic action plan, as part of a metacognitive approach to understanding learning behaviours, has shown to enable children to develop a discrete awareness of the value that oracy plays in promoting feelings of self-confidence and motivations to participate in educational dialogue.

Theme 2: Dialogic Classroom Culture

By having the embedded whole school approach to the promotion of oracy, a framework is established for a teacher to develop a dialogic classroom culture and the value that is put on talk. It is only when a dialogic classroom culture is set up from the beginning of the year, children reported that it made it easier to participate in whole-class and group discussions.

“In Year [number], we stand up to speak clearly and loudly, make eye contact, track the speaker, take turns to speak, praise others, use ABC, speak in full sentences. So, we just have to like stay in the order of these rules and like not talk when someone else is talking, track the speaker and stuff, don’t look at anyone else and get distracted.” (P6)

It can be suggested that having a set of ‘Talk rules’ enables a clear expectation of what is expected of primary-aged children during educational dialogue. Participant 7 expressed reasoning for why and how talk rules help dialogic talk, *“So like the class doesn’t like go chaotic”* Thus, demonstrating the importance of participating in educational dialogue correctly by incorporating structure when learning to talk. Additionally, participants responded confidently about knowing what the talk rules are, where they can find them and the role they must play when someone else is speaking: highlighting a fostering of respect through high expectation setting.

“It [Talk rules] tells us how when other people are talking what we should do or if we’re talking what we could do.” (P2)

“Because it helps you like do stuff like say that you gotta like speak in full sentences and you use topaz...you actually follow the rules that were said” (P8)

Another aspect of the dialogic classroom culture, endorsed by the children’s responses, is the evidence alluding to the creation of a supportive environment where respectful interactions are fostered and the value of one’s own voice is prioritised. For example, Participant 1 describes this supportive environment as a place where *“we support each other.”* Therefore, this aspect of the classroom culture makes participation more likely because the active speaker knows that the recipient of the talk is listening and develops increased self-confidence in knowing that their voice is worth listening to. This was clear in five out of the eight participants:

“So, we don’t always do it alone so we can include others and they feel comfortable speaking.” (P1)

“They think that ideas are worth listening to.” (P2)

“So, you could be kind and respectful and not really saying it in a rude attitude.” (P4)

“When I’m speaking clearly and loudly, I feel my voice is valued to other people.” (P6)

“Yeah, people should hear.” [Why do you think others should hear you?] “Because they could like...they could learn...they could learn from it and they could...umm...or you could learn from their opinions.” (P7)

To sum up, the way in which a teacher generates a dialogic classroom culture embedded in clear values for talk enables a place where children feel safe and supported to participate in discussion. The theme demonstrates evidence for how some of the strategies support self-confidence and participatory processes. Participant 3 describes the impact of the teacher’s hard work in creating this dialogic culture in the classroom by stating, “She gives me confidence.”

Theme 3: Physicality of Talk

The next theme extrapolated from the dataset considers dialogic teaching strategies involving a level of physicality of the whole body to aid self-confidence and participation. All participants detail how when using their oracy skills, there is a physical aspect to ensuring active participation during educational dialogue. They describe a reciprocal relationship with having to stand up to speak and how this aids self-confidence in projecting their voice. For example:

“Because, if you stand up and speak, it makes your voice louder so everyone else can hear.” (P1)

“When I stand up to speak, I kind of get a little bit more courage” (P2)

“You have to stand up...stand up straight, speak clearly and loudly and the person who's talking you have to track them.” [What do you mean by tracking them?] “Like...tracking them with your eyes and not getting distracted.” (P6)

Again, these contextual experiences reinforce the expectations set for discussion within the classroom culture; they provide interesting insights of the children’s perceptions of talk not just sitting and talking but something which encompasses the physicality of the whole body to build confidence and encourage participation. Moreover, a specific dialogic teaching strategy commented on which supports the idea of physicality of talk: ABC gestures. The interaction between the researcher and participant 4 clearly describes how to use this strategy:

“It’s just like yeah like for agree you do this [So like an ‘A’ shape?] yeah. And then for ‘B’, you would build – so you would like this [With your fists on top of each other okay] and ‘C’, you would challenge that so like...like make an X with your hand.” (P4 and researcher)

Subsequently, the physical use of hand gestures enables a greater level of self-confidence to engage as the gestures indicate different types of physical participation by showing they want to agree, build or challenge. Participant 2 indicates how the gestures foster curiosity to participate in educational dialogue but also self-confidence to build understanding:

“When we do the gestures, the person like...if they see someone challenging, they might pick that because they want to know why they think they’re...why they think they’re wrong.” (P2)

In summary, making talk a physical act supports internal feelings of self-confidence and increases the likelihood of participation of challenging opinions even when they might be wrong. Having the expectation to stand up when speaking is clearly summed up by Participant 5 who details how it increased bravery to challenge other’s views: *“It help me brave because if someone talks and you're very brave enough to say, “Hmm, I don't think it's that.” like it's just like you thinking and saying ‘Hmm, I don't think that it's right.’” (P5).*

Theme 4: Visual Indicators

The final theme is another consequence of a dialogic classroom culture. Participants expressed that visual indicators offer observable opportunities to collaboratively participate about the subject content or about a problem. They denote the use of visual strategies such as coloured sentence stems give them confidence engage. Participant 8 clearly expresses why sentence stems are used, “*So, we know what to say*” Therefore, indicating through using colour stimulates the expectation that a child must say something as evidenced in the following examples:

“Purple means that’s what you’re meant to do like...what you’re meant to say.” (P8)

“[sentence stems] To like explain it in fuller words...on our ideas.” (P6)

Although it has already been presented as a physical strategy for confidence and participation in dialogic activities, the ‘ABC gestures’ have been perceived by the participants to be a clear visual indicator which enables them to want to participate in class discussions and listen to views given by the other children in the class. For example, participants expressed that the use of a visual supports their willingness to listen to others and want to participate in classroom dialogue:

“We discuss if we would agree or challenge then someone might agree and the other two might challenge. So, then we feedback to the class...” (P1)

“When someone sees the hand signs, they pick you and they know like if you’re challenging or agreeing or building.” (P6)

“When someone else tells their idea, you could either build on it because you have a better one or someone else could challenge your idea and tell you why.” (P2)

To summarise, evidence demonstrates that when the teacher uses dialogic teaching strategies, which have a visual element to them, there appears to be a greater contextualised increase in self-confidence and participation during educational dialogue.

Discussion

The study has found a high degree of positivity and perceived usefulness of most dialogic teaching strategies identified by the teacher. Its beneficial influence on developing self-confidence and participation is evident through use of multiple strategies with some individual strategies having greater impact on individual learning behaviours from the perspective of the child. The value of talk that is cultivated in the classroom environment is underpinned by the institution itself utilising the importance of oracy within their strategic improvement plan to enhance the spoken language of their disadvantaged community.

Children in the study expressed clear understanding of their school's promotion of oracy through a curriculum-wide approach and embedded classroom practices. The school's metacognitive approach to learning behaviours was entwined with its promotion of oracy, demonstrated using a 'Gem Powers Approach' (GPA). The study's findings were supported by the topaz gem, which represented how oracy is promoted as part of the school's strategic improvement plan. Flavell's (1979) model of cognitive monitoring, which emphasises regulation and self-evaluation of one's cognitions, was found to be supported by the study's results. The use of a reward system was also found to improve metacognitive awareness, listening comprehension, learning motivation, and cognitive growth (Krueger *et al.*, 2017; Tan *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, these findings suggest that promoting metacognitive skills from a young age can enhance the potential for successful learning (Lyons & Ghetti, 2010), as demonstrated by the children's clear understanding and confidence in participating in dialogic interactions in the classroom.

By setting the stage for how oracy is promoted at the whole-school level, it allows a classroom teacher to set up an environment which is conducive for effective talk. When a dialogic classroom culture is constructed, it can provide opportunities to build conceptual knowledge and to analyse and evaluate the perspectives of others (Alexander, 2020). Worku and Alemu (2021) offer weight to the argument that instilling a dialogic classroom culture is the result of a teacher's careful designing of activities, the quality of questioning

techniques and the management of small group organisations. The findings corroborate this idea by revealing how the children perceived the 'talk rules' strategy which was beneficial to facilitating feelings of self-confidence and greater likelihood of participation in classroom dialogue.

The study found that the implementation of "Talk rules" created a structured and effective dialogic classroom culture that helped children to participate confidently in educational discussions. Research by Van der Veen *et al.* (2017) suggests that talk rules organise classroom interaction and benefit children's oral language development, while Phillipson and Wegerif (2016) suggest that utilising dialogic ground rules encourages critical, caring, collaborative, and creative thinking. The study's findings support this, as children explained how the construction of talk rules helped them develop confidence in expressing their voice and fostered mutual respect for all learners' contributions. However, Barak and Lefstein (2022) challenge this view, suggesting that children resist ground rules for talk and engage in messier yet authentically dialogic discussions. Despite this, the findings demonstrate how talk rules support structured yet authentically dialogic discussions, with multiple participants reporting increased confidence and participation when following the rules step-by-step. The application of talk rules activates participatory processes and structures participation into manageable steps (Hill *et al.*, 2004).

Much of the literature indicates dialogue as something which involves the voice and the voice only. Theme 3 discusses the role of physical actions in dialogic encounters, highlighting a novel finding that effective communication and conceptual knowledge building involves the whole body. The children in the study reported the importance of physically standing up to speak, which prepares them to actively construct their thoughts before expressing them. This is supported by limited research in this area, such as Wolf *et al.* (2016), who suggest that standing to speak is a requirement when engaging in big-group discussions. Additionally, the children reported the importance of 'tracking the speaker' and making eye contact, which enhances their oracy skills and helps them stay focused. This is consistent with Fisher and Frey's (2016) findings on the benefits of non-verbal communication in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. They suggest that tracking a speaker visually has a social purpose which enhances the learning experience of conceptual knowledge development and developing social relations with others: this is especially apparent for learners where English is not their first language.

The use of ABC gestures was also reported to be an effective physical strategy for indicating a desire to participate in discussions. This is supported by Goodwin's (2007) embodied participation framework and Maree and Van der Westhuizen's (2020) finding that hand gestures during educational discussions enabled a more succinct understanding of the content. Overall, the study suggests that incorporating physical elements in dialogic encounters can enhance oracy skills, feelings of self-confidence and promotes participation for a more effective learning experience.

Finally, the study found that the use of visual indicators and sentence stems are tools to support students in developing their oracy skills. The final theme developed in the study showed that children felt more confident and engaged in dialogic encounters when they had visual cues to help them articulate their thoughts and ideas using sentence stems. The use of sentence stems was found to promote higher-level thinking and listening skills in students, increasing participation in student-to-student talk and whole-class discussions. This finding is supported by Stibbard *et al.* (2020), who also found that sentence stems were effective in promoting dialogue in early years children. Additionally, Warwick *et al.* (2013) found that sentence stems can be used as a scaffolding tool when visually presented on an interactive whiteboard (IWB) to promote confidence in participating in educational dialogue. Therefore, the use of sentence stems and visual indicators can help to structure student contributions, increase confidence in individual thinking, and ultimately promote effective communication and knowledge-building in dialogic encounters.

Limitations

The study identified two main limitations. Firstly, potential bias in data collection by adults working with children made interpreting participants' responses difficult (Spyrou, 2011; Urbina-Garcia, 2019; White *et al.*, 2012). This study may have been subject to researcher bias, potentially misrepresenting the accounts and experiences of the participants (Lyons, 2011). Using a reflexive adaptation of the interview technique improved data quality and understanding of the children's experiences (James, 2007; Spyrou, 2011). Secondly, varying language skills and exposure to English among participants may have impacted response quality (Saracho & Spodek, 2007). Research suggests that factors related to socio-economic status, including reduced quality of

linguistic encounters at home and limited exposure to books, may impede vocal development (Dodd *et al.*, 2003; Oller *et al.*, 1997). However, dialogic teaching has been shown to be effective in improving speaking abilities and collaborative dialogue among children with English as an additional or foreign language (Halloush *et al.*, 2021; Zarrinabadi & Ebrahimi, 2019), despite grammatical errors or articulation issues.

Implications

Implications for Research

The study reveals a novel contribution to research by highlighting the importance of capturing children's voices, which has been an underrepresented area of investigation (Phelps *et al.*, 2014). Gripton (2019) suggests that this may be attributed to the misconception that young children lack communication competency. Thus, this study is the first to address dialogic information from the child's perspective and demonstrate how this methodological approach, when accompanied by appropriate research tools, can advance knowledge in the field. This approach also challenges the outdated educational initiatives and reduces the perception of children as unreliable witnesses and mere 'adults in waiting' (Gripton, 2019; Theobald, 2017). Given that children are direct recipients of educational reform, understanding how they construct and manage this aspect of their social world is essential (Bateman, 2017).

Implications for Educational Practitioners

The study's results have significant implications for teachers aiming to cultivate a dialogic classroom culture that supports students' self-confidence and participation in educational dialogue. Themes 3 and 4 offer practical strategies to promote meaningful interaction and enhance conceptual understanding. Explicit communication expectations, visual aids, and physical opportunities for talk are necessary to develop students' oratorical skills. This creates a dialogue-rich environment that encourages critical engagement with various conceptual issues and fosters confidence in expressing oneself clearly while respecting others' views. (Nagda & Gurin, 2007; Tan, 2021; Zúñiga, 2003).

Improving Educational Policy

An important message for educational policy is the recognition of language as the cornerstone of education, with a crucial role in fostering children's lifelong learning (Hulme *et al.*, 2020). The current study's findings revealed that children experiencing significant disadvantages often struggle to express themselves articulately and clearly. This underscores the importance of implementing dialogic-based strategies for children in such circumstances, especially in schools situated in geographically similar areas to the study locale. Without these practices, children may encounter limited opportunities for engaging in educational dialogue, potentially leading to irrevocable damage to their oral communication skills as they progress through the education system and into the UK workforce.

Educational policy possesses the potential to advance this initiative by enhancing foundational language skills necessary for future job prospects and breaking the cycle of disadvantage that could contribute to future unemployment rates in the UK. However, it's essential to note that this study drew from a sample of the target population (8 out of 17,200). While the study's authenticity remains robust, generalisations can only be confidently made within this specific geographical context (Robinson, 2014).

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the perceived effectiveness of dialogic teaching practices in a primary setting, specifically how particular strategies impacted the personal constructs of self-confidence and participation within educational dialogue. First-hand responses from eight 9-10-year-olds who received multiple dialogic teaching strategies were collected. The evidence collected suggests that a metacognitive intervention can have a beneficial impact on individual understanding of the value of talk within the classroom and on collective learning. Strategies that utilised a physical or visual element contributed to the development of children's skills in articulating and expressing themselves. The school's metacognitive approach to learning behaviours, which embedded reward or oracy-related achievement motivational cues, contributed to learners'

shared sense of achievement in developing high-quality oracy skills. Thus, developing a classroom culture that promotes and engages children enables them to demonstrate good oracy skills. Overall, the findings demonstrate that children understood most of the identified strategies, expressed how each supported their self-confidence, and provided alternative ways of actively participating in educational dialogue in class and smaller groups.

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