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How Small Group Discussions Can Improve Spoken Discourse Competence

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Abstract: Many students find it hard to understand complex texts. To help with this, we carried out a year-long study using a method called Quality Talk in two fourth-grade classrooms. This approach involves small-group discussions led by the teacher, with the goal of improving both basic reading skills and deeper, more thoughtful understanding of what students read. As the year went on, we noticed some important changes. Teachers began stepping back during discussions, allowing students to take the lead. At the same time, students started to think more deeply—offering detailed explanations and exploring different ideas together. We also saw meaningful improvements in their reading test scores, especially when it came to understanding texts on both basic and advanced levels. These results suggest that structured small-group conversations can be a powerful way to help students grow as readers and thinkers.

Keywords: Argumentation, classroom discussion, critical thinking, Quality Talk, reading comprehension.

Introduction

In today's world, where students are constantly surrounded by information from books, websites, and social media, being able to understand and evaluate complex texts is more important than ever. But many students still struggle with key skills—like answering deeper questions, finding reliable information, or making sense of challenging ideas (Bråten et al., 2011). A recent national report found that a large number of students don't even reach basic levels of reading comprehension, let alone the kind of critical thinking needed to really analyze and engage with texts (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). High-level comprehension is what happens when students reflect deeply on what they read, question what they're learning, and think about the quality and meaning behind the content (Iordanou, Kendeou, & Beker, 2016). To help students succeed with these skills, teachers need to use intentional strategies that support both comprehension and critical thinking. One promising option is using classroom discussions as a learning tool. In fact, research shows that talking about texts together not only helps students understand what they read—it can also teach them to think more critically about it (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009; Reznitskaya et al., 2008).

One of the biggest challenges in education today is that most classroom discussion strategies just aren't equally good at helping students understand texts on both a basic and a deeper level. Many of these methods don't do enough to highlight how important it is for students to think critically and analytically when working with complex reading materials (Murphy et al., 2009). To make matters worse, students are rarely taught directly how to participate in these kinds of meaningful conversations. Instead, they're often expected to figure it out by watching their teachers, without any real guidance (Murphy et al., 2010). That's why we launched this study—to explore how both teachers and students in fourth grade changed the way they talked about texts over a full school year using a method called Quality Talk (QT). QT is a structured, teacher-supported discussion approach aimed at improving students' reading comprehension, from basic understanding to higher-level thinking.

What Helps Students Reach Deeper Understanding?

To truly understand a text, students need to go beyond simply reading the words. They need to think around the text—asking questions, exploring ideas, and reasoning through what they're reading. This kind of deep comprehension relies on two key abilities: being

able to form and defend arguments and being able to reflect on how they know what they know. These are called argumentation and epistemic cognition (Bråten et al., 2011; Iordanou et al., 2016). Critical thinking is more than just having an opinion—it's about explaining your reasoning clearly and being open to considering different perspectives. Students show this when they offer detailed explanations of their thinking and when they respectfully challenge or build on each other's ideas (Murphy et al., 2014; Murphy et al., 2017). Learning how to argue well—with evidence and logic—happens best when students have the chance to talk things through with others (Iordanou et al., 2016).

But there's another layer to this: students' ability to think critically is deeply connected to how they think about knowledge itself. This is what we call epistemic cognition—how students come to understand, question, and make sense of information (Chinn et al., 2011; Kuhn et al., 2000; Lee et al., 2016). When students see knowledge as something they can evaluate and explore—not just something to memorize—they're much better equipped to engage with texts in thoughtful, meaningful ways. Epistemic cognition is just a fancy term for how students think about knowledge—how they learn, make sense of what they know, question it, and apply it. When students start to recognize the difference between what they know for sure and what they believe or guess, they're practicing this kind of thinking. Even though it might happen quietly in the background, it has a big impact on how they read, how they argue their points, and how they learn in general (Alexander et al., 1998).

For students to really understand what they read—and to talk about it in thoughtful, meaningful ways—they need to believe that texts aren't just facts to be memorized. They need to see them as ideas that can be questioned and explored. This means asking things like: Is this source trustworthy? Does it make sense with what I already know? Does it meet the standards we use in school subjects, like science or history? If students aren't taught to think this way and instead just try to memorize everything, they won't develop the deeper understanding or critical thinking needed for real learning. And they likely won't take much away from class discussions either.

There's strong evidence that helping students think about knowledge and how to build arguments really works—especially when they get to talk with peers in a structured, meaningful way over time. Studies show that when students are explicitly taught how to argue their points using evidence, they do better—not just when speaking, but in writing too (Ryu & Sandoval, 2012; Kuhn et al., 2013). Other factors also play a role in how well students understand texts. For example, gender and reading fluency matter. Girls, on average, tend to do better than boys when it comes to reading. This has been shown in national studies and across different age groups. A big reason might be that girls are often more motivated, have a more positive attitude toward reading, and are more engaged during discussions (Chiu & McBride-Chang, 2006; Logan & Johnston, 2009; Wu et al., 2013).

Research has made one thing clear: how fluently students can read out loud is a strong sign of how well they understand what they read—especially in the early grades. In fact, study after study has shown that oral reading fluency (ORF) is one of the best ways to predict a student's reading ability. One popular tool used in schools, DIBELS (which stands for Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills), found that ORF gave the most accurate picture of a student's reading level (Johnson et al., 2009). When we look at all the research linking things like how students think about knowledge (epistemic cognition), gender differences, and fluency to reading success, it leads to a big question: What can teachers do to help students really understand what they read on a deeper level?

So, What Is Quality Talk?

Quality Talk (QT) is one answer to that question. It's a well-rounded approach to classroom discussions that helps students become deeper thinkers and better readers. QT encourages students to not just read text, but to talk about it, question it, and really explore what it means. These discussions help students understand the basics and go further—developing critical thinking, forming arguments, and learning how to explain their ideas clearly, both out loud and in writing.

QT is built around four key pieces:

A clear structure for how discussions happen in class

Tools and strategies for meaningful dialogue

Specific teacher techniques for guiding conversations

Core teaching values that create a supportive and thoughtful learning space

In this updated version of QT, teachers also receive professional development and coaching. Students use journals to reflect and learn, and they're taught step-by-step how to ask good questions, back up their ideas, and build strong arguments. The Ideal Instructional Frame is the heart of how Quality Talk works—it sets up everything students and teachers need for rich, meaningful conversations about what they're reading.

Here's how it works: Students are grouped into small teams of four to six, and both teachers and students share responsibility for how the discussion unfolds. The teacher chooses the reading material and sets the topic, but students take the lead when it comes to who speaks and how the conversation flows. They're also encouraged to interpret and respond to the text in their own way. Before jumping into discussion, students go

through mini-lessons where they learn how to ask real, thought-provoking questions—and how to answer them thoughtfully too. They also prepare by reading the text and doing a short activity in their QT journals that checks for basic understanding and helps them create questions of their own.

When it's time to talk, the teacher acts more like a guide than a lecturer—helping students stay engaged and nudging them to dig deeper into the ideas behind the text. This might include looking for hidden messages, assumptions, or arguments in what they read. Students are encouraged to make personal connections to the text and share their own insights, as well as pull out key facts and details. Once students understand the basics and have made some emotional or personal links to the content, they're ready to think more critically and challenge ideas. To wrap it all up, students return to their journals after the discussion and write down their individual takeaways—what they think and believe based on the conversation. This step, inspired by Vygotsky's idea of learning through reflection, helps them really own what they've learned (Graham & Harris, 2014).

Discourse elements are one of the most important parts of the Quality Talk approach—they're the tools that help students think more deeply and talk more meaningfully about what they're reading. One of the biggest tools in this toolbox is the authentic question. These are the kinds of questions that can't be answered with a simple yes or no. Instead, they get students thinking and wondering. Both teachers and students can ask them, and the best ones lead to follow-up questions that build on what someone else just said. These are called uptake questions, and they help keep the conversation flowing.

Some questions might push students to analyze or speculate about what they read—for example, "What if this character had made a different choice?" Others ask students to make connections between the text and their own feelings, other books they've read, or things they already know. When students answer these kinds of questions, they often give elaborated explanations—responses that go beyond the obvious and show they're really thinking. You might hear a student say something like, "I think that would've changed everything, because if he stayed home, he never would've ended up at that school." These are moments where students are making sense of the story in their own words. They also get into exploratory talk—where they think through different ideas, offer their opinions, and even respectfully disagree with each other to make the conversation richer.

By engaging in these types of discussions, students aren't just talking about the text—they're learning to think critically. They start to question where information comes from, how strong someone's argument is, and whether evidence really supports a claim. These are skills that grow stronger when students are explicitly taught how to use reasons, find evidence, and respond to different points of view. To effectively implement the instructional frame in Quality Talk (QT), the manner in which teachers lead and participate in discussions evolves over time. This evolution is supported by specific strategies known as teacher discourse moves—types of language and interaction techniques teachers use to guide productive classroom dialogue (Wei, Murphy, & Firetto, in press).

At the beginning of QT implementation, teachers typically provide extensive support by speaking more frequently and modeling desired behaviors. For example, a teacher might demonstrate how to pose an authentic question or affirm a student's high-quality response (e.g., "That was an excellent elaborated explanation, Sienna"). As students become more comfortable with the expectations and begin to take ownership of the discussion process, teachers gradually reduce their input, allowing students to lead more of the conversation. Despite this shift, the teacher continues to play a supportive role, stepping in with guidance when necessary. It is important to distinguish teacher discourse moves from the general discourse elements of QT. While both are present during discussions, teacher discourse moves are used intentionally by educators to scaffold and develop students' critical-analytic thinking.

The final component of the Quality Talk (QT) model involves five pedagogical principles, each representing a foundational concept necessary for cultivating a classroom environment centered on dialogically enriched, text-based learning.

Language as a Tool for Thinking: Teachers must recognize that talk functions not just for communication, but as a means of processing ideas and examining knowledge (Mercer, 1995, 2000; Murphy et al., 2012). This reinforces the critical role that discourse plays in student learning. Normative Expectations and Dialogic Responsiveness: Effective discussions should be structured by clear ground rules—for example, "We don't raise our hands" or "We respect others' opinions" (Murphy & Firetto, 2017). As students internalize these expectations and participate accordingly, teachers can gradually reduce their control over discussions, allowing students to take on interpretive leadership. This transition demonstrates dialogic responsiveness—the teacher's willingness to let students guide the discourse (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983).

- Balancing Structure and Flexibility: While facilitating discussions, teachers must strike a balance between guiding the conversation (through teacher

discourse moves) and giving students the autonomy to contribute ideas that matter to them (Cohen, 1994; King, 1999).

- Content Mastery: Teachers must possess a thorough understanding of the text being discussed, enabling them to guide the conversation effectively and ask appropriate follow-up questions.
- Valuing Diversity in Discourse: Educators should create space for students to bring their individual experiences and backgrounds into the conversation. This inclusion leads to a more dynamic and inclusive learning environment with a richer range of perspectives.

What makes Quality Talk (QT) different from other classroom discussion strategies? A lot, actually. First and foremost, QT is all about using conversation not just to talk about the text, but to think through it. It's based on the belief that talk is a tool for thinking—for exploring ideas and building understanding together. Unlike most other methods, QT treats both teachers and students as key drivers of change. Teachers don't just lead discussions—they help students learn how to talk in thoughtful, meaningful ways. Through a series of specially designed mini-lessons, students learn skills like how to ask powerful questions or how to build strong arguments. That way, they can really participate, not just follow along. Another thing that sets QT apart is its real-world application. It doesn't rely on outside reading materials chosen by researchers. Instead, it works with the books and texts schools are already using, which means it fits naturally into everyday classroom routines.

QT also gives teachers strong support from the start—with training sessions and ongoing coaching that help them use the method effectively. Over time, teachers shift more of the discussion responsibility to their students, giving them space to lead conversations and think critically on their own. In early research studies, including one where 14 teachers and over 270 students took part, QT showed promise in improving how students understand and engage with texts. While those teachers got training, the students didn't yet receive the kind of step-by-step instruction the model now includes.

CONCLUSION

Today's students face a world full of information—online, in books, and everywhere in between. To succeed, they need to know how to think critically, evaluate sources, and make sense of complex ideas (Goldman et al., 2010). But those skills aren't automatic. They need to be taught, modeled, and supported, starting as early as elementary school (Bennett et al., 2008). Structured classroom discussions are one powerful way to build these skills. But too often, the way discussions are run in classrooms doesn't match what students need. Students don't get enough say, and the conversation doesn't go deep enough (Soter et al., 2008). That's where Quality Talk comes in. With its clear structure, focus on deep thinking, and support for both teachers and students, QT shows real potential to help kids become better thinkers and readers. The early evidence is promising—and now it's time to bring these methods to more classrooms so that all students are ready to take on the challenges of the 21st century.

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