

2 Recognising helpful and unhelpful talk

What types of talk engages pupils, develops understanding and promotes deeper thinking? Robin Alexander (2006)¹ identified the following five principles of helpful classroom talk - which he terms *dialogic*.

Dialogic talk is:

- **Collective:** teachers and children address learning tasks together, as a group or as a class, rather than in isolation
- **Reciprocal:** teachers and children listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints
- **Cumulative:** teachers and children build on their own and each others' ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry
- **Supportive:** children articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over 'wrong' answers and they help each other to reach common understandings
- **Purposeful:** teachers plan and facilitate dialogic teaching with particular educational goals in view

Neil Mercer (1995, 2000)² identifies the following three types of pupil-pupil talk. It is the third type, exploratory talk, that is most helpful fo learning:

Cumulative talk	Speakers build positively, but uncritically on what each other has said. This is typically characterised by repetitions, confirmations and elaborations.
Disputational talk	This consists of disagreement and individualised decision making. It is characterised by short exchanges consisting of assertions and counter-assertions.
Exploratory talk	Speakers work on and elaborate each other's reasoning in a collaborative, rather than competitive atmosphere. Exploratory talk enables reasoning to become audible and knowledge becomes publicly accountable. It is characterised by critical and constructive exchanges. Challenges are justified and alternative ideas are offered.

¹ Alexander, R. (2006). *Towards Dialogic Teaching: Rethinking Classroom Talk* (3 ed.). Thirsk: Dialogos.

² Mercer, N. (1995). *The guided construction of knowledge*. Clevedon, Philadelphia, Adelaide. Mercer, N. (2000). *Words and Minds*. London: Routledge.