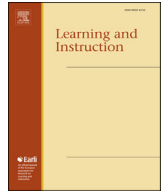




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# The effect of productive classroom talk and metacommunication on young children's oral communicative competence and subject matter knowledge: An intervention study in early childhood education

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was to investigate the effect of productive classroom talk and metacommunication on the development of young children's oral communicative competence and subject matter knowledge. This study can be characterized as a quasi-experimental study with a pre-test-intervention-post-test design. A total of 21 teachers and 469 children participated in this study. 12 teachers were assigned to the intervention condition and participated in a Professional Development Program on productive classroom dialogue. Multilevel analyses of children's oral communicative competence pre- and post-test scores indicated that our intervention had a significant and moderate to large effect on the development of young children's oral communicative competence. No significant effects were found for children's subject matter knowledge. The results of this study suggest that dialogically organized classroom talk is more beneficial than non-dialogical classroom talk for the development of children's oral language skills.

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## 1. Introduction

In the past decades, research on classroom discourse has received a considerable amount of attention in the educational sciences and beyond (for example, Cazden, 2001; Howe & Abedin, 2013; Resnick, Asterhan, & Clarke, 2015). This body of research has provided some support for the claim that dialogically orchestrated classroom talk is positively related to children's (content) learning and development (Kierner, Gröschner, Pehmer, & Seidel, 2015; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003; Wegerif, Mercer, & Dawes, 1999). However, according to a recent review on classroom discourse by Howe and Abedin (2013) there is a lack of empirical evidence to decide "whether certain modes of organization are more beneficial than others" (p. 325) as most of the studies on classroom discourse are qualitative in nature. Howe and Abedin suggest, "it is time to take

risks" (p. 346) and complement this body of research with quantitative studies. Furthermore, most studies on classroom discourse are conducted in the upper grades of primary education or in secondary education schools. Much remains unknown about the potentials of dialogic classroom talk in early childhood classrooms. Besides, most studies on classroom discourse focus on dialogue in small-group contexts. As many teachers struggle to orchestrate classroom discussion in whole-class settings, it might be worthwhile to investigate how dialogic practices can be transferred to whole-class contexts. Finally, many studies that report on the relation between classroom discourse and children's learning or development only take measurements of children's subject matter knowledge or their reasoning skills into account. Much remains unknown about the benefits of dialogically organized classroom talk for the development of children's communication or pragmatic language skills. In this article, therefore, we will focus on the possibilities of dialogically organized classroom talk in whole-class settings – which we will refer to as *productive classroom dialogue* (van der Veen, van Kruistum, & Michaels, 2015) – for the development of young children's oral communicative competence.

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### 1.1. Productive classroom dialogue

The concept of productive classroom dialogue (PCD) is rooted in Sarah Michael's and Cathy O'Connor's (2012; 2015) work on classroom talk. In PCD "teachers aim to break away from interaction patterns that are predominantly teacher-steered and based on recitation" (van der Veen et al., 2015, p. 321) and to move beyond the well-known and often used Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) sequence (see Cazden, 2001; see also the examples in Table 3). IRE sequences follow a recitation format in which the teacher poses a closed question, one student (or multiple students in chorus) gives a short response, and the teacher evaluates the correctness of this response. In PCD, however, children are given space to say more, carefully listen to one another, reason, and think together (Michaels & O'Connor, 2012). It aims for a classroom culture in which children take each other seriously and move beyond the boundaries of their own thinking and understanding. Furthermore, it intends to improve children's understandings and communicative abilities by collaboratively producing and negotiating new ideas.

#### 1.1.1. Productive talk moves

In PCD, teachers have several talk moves at their disposal that can be used to orchestrate classroom talk. These talk moves can be seen as tools (Michaels & O'Connor, 2015) that teachers can use to encourage children to (a) share, expand or clarify their initial ideas (*Can you say more about it?*) (b) listen to one another and take other's ideas seriously (*Who think they understood what X said and can put it into their own words?*), (c) deepen their reasoning (*Why do you think that?*), and (d) think with each other and build on each other's ideas (*Can you add onto his idea? Do you agree/disagree? Why?*). The use of these talk moves has turned out to be strongly related to children's academic learning (O'Connor, Michaels, & Chapin, 2015) as they open up the conversation and support teachers to move beyond Initiation-Responses-Evaluation sequences. A detailed overview of the talk moves used in this study can be found in Appendix A.

#### 1.1.2. Metacommunicative moves

In our work on classroom talk, we have added a category to Michaels' and O'Connor's set of talk moves: the metacommunicative moves. These moves are pedagogical strategies that teachers can use to explicitly reflect on children's communicative performance; they support talk about talk (see Appendix A). The importance of the use of metacommunication in young children's classroom talk derives from the work of Robinson and Robinson (1983). In their experiments, they showed that young children are often unaware of ambiguities and misunderstandings in communication. Robinson and Robinson (1982; 1983) found that making non-comprehension explicit (for example, by saying *I don't know/understand what you mean*) is more effective in supporting children's communicative understanding and performance, than when the listener interprets the speaker's utterance (for example, by saying *Is it the big one?*). The work by Robinson and Robinson (1982; 1983; see also Lyster, 2004) has shown that metacommunicative moves support both children's communicative understanding and performance. Furthermore, Wegerif et al. (1999) already emphasized the importance of the use of conversational ground rules to support classroom talk. We argue that these conversational ground rules also support talk about talk as they can be used to reflect on children's communicative performance.

### 1.2. Children's oral communicative competence

From a sociocultural perspective, children's oral communicative abilities are considered an important mediator for self-regulation,

learning, and thinking (van Oers, Wardekker, Elbers, & van der Veer, 2008; Whitebread, Mercer, Howe, & Tolmie, 2013). According to Mercer (2008), "learning is mediated through dialogue" (p. 35). Consequently, investing in children's oral communicative competence may contribute to the improvement of the quality of classroom dialogue and children's learning. Furthermore, children's oral language abilities are positively related to their social participation and acceptance (for example, van der Wilt, van Kruistum, van der Veen, & van Oers, in press). As oral language competence is the first language-based competence children develop – and a prerequisite for children's participation in classroom talk – we argue it is important for teachers to pay attention to it from an early age in a systematic and goal-oriented way. Following the work of Schiefelbusch and Pickar (1984) and Celce-Murcia (2008), we use the term oral communicative competence to emphasize that it is about the combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes that "enables a speaker to communicate effectively and appropriately in social contexts" (Schiefelbusch & Pickar, 1984, p. ix; see also; Embrechts, Mugge, & van Bon, 2005). In order for children to communicate successfully, it is not enough only to focus on the systemic and formal aspects of language use (grammar, pronunciation; see Celce-Murcia, 2008; Embrechts et al., 2005), but also to include a more communicative focus which entails practicing the different aspects of social interaction in meaningful activities such as classroom talk (Roth & Spekman, 1984). However, a recent review of empirical research on oral language education in the Netherlands and Flanders indicated that much remains unknown about how teachers can support children's oral communicative abilities through classroom talk (Bonset & Hoogeveen, 2011).

### 1.3. Current study and research question

In the current study, we investigated the effect of an intervention aimed at increasing the use of productive talk and meta-communication in classroom talk on the development of young children's oral communicative competence. As the relation between dialogically organized classroom talk and children's content learning is not yet firmly established, we also studied the effect on children's subject matter knowledge. Finally, we were interested in the following control variables: sex, age, home language, and socio-economic status. Previous research has indicated that there might be early sex differences in children's language abilities, with girls performing slightly better than boys (Wallentin, 2008). This sex difference, however, disappears over time. Furthermore, young children's language abilities rapidly increase over time when they enter preschool (for example, Nærlund, 2011; Tuijl & Leseman, 2007). A longitudinal study by Tuijl and Leseman (2007) suggests that a non-Dutch home language moderates the growth in language abilities for children attending preschool. Furthermore, a strong relation is often reported between socio-economic status and children's language proficiency and academic achievement (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002).

Using a pre-test-intervention-post-test design, this study was conducted to answer the following research question: What is the effect of an intervention aimed at increasing teachers' use of productive talk and metacommunicative moves on the level of young children's oral communicative competence and subject matter knowledge?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

A total of 21 teachers (and 21 classes) from 11 primary education schools in the Netherlands participated in the study: 12 in the

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