Summary of Research Results

This study investigated the quality of teacher-pupil dialogue in the guided reading session of the Literacy Hour and its relationship to pupils’ powers of comprehension. A pilot study showed that two different patterns of talk could be found in this context. Sometimes it resembled ‘pedagogical dialogue’, in which someone who knows and possesses the truth (the teacher) instructs someone who is ignorant of it and in error (the pupils). In other cases, it resembled ‘internally persuasive discourse’, in which pupils retell a story in their own words rather than reciting it by heart.

We recorded and analysed examples of discussions during the guided reading session in 4 primary schools, visiting each of them three times. On each school visit, we recorded the same group of six y6 children (10-11 year olds) working with their class teacher. We also made a video recording of each discussion which we used to study gesture and other aspects of non-verbal communication.

Our analysis of the data revealed the following results.

1. Teacher questions

Teachers commonly asked ‘test’ questions, with one right answer already known to the teacher (e.g. ‘Can you find for me a word that means predicted?’). They also used more challenging forms of test question where there were several correct answers (e.g. ‘Pick out the verbs that the author uses to show us Willy’s character’). Occasionally they used authentic questions which invited pupils to describe their own experiences, and were open to many possible kinds of answer (e.g. ‘How did you feel when you saw the pictures of the towers [of the World Trade Centre] collapsing?’). Authentic questions like this were rare.

2. Turn-taking

Teachers usually selected which pupil would speak next by picking them out by name. It was rare for pupils to start talking without being nominated by the teacher; instead they had to bid for a turn, usually by raising their hand. The teacher might pick a pupil who put their hand up, but could also ignore them and nominate another pupil according to their mental record of whose turn it was, or who had not spoken yet in the discussion. These observations suggest that the way in which turn-taking is controlled in whole-class discussion is carried over into the small group setting of the guided reading session. In consequence, teachers can ensure that every pupil gets a chance to contribute to the discussion, but there is not much scope for pupils to respond directly to each other’s comments and develop, challenge or qualify each other’s ideas.
3. Pupils’ own ideas

When a pupil introduced a new idea into the discussion, the teacher sometimes responded by putting a damper on their intervention and moving on to the topic s/he had in mind. At other times, they would take up the idea themselves, digressing from their agenda and elaborating on the pupil’s contribution for a limited time. This did not usually extend to inviting other pupils to comment on the new topic, however. We found no examples of teachers abandoning their own agenda altogether and turning the topic of discussion over to an idea introduced by a pupil.

4. Amount of talk

This pie chart, corresponding to one of our school visits, shows the amount of words produced by each speaker, and indicates who does the most talking. The teacher (Grey) produces almost half of the speech in the discussion, whereas the pupils are broadly similar in the amount of talk they produce, with the exception of Black who says very little. Other analyses revealed that in fact the teacher does not speak many more times than the pupils, but his/her contributions are longer and more elaborated. Pupils’ contributions, by contrast, tended to be short and to consist of few words. The pupil represented by Gold in this graph, for example, seems to have produced a lot of speech, but closer inspection shows that this consists of many very minimal comments such as ‘Yeah’, ‘OK’, ‘Right’, in response to what others were saying. Contributions like this are not likely to develop the pupil’s literacy skills greatly, and s/he would probably benefit from being encouraged to speak less often but at greater length during the discussion.

The results of the study suggest that teacher-pupil dialogue in the guided reading session of the Literacy Hour tends to be more like ‘pedagogical dialogue’, in which the teacher instructs the pupils about the true meaning of a text, than ‘internally
persuasive discourse’, in which the pupils retell a story in their own words. The teacher:

- usually asks questions to which s/he already knows the answer;
- normally selects which pupil is going to speak next;
- keeps a tight grip on the topic of conversation; and
- does most of the talking.

Sometimes the teacher relaxed his/her control over the talk in certain respects e.g. by using authentic questions. On our evidence, however, discussion in the guided reading session at present provides little space for pupils to articulate and develop their own ideas about what they have read. Guidance advises that group discussion in this part of the Literacy Hour should be teacher-led. Our study suggests that in practice the resulting talk is teacher-dominated to the extent that pupils are rarely encouraged to explore their comprehension of written texts in their own terms. There is a case for making time available during the guided reading session for a period of discussion in which pupils are invited to play a more leading role in shaping the topic of conversation. The teacher could continue to chair the discussion to make sure that everyone had a chance to speak, but would provide an opportunity for pupils to raise the issues and questions which they wanted to explore in making sense of the text. This would enable them to develop their independent powers of comprehension by engaging in a collective search for meaning in the text – to develop their understanding by retelling the story in their own words.