

VIEW FROM THE CHAIR

Steve Cooke

Many years ago, I was teaching a class with a supply teacher who was covering for the subject colleague I would normally have been working with. The pupils were happily engaged with a paired information gap activity. A few minutes after they had started the supply teacher announced to the class, “Don’t talk while you’re discussing this!” The pupils looked up slightly non-plussed. Doubting whether these Year 7s powers of telepathy were quite up to the challenge set, I told them to carry on with what they were doing and so they happily continued asking and answering each other’s questions. I still don’t know quite what the supply teacher meant other perhaps than to somehow express a deep seated suspicion of any classroom activity which involved pupils talking to each other. Times have changed or have they?

Certainly there are some grounds for optimism with regard to the possible development of good practice in using speaking and listening as means of fostering language development and enabling content learning. For a long time practitioners in EAL teaching have valued oral language activities, but have experienced frustration that mainstream classrooms have not allowed the space, time or opportunity to set up this mode of learning. However, the revised frameworks for literacy and maths are highlighting speaking and listening as key classroom processes.

Will this refreshed call to include speaking and listening on an everyday basis be beneficial to learners of EAL? Perhaps it is useful to think about why we as EAL practitioners are interested in speaking and listening anyway. I suppose we are interested, in fairly pure terms, in the oral medium as a means of

- introducing vocabulary, function words and structures
- getting pupils to practise vocabulary, function words and structures

However, if that is all we are interested in then no wonder that the interface between EAL and the mainstream classroom has been an uneasy zone to work in. It is unlikely though that many

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EAL practitioners are limited to these two purposes. Some may point out that speaking and listening is about developing fluency as well as accuracy and that speaking and listening and activities promote fluent speaking in English and also the ability to understand others’ fluent use of English. At first this would seem to offer much more common ground with the mainstream classroom. After all, class teachers would probably be thinking in terms of enabling all their pupils to be confident and fluent communicators.

The implication of this may be that pupils need the opportunity to ‘do’ speaking and listening and that opportunity alone will foster greater confidence and fluency. A relevant question may concern what the actual development is here. Is there a development in language or a development in pupils’ existing use of linguistic resources? In other words, are pupils expanding their range of vocabulary and language functions or getting better at what they can already manage? I may seem to be splitting hairs here, but in terms of EAL teaching and learning, we, as practitioners, are particularly concerned with expanding bilingual pupils’ abilities to understand and use an increasing range of vocabulary and functions. Unless the mainstream classroom offers this agenda for language learning then bilingual pupils are less likely to acquire this range. I think all of us are aware of the way in which some learners of EAL seem to ‘plateau’ and despite continued exposure to English (and opportunities to use it) do not appear to make progress.

What may be significant is whether speaking and listening is approached in lesson planning as an end in itself or whether it is perceived as a means to enable learning. As an end in itself, “We’d better do some speaking and listening” it seems to me that there is less likelihood that it will produce the kind of linguistic development we would want. On the other hand if the planning starts from the content and asks what is the best way to explore, understand and learn this content then speaking and listening becomes more focused and purposeful. It also inevitably becomes linked to thinking. This link is important because I believe that purposeful talk not

only aids thinking and understanding but that the process of thinking encourages a more precise and explicit use of language. And this is where the language development can happen.

It may be indicative of this lack of appreciation of the potential for talk as a means of learning that there is a general perception that up till now, speaking and listening in primary maths has not really 'taken off'. I would argue that part of subject learning is not so much learning 'the language of maths', but more learning 'to use language like a mathematician'. It is through planned and structured speaking and listening activities that pupils will be able to develop this capacity. Where does this leave learners of EAL and EAL practitioners? The emphasis on speaking and listening inherent in the revised frameworks potentially provides one opportunity to embed some EALness into literacy, maths and the rest of the curriculum. The orientation in EAL teaching of analyzing and organizing language in terms of linguistic functions and notions would allow both the realization of purposeful talk for all and a systematic but adaptable programme of English language learning for EAL learners. Without a principled approach to planning speaking and listening activities based on language and content integration, the programme for learners will remain ad hoc and rely on the opportunistic ingenuity of EAL staff.

The upside to all this, is that it is often EAL staff who are best equipped to implement speaking and listening activities and so class and subject teachers may turn to EAL specialists to help them meet the obligation to introduce more speaking and listening into the curriculum. This is where the opportunity lies. If we can respond to this challenge by producing activities that work for all pupils and which allow learners of EAL, not just to join in, but to learn English in a systematic manner then we will have achieved something important.

As we move further into the 21st Century, it appears that the UK will become increasingly multi-lingual and that this linguistic diversity will be apparent throughout the UK and not just in the traditional urban centres. It could be argued that virtually all schools will need, to some extent, to re-configure itself as an 'international school' serving communities which are ethnically, linguistically and socially diverse and are composed of a range of nationalities. Serving the community is not just a

matter of being hospitable to diversity but of developing a pedagogy which is enabling for all. Good practice in using speaking and listening as a means of learning and also language learning and development must be an important element in any pedagogy appropriate for the 21st Century.

This was Steve's final 'View from the Chair' as he has now resigned from that role to take up a senior post with the Strategy team.

Everyone in NALDIC will appreciate the enormous efforts and expertise Steve has brought to the role of Chair, representing the organization with skill and verve on various bodies, writing responses to consultation documents, chairing meetings, overseeing conference and ensuring NALDIC's voice is heard at every level.

His colleagues on the NALDIC Executive would like to say a special word of thanks to him for all his tireless work on behalf of the association and wish him well in his new and challenging role.