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Including English as an additional language (EAL) students in Spoken Word Education

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Background

I am a full-time spoken word educator working in a North-East London school whilst completing the MA Writer/Teacher at Goldsmiths. I teach mainly Key Stage 3 (11-14 year olds). Although my first language is English, I identified with the EAL students. My Northern Irish accent was often laughed at and misunderstood, especially when I first moved to England. In a school where 60% of pupils are EAL, they responded well to my strong regional accent and enjoyed hearing poetry in my voice.

I am interested in techniques to enable EAL students to voice their experiences. Justinas, an EAL student who informed much of my research, summarised the transformative possibilities of Spoken Word poetry better than I can:

'it just gets you, you want to perform again and again... like when you jump with a parachute from an aeroplane and you want to do it again because you get that feeling ... I look at everyone in my bottom set English Class and I see their story and I think if they start writing they could be like next Shakespeare.'

Justinas, EAL student

Why use Poetry?

Like Justinas, writing and performing my own poems 'got' me into poetry. The 'next Shakespeares' need to be inspired to write, however, poetry in schools is more about 'device spotting' (Dymoke, 2000: 82) than

self-expression and emotional literacy. Poetry lets us see and feel what others feel.

Writing and sharing your own poetry lets others into your world. Encouraging EAL learners to write about where they come from and tell their own story inspires many to write. Obied/Macleroy (2007) helped EAL students use poetry to voice their harrowing experiences in a new language (ibid, 2009: 87). Ofsted acknowledges that 'in a poem you can express emotions. You can't do this in a story ... You can confide in a poem, it relieves stress' (Ofsted 2007: 7).

Sharing self-expressive writing creates greater understanding in the classroom and 'a window on cultural experience' (Dymoke, 2009: 83). Poetry allows students to express themselves, 'without the conventions of grammar' (ibid, 2009: 79).

'the size is less daunting, giving the learner confidence to be playful with language [making it a] particularly successful form for students studying English as an additional language'. (Dymoke, 2009: 80)

Despite poetry's digestible size and rule breaking tendencies, many people are alienated by poetry; 'it is the text type that presents the most challenges' (ibid, 2009: 71). A collective groan can often be heard around the classroom when poetry is mentioned. Many students say, 'I'm no good at' or 'I don't like' poetry.

It is essential to allay fear and prejudice against poetry by 'engaging reading, writing, listening and performing' (Dymoke, 2009: 71). I would add "watching" to this list. Today the moving image is supreme, 'the book's role has waned, if not collapsed even in English' (Kress, et al, 2005: x). The increasing popularity, quality and availability of spoken word poetry videos is an essential element of engaging learners, especially EAL learners for whom images, animations, tone, pitch, and body language, all help convey meaning. There is a need to 'creatively utilize new media to include multiple means of representation' (Lotherington, 2011: 70).

I am keen to ensure that I am not part of what Santa Ana (2004) describes as a 'linguistic ideology that oppresses multilingual children in classrooms ... that denies indigenous ways of knowing and speaking' (quoted in *ibid*, 2011: 131).

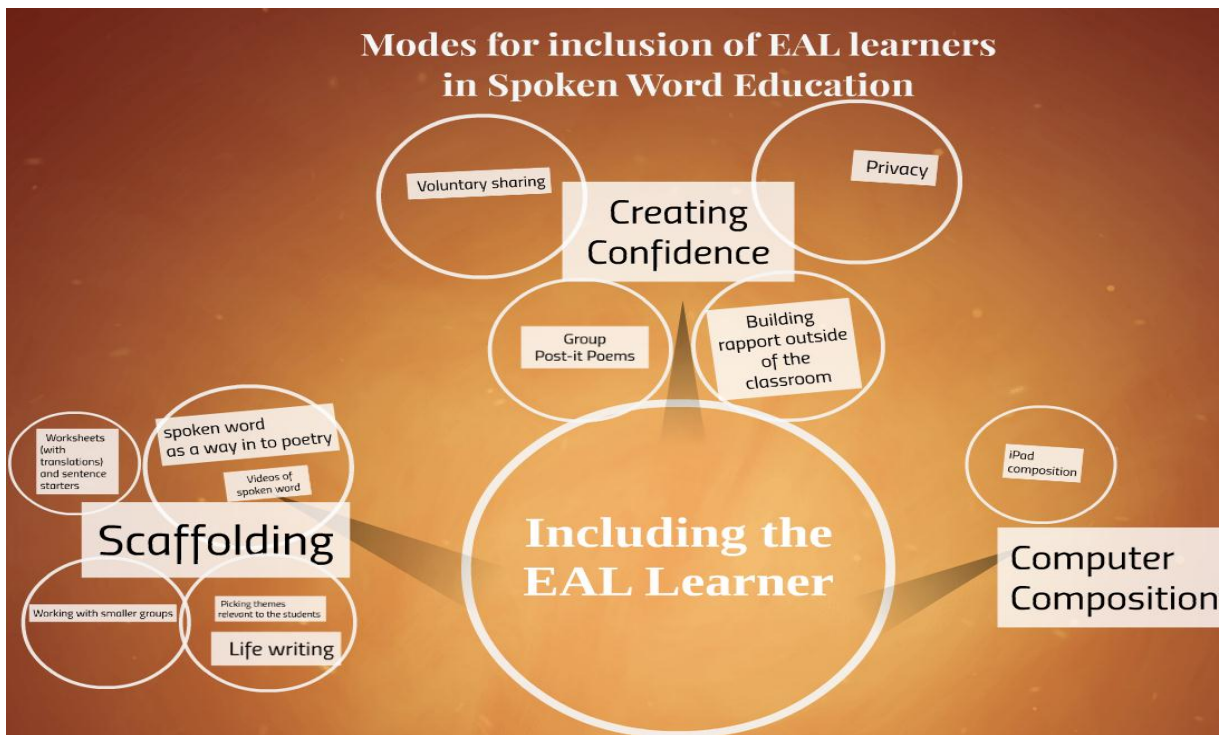
Learning to say 'hello' in the students' languages, shows their knowledge and language is valuable and valid. They become the expert, while I struggle. According to Department for Children, Schools and Families, learners 'need to have their bilingualism recognised ... [while being] made to feel part of the normal lessons.' (DCSF, 2007: 37).

In a multilingual classroom, in a school where an outstanding Ofsted rating is dependent on matching the needs of all students and providing 'sufficient challenge', how can I ensure that EAL learners can participate fully?

According to Leung, if we can ensure that EAL learners participate, then 'English language learning will follow' (Leung, et al 2010: 1). If you have recently arrived from Syria or Afghanistan, it is incredibly difficult to negotiate this new linguistic terrain, never mind the cultural landscape of a new country or the emotional minefield of immigration. This is the context within which I ask my pupils to write a poem. It is important that these students are encouraged to use their 'lifeworlds as literary resources' (Miller & Mc

Vee, 2012: 120) when writing poems in the classroom. Lotherington stresses the importance of positive engagement of learners' 'worlds of cultural knowledge' (Lotherington, 2011: 70).

The new curriculum includes a list of 'pre-twentieth-century writers' 'from the English literary heritage' (DfE website). Out of forty-five writers listed, six are female, one is homosexual (Oscar Wilde), they are all white and the vast majority are English. As Dymoke points out, this 'presents challenges for choosing poetry texts which will engage students' (Dymoke, 2009: 77). Reading poetry and plays from Ireland at school engaged me in literature and culture while giving me pride in my background and an interest in other heritages. In the multi-cultural classroom, there needs to be a shift towards a study of global literature in English rather than literature from England. I am concerned that the new curriculum places England at the top of a hierarchy of literature and that our 'understanding of culture is being shaped by assessment demands' (*ibid*, 2009: 87).



In order to deliver value for the school, I have to ensure my work complements the curriculum. However, I am able to choose poetry and writing prompts that are relevant to my students, so they can 'identify with poets and poetry' (ibid, 2009:76).

School Background

Poverty and instability are key factors affecting the students I work with. The school is under-subscribed, 50% of students are on free school meals, 20% are SEN and 92% come from ethnic minorities. Learners do not have access to the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1991: 62) or the economic security 'that grounds school literacy' (Lotherington, 2011: 4).

Attainment is low but progress is good and the school has a 'Good' Ofsted rating. The Ofsted report stated that sometimes 'planning is not well matched to the needs of all students' (Ofsted Report). This highlighted the need to include EAL students in spoken word education while providing a 'sufficient challenge' for native speakers. My interviewee, Justinas has been in England for three years. He is in Year 8, in the bottom set English class and has additional Applied English lessons. I was interested in his insider perspective on how to include EAL learners.

The interview was unstructured and felt more like a discussion between two writers. In the 'world of the classroom, children learn how to be as pupils' (Fisher 2010: 412) but one-on-one, Justinas felt free to interrupt me when ideas came to him. I encouraged him to elaborate while avoiding leading questions and a teacher/student dynamic.

Scaffolding Writing

Worksheets made writing accessible to students who felt intimidated by poetry and the empty page.

'Worksheet is easy for the kids who got problems with English, that helps them a lot because they know where to start ... the paper is for the kids who already wrote a few poems and they know how it works.'

Justinas, EAL student

Sentence starters were highly effective for the most reluctant. Students could go to the 'Your Poem' space on the worksheet if they had an idea and felt confident enough to dive straight in. Other students edited their responses into a finished piece. Some students turned the page over and continued on the back. Those with not much English at all drew pictures which showed they at least understood the prompt, *I come from*

... Each individual was able to progress at their own speed and write as much or as little as their level permitted, subsequently there was less class disruption.

I translated worksheets into the students' home language, as 'first language development supports the learning of the ... additional language' (NALDIC, 1999: 5). However, many students are illiterate in their first language and free online translations were often unreliable. Despite this, students who had never previously written in class wrote when they had a dual language worksheet and permission to write in their home language. This was important as they were practising their handwriting skills, essential for exams.

Students used the sheets and my feedback to type up their final poem. This allowed EAL students to translate from their home language and more able students to craft their writing. Poems were (successfully) submitted to competitions and displayed around the school.

Computer Composition

Computers encouraged students to edit and focus on the 'content aspect of writing' (Flynn & Stainthorp, 2006: 63). As a dyslexic poet who found her voice on the stage, I am interested in the students' ideas and the delivery of the poem. However, there is a need to strike a 'balance between helping young writers develop a personal voice and ... accurately written texts' (Warrington, et al 2006: 14). From September 2015, '20% of marks will be awarded for good spelling, punctuation and grammar in both GCSE English language and literature and digital texts are excluded' (BBC, 2013). This focus on the 'secretarial' (Fisher 2010 :415) or 'transcription' (Frank, S. 1982:20) aspects of writing disadvantages all learners in an era where the screen is more ubiquitous than the pen.

Students felt proud of their digital texts and teachers saw them in a different light when not distracted by inaccuracies and poor handwriting. However, ICT creates its own issues and as educators we must remember, 'tools are only as good as the learning environments' (Miller & Mc Vee, 2012: 131).

Writing a poem requires one to be immersed in a world, lost in a moment, focused on every word, grappling with questions. There is something permanent about putting pen to paper, even if you put a line through it; the evidence of what you have said is still there. On the computer, students seemed more prone to deleting. Computers are about multiple windows, multitasking, flicking, copy and paste and instant answers. At times it was tough to get students to focus on what they actually wanted to communicate; they got distracted with fonts, formatting and inserting images. Preventing students from going on the internet was very difficult and students plagiarised poems that they found.

Capturing the work that was done was also problematic. Poems were lost - one child cried over his lost poem and was put off writing for weeks. Students also logged off without printing or saving, making it difficult to capture their work. On several occasions the printer ran out of ink and paper.

Many of these issues could be resolved if electronic composing was more embedded in the school; computers in every classroom or a cloud where staff and students could access and edit work from anywhere with an internet connection. Despite the difficulties, ICT enabled many students to be 'proud of their work and [they] will remember it' (Miller & Mc Vee, 2012: 138).

There are also opportunities to encourage students to use the technology they have at home to compose their own texts. I asked one student, with the aid of his friends translating at lunch time, to email me his poem. It was a delight when he did and his writing showed he had understood the writing prompt from the lesson. It is important that educators encourage students to be creators so that technology is not simply a tool for passive entertainment, 'teachers [are] essential to mediating students' meaning making and learning' (Miller & Mc Vee, 2012: 133).

In a world where access to technology is increasingly unequal, it is important that schools provide opportunities for students from technologically deprived backgrounds to access the tools they will need to succeed in the workplace. Miller & McVee found that although

'most students ... engage with media ... many students did not have first-hand experience of multimodal composing' (ibid, 2012: 133). Classroom drafting followed by computer editing was more effective than composing from scratch on the screen.

iPads & the Poetry App

Poetry App visited the school with 4 iPads, giving EAL learners an opportunity to explore the app, and read and listen to the pre 20th Century poems. I created a lesson using the following resources: W.B. Yeats, "A Coat" about plagiarism; one of my own poems 'Two Bees' about lip balm and bullying; and a spoken word video by Wyclef Jean 'Immigrant' about having prejudice and trainers. I asked the students to write their own poems in the 'my poems' section of the app about an object important to them, linking it to their experiences of one of the themes. This lesson is freely available.

One of the most challenging students wrote a very illuminating piece about being bullied. He had never participated in other lessons involving worksheets, computers, audio-recordings or in his English book. He may have felt more compelled to share because he was outside of the classroom setting. Students do not want to write about personal, emotional issues in their English book; after all it is a public document that can be inspected by the head teacher. Students also complained that other students read and copy their work. Students stated that they felt free to write because of the privacy the iPad offered them.

However, three of the twelve poems were lost, we were unable to email the text of the poems and the poems were only available as photographs. This meant the text couldn't be edited later. However the print out of the poem looked beautiful and it removed the distraction of fonts, formatting and YouTube.

It is difficult to ascertain if composing with iPads and the poetry app would work in a whole class setting, and if it would be a worthwhile expenditure. It could be a struggle to ensure that students remained on task in a full class. A learning assistant observed that the students were 'proactive in starting the task and they found recording their ideas easier (in 2 minutes one

student wrote a full stanza)'. However, students got confused or became too engrossed in the iPad, making it challenging for me to get their attention when changing tasks. A lot of the time students didn't listen to me or other students.

The EAL students felt freer to focus on composing rather than spelling. They wrote a lot more than they would normally be able to. However, in the end I think I have to agree with Justinas, 'The computer and iPad are actually the same thing'. Except that iPads are more likely to go missing. However, hand-held, touch screen devices do offer the privacy that is a key element of personal writing for some students.

One student commented, 'it's better because it's Apple'; it's difficult to know if this intervention would work once the 'flashy novelty' (ibid, 2012: 137) wears off. Justinas prefers to first compose on paper. There is something wonderful about how it allows him to speak in a non-standard grammar and make up words, without seeing the red of the auto-correct.

Creating Confidence

'People laugh at you just because you can't speak English and you're not that popular.'

Justinas, EAL student

Public speaking is the world's number one fear. Yet having the confidence to share your thoughts and emotions with an audience is an essential life skill. I see encouraging young people to share and perform their poetry as a vital part of my mission as a spoken word educator. Performing and hearing others perform is what excites me about poetry. Dymoke advises, 'to flourish as a poetry teacher, embrace the multimodal experience poetry can offer' (Dymoke, 2009: 81).

I interviewed Justinas because he was one of the few students who chose to perform his work and I was interested in his motivation for doing so. He said

'I am always like that, I am not scared to show myself ... I'm proud of being myself that's why I want people to hear me and I want people to know me.'

Justinas, EAL student

Only a few students in each class had the confidence to perform in front of their peers. Justinas stated students were reluctant to write and share because the school 'is very multicultural, every single person is from a different place of the world'. I felt it was unfair to insist that every child perform their poem, especially when many students are EAL, SEN or both, while others are at a more advanced level.

Given limited contact time, a whole lesson would have to be devoted to performing and an unreasonable amount of time would be spent forcing students to read their work. Justinas confirmed that if students felt forced to perform that would 'make them feel more scared'.

Justinas wrote openly about the pain and confusion he felt leaving his home country, 'it is that feeling when someone takes a knife and cuts one third of you'. However, most students 'are scared to write about themselves ... where they come from, because I think they're scared because they are sad or something.'

Justinas stressed the need to work with students individually and provide space for privacy,

'if you see that boy or girl who is promising ... talk to them ... one-on-one, somewhere where no one can hear and just let them express themselves'.

Justinas, EAL student

As spoken word educators we can sometimes forget how scary it is to get up and perform a personal poem to a class of challenging students, many of whom don't speak the language. Although Justinas would prefer to have the stage to himself, many students feel better when other students stand beside them or they perform as a group.

The approach of having all the students compete in a class 'slam' and the winners compete in a whole year slam didn't seem appropriate for the school. Justinas confirmed this, saying 'some people [in this school] are not that accepted and if you say that guy is better than you, you just get them down more'. However, despite his confidence, Justinas 'saw people [performing their poetry] and then tried' himself.

Group Post-it Poem

In my search for ways to encourage EAL learners to perform their work in a whole class setting, I experiment with Post-it poetry. I asked each student to pick a line from their poem and write it on a Post-it note. They could choose what they wanted to reveal publicly making them less inhibited. Everyone in the class is capable of writing and delivering one line, which put everyone on an equal footing. The whole class lined up at the front and said their line one after the other. The 'Mexican Wave' effect of all the students' voices created a wonderful poem and gave the whole class a sense of accomplishment. You can find one of these group poems from the come from ... lesson at the end.

I initially tried to video students presenting their Post-it poems but they were resistant to being filmed, so I instead decided to use an audio recorder. Students didn't object to having their voices recorded, finding it less intrusive and embarrassing. The effect was transformative. They understood the need to be quiet so that they wouldn't spoil the recording, they actually listened to each other and everybody was able to participate equally. I played the recording back to the class and they listened intently. In this way, I was able to capture a snapshot of everybody in the class in just over a minute.

I played the recordings to other classes, they listened intently as well, picking out the voices of students they knew and listening to what they had to say. It was beautiful to hear all the different accents and voices. It was much more dynamic and moving than reading the same words written on paper. The group audio-recording had advantages over video too. Students listened to what was said rather than being distracted by shaky camera work or what people looked like. The file size is smaller as well which is an important factor in a world where virtual space is at a premium.

The students enjoyed the instant gratification of producing a piece as a group, even if they hadn't produced a poem by themselves. I enjoyed being able to 'teach skills as tools to be used immediately' (Dombey, 2013: 16). It allowed the class as a whole to work together to produce a

poem that reflected their experience, using 'multimodal composing as a social and cultural literacy practice' (Miller & Mc Vee, 2012: 137). The technique allowed EAL students to 'communicate meaning in powerful new ways, generating intense engagement and literacy learning' (ibid, 2012: 137).

When asked about the group post-it poems, Justinas commented, -

'you get more and more confident and you get more and more lines to write and from that line, that's what makes a poem'.

Justinas, EAL student

Findings

In a multi-modal world, it is essential that teachers make use of the available technology (no matter how problematic) or students will feel that school is irrelevant to modern life. Justinas commented that

'kids think education is not needed ... they think they are cleverer than teachers ... that teachers are just wasting their time ... That teachers do this for money'.

Justinas, EAL student

This attitude could stem from the belief that any question can be answered with a search engine. Miller & Mc Vee, (ibid, 2012: 150) state 'schooling ... must take up these other modes as essential ways of coming to know' (ibid). Using technology is even more important when encouraging EAL students to write, especially if they do not have access to technology at home. School should even the playing field between the technology haves and have nots.

Students need to feel secure in order to write about personal issues. A feeling of safety is difficult to achieve when students are coming and going throughout the year. Therefore, it is essential that students are not forced to share personal writing in front of the whole class and that time is set aside to work with them individually.

An 'authentic purpose' (ibid, 2012: 141) is essential when encouraging students to write. I encourage pupils to attend events where they can perform their poems, display their work and enter

it in competitions. It is important that students see me, not as a teacher but a writer and performer. As Justinas commented,

'English teachers are not poets, they don't have that experience, the teachers are just teaching you but when you have a poet they can show you what he did and how he did it.'

Justinas, EAL student

Having a poet in the school shows EAL learners and those from deprived social economic backgrounds that writing is a legitimate career option that is accessible to them. It is necessary to have multiple approaches to include all learners. Technology is essential in the modern classroom but pen and paper are still relevant. As the battery on my laptop dies, I think it would be a disservice to create a future generation unable to enjoy the pleasure of writing by hand.

8T – Group Poem

I come from old red brick houses

I come from rubbish lonely places

I come from crazy neighbours

But also a lonely quiet road

I come from a friendly neighbourhood Who cares for each other

I come from a place where there is no communication, where people talk

With themselves to try and find inspiration Cause no one else can

I come from where people work all day Just to feed their kids at night

I come from that old place where they still watch that same old cartoon,

There's still the sea where I used to sleep.

I'm hanging outside in the park,

Winning by three baskets,

We would stay in the park, day and night,

There's the slide where we used to climb

Hanging out with my friends in the trees Making tree houses

I had a special house to go to

I'd watch the stars on the swinging bench

*I come from muddy parks, size5 footballs
 With my friends I would hang out
 In the fighting park till the day I die
 There's the over flowing shed with toys
 I had a friend, she said that she was lonely
 Tears defying gravity like feathers
 Free falling from the sky,
 There's still the same adventures
 There's still the trees that stand tall,
 I come from a clear green pitch under bright
 floodlights.
 I was raised up in a place where people rise and
 fall, day and night*

Justinas' Poem

I come from ...

*We had only each other,
 The big flat building I lived in,
 No money, No wi-fi, No xbox,
 But I'm was still happy,
 Should say happier than I'm know.
 And even when I knew,
 That I have to eat,
 The same pasta like any other day,
 I'm was still smiling.
 And I Love it,
 Because of those parents,
 Who work hard all day and night,
 To make a better life for their children,
 And I love it,
 Because of the sound outside my window,
 That basketball bouncing sound,
 It was on and on and on...
 Like 24/7!
 And I'm proud!
 I'm proud to be same nationality
 As those people who stood up
 Next to those Russian tanks*

*And they had nothing,
 They had only each other
 And those massive spirits inside them,
 That kept telling them to fight.
 And this why I'm proud to tell everyone,
 That I come from Lithuania.*

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