

# PRACTICE, POLICY AND RESEARCH

## 'Circle time' as a supportive model of classroom discourse for EAL pupils

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### Introduction

This paper considers 'circle time' as a supportive model of classroom discourse for EAL pupils. The opportunities circle time creates for *contingent discourse*, part of a transformational pedagogy which can empower these pupils, will be described drawing principally on the thinking of Leo van Lier.

### The Circle Time Model

Circle time has existed in schools for approximately two decades, consisting principally of socialisation and problem-solving activities. In my observation of classes, I find the most common circle time activity is the 'round', in which pupils are invited to complete a statement on a particular theme (e.g. "I get angry when..."). Simple listening and speaking protocols are also usually used (e.g. holding a small object such as a shell to indicate permission to speak).

Teachers frequently report that after initial pupil enthusiasm and a welcome impression of 'structure' in sessions (i.e. improved behaviour in terms of turn-taking, interrupting, etc.), rounds often decline. Pupils increasingly 'pass' (i.e. decline to contribute) or 'switch off' as each of often 30+ participants struggle to complete the teacher's pre-determined sentence starter. Whilst helpful in scaffolding sentence completion for less able speakers, the round is not the most enabling activity for developing language proficiency, particularly for older (i.e. post-KS1) pupils.

I propose that a more challenging activity, the 'forum', is essential for engaging pupils in contingent conversation and extends skills in listening and speaking. The following transcript of a Y7 forum serves as reference point for this argument.

### The School Context

At the request of a secondary EMA colleague, I led circle time sessions in Year 7 as part of an initiative within PSHE. The school is a large community secondary with a high proportion of pupils in receipt of free school meals. The class consisted of approximately 30 pupils at various stages of EAL. The EAL register records proficiency in four 'stages' of English, from 'Stage 1 – 'newly arrived' through to 'Stage 4 – 'native-like competence'. A 'Stage 5' designation exists to record English-speaking minority ethnic pupils (in the case of this class Black British/African-Caribbean or Anglophone African pupils).

A discussion of issues surrounding the identification of pupils' ethnicities and languages is not within the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that the class reflected many inner-London classrooms in terms of its cultural and linguistic diversity.

### The Lesson

Within circle time, the staff wished to focus on the 'forum', a problem-solving discussion group, in order to develop pupils' listening and speaking skills and group participation. Pupils were invited to raise issues for positive group discussion with peers and teachers. The following transcript records an exchange within one session. Pupils had been taught to request and offer help using the scripts "I need help with..." and "Would it help if...?". As teacher, I intervened only with reminders of the scripts and 'ground rules' (i.e. no 'naming or blaming' of individual pupils). In this extract, Pupil J requests advice on controlling his temper.

### Transcript

Pupil J (male) Stage 5 (minority ethnic pupil, English)  
Pupil 1 (male) Stage 5 (minority ethnic pupil, English)  
Pupil 2 (male) Stage 2a (post-beginner) Croatian Refugee  
Pupil 3 (female) Stage 5 (minority ethnic pupil, English)  
Pupil 4 (female) Stage 3b (post-intermediate) Iraqi Arabic

**1) J:** I need help with...sometimes yeah, people get, say they cuss me. I get...I get angry...yeah and I swear and I end up gettin' in trouble.

**2) Teacher:** (intervention-request for peer support and use of script "Would it help if...?")

**3) Pupil 1:** J., would it help if you told the teacher?

**4) J:** Not rea...yeah, it, yeah I guess it kind of would but ..um, because...because its, it happens um, because it happens yeah...I get like real mad say if they cuss someone, a member of my family or something I'm too

mad to like tell the teacher or something and I end up...say I've ah...swearing at them back or hittin' them. Say like I'll get in trouble as well as the other person.

**5) Teacher:** (intervention-reminder to thank participants "Thank you for your advice.")

**6) J:** But thank you for your advice.

**7) Pupil 2:** (inaudible) J, would help if...if you...if you like ignore it?

**8) J:** Ignore it...but that's like the same issue as (Pupil 1). It's hard to ignore because um if I get too angry I just can't ignore it (inaudible) and end up... I just can't ignore it. It's too hurtful to ignore.

**9) Pupil 3:** J, why don't you...J., would it help if like...(pupil 2)'s right. If you ignore it, like the person who's cussing you or a member of your family, will like be a fool for insulting you if you ignore them 'cause like when you ignore them (inaudible) they're the ones who are like insulting themselves since you don't answer them back.

**10) J:** I'll take that in mind, but thank you anyway...

**11) Pupil 4:** It's like... it's like...

**12) Teacher:** Can you use the script?

**13) Pupil 4:** J, would it help if like you know the people who normally cuss you. Stay away from them. Like (inaudible) there's certain people....

**14) J:** Mmmm, OK, I'll keep that in mind.

Both EAL and some non-EAL pupils struggled to control the abstract language needed for successful participation in the PSHE curriculum at Key Stage 3 (e.g. expressing feelings, disagreeing, offering opinions etc); this struggle leads to a consideration of the 'curricular gap' that arises over time. Support provided to pupils in KS 1 and 2 by the more context-embedded activities of the primary curriculum continually reduces over time; by Year 7 some pupils may experience difficulties in fully accessing the curriculum. Activities that support contingent conversation, such as the circle time forum, may serve to close this gap, by providing a structure for *contingent conversation* within which pupils' can practice the higher-order, abstract language skills necessary for academic success.

### Contingent discourse and the circle time forum

The effectiveness of circle time as a vehicle for language development resides in its construction of opportunities for pupils and teachers to participate in *contingent*

*conversation* (van Lier, 1996). The forum serves both to support the development of higher-order language skills and to transform classroom discourse in favour of pupils who have frequently been disadvantaged by the traditional, transmission models of classroom discourse, by closing the often noted 'gap' that arises for EAL pupils (particularly those with insufficient bilingual skills to support their underlying conceptual knowledge) as they encounter the increasing language demands of the curriculum.

Before considering how contingent discourse supports language development, a description of other models of classroom discourse is necessary. Arguably the most prevalent model of classroom discourse is the *teaching cycle*, or *Initiation, Response, Feedback (IRF)*. The IRF model described by van Lier (1996), consists of the teacher initiating talk (almost always via a question), the pupil responding and the teacher evaluating the response (i.e. providing feedback judgment). Sources in the literature estimate up to 70 per cent of classroom interaction is partly or completely composed of this discourse model, hence one concern is teacher dominance of speaking which reduces EAL pupils' opportunities to practice and extend skills. "Who does the talking?" is important in the context of EAL to consider which model of classroom discourse provides pupils with more 'talk time'. While admitting IRF may sometimes be suitable as a classroom discourse, van Lier takes a generally critical view of the model due to concerns surrounding its effect on the quality of pupil participation:

"In the IRF exchange, the student's response is hemmed in, squeezed between a demand to display knowledge and a judgment on its competence. This can turn every student response into an examination, hence the frequently observed reluctance to 'be called upon' and to participate, and the paucity of linguistic elaboration when responding to that dreaded call. In addition to evaluating - or validating - the student's response, the third turn closes the exchange, preventing the exploration of interesting avenues of thought initiated by the students. The IRF structure therefore does not represent true joint construction of discourse. At times, then, the IRF structure makes it unattractive and un-motivating for students to participate in classroom interaction, since their responses may be evaluated or examined publicly, rather than accepted and appreciated as part of a joint conversation." (van Lier, 1996, p. 151)

In circle time, the use of a form of contingent conversation as an alternate classroom discourse provides a break from the IRF exchange, increasing pupils' motivation to speak as well as their 'talk time' within class. Pupil J conversed with peers who offered him ideas and advice; an intrinsic interest developed in the emerging 'real' conversation (i.e. no pre-determined

'correct answer', as in the IRF exchange). Although some pupils did not participate by speaking in sessions, all pupils appeared to listen with interest, and many increased their usual levels of participation (thus increasing practice of language skills). This is the power of contingent conversation in terms of EAL pupils' language learning:

"Conversation, or any language use which plays with contingencies... can therefore be expected to be the most stimulating environment for learning. Conversational interaction naturally links the known to the new. It creates its own expectancies and its own context, and offers choices to the participants. In a conversation, we must continually make decisions on the basis of what other people mean. We therefore have to listen very carefully... and we also have to take great care in constructing our contributions so that we can be understood." (van Lier, 1996, p. 171)

The 'ground rules' in the forum were simple and respected by pupils as necessary to maintain contingency (i.e. one pupil speaking at a time, as anyone wishing to participate in or follow the conversation must attend to previous speakers).

The scripts constituted a teacher-imposed structure (and so arguably do not count as truly contingent), however they provided both an appropriate starting point and register for the discourse that had been lacking in previous attempts at 'open' class discussions. "I need help with..." established a more formal register for discourse, serving to remind pupils that the forum is a problem-solving, communicative activity (and not, as one colleague said, 'a free-for-all'). One of the language deficits often identified for EAL pupils who have achieved a surface fluency in English "...difficulty adjusting register, and may sound impolite in formal situations" (Gibbons, 1991, p. 3-4) is resolved through scaffolded scripts (including one in which Pupil J states "...but thank you for your advice" to any peers whose advice he rejects!).

Emergent able speakers (such as Pupil 3) were not restricted by scripts (line 9), but they provided consistent scaffolding for pupils new to English, such as Pupil 2 (a newly-arrived refugee), who are likely to find aspects of fully contingent discourse more challenging than the typical IRF exchange:

"Sometimes participating in a less formally structured conversation is equally or more daunting for a student, especially a non-native speaker, since, in addition to figuring out the right thing to say, the student has to judge the right moment to say it (i.e. without being seen to interrupt, or to be incoherent), and how to say it (displaying the right conversational tone, and so on)." (van Lier, 1996, p.152)

Although Pupil 2's contribution is tentatively brief, he had attended to the exchange; having sufficient key vocabulary to make a meaningful contribution (i.e. the single word 'ignore', line 7), he used the script 'Would it help if...' as an all-important 'safe way in'. Teachers' noted a general increase in participation from normally very quiet pupils who rarely volunteered to speak. Without the scaffolding and structure of scripts, the 'cut and thrust' of totally unstructured contingent discourse might, as van Lier suggests, have been too challenging or intimidating for EAL beginners' voluntary participation.

The forum addresses the complex language needs of this class. For Pupil J, it provided an opportunity to organize his thoughts through uninterrupted, extended speaking and to experiment with new vocabulary and expressions (e.g. the term "hurtful" to more concisely describe emotion, line 8 and the self-correction "I'll take that/keep that in mind", lines 10 and 14). Van Lier (1996) identifies contingency as the key to extending skills by simultaneously enabling and challenging pupils to operate at the upper limit of their communicative ability. EAL pupils, those with interrupted schooling (e.g. refugee pupils) and others within this Year 7 class may have been 'unequal' participants in other forms of classroom discourse and have much to gain from contingent conversational activities such as the forum:

"...in general any pedagogical interaction which is contingent, is especially important for less motivated, culturally disenfranchised and other at-risk groups. The bigger the gap between students' backgrounds, ideals and aspirations (if any), and the school's institutionalized norms and purposes, the more crucial a responsive or contingent form of interaction will be, if we are to assist students in their development." (van Lier, 1996, p.163)

## Conclusion

By creating opportunities for contingent conversation, the circle time forum provides a discourse model that closes the gap between some EAL pupils and the increasing language demands of the curriculum. All those in the forum are involved in the process of making meaning, so that this jointly constructed activity supported pupils in becoming self-extending, engaged participants in the language learning process.

## References

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