

2 | EXPLORING THE ROLE OF PEER TEACHING ON SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE (EAL)



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1 | INTRODUCTION

I am a class teacher in a one-form entry Greenwich Primary School. I have taught at the school for two years, in two main capacities: year 2 class teacher and Modern Foreign Language teacher. Currently there is a relatively high proportion of children who have a native mother tongue other than English. Some children have received an introductory period of EAL support by means of intervention, which lasts between one and two terms.

The reason for my action research project stems from this. The arrival of a child from Bulgaria into a year 5 class, who has no previous knowledge of English, prompted me to question what additional support may be needed in order to meet the government's expected standard of attainment. The study for this project has been undertaken during the academic year 2015-6, from November to June.

2 | METHODOLOGY

Action research is a way of creating new knowledge through a practical context. Essentially, Koshy (2005) describes the purpose of action research as being 'to learn through action leading to personal and professional development' (2005). Carr and Kemmis (1986) also suggest that action research should allow 'constant reflection on educational practice' and 'greater autonomy and responsibility in the curriculum'.

Carr and Kemmis (1986) also argue that in order for teaching to continue to be regarded as a professional activity, we above all need to cater for our client base. Increased educational research, in particular action research, will enable us to achieve this in a greater capacity. Not only will this type of research invite a wider range of knowledge, it will also invite us further into the realms of collaboration, for quite simply, there is a sufficient similarity in most schools that the knowledge generated by action research ought to be transferable and useful beyond the local and into other classrooms.

One other positive element is that action research adopts a cyclical approach to transforming and understanding practice. The beauty of the cyclical nature of action research is that we can constantly reflect in a profession of constant change. The researcher can never assume a value-neutral stance, and is always being implicated in the phenomena being studied (Walsham 1993). The reason action research is seen as being so successful in education is that

the impact is so direct, and the value of the research is always measurable. If a strategy has not worked then we as education professionals are getting closer to why that might be. We are thus able to obtain data and information without the need to assume an objective stance that results in directly assuming that learning is the same journey for all. Carr and Kemmis (1986) discuss general traditions in educational studies and allude to the 'need to place education as a process of 'coming to know'' Brown-Martin, in his book 'Learning reimagined' (2014) also discusses this idea of subjectivity in education. Elaborating on his theory of the *tyranny of normal*, he suggests that it is impossible to measure what is normal and that the insistence on maintaining the status quo produces children as 'a product for a master no longer there'. If we don't undertake these cyclical paths of research, of trying out an action and reflecting on its successes, then we are surely passing children 'along the conveyor belt' rather than, as Brown-Martin (2014) advocates, seeing education as a passport where the outcome depends on 'who controls the borders'.

What this discussion highlights is that action research accepts that reality can only be understood as a social construction – an agreement between those within a culture. In doing so it encourages professionals to do the research themselves and produce their own knowledge based on their interpretative traditions. As I have shown, the crucial reason for celebrating the value of this type of research is that it clearly mirrors what the field of education is trying to do. We must allow action research to facilitate this system of learning without frontiers in order to reach the ultimate goal of making us more independent and critical.

Ethics

In order that my work is confidential, the child and family I worked with, as well as the school, will not be named. The children I interviewed will also remain anonymous. For the purposes of the project I was working weekly with one child in year 5 and her Mother, meeting twice weekly. Data was collected by means of observational notes, Ipad recordings and copies of edited work. All work was completed in school hours on the school premises. Through the school the work was unable to be confidential as we were seen working together and permission needed to be obtained to use school space. I obtained informed consent from all participants, as well as permission from the Headteacher and Class Teacher to undertake the project. The children interviewed were also asked if they were willing to take part in the project. They were told that this was not compulsory and they could change their minds at any time.

2 | MY CONCERN/ AREA OF INTEREST

The intervention that exists for EAL children in my current school is a short-term introduction to basic vocabulary and basic conversational language. This lasts for 1-2 terms and is not age or ability specific. Many children have come to the UK, to our school, at a young age, allowing the initial boost of language to be effective as a starting point to embed their English alongside their peers. My concern arose upon the arrival of a girl from Bulgaria into a year 5 class. Receiving the interventions as per the standard practice, the class teacher instantly expressed concern over how this child would be able to access the year 5 curriculum, in particular in literacy. With the pressures and demands of the new curriculum, and for a child

who had no prior knowledge of English at such a high school age, my concerns were essentially whether there was any additional support that would help to develop her language and in turn close the gap for her attainment. The problem in this case is that the year 5 curriculum is much more advanced than the basic level of language that is provided in the initial stages. There is a vast amount of literature on the topic of EAL owing to the high proportion of people who study in a language that is not their mother tongue. Murphy (2014) for example has undertaken numerous studies into Upper Key Stage 2 performances of EAL children in the UK. Her recent study measured writing capabilities in a variety of skill sets, profiling children based on chronological and language age. The findings were useful and have served to highlight the needs of EAL children on a general level in years 5 and 6, such as vocabulary knowledge and skills required to develop organisational and extended writing. Burgoyne (2009) also alludes to these skills, determining that written and spoken comprehension is key to deciphering the needs of EAL children, in order to ascertain word reading skill and general language skill.

Observation was a useful method for me initially because it provided me with information about real-life situations, in particular in respect of the fact that the child would be unable to explain her difficulties to me independently. It was also less intrusive than other forms of research in that the child seemingly felt no need to act differently and I could make judgements in an environment that she was comfortable in. I was able to see normal school environment behaviours without it being intrusive and hoped I would be able to see elements of EAL learning that may have been overlooked. Of course the disadvantages are that those being observed can change their behaviour and in that snapshot of time it can be difficult to create a general picture, not to mention the potential for overlooking key elements that the observer does not deem to be important.

I then interviewed a group of Key Stage 2 children, EAL, who had been in the school from year 1. The exception was one child who arrived in year 3, now in year 5. The advantage of interviewing these children would be that I might be able to ascertain what helped these children to secure their English skills, and would be areas I had perhaps not considered, thus potentially inviting a new line of inquiry. In order to avoid bias I was careful to make my questioning broad. It can be difficult to control the focus topic, but in this instance I took the view that all areas of comment would be valuable in some capacity: the key was in the summary of responses. In adhering to the principles of action research, who better to ask than those children who had lived through it? My constraints here must be mentioned: I went into this interview unaware of how reflective a child can be about how they learnt English and in addition how they used it to be successful in their learning. I also needed to remain aware that these children, much like the case studies used in the literature studied, have had chances to develop their English over a number of years. They in fact stated this themselves in the interview. Nonetheless I was given the key to my questioning. Individually, every child I interviewed stated that the best way they learned English, in their view, was to go home and teach it to their parents. This is by no means a new idea - This is a crucial similarity between these children and the child I was to be working with: parents with limited English.

4 | ACTION

The action I undertook was to measure if there was any noticeable improvement in the child's English ability through a programme of study, where a weekly lesson was taught by me and it was followed by the child teaching the same lesson to her mother. The criteria were explained to the child, namely that she was able to explain her understanding in her mother tongue or in English. She decided she wanted to speak in English. The lessons were planned based on mistakes I saw in the child's work, such as possessive pronouns. Once we had completed the lesson I asked the child each week how she would like to teach. Each time she elected to write a script to explain to her mother what she would need to do.

Upon my observations it was clear that her grasp of functional English and grammar was measurable: the mistakes I found and subsequently taught were rectified by her and she was able then to edit a previous piece of work correctly. What she was unable to do was explain this to her mother. In her native language the possessive pronouns do not follow the same format so she was unable to liken words to her own understanding of language. In the initial lessons I helped her to explain so she was able to address her mother's misconceptions more effectively. Once she was able to grasp this, I explained that I would not be able to talk and that she was responsible for the lesson. Observing this allowed me to discover instructional language that was developing, as well as an emerging knowledge of tenses. When correcting subsequent work, it was clear that there was an improvement and a consciousness of sentence structure. What I was unable to measure however, was whether the improvement had come from reinforcement (my teaching) or through explanation of her understanding to another person.

The effects of peer teaching have been widely discussed: the annual review of Applied Linguistics for example concluded in a 2002 study that 'peer peer collaborative dialogue mediates second language learning.' Whitman and Fife (1988) echo this view, asserting a number of reasons for the positive effects of peer learning. Improvement in socialisation, increased enthusiasm for learning and most notably, that it allows students to 'learn twice' were all findings of their study. This latter part was my initial goal: would this child consolidate her understanding through taking on the role of teacher? For this reason we changed the focus of the lessons. Instead of me teaching to address her errors, our lesson was spent planning an activity for mother. A subject of the child's choice, but something that she had learnt alongside her peers in class. This of course, by virtue of me not being her class teacher, meant she then had to explain it to me. This enabled me to see how well she had understood her learning, not just in English but across the curriculum. I allowed the child again to choose the language of instruction. She chose every time to write down her instructions and what she wanted to say, in English.

What transpired was that we had addressed many of the concerns through this method, as well as highlighting other areas for concern. In explaining her Math's learning, her subject of choice, the child was able to highlight aspects that she had understood well, and elements she was not secure. I was able to then feed that back to her teacher, as well as her mother, who was not able in English but able in Math, and who noted that she now had an outlet to pick up on her daughter's misunderstandings. Discussing Math's concepts also allowed me to see a greater depth of explanation, highlighting opportunities for an increased and cross curricular vocabulary. Gartner, Kohler and Reisman (1971) referred to by Whiteman and Fife

(1988) discuss many cognitive benefits of peer teaching. In order to teach, they assert, the teacher must review, organise (and thus seek examples to illustrate) and possibly reformulate in one's own terms, as well as simplify the learning in the quest for a basic structure. These aspects are all essential in order to reteach, so we must not ignore the depth of the understanding this child needed to reteach her learning each week. What this has now opened up is a regular pathway of communication in order that the mother can be better informed of the type of work her child is doing in class.

I have referred to noticeable progress in written form through lessons I have taught, but as stated, I am unable to unreservedly claim that this is a direct result of the child having to explain her work to her mother. External contributing factors include my additional teaching, as well as the progress she will naturally make through high quality class teaching from her teacher. Nonetheless, the skill that is required for this child to undertake the tasks I have set her each week must be noted. The cognition and understanding needed to consolidate her own thoughts, to translate this and subsequently explain to someone else, who has no grasp of the context in which it had initially been delivered, is high. I do feel that this is worth developing in further cycles. The question in a further cycle will be how to hone in on a measurable target whilst continuing to follow the same process.

In summary, this action has been effective. In a further cycle it is easy to see where this learning could go. The concept of project work, peer collaboration and peer explanation essentially means this type of intervention could be tailored in any way a teacher or student sees fit. The important thing to remember is that the allocated time to teach someone else, to explain understanding or misunderstanding, has allowed for a greater depth of comprehension, which is essentially what the academic literature has highlighted. This could easily be embedded into whole class teaching, thus addressing the needs for peer work and collaboration. The development of English can also work alongside the continued development of the mother tongue, such as explanation of the core text and related activities.

At this point in the action research, written progress is limited. But the development of the process will, I feel, continue to meet the needs of EAL children in class. Koshy (2005) also cites Reason and Bradbury in *The Handbook of Action Research* (2001) in stating that the process of inquiry is just as important as the specific outcomes owing to its concern with living knowledge. This can be confirmed in my own research, in particular in reference to the importance of the self-reflective stance of my case study. I believe that the child may take the reins in her own development of English now, possibly using this peer teaching tool to consolidate areas of learning of her choice. To have not reached the final outcome yet is not to say that the research has been unsuccessful. I have created new forms of understanding that I wouldn't have experienced without the action. For, to quote Koshy's citation, 'action without understanding is blind, just as theory without action is meaningless' (Koshy 2005, 9).

4 | CHANGES IN PRACTICE BASED ON THE EVALUATION OF THE ACTION

As a class teacher, it is vital that individual goals you set for your pupils are achievable. This includes not being too resource-heavy and also being easily modeled for independent access where possible. I believe that this will need to be considered, as I was fortunate to have time out of class to work 1:1 for a significant period of time. This also of course depends on the nature of the children, a peer is required who can also address the misconceptions, or who also doesn't speak English. In a one form entry school this is difficult to manage. It could be marketed in the way we addressed it, but again this was completed in school hours with the child's parent: would it be as effective if completed in private at home? In the next cycle, perhaps I could ask the child and mother to work at home and we can reflect further on this. The research has certainly posed further questions, such as at what point writing becomes the focus and whereabouts in the cycle it would fit, and also which is the 'best way' to adapt the cycle. Yet this last concern is actually in my view what could make it more successful. As a relatively new teacher to the profession it is difficult to contend with the idea that we can have autonomy over our practice. Yes, we have different ways of reaching the same end goal, but what this research has opened my eyes to, is how imperative it is that all teachers undertake research like this, that all teachers take time to reflect, that all teachers take time to consider the reality they want their students to construct. Moving forward it will be vital that I remind myself of this and where possible, ensure I am treating my work like an action research project at all times. One of my most crucial findings as a teacher, through this project, is that we must where possible, allow children to dictate their own paths of learning, to construct their own realities and to reflect on their own practice. Without this element in my particular piece of work I would not have come to the conclusions I did, to the set of results and reflections I was presented with.

5 | BIBLIOGRAPHY

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