ESL Students: Learning Through Talking

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It is going to clean my room. I build a house. To help me do my homework. To scare

Introduction

Returning to an ESL teaching role in 2008, I decided to use research, reflection and self questioning to improve my practice and discover ways to align literacy instruction with current pedagogy. The Quality Teaching model (DET, 2006) recommends that teachers incorporate students' personal and cultural knowledge into lessons. One of my goals was to find practical ways to achieve this. Over a period of eighteen months I searched for answers to questions that arose, and came to challenge some of my initial assumptions about ESL students' knowledge of English.

Context

I gathered data from a diverse group of fifty ESL primary students ranging from Kindergarten to Grade six. I used *time for "talk"* oral language assessment, *P.M. Benchmark* reading assessment material, and collected student writing samples. Some of the students were new to Australia and many had been in our school for a year or more.

When comparing an individual ESL student's oral language with a *non* ESL student at each grade level, it was clear many ESL students used little descriptive language and sentences lacked complexity. They experienced difficulties with tense, auxiliaries, articles and pronouns. When reading, missing a key word impacted on comprehension, and interpretation was often literal and incomplete. ESL students' reading and writing behaviour reflected their oral language skills.

I was concerned that when reading independently, many ESL students reinforced their incorrect use of English. To address this in class, we used a variety of strategies to develop reading skills and build vocabulary including shared reading with Big Books, plays and reciprocal reading.

ESL Program 1: Science is Fun

To support and develop oral language I designed a program using simple science experiments to engage small groups of ESL students. Experiments included rocket balloons, bubbles and investigating vibrations. These short, practical shared experiences required using language for different purposes e.g. predicting, phrasing questions and recounting events. Opportunities arose for regular explicit modelling and scaffolding for both oral and written tasks.

I wanted the students to reflect on their experiences, draw personal connections and reveal their facility with English so I often asked this *open-ended* question, 'What does it remind you of?'

Results

While constructing cone-shaped bubble blowers, we talked about what a cone reminded us of. They thought of so many things (apart from the obvious party hat and ice-cream cone). I loved: *crocodile tail; lady's dress; Parliament House; a bird's beak; the sharp end of a pencil; an icicle; torch light* and *aliens' eyes*. I was fascinated at the language they were using and began to keep notes during and after lessons. I also taped discussions and conducted interviews.

During lessons the students played, explored and commented, making connections with personal experiences and knowledge. When I asked, 'What does it remind you of?' They drew on different senses, weaving a rich and colourful tapestry of images as they shared their stories: 'The *sound* of my uncle riding his motor bike in Korea'. 'It *smelt* like salt and vinegar chips'. 'I *saw* fighting blue and red snakes'. 'It *felt* like mosquito spray'. One recalled 'The snow in the winter in the Ukraine'. An Indigenous student drew and then sang a song about a rainbow snake. Students regularly shared their thoughts, experiences and culture.

Reflection

While assessment data are essential for determining ESL educational needs, they are not enough to fully inform and guide practice. I began to question my earlier assumptions about the students' knowledge of English. One thing was clear, ESL students need *time* to clarify, discuss and share ideas, comment on culture, both their own and the newer one they encounter at school. They need to *play* with language and experience language through *directed* play so they can reflect, draw on prior knowledge and make connections. The engaging science activities combined with open-ended questioning offered many opportunities for this.

As I studied my notes I realised that, as well as sharing personal experiences and knowledge, the students were using plenty of descriptive language: *colourful* flowers, *giant's* food, a volcano *shaking* the earth, *strawberry* ice-cream, *a thunder* cloud and *angry* dinosaur. These images were imaginative and powerful. I wondered where the descriptive language had come from.

More research

Early in 2009 I read *Literature in Second Language Education* by Dr Piera Carroli (2008) who uses shared reading of Italian literature with students learning Italian at the Australian National University. Carroli (2008) suggests a deep level of engagement facilitates

students' learning of a language (Couper, 2009). As her students participated in shared reading, they drew on prior knowledge to connect personal experiences with the Italian literary themes, and this led to a deeper appreciation of the texts.

Carroli (2008) emphasises the importance of repeated *re-reading* to focus closely on text detail. As they read, wrote reflections in Italian and re-read, her students' language skills improved. She discovered they were learning aspects of the new language without realising it. I believed I had found the answer to my question about where my students' descriptive language had come from. I revisited my notes and confirmed that many comments they had made while deeply engaged were very literary-like: *a giant bird; the deep sea; wobbly jelly; a windy forest; dancing flowers;* and *aliens in space.*

Further reflection

I realised the potential existed to do far more than teach reading skills and vocabulary using shared reading. Carroli (2008) had used shared reading successfully with adults so I felt confident it could support ESL language development at any age. I wondered if critical literacy could also be achieved as she had found with her students.

Exploring shared reading with ESL students would require high levels of engagement to keep them interested and focused. I kept coming back to the need to *play* with and explore language. The link between emotion and thinking is confirmed by research. Hornsby (2000) comments on it in *A Closer Look at Guided Reading.* As teachers, we know how important engagement is for positive student outcomes, but it is not easy to sustain.

At a literacy conference Hornsby (2009) emphasised the huge importance of oral language, and stressed that prior knowledge is fundamental to all students' comprehension. He recommended teachers provide practical activities to expose students' prior knowledge *before* reading. He called these 'springboards' into texts. I knew this would be particularly suitable for ESL students.

I designed a shared reading program drawing inspiration from the work of Hornsby (2000, 2009) and Carroli (2008). There are three distinct parts to this program. Each builds on a different aspect of play to engage students.

ESL Program 2: Shared Reading

1.   Playing around language:
Before reading, time is given for talking, reflecting and making connections while playing *around* the language of a text using practical activities such as drama, technology, drawing, craft or science, that allow for playful exploration of a theme. The first reading by the teacher is for pleasure. Students predict outcomes (orally or by writing), and then the teacher reads on to complete the story.

2.   Words as Toys:
With each re-reading, the focus is on one aspect of the text. Games and activities get students to focus carefully on words and punctuation in *context*. For example: 'Guess the word' games; find or make rhyming words; explore imagery. Be innovative and choose activities that challenge, puzzle or amuse. Play with the rhythm of language. Get them to *see, hear, say* and *act* out words. Whole body movements engage kinaesthetic learners. Readers' Theatre using multiple copies of a text is a great way to encourage expression, develop fluency and experiment with different voices, while students *hear* the language over and over again.

3.   Explore and Imagine:
Students explore and extend ideas beyond the text: The text is a *stimulus* or *starting* point for speaking, writing, research, dramatic or artistic expression.

Application

I chose a Big Book, *Monster for Hire*, to study narrative, and make explicit the reading/writing connection with a group of Grade 3, ESL students over a three week period. It has a high interest theme, clear narrative structure and good literary language. After an introductory discussion about monsters and the word 'hire', I asked them to draw their own monster and write what it could do for them.

As they drew I listened to them talking: 'Mine's got a jetpack'. '… and then I have elephant ears'. 'It's got 1000 fingers'. 'Mine's a girl, I'll put a dress on for it'. 'It's nearly finished, I just need to orange it'. The jobs for monsters demonstrated the students' power over their monster: 'Clean my room', 'Do my homework,' and 'Make me warm'.

We read the first two pages and met a giant. I asked, 'What does he remind you of?' Suggestions included three giants in a Ukrainian fairytale, a Chinese story about a giant and a pet monster, *Jack and the Beanstalk,* and a giant in a movie. We continued reading, paused to predict and then read on to the end.

We next focused on different aspects of the text. I asked what was meant by, 'The witch *eyed* the monster' (Wilson, 1987, p. 23). They immediately acted this out. We discussed, identified and named the parts of a narrative then carefully re-read the story to place Monster's attributes on a semantic map. A girl suggested he was 'as tall as a table'. I seized the chance to explain similes. They each completed
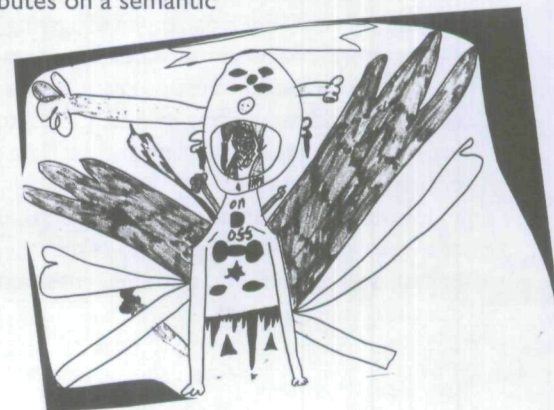
a semantic map for their monster and similes were everywhere!

Writing observations

They began to write their stories. The first drafts showed a range of English abilities and language skills, and many contained at least one simile. A student revealed the ability to play with the word 'handy', 'Faraway in the universe lived a monster, of course it was very handy, but it doesn't mean helpful, but it is. I mean it has big hands'. She explained that drawing it first had helped achieve this.

I hid descriptive words on a page with post-it notes and we read the text together. It still made sense. I revealed the hidden words and we focused on the enhanced meaning. I had written a basic word on post-it notes on another page and as we read they suggested better words, then the descriptive word was revealed. This game was fun and they all contributed.

Unaided, they edited their work. I found the first clear indications that shared reading activities could support ESL literacy development. One changed 'very shy' to 'extremely shy'. Another changed 'a monster' to 'a scary monster.' A girl changed: 'They cast a spell and she was gone.' to: 'They cast a magical spell and she just disappeared.' I was delighted to find four students had made improvements to their sentence structure.

Further exploration

Carroli (2008) stresses the critical importance of group dialogue. During a discussion about the main character in Monster for Hire, I listened as five students went beyond the literal meaning of the story and analysed Monster's character without my assistance, concluding that although he was a 'calm' character he was also 'naughty'. Multiple re-readings of the text followed by group discussion and reflection had led to the students engaging in critical literacy. I asked, 'Who does Monster remind you of?' They shared stories of mischief as they made connections between personal experiences and the literary theme.

Then individuals shared a Finnish story about a girl who misbehaved at a party, a Punjabi story about two birds making dhal and a Chinese story about a sneaky princess. A boy recalled Scandinavian stories about trolls. The students revealed a wealth of knowledge about narrative as they shared personal and cultural stories.

One of the surprises was the effectiveness of group dialogue in enabling students to explore complex ideas. We returned to Monster for Hire to identify the 'aha!' moment, when Monster found the chance to turn the witch into a toad. (I was interested to see if they shared my view that Monster was an opportunist.) Some of the students however began to voice their growing indignation. They just did not approve of Monster's actions. They commented, 'Just because the witch was bossy, he could have gone away and not been mean!', 'He could have made other choices!', 'He should go where people are not so bossy!'. They had not only made connections between their diverse personal and cultural experiences and the text, they were also drawing on their shared school culture as they voiced disapproval of Monster's behaviour.
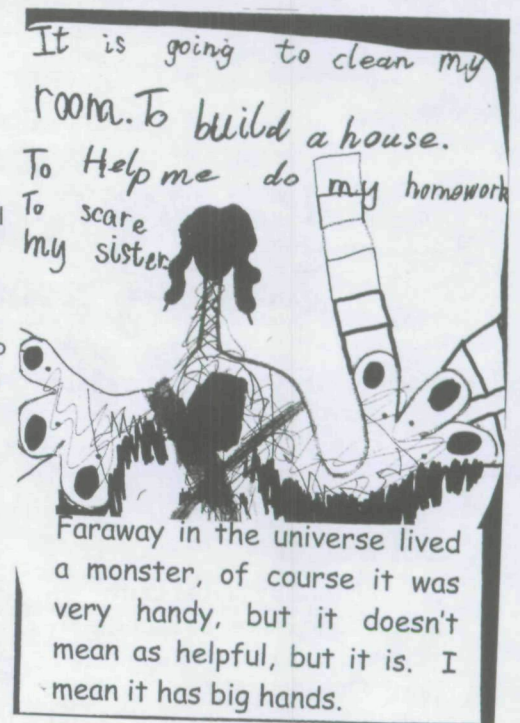

Faraway in the universe lived a monster, of course it was very handy, but it doesn't mean as helpful, but it is. I mean it has big hands.

Conclusion

Allowing ESL students time to play with language, explore meaning and exchange ideas helped them connect prior knowledge with lesson content and enabled them to share personal and cultural knowledge. This led to a deeper understanding of themes in shared reading and provided excellent support to all aspects of ESL literacy development. I believe engagement is fundamental to effective ESL teaching and learning. Being engaged not only enhances their learning of English, it also gives students the chance to reveal what they already know.

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