

Joined In Thinking Weblog

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Our EAL Beginners weblog was born a while ago and is now sturdy enough to stand up to a bit of publicity. It is not a wordpress type blog so has reduced functionality for feedback. However, one thing you cannot do with templated blogs is produce a version in PDF - but we can! We thought you might want to use it for CPD or discussion. Any constructive criticism is most welcome; use the email above. And many thanks for the positive comments we have received so far!

Introduction

Hello world!

Or, more likely, hello fellow teacher. My name is Jude and I am an EAL teacher supporting a mix of new and recently arrived pupils who speak little or no English. I work in a Primary School in South London, and work with Key Stage 2.

I have been a teacher for 27 years, and I find myself having similar conversations about EAL beginners to those I had when started teaching. But now, we do not have the benefit of EAL specialists in all our schools and many Local Authorities have been pared to the bone.

I have decided to start a blog to share with the world my experiences, thoughts and strategies for keeping new arrivals "joined in", that is to say an integrated member of your class and your school.

Throughout this blog, the experiences and words are real but the names have all been changed.

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Well Begun is Half Done



I was talking today to Nancy who is now in year 6 and a very skilled user of English and Thai. Throughout KS1, however, people were concerned about her use of language.

She remembered her first day at school in Reception:

"It was terrible, I didn't know any English. When I went to the toilet my Dad left. When I came back no one understood me and I didn't know what they were saying. I just cried and cried." (note from the teacher who was there - screamed and screamed!)

Nancy has overcome her jolting start to education, partly because she has been in classrooms attuned to language development for young children, and many of her peers were in the same boat.

What of our older starters who may be similarly jolted and scared? We need to try and give them an encouraging and nurturing environment full of smiles. We need to find secure places to stand and rest and survey the landscape.

But how?

Remember the big shock the child is experiencing. If you need help, tune your radio or TV to a language you do not speak. Now imagine that is all you have all day and you are expected to respond. It is hard. Always. For everyone.

Have friendly chatty children around to help, but be alert to overwhelmingness. Keep an eye out at lunchtime and on the playground. Look at dinner and make sure the child can eat and enjoy it. In your classroom have a nifty box of interesting things:

- an atlas is essential
- something crafty and fiddly
- photos of the school
- text free (or nearly) books e.g. You Choose, Where's Wally?
- language free games (pelmanism, connect four)
- a few phrases in their language if you can

These first days are not about learning English, not about being assessed and put into a slot. They are about learning to feel at home in this alien environment. They are about finding a safe place to stand.

For everyone.

Posted on 20th May 2013

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Sssh

" I may be silent
but I'm thinking.
I may not talk
But don't mistake me for a wall"
Tsubjo Shigeji



The "silent phase" is well documented, and has an almost hallowed status in some quarters. Many teachers have read or heard about this stage that beginners to English go through.

I had a very aggrieved teacher say to me, "Why is he trying to talk? He should still be in the silent phase."

It's a funny old fish, the silent phase.

I've come to the conclusion that it will be slightly different with every child.

Some children just want to talk, so they try talking persistently in first language, despite the fact we don't understand, (if that seems strange, bear in mind that it is mirroring our behaviour exactly). When they realise that we don't get it they stop talking or they try to copy words.

Some children, who have a fascination with language, start trying to use words and labels very fast.

Some children don't talk, but watch carefully and try to imitate others.

Some children are wary and fearful and almost "shut down"

Child number four is the one we need to watch carefully and treat gently. She needs things made very clear with visual models, she needs some access to first language - a recording, a video, a book, a person of any age and status in the school.

She needs some friends who don't mind the silence.

It's a tall order. We are programmed for two-way interaction. When people don't respond to us we naturally give up, you see it in babies and toddlers on the bus.

So with a silent child keep talking, keep interacting, keep smiling.

Then one day, after a few months of careful, gentle nurturing this happens:
A group of year three children ran across the playground gleefully

"Miss, miss, miss - Maria's talking!"

When you thought nothing was happening, when you thought that all your effort was in vain, Maria was listening, she was trying to make sense of it all. That watchful, wary, haunted look was the mask she wore whilst intense linguistic activity was underway. Maria has taken a few tentative steps, which are, in fact, her giant leap. And her peers recognise it.

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Social glue

"If you want a child to learn make sure he has a friend"

Johnson and Johnson

Children need to feel part of this new community, that is your classroom and your school. We want them to have as many positive interactions as possible every day. But, because we have so little shared language we all find it hard. If children have no way of indicating their needs they may resort to physical solutions, which can all too quickly led to negative labels, alternatively it can led to physical discomfort. So teach, model and practise some body language and gesture e.g the BSL gesture for toilet is to move the long finger on the dominant hand up and down slightly against the shoulder. You can also create or buy communication fans, some designed to express physical needs and some emotional needs. A link to these will be popped into the filing cabinet.

I do like to start, as we all do, with labelling the environment, so as well as the obligatory tour of the school and pointing out places where help can be found - e.g speakers of the same language, I try and acquaint children with the equipment they will find in the classroom.

I put together a small pack with a selection of classroom equipment.

I play a game called "can I have?", though game is probably too strong a word. I teach the names of the objects - then I find a willing partner and I ask "can I have a pencil?" and thank them, we model it a few times then I try with my new child. Once they realise that all I want is an object, things usually go quite fast.

This is, in my view, a lot better than the worksheet based variations with sticking and matching words because there is practice in the kind of language which commonly occurs around classroom vocabulary. It also practices a pathway which will ease social interaction. Once you say "Can I have?" in the dinner hall people start to be a lot nicer to you.



In the second drawer of the filing cabinet you will find a PDF of this activity, in case you want to ask another adult to do it for you - schools these days don't allow much time for explaining to our colleagues. Once some children know how they always do it in a few minutes.

A word of warning.

Scissors.

Not all children have had good hands-on prior experience of scissors. Cutting human hair is very satisfying, especially if you have a good fringe. Nursery teachers know this and make sure that children rarely go home with a new hairstyle, older children have got it out of their system. You may want to run a supervised cutting experience to get it out of your new arrivals system.

6 or 7 art straws spread across the hand and snipped off gives a satisfying experience, as does cutting along the fold to make paper lanterns, and attempting to make a feather from a piece of paper - draw the feather outline, then snip in as close as you can to nearly the middle. With care you can make a nice fluffy feeling feather.

Posted on 7th June 2013

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This Year's Crop



The life of an EAL teacher is predictable only in its unpredictability. As the new school year settles into its own rhythm, and children and teachers find their feet, that's when everything gets upended. October always brings a swathe of new admissions, but you can never predict who, or when, or how old, or where from. So you carry on until they arrive.

There I was; planning with teachers, getting ahead in my organisation and generally feeling like all was going swimmingly. Maybe even having a moment or two of smugness.

Then the lovely office lady called me "Judith," she said, in her brisk and cheerful way, "new children for you to see."

Plural.

FIVE.

All to start the same week.

So now we know: three Pushto speakers, two Vietnamese speakers, all with very minimal experience of English.

Years 3, 4 and 5.

First things first: prepare the teachers. Smile. I always say I have "Good news," I give the teacher as much information as I can. I tell them what I will do to help. The format I use to pass on information is here*. Then I make a cup of tea.

Secondly: prepare the children. Finding good buddies is quite an art, some children who you think will be good turn out not to be.

Buddies need to be:

- Chatty
- Secure in the social hierarchy of your classroom
- Able to share
- Sensible and caring
- Not too anxious
- Positive about bi-lingualism

People often think girls will be better at it than boys, but actually some of my best buddies in the current crop are boys. It is worth cultivating the role of the buddy and preparing a few children so you always have some on hand.

Hampshire EMAS team have produced an excellent resource* on training buddies, which is well worth the few pounds it costs.

Watch like a hawk in the first few days; watch out for smotherers who fuss too much, and for those who cannot make allowances. Watch out for your power players who will try to exert control.

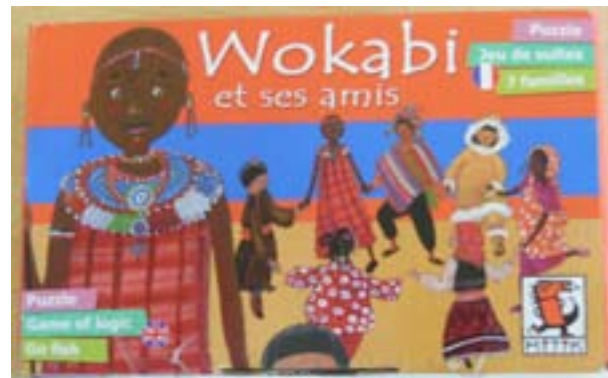
Remember the buddy is not necessarily going to be a long term friend, we just want there to be someone who is looking out for our new arrivals and helping

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* go to the collaborative learning links page to find this!

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Grouping and Sharing



Where in your classroom is your new arrival going to sit? As an EAL teacher, this is, I think, my biggest battle. Intuitively teachers and teaching assistants feel that the table where there is most support is best. This is very rarely so.

Children who struggle to learn are also often poor communicators.

New arrivals need to be exposed to extensive good language modelling. If you are blessed with chatty children, who drive you mad, now is their moment to shine.

In the early days of learning English, just hearing English spoken, so they can tune in, is vital. So put your new arrival on a table of higher attaining pupils. They may well have knowledge and understanding that means this is their natural peer group.

Last year we had a new arrival from Spain, Jose. He was placed on an extensive support table for all subjects. In a maths lesson it was very clear that whereas the other children were struggling with the concepts, Jose was a very strong mathematician. It was extremely hard to persuade his teacher that he could and should work with higher attaining groups. After a series of lessons where I adapted the material and provided word banks, he did move and was rapidly recognised by the others as an able mathematician. He now works happily in a challenge group in Maths with other pupils offering quick additional translations where needed. Good mathematicians like working with other good mathematicians.

Of course, your new child may find things hard: Maths may have been taught very differently and topics such as Shape and Space or Data Handling may be new areas. Even in this instance it is better to do different work alongside brighter chattier pupils.

Zara had to be incorporated into a year 4 literacy lesson describing Caliban and Prospero from the Tempest. As she sat with some very good writers and sorted some colours to create a monster we were able to all talk about the characters - Zara then made a mini book of colours to go with her monster so that at home she could add some Pushto words to describe a monster. The other children wrote their descriptions, and because they had really imagined monsters their writing was vivid and powerful.

A win, win situation.



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The Power of Three - Part I



The power of three - Triangles Part 1

Despite all the fashionable fads and whims in education some ideas endure through it all. If they do it is because they make sense and have a resonance for teachers in their practice. Maslow's pyramid is one such enduring idea. It has shaped my work for the best part of three decades, and should always be at the forefront of the EAL teacher's mind.

In case Maslow has passed you by, in a nut-shell, we cannot learn if certain social, emotional and physical prerequisites are not met. We easily understand that students need to be not sleepy, not hungry, not hot and not cold. We also can recognise the need for physical safety, though for refugee children some situations can seem more scary than we realise. Loud bangs, mental maths games where teachers pretend to be shooting with a gun, banging doors, can all trigger memories we can only imagine, and make school seem unsafe. Our students also need to feel emotionally safe which can be harder to achieve.

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The Power of Three - Part II

Triangles Part 2

"none shall push aside another, none shall let another fall."
From Pete Seeger's lyrics for Ode to Joy

These lines always seem to me to encapsulate the perfect society and the exact culture we should strive for in our classrooms and schools. It is also the culture that will support inclusion.



So, following on from last time, physically safe we can achieve, but emotionally safe, how shall we do this? What does it mean to be emotionally safe?

Firstly, it means knowing that people care about you, think about you and will look after you.

Secondly, it means accepting who you are believing the best about you, so if you do something the assumption will be that your intentions were good.

Thirdly it means that you can make mistakes, get things wrong and people will not laugh at you, they may even help you.

The EAL teacher is a bit like an amalgam circus performer, spinning the plates and moving from place to place keeping things spinning, or walking along a tightrope, sensitive to every little fluctuation. One day the year 6's need you to reassure them about SATs and secondary transfer, (on this subject check the guidance for accessing the tests: <http://www.education.gov.uk/sta/keystage2/ks2tests> and don't assume someone else will sort it out), the next day the year 4's are feeling lost and bewildered by the new literacy topic, then the year 3's have a supply teacher who shouts.

I also feel like a hawk, watching in class, on the stairs, in the playground, watching for the children and adults who are helping and contributing to success, praising and celebrating the positive. Also watching for the first hint of derogatory behavior and pouncing to stop it before it starts.

While withdrawal from the classroom is very rarely a useful strategy it can create an emotionally safe place for early attempts at language production. Binh a Vietnamese boy in year 4 was unhappy about using English, to the point where he screwed up his face and put his fingers in his ears. Working in a small group, we made wind-up monsters, which fitted in with the topic on moving toys. At the end of the second session we spoke and wrote a little about our monsters. Binh took a whiteboard and started to draw a flying saucer. Then he said "Him this one sky come."

This was of course responded to very positively. This small slight positive exchange was instrumental in improving Binh's willingness to engage with talk in the classroom. We can of course, see that we followed a key sequence of > understanding the task, > having something to communicate > having success in communicating.

You know you are successful when the new arrivals are all happy in class laughing in the playground and the teachers and TA s are telling you about their successes. You know you have work to do when the children see your presence as a lifeline. The less everyone needs you, the better you are doing your job. It can be hard to remember.

Posted on 2nd May 2014

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The Power of Three -Part III



Triangles Part 3

Maslow identified the importance of safety, both physical and emotional, but we also need to build a sense of self worth, of adding value to the community our students have joined.

For our New Arrivals it easy to cast them as "people who can't," rather than "people who can." In order to succeed students need to know that they are successful and to be perceived by other students as successful.

If you doubt the power of this validation try the wall experiment. Put a piece of your new arrivals works on the wall and highlight that which is good. Watch them shine and approach all learning with renewed vigour.

In a Year 5 class the teacher did such a thing, she added a text written in Vietnamese and one in Polish, written by two new pupils. (Both here for about six months.) She praised the work. With support from other pupils and staff, an element of translation was added. This simple activity had many benefits:

The new pupils felt validated ("me work wall yes" as one put it.)

Other pupils had their language skills validated.

We took a tiny step to counteract the view that English is the only language of value in our classrooms.

Pupils may well try to find ways to seek validation. If we are lucky this will be at something positive and helpful, e.g. mental maths, origami, drawing, basket-ball, football, running or gymnastics. If we are unlucky it will be at something less helpful e.g. climbing trees, walls and fences, or fighting. I once watched as a support assistant tried to explain that climbing a fence to seek a ball was dangerous. As this child was from Barbados and had spent many hours up tall trees, his expression showed complete incredulity that a one metre fence posed any danger. He, of course, quickly became a very popular figure thanks to his ball retrieval skills.

So look at the new arrival in your class, find ways to publicly praise them, and make sure that they know that you and the other pupils know that they have skills and talents.

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Give and Take



The "Matthew Effect" is well documented in sociology and economics.

For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath.

—Matthew 25:29, King James Version.

Or - "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer."

Sadly, it also occurs in terms of academic success. This is all the more depressing when we are actually trying to prevent or redress educational inequality.

When I trained as a teacher, a popular element of all courses was to look at the Rosenthal research, where a group of students were randomly classed as "very bright" or as "a long way behind." The teachers were told which group the pupils belonged in. Each group contained the full ability range. At the end of a term the pupils in the "bright group" had all made good progress, the "behind group" had all achieved less. So the pupils had fulfilled their label even though it was arbitrary. This was always required reading to highlight the damaging effect of low expectations by teachers.

But expectation alone cannot account for the differing performance; there must also have been a modification of teaching to each group.

I often look at work from struggling writers; their books are littered with positive comments and smiley faces, which is obviously good for their sense of self worth. What they don't get, however, is the kind of developmental feedback "you need to add two adjectives to this sentence", which would improve their work. Maybe this subtle change in feedback is the cause of the failure.

Don't say it's good if it's not; praise the effort and the improvements, but not the total outcome if you can suggest a couple of improvement points.

On a recent training course a teacher of KS3 asked me if she should ever correct EAL learners English. I was somewhat taken aback; you obviously don't humiliate and belittle, but if you know that you have taught a language item then a little reminder is absolutely in order.

The key points would be to focus on the message the pupil is communicating, perhaps ask key questions to clarify and show where there might be an error, then model and explain. This should all happen relative to the stage the pupil is at. Unchecked errors do nobody any favours; at the very least, make a note in your mental or actual notebook, so you can address it later in a teaching context.

P.S. Do take a look at the Learning Without Limits project - again the Collaborative Learning Links page will take you there.

Posted on 29th September 2014

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Room for one more on top!



The last seven days have absolutely stretched our school to the limit. They've also given this EAL teacher to a sensation of being on a very fast moving roundabout.

We have added 6 children, who have never been to school in the UK, to our roll. On top of the 4 admitted earlier this term.

This doesn't sound like much as I write it down, but the reality is:

- 4 families who need time and welcome and possibly advice about living in the UK, that may be someone else's job, but I see no-one stepping up to the plate.
- 6 individuals, all with different needs who need to be welcomed, supported and made to feel like they are the most important person in school.
- 6 teachers who need to be supported and made to feel like they are my number one priority.
- 6 classes (150 children) who need to be empowered to help, support and include our new children.
- 6 classroom assistants who need to be given support packs, guidance and help.
- 600 attempts to create a working timetable that allows every child to get enough support to be able to cope within the classroom, not just this batch, but last term's and the term before, and the term before (who have still only had 8 months of exposure to English at best).

In days like these people query the sanity of keeping children in class.

"Why not," they ask, "why not create a New To English unit, keep them for a while and then send them into classes in a term or two?"

It would be easier for me, it would be easier for the teachers and assistants.

But it would not be better, it would not be morally right and it would not be within the spirit of the law. I also believe that OFSTED would be profoundly unimpressed, having read the latest guidance.

The reasons it would not be better are as follows; the children would be denied access to a peer group to learn from, they would not be socially part of the school, they would not get full access to curriculum entitlement, they would still have to make a move to managing in mainstream classes, they would not make such good progress.

"The best place for a new arrival is your classroom."

So we will resist the lure of the cosy, well-equipped unit. We will run up and down stairs with our baskets of tricks, distributing visual prompts, vocabulary support, dictionaries, beginner boxes. We will read plans at 11 o'clock on Sunday night and try to add adaptations. We will take time to support our language ambassadors and buddies. It will get better. Wish us luck.

Posted on 3rd October 2014

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One of those Magic Grid Things.

We added more new pupils this week, and the staff and fellow pupils are rising to the challenge in a way that makes me feel quite humble.

Last year I ran training for the teachers at school, the training covered early stage EAL learners. Now, as every Keystage 2 teacher has a new arrival in their class, some teachers are dusting off their notes. One teacher asked me,

"Can you help? I need to make one of those magic grid things."

She meant a substitution table.

Now many people will know exactly what I mean, but for those who don't, substitution tables break language structures down in a way that enables pupils to read across, select vocabulary and create a sentence.

e.g.

The	circle square triangle	is	red green blue	.
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You can, of course, add images and colours to nouns to support meaning.

Substitution tables are best used with pupils who have literacy skills in L1, who have begun to engage a little with English, and who want to have writing in their books so as to be like their peers. The alternative would be copying and not understanding what is being copied.

Constructing the tables requires a little thought,

1. Think about the language structure you want, Theis ..., or Thehas....., are useful starting structures.
2. Decide how many items are to be substituted, the example above has substitutions for noun and adjective, simpler variations would simply substitute adjective, The volcano is
3. Think carefully, what vocabulary will be useful? What can fit in with classroom work? Yr 4 are studying volcanoes so its helpful to introduce this word, if they weren't it wouldn't be a useful language item. Shapes, colours, numbers, body parts and classroom equipment are always useful.
4. Add pictures, or provide separate picture cards for nouns, if you need to.
5. Explain how they work (using first language, if you, or anyone, can).

With practice you will be able to create these for many lessons. The advantage over copying is that the pupil has made some word choices, they have begun to see how sentences are structured, and you have included them in your lesson. They should be able to read the sentence back, or select the correct image if they are being silent, so check this and make a note in your marking.

As things progress you can add negations, vary verbs, add plurals, and generally make things more complex. I will be popping a couple of examples in the filing cabinet, but I urge you to make your own. The process of construction makes you more aware of language and how it is being used. English always has the fun of one or two items that just don't fit, and this is often only comes to light when you make the table. Next week we'll look at them in context.

Posted on 10th October 2014

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More of those Magic Grid Things

As I said last time, the process of construction of substitution tables makes you more aware of language and how it is being used. I have still not kept a bank of readymade ones because the creation is part of my planning for the group. I thought I could demonstrate by discussing a few I have created in the last fortnight.

Bears

I am very fond of the Kingscourt book Bears, which is in their storyteller series. I use it with children who are securely at S1 on the Extended Scale, and building up S2 skills. (If this is unfamiliar to you, do not worry, I have added a couple of links to explanations in the public domain, and many authorities have produced their own guidance. Redbridge, Wigan and Reading are good examples I know of.)

A substitution table can easily be created, but first you need to make some choices; will the bears be plural or singular, the polar bear likes or polar bears like? The book is in the plural and the generalisation will be useful in cross- curricular texts so I decided on plural.

What would be the sentence structure? To build on where the pupils are, and useful sentence structures for the classroom I decided on :

article (the), subject (.....bear), verb (likes), gerund (...ing).

Although the word bear appears by each name it is repeated five times, and not left in the sentence block; this is because it belongs with the species as part of the subject, and not with the likes as part of the verb.

Next how many words do we want the pupils to select from? The book contains brown, black, polar, grizzly and spectacled, and swimming, fishing, eating, playing, climbing, rolling and sleeping. I decided to leave out the Spectacled bear but to keep the others. Grizzly would have been a candidate to omit, but the Grizzly bear is on so many pages it would be strange, and the word is not so hard to spot. I left out climbing as it is not so evident from the pictures, it is a hard word, and it is the only thing the spectacled bear does, I left out eating, again because the pictures are harder to see and all bears eat.

So the table looked like this:

The	Brown bear	likes	swimming	
	Black bear		fishing	
	Polar bear		rolling	*
	Grizzly bear		playing	
			sleeping	

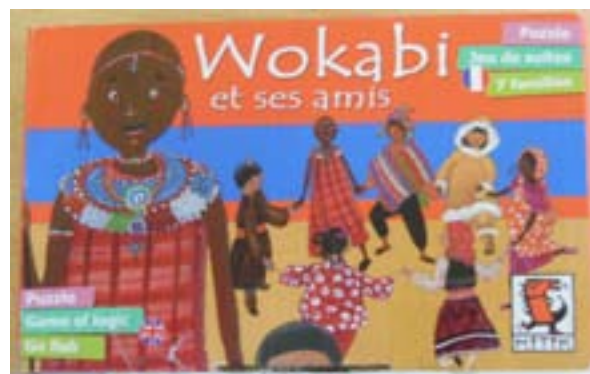
Interestingly, when we came to do the task, Binh was keen to point out that I had missed one and wrote a climbing sentence in his book. I think this is because he loves the Monkey and Panda book and spots all the monkey pictures, which he offers to imitate, so climbing is a word he gets. This also told me that Binh is ready to write more independently without scaffolds.

I will put the Bears substitution table in the filing cabinet, but please don't use it without the picture rich book to support the task.

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That's Me That Is

At school we have taken advantage of the curriculum overhaul to add a global dimension to our curriculum, this is probably long overdue and many people are finding the resourcing hard work. Where we are moving forward the effects are quite startling.



Children engage more, learn more and try harder when they feel the text, or science, or history or maths relates to them.

Charmaine Kenner's research into first language in the classroom is a powerful piece of work. The maths problems given to the children were all culturally contextualized, so they were working out how many fish to buy for a wedding banquet, with impressive outcomes. Where the teachers were not overly familiar, the children were overtly encouraged to provide the context for new problems. When we ask children to make up their own problems, they often stay guarded and write only in school familiar contexts. However, if we take the steps to open up and show that we are genuinely interested we can reap a rich harvest of engagement. Our new arrivals may well be the only child from their background in the class, so they will naturally be reticent unless we create a context for sharing ideas. Gordon Ward's Racing to English stories are all set in countries that are familiar to many of our new arrivals. Ali who is a year 6 boy from Afghanistan, via many other countries, positively shone when he read a story about a school in a tent. He laughed, answered all the questions then proceeded to talk and write about school in Afghanistan. This was the most engaged in literacy he has been all year.

Binh was similarly engaged by a story about snakes in Vietnam, he maintained a twenty minute dialogue, with many extended and joined phrases, about the time he tried to catch a frog in Vietnam.

"Me..him.. this one big..this one small, too many much frog everywhere. Me him catch. Me him run after ..chase. Him run this.. this.. this."

This was accompanied by a great many gestures and jumping around the room. I think he would have tried to catch a fly had it been the summer, so in role was he. Of course we generated this into a story about frog catching in Vietnam.

So we must seek out resources, books, pictures, contexts that will enable our new arrivals to use their developing language whilst feeling absolutely confident about the content.

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Getting Better and Better



How do you know that your pupils are making progress? You would think this question is at the core of our profession, the very essence of teaching. But, sadly, it seems not. As the year creaks on and the targets set so cheerfully in September now look like mirages, as we realise that we have eight weeks until the SATs tests, we lose sight of any progress that isn't easily pinned down and annotated.

The new curriculum promised a life beyond levels, but many of us we are still APP ing, and levelling against an outmoded set of criteria. The problem is levels and progress are so embedded that they run through our schools like writing on pink rock. We are used to evidencing progress and defending ourselves, within this framework. For EAL learners we use, probably, a local variant of Language In Common. This is by no means an acclaimed or flawless system, but the exemplifications created by EAL practitioners from all areas and backgrounds mean we all have a varied menu to select from. I prefer the ones that give ideas on what you might do next, maybe because I am a great subscriber to the "so what?" school of assessment.

Once upon a time we had a shared understanding of Language Development. We saw stages in English acquisition where pupils' use of other languages was recognized, and where the complexities of developing bilingually were articulated. Language In Common replaced this with a simplified structure in an illusory attempt to align with NC levels. Its introduction did not cause universal celebration, but at least there remained descriptors specific to EAL pupils.

But now, beyond levels what shall we do? All learners are to be classed as at age expectation, below age expectation or exceeding age expectation, if we are lucky each strand may be subdivided into three. Our EAL beginners will be below age expectation, and may stay there for a while. No explanation of why, no raising expectation, just below expectation child, therefore not a good enough teacher.

The battle to ensure that speaking another language is not regarded as a deficit in learning has been constant through my career, and it seems that the situation is about to get worse than it ever has been.

As a profession we need to fight the corner for our pupils, to argue for, design and disseminate a means of describing the journey through English acquisition that our pupils make. We need this in order to defend ourselves professionally, as well as to help our school leaders be proud of the achievements of this group. We need it or EAL beginners will find themselves unwanted and unwelcome in schools. We need it so we can help our pupils make that journey rapidly.

Posted on 22nd February 2015
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Joined In Thinking Weblog

A Framework that Seems to Work

A whole month since the last blog : sorry. School's been a bit "interesting", but enough of that.

I have been mulling over a new (to me) framework for learners. I was talking to wonderful Simon Wrigley at a Teachers As Writers meeting a fortnight ago and he shared his theory on the writing process:

You need:

confidence > participation > practice or experimentation > reflection >

to succeed on a writing task.

I am sure this neatly encapsulates what I have been trying to say here on Joined In Thinking. Except, I really feel that for EAL beginners practice and experimentation are two different things.

This could of course be represented as a circle (remember when everything in education was presented like that?)

So what does this mean in practice?

Confidence

- all we have said so far about welcoming, supporting, valuing.

Participation

- Maslow's triangle, having a go, joining in.

Practice

- knowing what to do, having some models you can work on, building your command of sentence structures, adding to your vocabulary, using substitution tables.

Experimentation

-the moment we strive for, adding the bits you know together, possibly from your first language framework, building your own attempt at meaningful communication.

You know these moments, they are ones to lighten your darkest hour, make you smile, and you remember the first one of these for every new arrival you ever worked with.

Reflection

-a somewhat advanced state, where you are able to compare your language to the models around you. So when children read their writing, then listen to you say the words from the model, and realize they have forgotten the 's'. Many adult bi-linguals don't reach this state.

Clearly our learners will keep going through this cycle. It won't be a one off. But I do think seeing where they are the first time round will be helpful in articulating those very early stages. (PS, S1,S2)

And of course, remember context is all, this only works in the science lesson on frogs, where you joined in with everyone else. Not with words you are learning because they are next on someone's list.

When you teach the months of the year do you start with January, because it's first, or March (or whatever) because it's the one you are in and will be writing, or seeing written, 4 times a day for the next two weeks?

The more I mull over this framework, the more I like it. I am currently playing with a snazzy artwork version to create as a PDF - when its done I will pop it in the filing cabinet. If you like it, print it out and blu-tack to your wall, or leave it in the staffroom, or put it on a power-point and use it as part of an inset.

You can even claim it as your own. Though that's not very fair to Simon!

Posted on 20th March 2015

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Joined In Thinking Weblog

Be More Saxon



There was a small news item the other week that caught my eye. Someone analysed the DNA of a number of people from longstanding "area-based" families, that is to say people with all four grandparents originating from the same place. From this it was deduced that the invasion with the biggest long-term impact on the English populace was not the Romans, the Vikings nor the Normans, but the Saxons.

The Vikings and Romans came and raided. They built things and left some words and place-names, but very little tangible DNA continued in the English population. The Normans left even less DNA, despite being our most famous invaders, though they did give us Magna Carta and a lot more words. But the Saxons, hardly mentioned, left DNA which is still clearly present in modern Brits.

What on Earth has this to do with EAL, I hear you ask? Well it seems to me the Saxons may be the best blue print for EAL teachers.

It is a constant, well frequent, puzzle to me, why, after fifty years of EAL support in schools, do so many teachers seem surprised by the efficacy of group work, talk, and comprehensible input?

Many EAL teachers in the past, sought to emphasise their specialism. A worthy niche was carved, but other teachers were not privy to our mysterious ways. This meant when the funding went, the knowledge went, leaving EAL beginners at the mercy of phonics programmes and SEN groups.

Similarly, others felt that the way forward was to secure roles in the hierarchy of schools, or even out of schools. Ensuring status for EAL professionals was a route to raising the status of EAL pupils. Unfortunately, it is actually quite tricky to influence classroom practice through dictates and guidance documents. Certainly in Primary Schools; in Secondaries it may be different.

Going back to invaders, the Romans and Normans were superior and separate, mixing little with the populace. They came, they saw, they conquered, they went away and we carried on as before. The Saxons seem to have lived among us, introduced ideas, and worked with us. Through this process we became, at least in part, Saxon.

So, EAL teachers, be more Saxon. Don't worry about our specialness, our separateness or our place in the hierarchy. Be a teacher, be in classrooms, work alongside your fellow teachers and share your ideas. Give away your ideas. Watch as teachers start to incorporate EAL friendly and effective practices into all their lessons.

In short, become part of the DNA of the profession. Be more Saxon.

Posted on 24th April 2015
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Joined In Thinking Weblog

Look More, Listen More



What makes classrooms effective learning environments for EAL learners, especially beginners? This is a question that has cudgelled my brain, for my whole career.

We know, and can recite; a language rich environment, purposeful interaction, visual prompts, modelling, rephrasing, repetition, headlining of content, orientation, high expectations, positive attitudes to diversity and an inclusive ethos. But... it still remains the case that some classrooms and some teachers create more rapid progress than others.

I have the privilege of watching lots of teachers and EAL learners at work. Through this I am developing a hypothesis.

I think you need two finely balanced dichotomies; observation and action, freedom and control.

You need teachers who have classrooms where all children know they are expected to behave in a certain way. But this cannot be the authoritarian model where children live in fear but do not change; it needs to be the improving model where the behaviours are part of a greater good and a common goal. It will look like and feel like freedom. It won't be that exactly, since pupils will need to be responsible for their own learning, but, if they are not expecting enough of themselves, then they will be challenged.

Yesterday Yr 6 came to school while the rest of the school were at home because we were a polling station. We needed to do some SATs stuff, but also wanted fun. We put a range of SATs questions around the room and mixed the children up to work in mixed ability threes (not random as we wanted a range in each group). Each team had to work together to answer questions in treasure hunt style. The only rules were one pencil per group, and the whole group had to agree on the answers. There were additional points for co-operation.

Watching, looking and listening I was struck by the ability of so many pupils to teach each other and to learn from each other. On the narrow checklist in operation: in some places it would have been criticised, since we didn't have five levels of differentiation with discrete tasks, nobody had taken a small group to one side for "intervention", but there was tangible learning and a rise in all pupils' confidence about next week. It looked and felt free, but it wasn't, there was a strong structure underpinning it all.

A finely balanced dichotomy, how do teachers develop this?

At the heart of it all is an open minded responsiveness. A process of skilled observation and constant evaluation of where children are, what they need next and what they are ready for. Watching, listening, waiting and acting at the right moment. Knowing when to push, when to challenge, when to step back and let things unfold. I see so many teachers doing just that, but I also see so many moments where the watcher mis-interprets and acts too soon, or too late, too much or not enough.

Some teachers, feel that they do not have the skills to help new arrivals; that their ability to look and listen does not apply to this group. To these teachers I would say, develop these skills with all your pupils and do exactly the same with your new arrivals. To EAL teachers I would say, model these skills with all pupils you meet, not just your target children.

When teachers can balance observation and action, they will know when to allow freedom and when to curtail it.

Joined In Thinking Weblog

To Set, or not to Set? That is the Question.

It is a question I have pondered for the last two decades. Are maths sets for year 6 a good idea? Instinctively I say no, but there does seem to be evidence that there is an opportunity to fine tune and fill gaps that benefits pupils. There is always the anxiety of where to put new children; good mathematicians must be in higher sets even if the language needs adjusting or illustrating. Where you have teachers with the skills to adapt, and access to dictionaries, progress can be rapid.

For children from overseas the biggest hurdle is often our very different curriculum. Taiwo, from Nigeria asked me "Is it always shape in England?" This was because all her gaps were in shape, scarcely covered in the Nigerian curriculum, but a make or break aspect of the old SATs tests.

Similarly, our desire to wrap and disguise the calculation we want is confounding for some pupils. This is actually a problem for many pupils from other cultures in the UK. Charmaine Kenner undertook a great project in Tower Hamlets where pupils created contexts for maths problems that were very familiar to them, in order to better engage them in the actual mathematics they were learning.

The other approach is to remove the context and go to complete fantasy with made up characters. It seems bizarre, but calculating how many glurks can fit in the space ship gives learners a confidence when confronted with the equally baffling carnations into a vase.

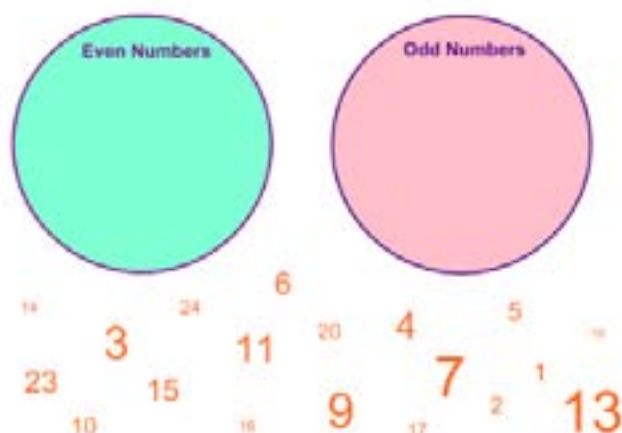
A colleague asked me what was the point of the three children in all the old maths and science papers. This is a question you would not ask if you had watched an EAL pupil struggle with the name Graham in a 35 minute maths test.

Posted on 26th November 2015
www.joinedinthinking.org.uk

Joined In Thinking Weblog

Even or Odd? The Case for Maths Sets

Which numbers are even? Which are odd?



We set for maths and I have the pleasure of working with eight children who have failed to grasp things over the course of their educational careers. I explained to them at the start that we could all ask any questions, that it was important that they understood all the work we did and it was their responsibility to ask.

Victoria approached me shyly. She is a copying queen, always looking for someone else's work to use. Unfortunately our maths group provided scant pickings for this. Victoria said, "I don't really understand anything in maths."

I cheerfully reassured her and asked her what was her biggest worry.

"Well," she said, "when they say 'even' I don't get it. People say 'Is it even a number' I think yeah it's a number, then they say 'No, it's odd' but they are all odd. So I just don't know."

Language and maths collide. Did any teacher, puzzling over her maths work have the time or capacity to ask exactly what she thought the question was? Did Victoria ever have the capacity, space or confidence to explain her confusion? The answer is no, until she was in a maths group, small enough and unthreatening enough.

Do you have a Victoria in your class or group? It might be worth trying to create a moment to check back on a few basic ideas.

Posted on 27th November 2015
www.joinedinthinking.org.uk

Joined In Thinking Weblog

Sustained Shared Unthinking - The Case Against Maths Sets

We are, as a profession, optimistic. Otherwise we couldn't carry on. Sometimes this leads to a triumph of hope over experience. Painfully.

In a lesson on angles I decided to throw in a quick number challenge, as in dividing a right angle and asking, "What's half of 90?"

Didier: Easy it's 99.

Me: Try again, it needs to be smaller.

Didier: 10

Zahra: 40

Me: OK - show me how.

(Zahra shakes her head)

Andre: 50

Binh: No 50 is 100

Me: Are you reminding everyone that 50 is half one hundred?

Binh: No

Didier: I do think it's 99

Me: OK let's draw a line. Can you see - maybe we want to look at the tens on each side, What's the 10 before 90

Amy: 100

Me: Close, that's the ten after what's the ten before?

Didier : 99

Me: The tens number

Amy: 80

Me: what's half of 80

Zahra: 40

Me: Fantastic (writing on board) is that the end answer though? What about this ten? What's half of ten?

Amy: 20

Me: Wrong way. Victoria what's half of 10?

Didier: 1

Victoria: (looks at 100 square and says questioningly) is it 5?

Me: Yes it is. OK what's 40 add 5?

David: 45

Binh: Exactly!

You can well imagine the thoughts in my head as this went on!

The problem with a group like this is that everything is tentative and they are so easily led into changing their line of thought.

They lack confidence in what they know, they are trying to please me and guess what I want.

They assume questioning means they are wrong. They use strategies such as guessing or repeatedly saying the same answer. They lead each other astray.

In a more mixed group the discussion could happen without the scary query from a teacher, they could help each other.

So on balance I would say ideally, don't set, but do create safe spaces for questioning and experimenting.

Where I am we do set, so on and up I go. 99.

Posted on 28th November 2015

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Joined In Thinking Weblog

What Price Outstanding?

Recently I encountered a charming young man. He is eleven years old. His parent and sibling have fled a situation of desperate peril. Like so many, they have NRPF (no recourse to public funds), which means life is eked out on meagre scraps we choose to offer. London is expensive so they inhabit one room.

Some of you have noticed his age and will predict the next bit of awfulness. He is in Year 6. He does not speak English. He has been traumatised. He has been out of school since last summer.

Why? Because no local school could find themselves able to offer a place. Were they full?

No.

So why could our public funded institutions, designed to educate all of our children, not find a space?

Because he needs help. Because Year 6 is a key year. Our high stakes system means that no-one dare risk a "drop" in standards, because they might cease to be outstanding. If you are unlucky enough to lead a school that gets downgraded, your career is probably over. Headteachers are like football managers

So is it surprising that schools find a way to protect themselves? No. But really at what price to a child?

If, as most people who read this surely do, you work in a school; look at your Year 6.

Do you have spaces?

Do you admit new vulnerable pupils?

If not, look at your local area.

Look at the windows when you head home.

Behind those windows, how many desperate ten and eleven year olds are spending their days in a small room robbed by the current system?

Maybe the price of outstanding is too high for our consciences.

Posted on 31st May 2016

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Joined In Thinking Weblog

Another Fine Mess

Well assessment at Key stage 1 and 2 is going well isn't it? As far as I can see, all attempts to address the issues of life beyond levels have merely become a life with new and (different) levels.



The SATS tests were new, and depressingly similar, and children managed to exhibit the same variety of strange behaviours that they always did. Of course, EAL pupils managed to add in the extra misinterpretation that only living with several languages can offer.

If there was a genuine desire to rescue our children from the test mill of the last two decades, there should have been an abandonment of this high stakes test culture. Schools could have got to grips with the new descriptors, information could have been shared in a collegiate and supportive way, teachers might have thought about teaching and meeting pupils' needs.

EAL pupils could have fitted into this structure and we could have developed a national understanding of what it really means to be a developing bi-lingual. But an extreme reluctance to abandon existing models of test driven accountability has prevented this. We are doing what we've always done, so nothing can change.

EAL assessment could have been a gainer from the new world. We have finally been able to abandon the singularly unhelpful Language In Common framework. Several groups have designed new assessment frameworks, and with a good heart, we have all tried to make them work and provide clarity for teachers, and school leaders.

Then the government chose to share the information that they would be collecting data on every single EAL pupil in the country using a five point scale. Since one of these five points is complete fluency (or proficiency), this effectively leaves four points for developing bi-lingual pupils to be slotted into.

All the new frameworks have more than four points. NASSEA has 7 or 8.

So now, everyone has to try and identify assimilation points.

Everyone has to try to understand how pupils fit into the EAL scales and age proficiency levels.

We don't have a collective understanding of what it all means exactly.

We have no idea what KS2 results day on 5th July will bring. The secondary schools our year sixes are going to won't understand what they are receiving.

We don't know how to report all this to parents.

We don't know how to reassure pupils that they have done well.

We don't know how to reflect on our work and evaluate it.

And tomorrow it is June.

As Oliver Hardy would say "Another fine mess you got me into!"

Posted on 1st June 2016

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