LSIS Practitioner Enquiry: Using exploratory talk to develop ESOL writing

LSIS Research

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Background

Birmingham Metropolitan College is a large FE organisation offering a variety of learning provision to a diverse range of learners across north and central Birmingham. The Directorate of Skills for Life and ESOL comprises nearly 3,500 learners and offers provision on six main campuses plus a host of community and outreach venues. Following the successful piloting of Supported Experiments in 2011-12, leading to a week's worth of teaching and learning experimentation, it was decided to formalise the process in the form of an enquiry and, by working with CUREE, produce reports and case studies on our findings.

A core of 9-10 staff members were involved in the process from start to finish, but the entire Directorate were involved in 'Something New Week' 2013, in which teaching and learning strategies formulated as a result of the enquiries were uploaded to a centralised database for tutors to experiment with themselves during the designated week and beyond. The focus of the enquiries was generated from key identified areas for development for the Directorate, and also from our own experiences as tutors.

One of the areas identified for development was ESOL students' writing. I decided to investigate the impact of exploratory talk on ESOL students' writing. I wanted to study how exploratory talk can help create a safe, collaborative environment during writing sessions whilst building students' self-esteem and contributing positively to their writing. When students discuss learning together, social and communicative needs require that they share, explain and justify their decisions to each other. It is these processes in talk that then lead to a development of higher order thinking skills, (Mercer, 1995). Although Mercer identified three types of talk among primary learners (disputational, cumulative and exploratory), he found that it was exploratory talk that was the best language for learning. Consequently, I decided to use guided exploratory talk in my adult ESOL writing sessions to see whether it would aid and develop their writing.

Starting point

To begin with, I wanted to establish whether, as I suspected, ESOL students actually thought writing was the most difficult skill to develop. Therefore, I drew up a questionnaire which was distributed at one campus by
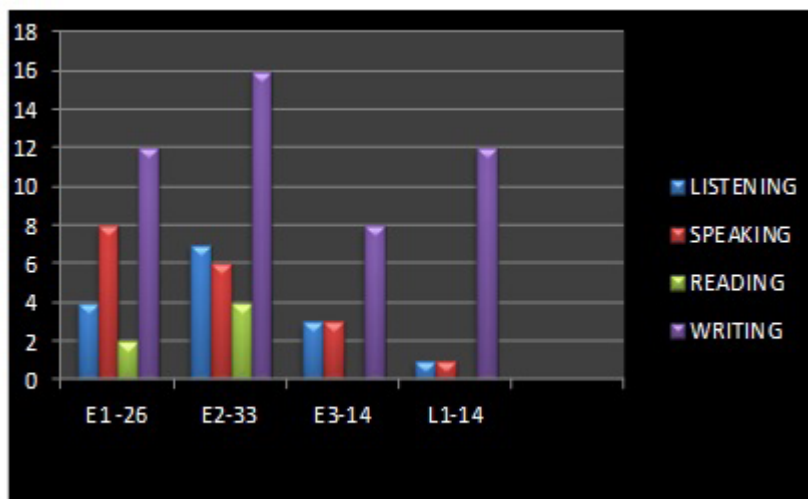
FIG 1

teachers in the ESOL department. One hundred and seventeen surveys were given out to four Entry 1 classes, three Entry 2 classes, one Entry 3 and one Level 1 class: 87 were returned.

The results confirmed students found writing to the most difficult skill.

In order to triangulate my data and add viability to my investigation, I selected two groups from the original cohort on the basis of level of learning and age in order to gain information about the reasons why they found writing the most difficult. One was a 16-18 Entry 2 group and the other an adult L1 and asked their permission to be interviewed (following the ethical guidelines suggested by BERA, 2011).

Students felt that the main issues were a lack of vocabulary and what and how to write. They commented, for example: *"I don't know a lot of words so I don't know what to write".*
"Our writing is different, we start from the right".
"I don't know how to start, you know formal things…"

Teaching and learning processes

I selected the two groups of students I had interviewed, but later included an E3 adult group after half the group had failed their writing exam. I adapted some 'ground rules' for talk (Mercer, 2000) which I simplified further for learners whose English was not so good (See FIG 2)

I also gave the students a copy of some questions and sentence starters (based on Dawes, et al., 2000) that would help them to use exploratory talk before writing, for example see FIG 3.

For each writing task (e.g. an email and a letter) I distributed a writing frame divided into sections that had specific headings for different parts of the writing activity to help the students develop a plan and ideas for writing. The sections in the writing frame included ideas to be used in each paragraph, any useful phrases, how to begin and end and specific

• Everyone in the group/pair is encouraged to contribute	1. We will talk together to think about what to do.
• Contributions are treated with respect	2. We will share what we know with each other.
• Reasons are asked for	3. We will ask everyone/each other to say what they think.
• Everyone is prepared to accept challenges	4. Everyone will listen carefully to others and consider (think about) what we hear.
• Alternatives are discussed before a decision is taken	5. We will give reasons for what we say.
• All relevant information is shared	6. We will pay attention and try to think of good ideas.
• The group/pair seeks to reach agreement.	7. We will decide what to do only when everyone/each of person has said all they want.
	8. We will try to agree about what we think.

FIG 2

• What do you think?	• I think...because...
• What are your reasons?	• I agree with...because...
• Is there another way of looking at this?	• I disagree with...because...
• What if...	• Another reason is...

FIG 3

vocabulary that could be used. Each student worked in a pair and as part of a group of four. They used the questions and sentence starters to discuss and reach an agreement on what they would or could write. This enabled them to clarify any concerns and me to gain insights into their thought processes.

Impact

To establish what impact it had on student's learning, I distributed another questionnaire and conducted interviews. The results below (see FIG 4) show that the 16-18 E2 group favoured speaking in a group to speaking in pairs. The younger students felt that peer pressure from their peers made them reluctant to respond in pairs. They did not like being under the spotlight when they were in pairs as it was not 'cool' if you got something wrong or do the work without the teacher 'making them'. However, as part of a group they wanted to be the best or the one who knew things.

On the other hand, the adults preferred pair work as a preparation for writing. They felt it helped them think and discuss what they could write and even better how to write. Although some felt group work made them feel shy and they hesitated or stayed quiet in case they said something wrong. They also felt you could work more slowly and ask for more help from the teacher and use dictionaries to translate words they did not know in English.

Almost all students found talk around what words to use and how to begin to write a formal and informal letter or email extremely useful. Some comments were:

> "When I spoke to other people on topics I don't know I got lots new words".
> "I didn't know you can use different words".
> "I learnt different ways to start and finish, but keep forgetting".

The advantages of using talk before writing was not just

limited to the groups I had selected for the intervention, but was extremely favoured by the L1/L2 group, which had undertaken the exploratory talk process with a different tutor. The tutor felt incredibly positive about the value of using exploratory talk. She commented:

> "It externalises the process in the mind and develops the thinking process".

Other colleagues who were not part of the study, but who taught the same cohort of students noticed considerable improvement in students' writing. One tutor commented:

> "I have certainly noticed a considerable difference in their writing since you started using exploratory talk with them".

Further reading

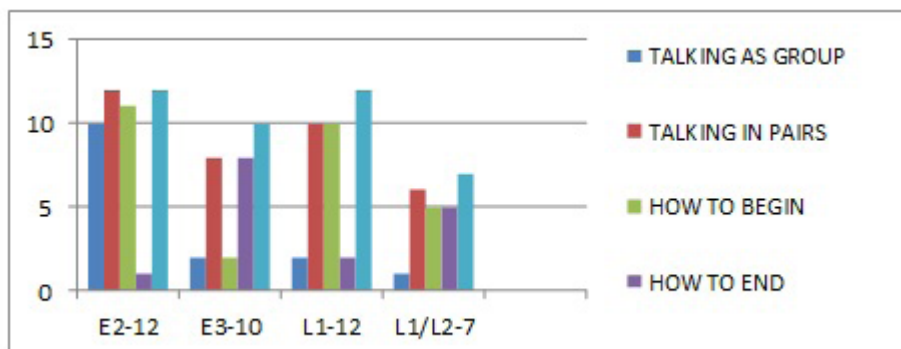British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) Ethical Guidelines for educational research BERA

FIG 4

Dawes, L., Mercer, N. and Wegerif, R. (2000) Thinking together: a programme of activities for developing speaking, listening and thinking skills for children aged 8-11. Birmingham: Imaginative Minds Ltd.

Mercer, N. (1995) The Guided Construction of Knowledge: Talk Amongst Teachers and Learners. Clevedon, Multilingual Matters.

Mercer, N . (2000) Words & Minds. How we use languages to think together.
London, Routledge

Contact

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