Cultivating year 9 English as a Foreign Language oracy skills in a Norwegian classroom

RESEARCH LESSON STUDY REPORT

Cultivating year 9 English as a Foreign Language oracy skills in a Norwegian classroom

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Abstract

Background and purpose: We were becoming more aware of the importance of designing and planning activities where pupils can practise their oracy skills. Teachers have to give pupils the opportunities and the time to practise their oracy skills in the classroom, and we wanted to explore different tools to support this.

Aims: We chose to look at how different tools, such as sentence starters, talking points, roles and café dialogue, can help pupils to participate in group and plenary conversations in English.
Study design or methodology: We conducted three research lessons in one year 9 class.

Findings: We found that these tools helped to increase the number of pupils who participated in the conversations in English. The interviews and questionnaires we conducted confirmed our observations: the pupils found most of the tools helpful, especially the talking points, roles and café dialogue.

Conclusions, originality, value and implications: This research underscores the importance of considering the way that pupils communicate in the classroom and of giving them the tools they need in order to include everyone. All pupils seemed to benefit from the tools that we provided, but in different ways and to varying extents.

Keywords: oracy, english as a foreign language, oracy tools, classroom conversations

Context

Bogafjell ungdomsskole (lower secondary school, Year 8-10), Sandnes, Norway. We conducted our research in a Year 9 English as a Foreign Language class (EFL) where the pupils are 14-15 years old.

Co-researchers

Stian Ringdal Hognaland (Bogafjell ungdomsskole)
Daniel Aaslie (Bogafjell ungdomsskole)
James Jacob Thomson (University of Stavanger)

Motivation for this lesson study

We based our research on several different lectures from our collaboration with Cambridge University, such as Neil Mercer's lecture on *Oracy*, Wendy Lee's lecture on *Oracy and Inclusion* and Lyn Dawes' lecture on *Teaching children oracy skills for learning across the curriculum.*

After listening to their lectures, we became more aware of the importance of designing and planning activities where pupils can practise their oracy skills. Teachers have to give pupils the opportunities and the time to practise their oracy skills in the classroom, and one way of doing this is to use different oracy tools, such as ground rules, sentence starters, roles and well-designed group work.

A summary of the gap analysis taken at the beginning

The situation today	The gap	The wished-for situation
There is a large gap when it comes to pupils' English language competence. A number of pupils lack the confidence to speak English with their fellow pupils and/or teacher.	Teachers need to learn how to include all pupils in oral activities. This involves learning about, and trying, different oracy tools that can help pupils develop their oracy skills and language competence.	We want all pupils to be able to participate in conversations in English in the classroom, whether it is with a learning partner or in small and/or larger groups. In order to achieve this, pupils need to practise participating in conversations in English using a number of different oracy tools.

Focus and research questions

To what extent can oracy tools help pupils develop the competence needed to participate in oral activities in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom?

Our lesson study plan and activities

We believe that all of our pupils can benefit from using different oracy tools, but we are unsure if they will recognise the benefits, and whether they actually take advantage of the tools we provide them with.

We believe that the number of pupils participating in English in the classroom will increase when we provide them with oracy tools such as roles, talking points and sentence-starters.

Choice of and rationale for case students

- The class we did our research lessons in: Year 9
- Our choice of research pupils and the reasons behind our choices: We observed different groups and pupils in each of the lessons in order to investigate their use of the oracy tools. We randomly chose three different pupils to interview after RL2. We conducted a questionnaire with the whole class after RL1 and RL3.

- Progression: We observed that pupils benefited from the way we planned the research lessons. We planned them with a clear progression regarding what the oracy tools required of them when it comes to their language skills.

Research Lesson (RL) 1

Aims of RL1

Pupils should be able to identify aspects of successful classroom conversations and try to use ground rules and sentence starters in their own conversations with a learning partner.

What happened?

- Make pupils aware of what a good class discussion/conversation is
- Introduce ground rules for conversations and one oracy tool (sentence starters).
- Practise using the sentence starters in a discussion/conversation with their learning partner.

Observations of case students (including comparison with predictions)

We observed that the pupils found the ground rules to be useful. However, the class should create their own rules at the beginning of the school year so that they feel a sense of ownership.

The teachers modelled good and bad conversations. This was useful because the pupils were made aware of good discussion practices, such as respectful behaviour and how one should and should not respond when one disagrees.

Sentence starters can be useful for some pupils. However, some pupils found them to be a bit scripted and could not incorporate them into their natural language.

Student interview Feedback

- “Sentence starters are useful”.
- “It is easier to participate in conversations in English as long as we talk to friends.”

Research Lesson 2

Aims of RL2

Include all pupils in conversations in English

What happened?

- Introduce talking points
- Assign and introduce three different roles for the pupils: pro, con and moderator.
- Participate in a group discussion with and without assigned roles

Observations of case students

We observed that assigning pupils different roles made the conversations more interesting and productive. The feedback from the pupils confirmed these observations.

Talking points were very useful for a number of pupils. In the post-lesson interview one student said that the talking points helped them to find the correct words to use when presenting their arguments in English.

Student Interview Feedback

All three pupils found the group roles useful.

Two out of three pupils liked the talking points:

> "They help us remember the arguments, and they helped us when we couldn't remember the words in English. They kept the conversation moving forward"
>
> "They helped me a lot. It was difficult to come up with arguments when I didn't have the talking points. The conversations were more productive when we had them available. It is probably not as necessary to have talking points when we speak Norwegian."
>
> The last pupil said: "(...) I didn't really understand why you gave us the talking points".

Research Lesson 3

Aims

Pupils should participate in a group discussion.

What happened?

- Café-dialogue
- Class discussion

Observations of case students

Café-dialogue was a popular activity. We found it to be a useful activity because all of the pupils participated to some extent. We could have included roles and talking points in the café-dialogue to make it more productive and inclusive.

Student Interview Feedback

The pupils mostly agree regarding whether or not the oracy-tools were useful, but they had different opinions regarding which tool they liked best:

10 - Café dialogue

7 - Talking points

7 - Group roles

7 - Sentence starters

3 - Ground rules

Ethical considerations and relationships with others:

We had to consider pupils with different language and learning disabilities when we chose the oracy tools and activities, and we tried to make sure everyone was included in all activities. We also had to carefully consider the way we organised the groups because we wanted to create a safe learning environment for everyone.

Findings

We observed that these oracy-tools helped to increase the number of pupils who participated in the conversations in English. We estimate that 40-50% of the pupils, who previously would be unlikely

to engage in English, did so during the group conversations during our research lessons. These pupils will usually speak Norwegian instead of English.

The interviews and questionnaires confirmed our observations.

The pupils found most of the tools helpful, especially the talking points, the assigned roles and café dialogue.

This research underscores the importance of focusing on the way pupils communicate in the classroom and of giving them the tools they need in order to include everyone.

All pupils benefited from the tools that we provided, but in different ways and to varying extents.

Any resource or approach you created or trialled

We created resources based on our pupils' needs and according to the topic the class was working on. Some of the resources, such as the sentence starters, were created last semester in relation to another Lesson Study cycle. We decided to reuse them because many pupils at our school are already familiar with them.

Significant quotations

We asked the pupils the following question:

Do you think that sentence starters, ground rules, roles, talking points and café-dialogue make it easier to participate in conversations in English in the classroom?

> "I think it is easier to participate when there is a specific topic to discuss, and I really enjoyed the café-dialogue activity and the talking points because everyone had the chance to talk. In my opinion, speaking English is the best way to learn the language, and that is why I enjoyed these activities."
>
> "Yes, because it makes it easier to speak English, it makes it easier to start conversations and to find something to say."
>
> "I find it difficult to speak English, but I was able to talk when we were organised in small groups."
>
> "I think it was useful because it was easier to start the conversations."
>
> "A little bit."
>
> "Yes, it was easy to participate in the conversations."

Changes to practice

These are the changes that we intend to make to our practices based on the research and results:

- We will ensure that oracy-tools are included in our lesson plans. Our research showed that using different types of oracy tools can help to include all pupils in oral activities.
- We believe teachers have to work together and should share the practices and tools that have been successful in their classrooms.
- We will continue to trial new oracy tools to ensure that we are making informed choices about how we include every student in our classrooms.

Reflective Evaluation

We worked well as a group during this process because we all wanted to increase the participation in group and classroom conversations. One of the factors that ensured the success of this project was that we had participated in the lectures from University of Cambridge which gave us the same theoretical foundation before we started our project.

Looking back, we acknowledge that we could have planned some of the activities in more detail, such as the café-dialogue. We could have included more of the oracy tools, such as roles and talking points, in that activity in order to increase the level of student participation.

Making the enquiry public

We have shared our research and results with the staff at our own school and also with other schools/institutions in our lesson study professional development network.

We would advise others to make sure that oracy and oracy skills become a part of the local lesson plans at their school. With this support, teachers can plan lessons and activities that are more likely to help pupils develop these skills, skills that we sometimes assume that pupils already have.

Next Steps

Our next step is to keep on focusing on oracy in all lessons and subjects. We believe that oracy has to become an integrated part of the school's plans.

We intend to create an environment where there are opportunities for sharing oracy practices, tools and activities.

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