

## Wendy Wilson's Development Work: Developing older pupils' oracy in English lessons at St Mary's School, Cheshunt

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Wendy Wilson was a member of the Teacher Led Development Work group at St Mary's High School (2005-06).

Wendy was Head of English and had been asked to take up the challenge of raising 6<sup>th</sup> form students' achievement. To begin with she decided to focus on developing their oracy in English lessons having experienced a particularly reticent group which she taught once a week. Their unwillingness to contribute to discussions made the pace of the lessons slow. She often left the lessons feeling a sense of failure and when she discussed this with colleagues she found that they were experiencing similar frustrations.

Wendy looked on the internet for ideas and found a website produced by the Leicester local education authority on which there was good advice about 'Speaking and Listening' (Leicester City Council, 2005). This included useful guidance on the purposes of talk, strategies for organising group work and 'golden rules for talk'. She thought that the following quotation was particularly apt:

Real discussion is more likely to take place when there is an authentic task, a reason to communicate and where pupils have negotiated a set of ground rules.

Wendy became increasingly aware that she needed to discuss with students the purpose of discussion work and the valuable skills which it would enable them to develop. She found support for this through reading Professor Robin Alexander's book, *Culture and Pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education* (2000). She realised that many of her students were held back by the belief that the purpose of school was 'work' rather than learning and that the real work was necessarily written work.

Wendy wanted to find out more about the students' perceptions of oral work in order to explore how she might encourage participation.

She asked them to complete a questionnaire to see if there was a pattern in their experience of being taught English by three different teachers. Initial comments were encouraging as the students agreed overwhelmingly that they were given opportunities to contribute orally in English lessons. However, the students fell easily into three categories: those who were confident in both whole class and small group discussions; those who would contribute to whole class discussions but only if they were sure of the answer, and those who would only contribute in small group discussions. The factors that appeared to discourage participation were: fear of being wrong, concern about other students' responses, and not knowing how to break into the discussion.

Wendy reflected on this and asked herself why she spent so much time holding whole class discussions when it was evident that only half her students were confident enough to express their ideas. She concluded that this was a response to the pressure that she felt about covering the syllabus and monitoring everything that her students said. She resolved to devise a range of teaching strategies which would encourage all students to contribute. She decided to keep a journal in which she would record her evaluation of the lessons and arranged some peer observations between herself and a colleague.

The strategies Wendy adopted included:

- Pen passing: Students were only allowed to speak when they had the pen. Everyone had to be included. Students could not ask for the pen but had to wait for it to be passed to them. No writing was allowed.
- Names on the table: These were used in a variety of ways; students could not speak once their name was off the table or had to think of two questions to ask the group if their names were left on the table. Two cards each on the table meant that they had two turns at speaking.
- Paired talk time.
- Collaborative presentations: Students worked in pairs to prepare presentations to the whole class.
- Silent thinking time.
- Whole class brainstorm followed by small group discussion.

Keeping the journal enabled Wendy her to reflect on the progress of the group and the impact of her new strategies. One of the issues her journal showed was that there was an emerging tendency for some

students to dominate the discussion. She found that structured activities and groupings chosen by the teacher not only benefited quieter students but helped the more outgoing students to work more collaboratively and considerately.

Keeping the journal also helped Wendy to see that students need thinking time and that starting discussions too quickly leads to poor quality discussion where the teacher has to intervene all the time. She was forced to consider the whole purpose of discussion. Students' responses to her questionnaire had indicated that they were unclear about this and that for many it was simply a process of finding the right answer or guessing what the teacher was thinking. Wendy found herself questioning whether she should allow students to continue in discussions which appeared to be heading in an unproductive direction. She found the use of structured worksheets and tasks were ways of guiding discussion and led to heightened engagement and sense of achievement at exploring and evaluating their ideas. As the quality of discussion improved Wendy found that the need to intervene lessened.

The peer observations that Wendy carried out with other members of the team raised some key questions about their approaches to teaching. It became clear that monitoring group dynamics was important, that shorter, more focused discussions were most productive and that clear ground rules enabled teachers to guide both dominant and reticent students without making criticism seem personal.

Wendy's department responded positively to what she discovered and were keen to improve students' oracy across all key stages. She arranged a department meeting to consider strategies to develop oracy skills. She worked with the TLDW tutor and planned a whole school professional development session in which she asked colleagues to consider these key points:

- Students talk more freely if they feel comfortable with other members in the group: therefore, the teacher should manage groupings according to different purposes, and should ensure that their composition was changed regularly.
- Teaching students the necessary language skills for discussion increases confidence academically and socially.
- Classroom management strategies should support discussion.
- Students need thinking time.

- We need to explain the purpose of tasks and help students to evaluate their success in completing them.
- Students need to be freed from note-taking during oral work.

By raising these issues with her colleagues Wendy sought to extend the impact of her development work on different teaching and learning areas. This was just the start of a process of raising awareness of the importance of oracy for students' learning and developing practice at a whole school level.

## **References**

Alexander, R. J. (2000) *Culture and Pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Leicester City Council (2005) *Leicestershire Grid for Learning – Literacy*  
[www.leics.gov.uk](http://www.leics.gov.uk)