

## **Masters Unit Educational Enquiry 1 2006, University of BATH**

### **How am I enhancing communication within my classroom with traditional stories and using both non-verbal and verbal language?**

*Nina Clayton*

I am using this enquiry to investigate how I can better support communication in my class, especially for those children who find it difficult to ask for help, who rarely speak or express excitement. Whether they have low self-esteem or are frightened is a part of the enquiry. However my aim is to provide as many opportunities as I can for the children in my class to feel comfortable and able enough to communicate and explore their personalities to me and each other.

I do not see learners as empty pots that can be filled with knowledge. In the same way that if I am to improve my own learning, I need to research it myself. Living out what I believe, and strengthening my teaching, is what I intend to do, by reflecting and learning from my own mistakes. This is why I have chosen to use the Action Research process as described by McNiff & Whitehead (2005), rather than other ways of researching. I don't want to make public a claim about what I might have found out about education, but I do want to make interesting reading for fellow colleagues. Within this enquiry I have asked myself many questions about my practice. It is important to look at what I do already, why I do this, identify difficulties, improve them, reflect and move forwards. I believe Action Research is meaningful to my life as a teacher and a thinker. It is driven by my own values and ideas, but questions, explores and reflects on other theorists.

#### *Reviewing present and past practice*

Working first in Chile and then in Hungary, I realized that I could teach non English speaking children without them understanding a word of the spoken language I used (English). They would join in with action and songs, listen to stories, and act out role-plays, 'at the park' or 'in a restaurant'. After spending a long time exploring the spoken language of English through physical actions, pictures, role-play and games, these children could hold conversations in English with me. They had learnt to speak English by copying me and following my non verbal and verbal cues. Reflecting back on how this happened, I am convinced that through a combination of non verbal and verbal communication I could express myself, without them knowing, at first, what the words meant.

"In terms of skills development, non-verbal clues should not be underestimated when developing both the listening and speaking skills. Like grammatical structures, non-verbal communication has form, function and meaning....." Darn & Eryilmaz, Izmir University of Economics, Turkey. Retrieved 1st February 2006

from <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/nonverbal.shtml>.

There are many different ways in which we communicate. We can communicate using messages via all of our senses; through the way we dress, behave, touch, smell or sound. The decision to send out a message can be made consciously or sub-consciously. The tones in our voice can relay messages that we didn't necessarily intend to. I understand 'communication' as a way of interacting with another, or others, and exchanging ideas and feelings. Words are not always necessary to communicate and we can use both verbal and non verbal clues. By verbal communication, I don't just mean a way of expressing needs but also to be able to discuss ideas and give opinions. We can use spoken language to communicate with each other, to move things forward.

A teacher has a duty to their pupils to develop and create opportunities for high quality verbal communication skills. Obviously a good deal of learning goes on through spoken language. Language allows us to explain concepts and talk through ideas, have friendships and discuss feelings. What we talk about together helps our thought processes, which are later internalized by ourselves. Supporting children to become verbally proficient can also contribute to their ability to resolve interpersonal conflict and express opinions, nonviolently. Peacemaking skills require verbal negotiation, discussion, and tact.

Through non verbal communication, information is passing all the time. Our stance and posture communicates messages. Facial expressions, like a turn up of the lip, or strong piercing eyes convey meaning. The way, in which we speak the tone, speed and volume of our voices, the use of timing and pauses can all communicate different messages. Our voice can convey enthusiasm or boredom about the activities we teach. How we touch or shake hands, and our use of space all say something. The way the furniture, equipment and displays are set out in our classrooms, again have an impact on our teaching and learning.

Thurman, Jones and Tarleton (2005) discuss people with high levels of individual communication needs, who do not use formal methods of communication such as speech, writing or symbols. They communicate through their bodies, facial expression and sounds.

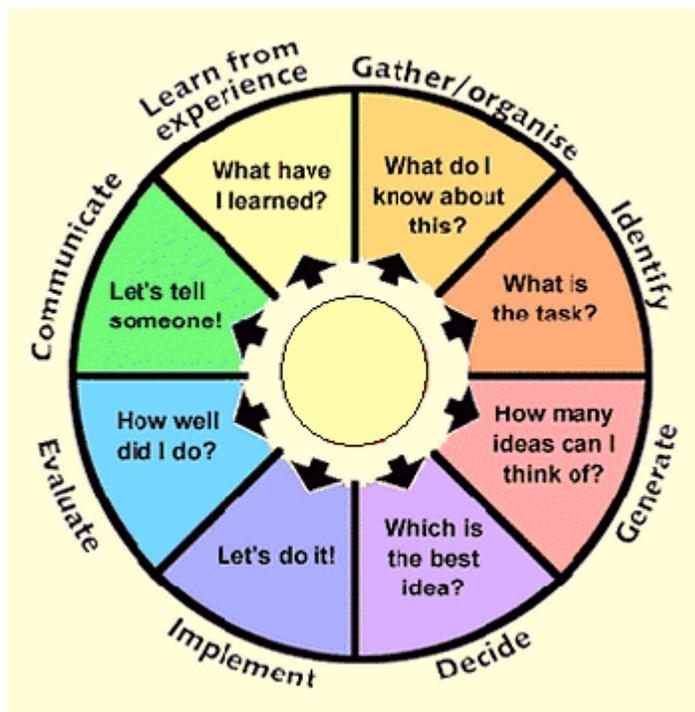
We all use our bodies to convey meaning, it helps reinforce verbal messages. Often these non verbal messages (hand gestures, raised eyebrows, slumped shoulders) are powerful enough to stand alone. Mime artists prove this is possible. Last month a visiting theatre group, 'Travelling Light', performed 'Clown' by Quentin Blake (Blake, 1996) without using words. They used just sounds, props and visual images. Both the children and adults were thoroughly entertained. The children were mesmerized by these actors who turned themselves into so many different non speaking characters, who only grunted and screeched meanings. They elaborated on the body signaling devices we all use every day. Body language is a powerful form of communication and can have both damaging and positive effects. I was told when I first started teaching,

that I use this language in a positive way to help children feel valued and important. When you are talking to someone you expect them to listen, to face and look at you. I physically get down to a child's level and try to encourage a secure environment, one where a child is more inclined to talk.

### *Identifying an aspect to improve*

The TASC wheel (Thinking Actively in a Social Context), Wallace (2001), is a useful tool to use as it encourages a reflective cycle. Reflection of my practice is what drives me forward. Using the TASC wheel highlights what the children already know and helps them decide what they would like to find out about It encourages collaborative learning and allows time for reflection and improvement. The wheel is a way of teaching that works against the idea of a teacher standing at the front of the class, pouring out information that very few pupils will take in and understand. Discussing, doing and experiencing life, is a more exciting and memorable way to learn.

This action research approach to improving education is being used by both teachers and pupils: see the TASC Wheel developed by Belle Wallace.



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I am satisfied with how I communicate myself to the children within my classroom. I have the ability to clearly speak English. My concern lies with how the children communicate with me, each other, their parents and other adults. They lack the skills and confidence to communicate their thinking and needs. I want to improve the communication within my classroom.

The numbers of special educational needs children in mainstream schools is increasing. There are 17 children out of 25 in my class this year that have a specific need that I should be addressing. How can I teach these children knowing I am giving them the best education I can, when I have had no training to deal with these needs? My major concern is that I feel under – equipped to teach children of varying abilities in the same class. I need to draw on what I know already, my values and employ these in my teaching. This is why I have changed the planning to suit the needs of the children in my class.

### *Improvement*

Briefly I shall explain why I changed how the planning was delivered in Year1.

- I was feeling exhausted after a days teaching, yet not reaching any success criteria I had set for the children. All the planning had been in place for years, and it was only ever slightly modified if essential.
- I questioned, why was I was doing all the work? I felt it was essential I included Shirley Clarke's work on the importance of questioning as a tool for assessment for learning.
- I had previously worked in Foundation Stage for two years working from a play-based relevant curriculum. I knew what developmental stage these children were at, and also knew that the year 1 planning that was all prescribed and ready to go, teach and deliver, was not suitable. I only feel motivated when delivering a curriculum that the children are excited about and that is appropriate to them.
- After working with a violent child with 'Attachment Disorder' I now realize that many other children in the class may be suffering from this condition too, but showing their feelings in a different way. This child alongside a child with Autism and a child who is just starting to make sounds to communicate, would be in my class.
- I am aware of the limitations of verbal language and difficulties experienced by children with ASD (Autistic Spectrum Disorder) in understanding verbal and non-verbal communication. I began to investigate methodologies to support my work. My school has a specialist unit for pupils on the Autistic Spectrum; I have developed links with staff and pupils, attended training and volunteered to work with non-verbal children using PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System). This has helped me realize the importance of minimizing language, and using visual prompts to support my communication with children who experience a variety of language and commutative disorders.

- I looked at Guy Claxton's (2002) principles for 'Building Learning Power' (BLP). I wanted to include some of the BLP influences by making the children more independent by using their own thinking skills as well as working collaboratively.
- I wanted to incorporate the inspirational and creative work from the Reggio Emilia philosophy. Reggio Emilia creates a learning environment that matches the developmental and social needs of the individual child.

### *What I have changed*

- Instead of teaching science on Monday, R.E on Tuesday etc I have followed the TASC wheel approach and taken the ideas from the children. The afternoon curriculum now is topic based, where the planning is created from what the children want to find out about. Learning is happening through well planned or child initiated play based activities, hands on discovery work.
- Whilst been trained as a teacher, I remember been advised, that if you are told something you forget it. If you see something, it helps you remember. If you do something, you will remember. This statement seems true to the way most of us learn.
- Once the children have had a meaningful experience there is time for reflection. Time is given to decide how to improve or extend their learning. Spoken communication is a large part of the TASC wheel. Through discussing ideas with each other, the children are exposed to a range of reasons, ideas and answers.
- No written work is expected from the afternoon topic work, but so far the children have initiated written work and wanted to record their learning in some medium. I have been collecting my own evidence of their learning through displays, floor books, children's comments recorded and digital evidence.
- I have taken some Ideas/strategies from our Autistic unit e.g. A 'Choosing board' of only a few activities are offered, to reduce anxiety. I have been learning the sign language of 'Makaton', which is becoming a strong feature in my classroom, to support spoken language and help the less verbal children to express themselves.
- Story writing is based on the story making project set out by the International Learning and Research Centre– ( which I am exploring in depth and will discuss later)
- Previously the numeracy plans were taken off an Abacus scheme, now I use the 'unit plans' recommended by NNS (National Numeracy Strategy) alongside 'Models and images' ideas- appealing to kinesthetic and visual learners. It encourages a more hands on approach to understanding number, shape and measures. The questioning techniques involved cause children to explain their reasoning, supporting a deeper understanding.

- After reading so many studies revealing the large proportion of time a teacher speaks in lessons, compared to the small amount a child does, I fully encourage 'the student voice'. There is less teacher directed time on the carpet and more group work (as seen after a trip to a Welsh school who deliver a play based curriculum after SATs were abolished. See appendix A)

### *Modifying and continuing with the action*

What is missing from the children in my class? Why do they come to school working at a rate much lower than the national average? Why have they so many language difficulties? What support have they had with communication skills before coming to school?

How we learn to speak is an area that interests me. Babies use non verbal communication to begin interacting with their carers by crying, blinking and smiling. From birth, they respond to their parental speech patterns. Through social interactions involving conversations where linguistic and nonlinguistic contextual cues are used, children learn about language. Reduced social interaction between parents and children may lead to language delays. Bruner (1983) regarded interaction as the major form of assistance provided by adults for language development.

After discussing some of these issues informally with staff, and through my own reading and knowledge of the children in my class, I came to a realization. Maybe, by having little or no knowledge of traditional tales and nursery rhymes this can be detrimental to your communication skills.

"I would expect therefore, that children who frequently heard oral stories, that are not from books, before going to school would also be well set up for future literacy." (Fox, 2003 p. 194)

Fox tells of how much of young story books are the written form of traditional oral stories, and that through them, children become familiar with formulaic patterns of stories.

This is what I wanted to research. Traditional stories hold important morals that can shape constructive personal values by presenting imaginative situations in which the outcome of both wise and unwise actions and decisions can be seen.

Traditional stories encompass a child's empathy, understanding of others, issues to discuss about hope, hatred and desire. Storytelling based on traditional folktales is a gentle way to guide young people through most possible story scenarios. Booker (2005) believes that there are 7 plots on which all literature is built. For example he categorises Cinderella into the second plot, "Rags to

Riches”, where the modest or downtrodden character, whose special talents or beauty are at last revealed to the world for a happy ending.

Traditional stories seem to encourage children to use their imaginations. Developing the imagination can empower children to consider new and inventive ideas. Developing the imagination can contribute to self-confidence and personal motivation as the children envision themselves competent and able to accomplish their hopes and dreams.

After attending a story making meeting I decided to take on some of the principles set out by the International Learning and Research Centre (story making project). Their work has been influenced by the ‘narrative format approach’ for second language learning, researched and developed with very young learners by Professor Taute Taeschner. The Italian immersion model, based on psycholinguistic principles, uses kinaesthetic and visual experiences to enable young learners to memorize the language patterns of the second language. Language formats (predictable routine language repetitions used by carers at meals, bath-times, in action songs and reading books together) help children to learn how to use language; in other words, they learn to understand that language has order and involves interactions. (Bruner 1983) The technique is based on dramatised stories, using Bruner’s concept of the format to help to construct the link between non-verbal communication and language.

After videoing myself teaching, on a number of occasions, I have realized how I use my body to communicate and reinforce learning points. This has naturally developed over time. Influenced mainly by teaching English as a foreign language and being a trained dancer, I have a natural desire to use my body to express myself. I find myself reading to the children but acting out the story with my hands too. I involve the children when I read, through questioning and physically asking them to act out verbs as I read them. E.g. the owl swooped down towards his nest. “Can everyone show me how they can swoop?” Watching myself on the video doing this I asked what purpose am I serving? I believe I am extending their range of vocabulary and their understanding of words as well as supporting kinaesthetic learners. I am involving them in the story so as they are not passive listeners but gaining a greater understanding. I learn kinaesthetically but realise not everyone does and the principles of the story making process includes a number of different learning styles.

### *Trying a new way of working*

Over a 3 week period I have been trialling a new way for my children to have an in depth knowledge of the Elves and the Shoemaker. Within Booker’s 7 plots I couldn’t seem to fit ‘The Elves and the Shoemaker’. It is not comedy, tragedy, voyage and return, rebirth, the quest or jaws. However, it seems to fit into one of the two further plots mentioned later, ‘rebellion’. This traditional tale seemed an

appropriate choice for a number of reasons. One being that the humanities topic this term is 'Light and dark', so I could make a dark room which could double up as the Shoemaker's workshop.

Having recognised that I use my body language to communicate meaning I wanted to formalize this and uniform my actions rather than randomly decide on what actions I felt like at the time. Traditional stories emphasise repetition of words and focus on rhythm and patterns and this is what I needed to do with my actions.

I am also conscious that for children with communication difficulties, I need to teach them what different facial expressions, gestures, body postures mean, if they are to access the benefits of this story telling approach. Children with ASD do not pick up these non-verbal cues as part of their development unlike 'neuro-typical' children.

Already use of some basic Makaton signs are helping certain children communicate. They are able to use simple phrases e.g. good morning, please, thank you. I believe they benefit the children in the class who lack confidence to communicate with me and others, they are also fun for the children who are able to express themselves.

My Year 1 colleague and I decided to take on further Makaton signs to help support the teaching of the Elves and the Shoemaker. The signs have helped the children to remember the story more easily and give the non-verbal children a form of direct communication. We now have 'story word books', which include all the pictures of actions to go with familiar story words. See Appendix B

We felt the majority of the chosen words would start off their bank of well used story words that could support in everyday communication and could be added to as they year goes on.

### *Evaluating - What I did to incorporate different learning styles*

Drawing a story board using simple pictures

Using their story boards to retell the story – in a group, with a partner

Mime

A role play area with props and costumes

Acting out the story in groups

Individual books- for sequencing and colouring (no words)

Making puppets of the characters

Different types of questioning

Writing of the story after 2 weeks of no writing

## Results so far

- Video evidence indicates the children have remembered the sequence of the story through the combination of words and actions together.
- The bank of story words and repetition of the story are what the children remembered to use, when speaking and writing the story.
- Written and spoken results were of a much greater quality than any other piece of literacy work this year.
- Every child in the class could retell the story with a little prompting for some children). The quality from each child was completely different; the children working at a higher developmental stage were communicating the story using more of their own imagination and language. The children with specific language problems tended to stick with the framework of words given.

Examples of the vocabulary they used in their retelling, (which includes many ideas and dialogue that were not written in the original text):

*'They danced for joy.'*

*.....sneaked...*

*.....crept.....*

*.....picked up their hammers.....*

*.....shocked.....*

*.....lovely/beautiful pair of shoes*

*"Who made these shoes?"*

*He explained to his wife...*

*Another visitor (customer) came.....*

*In the shoe maker's workshop.....*

- The children who always 'copy write' words, mainly due to their lack of knowledge and confidence of writing, were asking me if they could write the story under the pictures they had sequenced. They were desperate to write the story!

## Next steps

'Fairy tales and teaching family therapy', a paper written by Robinson, J (1986), discusses the importance of known fairy tales as well as analysing the deeper, underlying issues brought out by the stories. I am particularly interested in how role play was used to discover what a person may believe in or realise and how their personality is shaped through the retelling and acting out of stories. Some of the tales are broken down and analysed in greater detail. She describes a psychoanalytic perspective for example: Cinderella, sibling rivalry, Little Red Riding Hood and super ego formation, Snow White having narcissistic disappointment.

Stories can be used to allow our minds to wander, day dream and fantasize. We can be who we want to be in the safety of the story framework but we can take it beyond the boundaries as we become more familiar with the framework. The stories give children the capabilities and opportunities to mirror their unconscious development. It is essential the children are familiar with the stories in order to work through any unconscious anxieties.

I now want to tackle another traditional story; I have chosen The Ginger Bread Boy. I am hoping for the children to take on the character of the ginger bread boy to fulfil their dream of a 'super ego'. To live out their dreams and ideals as a person, through this character. Further reading from the International Learning and Research Centre, shows they recommend that on first introduction of the traditional story, no text or visual images should be used. This is different to how I usually introduce a story. I am hoping that, by not showing the children the book of Ginger bread boy that their imagination of the story will develop without the influence of pictures in a book. They should be more able to visualize the story themselves and discover their own creation.

### *Conclusion*

I have found that traditional stories fire imagination and a good knowledge of a range of traditional stories will expose children to most aspects of our world of literacy.

The non verbal communication tools has aided the teaching of traditional tales, mainly for remembering the sequence of the story, and the connectives and story language words that we tend not to use in everyday language.

My awareness of the needs of ASD children has grown. Knowing that these children need to be taught body language and facial expressions, has in turn enhanced communication within my classroom

Talk partners, and the use of a range of questioning has increased the thinking and discussion skills.

Story telling has helped the children realize that their opinions are valued because there is no right or wrong answer to the world around the outline of stories.

The research so far has supported peer partnership with a Year 1 colleague, I intend for it to take effect throughout the infant school as I introduce it to other members of staff.

I have recorded the children retelling a story of their choice (Appendix C). It has really highlighted to me, how they are speaking grammatically incorrectly and need further opportunities to learn the spoken language. How can they suddenly

speaking perfect English when they haven't had any practice at it? Even if these children are speaking grammatically incorrectly at least they have the confidence to speak now. This in itself is a great improvement. How I create these further opportunities will be a part of my continuing research. I believe that non verbal clues aid spoken language and I intend to live out this belief in my teaching. As the cycle of enquiry continues I feel a sense of achievement at the quality of learning that is happening with children who showed little desire to communicate before. I feel I have changed how I deliver stories and know that it is having a positive effect on the self esteem and communication skills. I, the teaching assistants and the children are well motivated and happy and learning from our experiences to move us forward onto the next cycle of improvement.

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