

cashmere processing factories were built in China. There were 24 million goats in 2004, the roots disappeared, the dunes began to move and the wind blew sand on to Chinese farms and blew fine dust as far as California where it pollutes the atmosphere. Collaborative group work can present case studies in a visual and compelling way so that learners can make the leap from concrete contextualised but difficult concepts to more abstract and generalised ideas.

Language Development

Vygotsky's theory that language and thinking enhance each other's development has been confirmed by the subsequent field research into talk. For a thought to be developed, it needs to be discussed and tossed about between talkers. There is now more neurological research to show that the act of talking and thinking increases the number of connections and cells that build the brain. Exploratory talk is untidy, but it generates new ideas. All learners need exposure to this powerful form of talk at the cutting edge of developing new meanings, but currently less than 10% of classroom talk is exploratory. It is difficult to implement in the classroom without planning and scaffolding. There is never enough time to explore ideas, what with the pressure of the overloaded curriculum and the need for lessons to run at a swift pace. Although policy documents often endorse the value of talk, firm guidance on implementation is often neglected.

The most recent "experts" report on the curriculum states that the gap at 11 is wider in the UK because talk is not valued. Learners learning language while they are learning need plenty of occasional exposure to exploratory talk through the day with only gentle pressure to participate at their own pace and in their own time. Although exploratory talk does not appear to be very well organized nor 'grammatical', its paraphrase and repetition in the search for new meaning provides an excellent language model which the learning brain will leap upon. Collaborative group work creates situations where, while all learners are talking through their ideas, English language learners are learning language in context. Recent funding to build an assessment tool for talk may raise its value. Cinderella may get to the ball! We work to create the best environment where children new to English can learn their English while they are learning to enjoy learning.

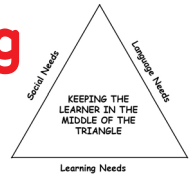
Please go to <www.collaborativelearning.org/bibliography.html> to access all the references for this short introduction.



Collaborative Learning

An Introduction

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It is very important to always know why we choose to teach in a certain way and how research informs our practice. Increasing political interference in education has led to teachers being presented with training manuals and told to follow instructions unquestioningly. I want to provide enough theory to show how this particular teaching style empowers children learning while learning a new language. EAL friendly collaborative group work is an effective and empowering teaching style for children learning English. This is a kind of group work exemplified by the resources shared by teachers on the Collaborative Learning Project website.

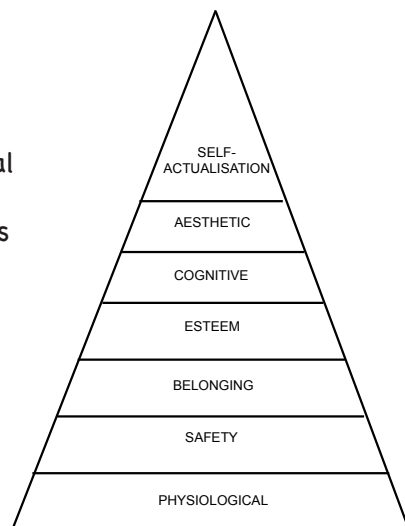
Collaborative learning is language conscious and EAL friendly. It has evolved over the last forty years and is still evolving. The spring that set us in motion was the movement in the 1970s and 80s to encourage teachers to engage in research in the classroom and the energy released by the discovery that working with other teachers led to more creative and reflective practice. We were working in challenging classrooms. Our pupils spoke a lot of different languages. Their command of English and literacies varied enormously. They were a mobile and vulnerable population. Children were moving on and new arrivals were taking their places.

We discovered how important it was to know why our practice could refer back to theory. We had a wealth of educational theory to draw on and test hypotheses in the classroom. Great minds had been busy and made us busy too to explore practical ways in which to interpret and realise their ideas. It was vital to know why our practice was the best we could offer, because not all of it fell in easily with so-called common sense. We felt that we would probably need to defend it. Even though, increasingly, new research is now supporting the theories that underpin our practice, we are still frequently called upon to defend the way we work. EAL policy and recommended practice probably suffers from more political interference than any other educational area, although in the recent political climate this is becoming more disputable. Certainly the need to defend developed practice and act as advocates for our students has not disappeared.

EAL teachers need the following qualities: they must be optimistic, tenacious, confrontational or devious when appropriate, they must be well read and up to date on research, they must be part of a strong network and always professional and confident about how they work and able to explain why they work in the way they do. I am going to look at the value of building good practice in three areas: emotional and social development, language development and curriculum development. I am going to look at the areas separately, but argue that collaborative group work provides an opportunity for these three developments to be integrated.

Social and Emotional Development

Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides a powerful key visual for our first aim: making sure that the emotional and social needs are satisfied so that learning can begin. Maslow's pyramid clearly illustrates that unless the basic needs are in place there is nowhere on which to build up confident learning. Teaching language or curriculum without the secure base to the pyramid is like moving the chairs around on the Titanic. Schools have often used Maslow's model for planning and implementing induction programmes because it helps them to identify actions and set clear targets. Many schools have implemented ways of welcoming EAL pupils including safe havens, buddying, lunchtime clubs etc.

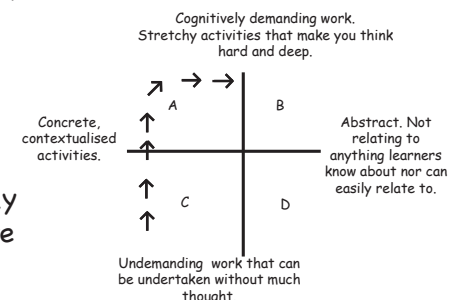


Then the pair of learners have to present what they have just acquired to another pair. Often they have to act on a new piece of information by filling in a timeline, completing a chart or visiting a part of the classroom. These techniques ensure that all learners are working with all the other learners in the class in turn at some point. They encounter a wide variety of language use and there is a lot of opportunity for active listening, paraphrase, recasting and repetition.

Curriculum Learning Development

Krashen's concept of comprehensible input and Cummins' emphasis on concrete and complex together are the powerful drivers for planning curriculum for EAL learners. Language work divorced from context is as ineffective as a chocolate saucepan. Only very highly motivated adults can tolerate practicing meaningless sentences, just for the sake of getting pronunciation right. The key to successful language development means linking every language aim to a curriculum aim. In theory any topic, however abstract or complex can be made entertainingly accessible to any age group by breaking it up and looking at ways of exploiting the visual and the tactile. A timely image can open doors into other ways of thinking. Showing a picture and inviting responses reveals a lot about prior knowledge and tempts quiet or unconfident learners into contributing information.

Every teaching activity can be plotted on this quadrant. EAL (and all other learners) need work that follows the arrows: always concrete and growing more demanding on thinking until they can make their own leap into the abstract.



Thinking of ways to present information in bite-size chunks, concentrating on detail and devising ways in which the detail can slowly reveal the bigger picture is like the way in which the dots in dot matrix prints can be stepped back from to see what they reveal together. In this way complex ideas can slowly reveal themselves.

An example of making explicit the concepts of globalization and sustainability could start with a study of the function of goats' feet in the Gobi desert. They dig up roots of plants in the giant sand dunes. These roots work a bit like Velcro and prevent the sand in the dunes from blowing away. The Gobi is a cold and very windy desert. In 1990 there were 2.4 million Kashmir goats in the desert. There was strong demand for cashmere and herders were allowed to expand their herds. 2000