

## Orality, Inclusion and Equality in the EFL Primary Classroom

### Oralità, inclusione e parità nella classe di inglese lingua straniera

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#### Abstract

This paper describes the interplay between orality and inclusive English as a Foreign Language Teaching (in the primary classroom), with reference to the Italian context. Inclusive teaching is here understood as a teacher's ability to provide environments ensuring every pupil equal access to the English language. In the first part of the paper, a case is made for the need to implement the use of aural and oral communication in the EFL classroom, both in terms of letting children listen to the sounds of the new language (thus fostering comprehension skills) and enabling them to copy the teacher's sounds and words, or even express what they might already know. The second part of the paper focusses on the learner, and in particular on immigrant children who are trying to master the local language (Italian), native children who might have different levels of access to the foreign language outside school, depending on their socio-economic status, and children with specific learning difficulty. Finally, the paper briefly discusses the implications, both for in-service teachers and for university student teachers, of the implementation (and increase) of classroom orality.

**Keywords:** orality, EFL teaching and learning, inclusion, equality.

#### Sommario

L'articolo descrive l'interazione tra oralità e insegnamento inclusivo dell'inglese lingua straniera nella classe primaria, con particolare riferimento al contesto italiano. Per insegnamento inclusivo si intende la capacità di un insegnante di creare ambienti di apprendimento che garantiscano pari accesso alla lingua inglese a tutti gli allievi. Nella prima parte del lavoro, viene discussa la necessità di incrementare l'uso della comunicazione uditiva e orale nell'aula di inglese LS, sia per ciò che riguarda l'esposizione ai suoni della nuova lingua (favorendo così le capacità di comprensione), che consentendo ai bambini di copiare i suoni e le parole dell'insegnante, che per la necessità di fornire i mezzi necessari a esprimere conoscenze linguistiche pregresse. La seconda parte dell'articolo si concentra sullo studente, e in particolare sui bambini immigrati che stanno cercando di padroneggiare la lingua locale (italiano), bambini nativi che potrebbero avere diversi livelli di accesso alla lingua straniera al di fuori della scuola, a seconda della loro condizione socio-economica, e bambini con disturbi specifici dell'apprendimento (dislessia). Infine, l'articolo discute brevemente le implicazioni, sia per gli insegnanti in servizio che per gli studenti di Scienze della Formazione Primaria, dell'incremento della comunicazione orale in classe.

**Parole chiave:** oralità, insegnamento e apprendimento dell'inglese lingua straniera, inclusione, parità.

### 1. The importance of aurality and oral interaction for foreign language learning

Aurality, or hearing/listening to people speak, is at the heart of children's language acquisition. Children need to hear language from the voice of another human in order to acquire it and master its use, they need to be immersed in the sounds of the mother tongue/s, and hear words in the *here and now* in highly contextualised utterances that will allow them to associate sounds with elements of their environment, thus beginning a meaning making process in linguistic terms.

From oral speech (orality), children derive the ability to separate sounds into words (*segmentation*) as well as fundamental auditory clues, from prosody, pitch and intonation, which enable the listener to understand the difference between polysemous words. Thanks to significant exposure to language in their early years, children understand how utterances are organised and venture into building new ones (*syntactic bootstrapping*, see

Soderstrom *et al.*, 2003). Intonation and voice quality are essential aspects of language learning also from a cultural point of view as they are directly related to the ability to understand what can be said, when, to whom and in what circumstances. Children learn the social use of language by witnessing verbal interactions and especially by hearing others talk in contextualised and familiar situations that involve explanations and descriptions of what is being done: through listening to adult's contextualised speech, and «through conversational interactions», children acquire «their conceptual foundation (knowledge of the world)» (Cummins, 1999, p. 4).

Exposure to oral language is equally fundamental for foreign language acquisition at a young age. From orality, here intended as everyday spoken language<sup>1</sup>, children derive their knowledge of language (in) use. As Ong points out «oral habits of [...] expression are [...] deeply repetitive, built on formulaic expression, commonplaces, epithets, responsive to the total context in which they come into being» (Ong, 1988, p. 265), and it is precisely the mnemonic and meaning-making potential of repetitive, formulaic, and context-dependent speech that allows children to emulate language for communicative purposes.

The EFL classroom is (generally) the only source of English for young (primary school) learners who do not regularly socialise in English outside school. For this reason, EFL primary teaching should strive to maximise exposure to and quality of oral input, just as mothers do when they spontaneously repeat words, make skilful use of pitch and prosodic traits and linger on naming the things of the world around children: the things children can see, touch and hear.

In order to begin to acquire the FL, children need to hear the sounds it is made of through various means and natural inputs, ranging from unstructured teacher talk (see Krashen, 1981, p. 11 on the importance of teacher talk in the foreign language classroom) to dramatic reading of dialogues in children's books. Young EFL learners are extremely interested in the sounds of the new language. Kramsch notes «how sensitive undergraduates are to the sounds, shapes, and rhythms of the FL and how they resonate emotionally to form» (Kramsch, 2006, p. 251), but the same can be said for primary school pupils who display a natural curiosity and attraction for language and language play when they first encounter the foreign language. Hearing new sounds engages children in a quest for meaning that is fundamental for language acquisition. Teachers who nurture orality in the classroom can support this quest by making use of talk that is accompanied by a wide range of aids, from body gestures to facial expressions, skilful use of voice, miming, use of sounds and images, in order to allow children to capture the meaning of what they hear. This use of orality cannot confine itself to structured listening activities, rather, it should aim towards a fluid use of unstructured talk to interact with pupils on a daily basis and describe the world around them in English.

Initially, the teacher might be the only main source of spoken English in the classroom, but concrete teacher talk that makes use of non-verbal cues is dialogic by nature: it prevents children from being passive receivers from the very beginning by granting them alternative ways, other than verbal production, to express themselves and join in by appealing to gestures, for example, thus holding off producing speech until they feel ready to do so. A teacher's main duty is to make children feel competent and do anything to prevent affective filters from getting in the way of emotionally conducive learning. Hence, language learning should be as close as possible to children's personal experience and the new language should be perceived as a means of personal expression, regardless of how little the children know in terms of vocabulary and grammar: this can only be achieved through orality.

EFL teaching needs to make the most of children's natural inclination for talking and give them words they can use to form speech that is relevant to them. For this reason, children need to hear language in the space of the classroom (given that it is the only place where they will get significant exposure to English), language that is directly related to whatever they are experiencing in class. Far from being reductive, this view implies that the classroom can become the world around them, by helping children describe their lives outside school or by sharing books which by definition can bring several worlds into the classroom and multiply linguistic contexts.

Being immersed in the sounds of the new language in highly contextualised interactions helps children develop communicative confidence. Ultimately, EFL teaching should strive to equip children with basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) that enable them to perceive the power, also in terms of personal identity, of having a second language to think in and to express themselves through. And when it comes to equipping them with a means of self-expression, features such as voice quality and pronunciation play an important role. Even in its most reductive definition, communicative competence means being able to make oneself understood, and mispronouncing *leave* and *live*, or *eat* and *heat*, for example, can considerably slow down successful communication, to the point of producing unintelligible utterances. In many a school projects where EFL learners from different countries have been asked to communicate through EIL (English as an International Language) teachers have witnessed children suffer from being unable to make themselves understood orally, due to mispronunciation, despite their writing skills. Nurturing orality implies providing support at all levels to equip children with communicative skills that are suitable to their stages of cognitive, linguistic and emotional development.

Yet, orality in the EFL classroom is still overlooked and very little English is spoken in many cases. Explanations are often conveyed in the language of instruction (Italian) and English is used for single words and isolated sentences, rather than in the natural flow of teacher talk. This is often the case in foreign language classrooms in many non-English speaking countries (Bashir and Dogar, 2011), and Italy is no exception (Santipolo, 2016). This implies that children get hardly any exposure to spoken language and they are introduced to writing and reading before they can form a sentence in speaking and, most of all, before they have developed the necessary listening skills to understand natural speech in English.

Reading and writing are later cognitive developments compared to speaking and listening, even more so in the acquisition of a foreign language at a young age. The neglect of orality is due to a number of reasons. In some cases in particular, teachers have received very little training (as little as 50 hours) and do not feel confident enough to improvise and use English for unstructured communication. As a result, more than 80% of speech in the classroom is in Italian (Santipolo, 2016, p. 182). The recent (2019 for primary schools) introduction of English among the subjects tested by INVALSI, the national standardised testing system (the results of which have «no impact on the student's academic career», see Morris, 2011, p. 1), has not helped boost natural oral interaction in the classroom, given that INVALSI do not test speaking, but only listening and writing/grammar skills. As a result, school instruction is often geared towards developing the necessary knowledge to perform at high levels in INVALSI and speaking and unstructured oral interaction take second place. One more reason for the neglect of oral interaction in many EFL primary classrooms stems from a persistent belief, even among young teacher graduates, that skills acquired in writing will transfer into talk: this increases the amount of written work children are asked to carry out to the expenses of their oral communicative skills. It is rather the opposite though: it is through hearing that

children will come to acquire certain automatisms which they will transfer in talk and writing. Educational programs such as *Talk for Writing* (a very successful UK based initiative) argue that children need to talk through what they are learning and «imitate the language they need for a particular topic orally» (<https://www.talk4writing.com>). Indeed, if «acquisition can be understood as learning to process language» (McCauley & Christiansen, 2019, p. 1), then children need to hear language they can process and that language can only be found in oral interaction: for this reason, EFL learners who are exposed to English for as little as two hours per week need to make the most of those hours and hear as much spoken language as possible. Relying on written language more than on orality equals asking children to read music before they can sing. Favouring orality, however, does not imply ruling writing and reading out, but rather preparing the grounds for these skills to be acquired after a bond with the language has been established through the aural channel.

More importantly, the implications of nurturing orality in the classroom are not limited to teaching and learning, but they expand to developing inclusive classroom practice which can help extend an enjoyable language learning experience to all the children in the class.

## **2. Orality and inclusion in the EFL classroom**

Amongst many other situations I have observed and collected through the years interviewing primary school pupils and their parents (within a qualitative research project aimed at collecting perceptions of the quality of primary EFL teaching and learning), and working with students in teacher placements, TESOL students for young learners, as well as in-service EFL teachers during CPD (Continuing Professional Development) training and school projects, I will mention one case which is particularly relevant to the present discussion:

A class of 35 primary 2 children aged between 6 and 8 (for a short period of time) gathered once a week in a gym after school to play in English with a free-lance English language teacher. The afternoon meetings, independently organized by the children's parents, were very inexpensive (5 Euros for two hours). The approach was forcibly oral, as the meetings took place in a public space and the children had no material other than crayons and paper in their bags. The children had very little English, if none, but they were very enthusiastic and they enjoyed the idea of semi-free play in English. The reason why the parents had autonomously decided to put this group together was that their children seemed to struggle with English at school. The meetings had no pretence of teaching the language, rather the idea behind them was to get the children to play with it and enjoy its sounds. The teacher made use of stories, TPR activities and games of all kinds and spoke English for 99% of the time.

On the day of the third meeting, a new class mate showed up with the group: I will refer to him as E. E. shuffled in as if he'd been carried by the current of his classmates but he seemed rather unwilling to participate. He had recently joined the school, and only recently migrated to Italy from an African state with his family: some children told the free-lance teacher that the boy did "not understand Italian very well". Despite the fact that he was much taller and seemingly one or two years older than the rest of his classmates, he was rather shy and seemed to go unnoticed most of the time, apart from the moments when he became disruptive. His classmates seemed to take his manifestations for granted.

A few minutes into the meeting, however, the dynamics of the group changed considerably. As the teacher began to play, and make use of total physical response games, it became clear that the *new guy* understood most of what the teacher said and that

he could often act accordingly, contrary to his classmates who needed constant visual support and often asked for translations in Italian. In a short while, he began to instruct the others as to how to join in, telling everyone where to go, how to sit, sometimes translating into Italian (the L2 he was just beginning to get to grips with) and sometimes physically showing them what to do. The way the children in the class looked at him changed radically: there was an evident look of surprise on their faces. They were following him waiting for his instructions and remarking on how good he was at understanding and speaking this new language. They were all looking up to him now, as opposed to when they came in, and he was part of the group.

A few important things stand out from this anecdote. First of all, E. knew some English although it was not his mother tongue. His knowledge of it came from oral interaction, he had not studied it in school back in his home country. This is the case of many children who migrate to Italy (or any other non-English speaking country) with a knowledge of English that is often enough for them to understand most of what the EFL teacher says. That knowledge might come from hearing people speak it back in the home country, where it might have been an official second language, or hearing their parents speak it in the house or outside the family as a pivot language. Not only do these children come to school with some English, they also find picking up more of it easier, because they are used to having two language and maybe even to acting as translators for their parents, thus getting daily practice in switching from one code to another. Indeed, research on the so called bilingual advantage hints to bilingualism playing a positive role in the acquisition of a third language on many an occasion (Singh, 2018).

The second important thing that emerges from the anecdote is that E's knowledge of English had been unknown to his classmates up to point where he had been in an environment where he could interact through this language. The school teacher was certainly aware of it, but his peers, his very school community, were not: as a result, they were relying exclusively on the little he could communicate of himself through a second language he was just beginning to master and their limited possibilities for communication had that far prevented them from getting to know each other fully. E's communicative power was drastically reduced in the school classroom, where a mostly written approach was used, children were exposed to single vocabulary and never to a flow of language (as reported by the parents who organised the afternoon meetings). At the beginning of their school path, children like E. might be struggling to get to grips with Italian as a second language and its orthography. Inserting one more graphic system might be too daunting for them and it might even cause them to doubt their actual knowledge of that language. At the end of the five years of primary INVALSI tests reveal that immigrant children, on the whole, do better than native Italians in English, but at the beginning of the cycle they need, like all children for that matter, to be immersed in an environment where the language they have picked up orally is spoken in natural oral interaction. Interestingly, immigrant children appear to do better in listening activities, while their native peers do better in written activities. Many of these children come from communities where orality and aurality are still the main modality for learning language: especially in terms of teaching through speech and stories to pass down knowledge and values. Orality is still the means through which many societies and groups pass down important information, suffice it to think, for example, that «performance and aural reception have remained incredibly important in how Muslims learn, transmit, and practice the Quran in their everyday lives» (DeYoung and Ali Altaf Mian, 2019, p. 784).

The importance of orality as a learning tool, however, is not confined to immigrant communities. Primary school children still learn chiefly through what they hear around them. Repetition, melody, and rhythm are at the basis of learning especially for children.

Hence, as Hymes pointed out back in 1996, «a classroom that excludes narratives [and orality in general] may be attempting to teach them both new subject matter and a new mode of learning, perhaps without fully realising it» (Hymes, 1996, p. 116). Any student might «come from homes in which narrative is an important way of communicating knowledge» and might «take part in peer groups in which experience and insight is shared through exchange of narrative» (Hymes, 1996, p. 116). When applied to primary EFL teaching, the thought of attempting to teach a foreign language through a mode of learning that is novel for children appears even more problematic. Supporting orality and oral interaction in the language classroom, as opposed to relying too heavily on writing and structured exercises, allows primary school children to experience a transitional phase in which they can retain a sense of confidence and competence even during the challenging process of acquiring written language and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). An EFL classroom based on oral interaction allows children to approach the foreign language through a familiar mode of learning. Through properly supported oral communication all children can rely on common communicative grounds to interact with their peers and strengthen social bonds.

In such contexts, linguistic competence acquired through orality, such as what E. revealed in the afternoon meetings, is free to emerge. The approach based on oral interaction, miming and movement used by the afternoon teacher had allowed E. to reveal his knowledge and use it to negotiate and transform his relationship with his classmates, thus promoting change in the way they looked at him.

Favouring orality in the EFL classroom also implies facilitating immigrant children in cultivating their bilingualism, without suppressing but rather capitalising on their home languages, given also that research has been advocating that suppressing one language might impinge on how the second and third ones are learned (REF). It is often the case that immigrant children will contribute with words from their native language in order to prove their knowledge, and English might be an important pivot language to begin with, one they can use to maintain a feeling of linguistic competence while working towards proficiency in the second language (Italian) and negotiate successful switching between home language and the language of school instruction. Yet, this fluidity can only be achieved if communication is happening in the form of oral interaction, allowing children to make the most of what they already know. These children's existing knowledge deserves to be acknowledged and the EFL classroom, for a short while, might be the only place where they have the power to emerge. Denying them oral interaction equals preventing them from conveying their identity fully. Although research on the concept of identity in connection with language learning tends to concentrate on teen-agers and adults, this issue is most important also for primary school children and Pierce's words apply fully to young children who embark on the adventure of learning a new language:

I argue that SLA [second language acquisition] theory needs to develop a conception of the language learner as having a *complex social identity* that must be understood with reference to larger, and frequently inequitable social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction. In taking this position, I foreground the role of language as constitutive of and constituted by a language learner's social identity. It is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time, and it is through language that a person gains access to-or is denied access to-powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak [...]. Thus language is not conceived of as a neutral medium of communication but is understood with reference to its social meaning (Pierce, 1995, p. 13).

Orality in the EFL classroom can create a space where inequalities experienced outside school are questioned and even subverted and a new community is negotiated on the basis of children getting to know each other through a fluid use of languages in interaction (Pennycook, 2010).

### 3. Oral interaction and socio-economic inclusion

Negotiation of a «sense of self» (Pierce, 1995, p. 13) through second/foreign language learning is equally important for native Italian children, especially because the foreign language they are learning in school is English. In everyday discourse, a knowledge of English is often seen as essential in order to survive and thrive in the present global world. Many parents will refer to English as a *passport* for better universities, better jobs and better prospects for their children's lives (see also Pennycook, 2017). Although EFL learning should equal any other language learning experience, it is undeniably entangled with economic and social concerns which are communicated to children through daily talk on English learning, and through parents' patterns of expectations. As a result, going back to Pierce's words, it seems particularly true that learning English as a foreign language might forcibly play a role in children's negotiation of «a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time» and that children, no less than adults, might sense that through this language «a person gains access to-or is denied access to- powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak» (Pierce, 1995, p. 13). Unequal distribution of narrative rights is a result of, and leads to, social disparity, and teachers must recognise that the EFL primary classroom, just as EFL teaching in general, is affected by socio-economic issues. As Tollefson points out, «at a time when English is widely seen as a key to the economic success of nations and the economic well-being of individuals, the spread of English also contributes to significant social, political and economic inequalities» (Tollefson, 2000, p. 8).

As far as primary EFL learning is concerned, inequality often coincides with disparities in terms of levels of exposure to English. Nowadays, many children in Italy get extra afternoon and weekend private lessons. At primary level, these extra hours do not represent actual tutoring, but rather a *boost* to children's English to increase exposure and often make up for what is perceived as weak school offer. This is a growing phenomenon in our country and in most non-English speaking countries. On one hand, it stems from the perception that school instruction is insufficient, on the other from the fear that it will be poor in the future: some parents start acting when children are in their first year. Saturday classes in private institutes are well established because many parents feel the need to familiarise their children with this language as soon as possible. Aside from the disparities this might cause in social terms, this approach to language education is problematic from a pedagogical point of view. The risk is perceiving English as «a 'global commodity' to be bought and sold on the world market» (Pennycook, 2017, p. 158) which is available only to some. Language education, informed by principles of critical language teaching (Pennycook, 1999) should be delivered in the school environment, where children are all together and not selected according to social positions.

On top of afternoon classes, some children will get English at home, might get help with homework, have satellite televisions, and other inputs outside school which will improve their performance. What teachers will inherit, as a result, is a class where some children are advantaged and will continue to be as their external linguistic input continues, and other children who will not get the chance to get external help and will be disadvantaged: in this situation, if school offer is insufficient, those who cannot afford to

integrate it will struggle. Not surprisingly, INVALSI reports tell us that students' ESCS (Economic Social Cultural Status) influences their results: in general, children with low SCS do not do as well as children with high SCS. While this difference emerges also in other subjects and might be due to a number of variables pertaining the family environment, when we look at English as a school subject poor results are also due to the fact that lower income students do not get the chance to study outside school. Language learning depends on exposure, and if these children do not get extra exposure at home, they will stay behind. These are fundamental years for establishing a positive relationship with a foreign language and the EFL primary classroom is the very place where children will decide if they wish to love or hate this language, if this language is for them or not, if they feel it is useful or not. This is where they might begin to sense disparities and inequalities in social and economic terms.

For these reasons, English cannot be taught as if it were «a neutral medium of communication» (Pennycook, 2017, p. 246). On the contrary:

Given the global and local contexts and discourses with which English is bound up, all of us involved in TESOL might do well to consider our work not merely according to the reductive meanings often attached to labels such as teaching and English but rather as located at the very heart of some of the most crucial educational, cultural, and political issues of our time (Pennycook, 1999, p. 346).

EFL teaching needs to take into account the discourse around English and how this discourse acts to increase inequality outside school, and then seek to repair inequality through language education that aims at giving children equal communicative power in English. Inequalities can be either repaired or reinforced through classroom practice. The way English is taught is extremely important. Schools should strive to deliver language education that can offer children equal rights, because «particular ways of teaching English [...] may lead either to the reproduction or to the transformation of class-based inequality» (Pennycook, 1999, p. 332). Exclusively written work that does not correspond to the way children learn languages at a young age will deny some the chance to pick up language, if they do not have extra help outside the class. Equally detrimental is the fact that children are often asked to carry out difficult written work at home and they might not be able to get the help they need. The EFL classroom is all they have and oral interaction is what they need in order to feel that, far from being stuck at the margins of the learning process, they can be active agents of their learning just by taking part to classroom communicative practice. Fostering a sense of agency through orality is fundamental, because we know that «feeling disconnected from one's classmates and not identifying with school can alienate students from academic work» (Juvonen and Knifsend, 2016, p. 243).

This implies we need to create an environment where everyone feels they are being provided with learning material. Language learning, at a very early age, must be concrete and depend on the context, rather than transcend it with a view to teaching a neutral language «in the interest of the opportunities and accomplishments of a general public sphere» (Hymes, 1996, p. 116). Establishing context-dependent oral interaction means creating an environment where all children have equal possibilities to learn and acquire a significant amount of language that is relevant to them, to their lives in the classroom and outside it, by bringing the outside in in the form of personal narratives and examples (for example, asking children to bring photographs of themselves and places they like which the teacher can describe and comment in English). A feeling that this language is relevant to them equals feeling entitled to acquire it, and this might provide them with the



motivation to carry on studying it and live a language learning experience that will leave it to them to decide if they wish to use it or not in the future. What matters is that they will be empowered with the knowledge they need to carry on and perform at high standards in English, if they wish to.

#### **4. Reaching out through orality**

Making daily use of oral interaction based on concrete situations in the classroom can provide significant support for children who struggle with reading and writing. Dyslexic children with normal auditory skills (Schneider and Crombie, 2003), for example, can be facilitated by an oral approach, both in the classroom and at home: what is done in the classroom will lend itself to providing accommodations such as recorded material (of stories and dialogues, for example), which the children can listen to at home in their own time. Acquiring language aurally, by listening to adults and peers talk, is essential for these children in terms of their capacity to tackle reading and writing, especially for children whose L1 has a regular orthography and are suddenly confronted with a new language with opaque orthographic features. The skills acquired through listening and interacting through the teacher's prompting will transfer into reading. As Dal points out:

Reading is a derived skill that builds on spoken language, reading can be defined as the ability to translate from print to a form of code from which the reader can already derive meaning; namely the reader's spoken language. Although there are differences between spoken and printed language (such as in how language is represented in speech and in print), *comprehending text requires the full set of linguistic skills needed to comprehend spoken language*, including locating individual words in lexical memory, determining the intended meaning of individual words (most of which are polysemous), assigning appropriate syntactic structures to sentences, deriving meaning from individually structured sentences and building meaningful discourse on the basis of sentential meaning (Dal, 2008, p. 253).

These are all extremely important features which can only be derived from hearing language in highly contextualised oral interactions which make use of the environment in order to show what language means, thus providing children with essential aids such as props, visual supports, objects, sounds. The power of the EFL classroom is that comprehension cannot be taken for granted, after all it is a foreign language, and for this reason EFL teachers are constantly employing scaffolding of all kinds.

Even for children with poor auditory skills, hearing spoken language in the classroom, in confidence-building situations, can facilitate natural acquisition of words, thanks to the use of concrete and context-dependent language repeated in daily interaction. If «instructional strategies for alleviating [foreign language learning] anxiety should always include teaching techniques aimed at easing language learning difficulties» (Chen and Chang, 2004, p. 285), then oral interaction in the primary EFL classroom really lends itself to a multisensory approach which can reduce anxiety as (by definition) it relies on interactive teaching aids that provide support for meaning making and create a joyful environment, which can alleviate the pressure of foreign language learning.

Providing extra support, however, does not imply singling students out. On the contrary, focussing on orality benefits everyone and every student can take extra material home (a practice which can facilitate involving parents in the children's learning process and help them support their children during their homework). Focusing on the needs of some results in practice that attains better learning for all. For this reason, orality-based

practice can be defined *inclusive*, in the sense that it provides an environment that is suitable to all and nurtures the needs of all. Orality really means «extending what is ordinarily available as part of the routine of classroom life as a way of responding to differences between learners rather than specifically individualizing for some» (Florian and Linklater, 2010, pp. 369-370). It means extending the range of the offer in class, not narrowing it down to writing and exercise which might work only for some and perpetuate differences.

## 5. Implications for in-service teachers and student teachers

Having so far discussed the advantages of fostering oral communication in the primary EFL classroom, the question remains as to how to put this into practice when a teacher does not have the confidence to improvise in the classroom. How to generate speech and expose children to language in use when the adults are not proficient?

I argue that teachers need to extend the concept of inclusion to themselves in the first place. This implies that teachers can put themselves in the position of learners, together with their students. As Florian and Linklater point with reference to programs aimed at boosting teachers' inclusive teaching practice, we need to make «best use of what they already know» (Florian and Linklater, 2010, p. 369), and find strong points where at the moment there might be practice that reinforces inequalities and a sense of *some over all*. Some teachers might find themselves constrained by such practices too: following the text book might be stressful and far from enjoyable for them. They might not feel at ease with the English language, but what teachers know best of all is how to empower children in the learning process, they know their students, they care for their needs. Getting teachers to do what they know best implies relieving them of the stressful job of being the only authority in the classroom with respect to something they themselves feel unequipped to teach. For this reason, teachers would benefit from sharing the burden. By employing an array of authentic material (from picturebooks to audios, video and games) these teachers can get a native speaker to do part of the job. A carefully chosen picturebook will expose children to repetitive language in use that is certainly correct and natural, a well picked audio will introduce children to a variety of native accents, and a video will have both the aural dimension and the visual (Masoni, 2019). Picturebooks, for example, expose children to a wide variety of scenarios communicated through highly contextualized, repetitive, rhythmical language. As Krashen and Mason note, stories are an example of *optimal input*, because, as well as being *comprehensible*, their text is also *compelling*, *rich* and *abundant* (Krashen and Mason, 2020, see also Krashen and Bland, 2014). Indeed, picturebooks offer effortless repetition that children are willing to accept: in them, children will hear the words of their English-speaking peers, drawn from different cultures attached to English and from different linguistic variants. These imagined interactions are in many ways just as good as real ones, as far as language learning is concerned, because they allow children to live embodied experiences of language through stories with which they can identify or which they can use to understand themselves through the lives of others. As Kramsch puts it, «it is through literature that learners can communicate not only with living others, but also with imagined others and with the other selves they might want to become. Through literature, they can learn the full meaning making potential of language. [...] What literature can do is foster the three major components of symbolic competence: the production of complexity, the tolerance of ambiguity, and an appreciation of form as meaning» (Kramsch, 2006, p. 251).

A teacher who makes extensive use of authentic books will be sure of exposing children to correct and relevant language and, if implementing with audio versions, will

also make sure children are exposed to correct pronunciation. There is nothing wrong with sharing the burden and continuing to learn together with our pupils. Indeed, children will benefit enormously from these inputs and they will also see their teachers embarking alongside with them on the difficult, but potentially highly rewarding, enterprise of foreign language learning. Together they will wonder about meanings and sounds, they will look for and find explanations to idioms and apparently counterintuitive turns of phrases for speakers of other languages. In this process, bilingual children can potentially help to a great extent, given that they have one more language to appeal to for fruitful comparisons. A teacher's authority will not be undermined: on the contrary, children will look up to a guide who has the knowledge and the skills to navigate them through a journey of discovery of the English language.

Also university student teachers who will one day be called to teach English, as well as all other subjects, need to develop the skills to employ authentic material to a great extent. At the same time, however, we need to make sure they receive proper speaking training. It is our duty to do all in our power to give them the confidence to speak with ease in the EFL classroom. Even if the Italian system does not require them to specialise in EFL teaching, they need nevertheless to tackle the teaching of every subject with confidence, and nothing grants more confidence than being able to talk freely and pronounce things correctly in front of children. Future teachers know very well that their pupils will copy their pronunciations, will pick up their accents and memorise the sentences they repeat daily. Young teachers in training feel a great sense of responsibility towards their future pupils and they should leave university with the skills to do right to their pupils right. As far as English teaching is concerned, this knowledge cannot be built around exclusively written work and exams. On the contrary, it originates from spoken language more than from anything else.

## Conclusion

Schools should provide English language teaching that strives to repair inequalities, not just through more successful instruction, but also by looking at teaching as a complex reality which needs to take social and economic factors into account. EFL teaching that is pedagogically sound should be concerned with the creation of a learning environment where children can contribute in multiple ways in order to tap into all their knowledge.

At a time when children might be learning to read and write, this implies using oral/aural approaches more than anything, because it is through orality that they can join in and prove their knowledge. In its purest form, the EFL classroom has the potential to be the place where all children, regardless of where they come from, start from scratch, learning a language they do not know, or improving a language they do not master. It is a humbling experience, but also one that calls for community building and for putting resources together, in a meaning making process. In a classroom that favours orality, other languages can be worked into EFL teaching, in order to talk about language, make comparisons, and facilitate children's learning. In this situation, far from being hegemonic, English could provide a space where dynamic language practice can be observed. The EFL classroom can be a place where children experiment appealing to multiple codes in order to acquire communicative power: these *linguaging* practices (Becker, 1991) can potentially contrast social inequality.

Regardless of their sociocultural background, children should get EFL school instruction that empowers them with equal communicative rights. Whether this happens or not though, depends on how English is taught and how it is taught should stem from a need to use language education to acknowledge and overcome differences, because

ultimately, as Pennycook puts it: language teaching pedagogy should include «a vision of a better world for which it is worth struggling» (Pennycook, 1994, p. 299).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In terms of organization and markers of spoken discourse) and/or language with the characteristics of spoken discourse (as in simulated conversations in children's books).

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