

English Language Partners ESOL Literacy Classes

Catherine Taylor

Introduction. This afternoon we will be discussing some of the challenges and insights gained from our ongoing trial this year on developing effective strategies in the facilitation of a strengths based approach to group discussion.

Shortly, Christine will talk about some of the topics we have covered this year and the strategies we have trialled during classroom discussions of these topics using a strength based approach. Remuuna will conclude our presentation by sharing with you some of the challenges implementing these strategies presented for our Bilingual support team, what techniques helped them to manage these challenges, and insights gained so far, that will inform what strategies we implement in discussion groups next term.

Firstly though, I'd like to provide you with a brief overview of our programme and classes. We deliver the ESOL Literacy Programme which is specifically designed for Adult refugee background learners with low level literacy who have 0- 8 years of formal education. Our learners are mostly Bhutanese (ethnic Nepali) and Burmese (Karen and Muslim). We also have several Afghani learners and one Congolese learner. All of our classes comprise of some learners who are related: husband and wife, mothers-daughters in law, brothers - sisters in law....

In addition to assisting our learners in developing basic literacy, numeracy and spoken English proficiency, we also cover a wide range of topics relevant to daily life and successful long term resettlement in New Zealand. Out of class visits and guest presenters from various resettlement, health and service agencies form an important part of our lesson planning.

Successful guest presentations:

- Collaborating closely with presenters
- Increase learner engagement with topic
- Follow up group discussions

Last year, we realised the information we were providing our presenters prior to their visit; number of learners attending, number of language groups, translators being utilised, and technology available, in addition to advice on selection or adaption of resources used, was not enough to ensure a successful presentation. We began to implement a more collaborative approach to the planning of presentations, with teachers and sometimes a Bilingual Assistant meeting with the presenter prior to the visit to discuss and plan, lesson content and delivery and learners needs in more detail.

This proved successful, however, during classroom post presentation feedback and evaluation, learners often commented that there was too much information and they were not able to remember much of it. In some cases learners suggested that we invite the presenter back again next year to repeat the presentation. Obviously, this is not ideal. We had to think of a more sustainable way for learners to retain the key content from each presentation. We decided to plan time for a follow up discussion in class shortly after each presentation. Our hope was the discussions would:

increase individual learner engagement with topic/lesson content and promote deeper level learning of the topic.

The discussions worked well, however many learners did not actively participate. We realised then that we needed to find strategies to help maximise learner participation in group discussion.

Strengths based model: new learning that builds on past success

- PAUA (Preschoolers At home Uniquely Achieving) play workshop
- Triple P (Positive Parenting Programme) workshops

Christine Dykstra

One simple definition of a strengths based model is: new learning that builds on past success.

We have implemented a strengths based model using group discussions in a range of topics in our ESOL Literacy classes this year, I will briefly discuss some of these. In term 2, we held a PAUA workshop on play. This is an early childhood home-based care service which involves many of our learners. As part of this workshop we discussed our ideas of what is important for a child's development and what we can do as parents and grandparents.

Last term we had a major focus on further parenting and grand-parenting issues, with a series of workshops help by Triple P parenting. Triple P is Positive Parenting Programme; a programme which helps and supports parents and caregivers worldwide. As part of this, we had several discussion groups. The first focused on us as parents and grandparents; what do and what don't we enjoy about parenting, what is difficult or challenging, how is parenting different in NZ than in your own country, what are ways of rewarding and disciplining children that we know of or use.

Our next pre-workshop discussion focused on challenging behaviours in our children, with a series of pictures showing various behaviours from younger children talking back and not listening to smoking and drinking in teenagers. Pictures were discussed one at a time; what is the problem behaviour, have we had this experience as parents, how did we or how could we deal with this?

After the workshop, the discussion groups discussed what was learnt, how we felt about the information presented, will it change the way we parent/grandparent, and how?

Challenges of multi-lingual small group discussion based lessons:

- Working with presenters
- Using strengths based model

Some of the challenges we faced included working with presenters to develop presentation styles that suit multi-lingual, refugee-background learners; breaking down the information into manageable chunks, allowing time for translation and using a variety of methods to engage the learners rather than a presenter-focused lecturing style.

The second major challenge was actively following a strengths based model; that is starting with previous learner knowledge and strengths and cooperatively building on this as a group, rather than focusing on weaknesses. With the parenting workshop, the potential existed for the learners to feel as though their parenting methods were not appropriate or successful. Remuuna will discuss how we sought to overcome this tendency and strategies we used to actively engage learners in sharing their thoughts and experiences and some of the insights we gained which we will implement next term.

Establish a foundation for a strengths-based model - starting with learners' ideas.

- For example; sharing parenting experiences. (eg rewarding good behaviour by taking child to the park or playing with child)

In the discussion group, we would start with asking a question and encourage learners to think of their own past experiences. For example “How do you reward good behaviour?”, elicited the responses: I take my child to the park when she’s been good, I play with my child to reward him. This then led to further discussion of how this is helpful, what appropriate rewards for which type of behaviour, etc.

Strategies to engage learners in discussions:

- Asking focused questions. (for example “What is one thing you learned from the workshop which you can use in your daily life?” rather than “What did you learn from the workshop?”)
- Using a token system: each learner receives 3 tokens (eg buttons) which they have to use each time they have a speaking turn.
- Think-Pair-Share: pose the question, learners think quietly for 1 minute, discuss with a partner for 2 minutes, then share with group. (One important consideration was seating arrangement, making sure learners were pairing with someone who speaks the same language and there are no relational issues.)

Making sure the questions are very specific and limiting the responses meant that the learners had a better understanding of the question and would stay more focused and on topic.

The token system led to greater learner involvement with even normally very quiet learners engaging, thinking and participating. It also avoided the problem of a few dominant speakers.

One issue that developed from the think-pair-share strategy was that in one of the cultural groups we discovered that it was inappropriate for people with certain relationships to discuss certain topics. The knowledge of the bilingual assistants is crucial in these instances.

Challenges faced by the Bilingual Assistants:

- Keeping the discussions focused
- Giving examples: learners focusing on the examples rather than the general topic.
- Avoiding repetition of ideas
- Dealing with negativity or advice giving

Going off topic was a common issue, as we learned to better focus our questions this improved. Good preparation and understanding of the topic by the bilingual assistants helped with this.

One instance of focusing on examples was an example of a parent asking a child to carry a heavy laundry basket up the stairs as an illustration of how we can sometimes ask a child to do something that is too difficult for them, rather than focusing on the topic the learners would respond with “I don’t ask my child to do this”. We found that when we limited giving examples and do so only when learners really did need them this improved.

One learner would give a response which would then be echoed by others. Asking for unique, new responses led to deeper thinking and further ideas.

Sometimes a learner would share a personal example, which another learner would immediately offer advice for. The bilingual assistants needed to be aware of this and steer the discussion away from advice giving.