Developing teenagers' speaking skills in English through Storyline

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It was interesting to see how much we actually learnt. This was one 15 year old's reflection on the six-week project in which three classes of Swedish year 9 pupils had taken part. For two lessons of 60 minutes each week, the learners created and took on the roles of characters in a Storyline based on the young adult fantasy novel, *Gone,* by Michael Grant.

Introduction. As a teaching approach, Storyline is well-established in first language teaching in Scandinavia. Originating as topic work in Scotland in the 1960s (Bell and Harkness, 2013), the narrative framework of Storyline provides a meaningful context for working with the content and learning objectives of **a country's national** curriculum. Learners, in small groups, work on open key questions, which structure and drive the story, and which are linked to curriculum content. Today, the Storyline approach is established not only in educational contexts ranging from pre-school to higher education, but also in second language teaching, where it can be seen as an example of task-based learning and teaching (TBLT). **The tasks that pupils work on can be adapted to support weaker learners and challenge the more proficient.**

From the extensive literature on TBLT, Ellis (2018) identifies four characteristics of task: a) the primary focus is on meaning, b) there is some kind of communicative gap to be bridged, c) the learners use their linguistic and other resources and d) there is a clearly defined outcome. What Storyline brings to TBLT is the story framework, which creates a forum for a variety of communicative tasks, linked to the syllabus for English. The tasks are instrumental in developing the story, with products from one part often forming the basis for tasks later on.

With its characteristic features of creativity, communication, collaboration, problem-solving and variety, the Storyline approach fits well with the Norwegian national curriculum and its ambition of providing inclusive education. **For example, the new curriculum LK20 highlights the**

importance for learning of pupils working together, and with tasks that require them to think creatively and allow them to express themselves and their learning in a variety of ways.

Background to the Storyline project. The results of a previous Storyline study with 11-13 year olds (Ahlquist, 2013) found that, apart from learning many new words to do with sustainability, which was the topic of the story, many of the young learners displayed an increased willingness to speak in English as time went on. In evaluating their progress at the end of the project, they were asked to give themselves advice for future English lessons, and a recurring theme was: *Dare to speak more English!*

As teachers of adolescents know, getting them to speak in English is not always easy. Research finds that as learners approach puberty, they become self-conscious (Enever, 2011). Adolescent learners are in the process of developing a self-image, and the opinion of peers has a great impact on this. A teen's greatest classroom fear is often loss of face, either through making mistakes and being laughed at, or being publicly corrected by the teacher. One way to avoid this is to say as little as possible, or preferably, nothing at all. In one or two extreme cases, this was the situation in the project classroom. A learner's reluctance, or even refusal, to speak in the language classroom, has a negative impact on learning. Research finds that cognition and emotions both play an important role in the learning process, and according to Swain (2016), cannot be separated.

Researchers who have studied a phenomenon known as *willingness to communicate* (WTC) have found that a learner's level of verbal participation is not a fixed personality trait, but something which is influenced both by their relationship with others in the classroom and the task (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels, 1998; Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015). This is encouraging, suggesting that in the right circumstances, learners who are insecure and reluctant may be willing to engage in speaking. This was the case in my earlier study, previously mentioned, and it can be linked to one particular feature of Storyline, which the young learners highlighted as a favourite: working in the same small groups.

The project which is the subject of this article was originally planned for one class, but owing to interest from two other teachers, ultimately involved 60 pupils. Neither the teachers nor pupils had ever worked with the Storyline approach before, but the teachers and I planned the work together. At the teachers' request, the pupils were grouped across the three classes, which had not happened before, and the groups were homogenous in proficiency level: higher proficiency together, average proficiency together and the lowest proficiency learners together. This was also contrary to how groups were normally formed. The situation raised interesting research questions: if a familiar classroom environment promotes speaking, then what would happen when learners were grouped with those they did not know? Further, what would happen when the learners were grouped with those of a similar proficiency, particularly

in the case of the less proficient, who would have no one of greater ability in English to depend on? These questions were investigated using observation notes, pupil questionnaire and teacher interview.

The Storyline project. The novel, Gone, opens as follows: on the stroke of 10 a.m., in a California high school, everyone over the age of 14 disappears. It is soon clear that everyone in the community over that age has also disappeared. The teens have to take on adult responsibilities in trying to ensure that society continues to function. A threat to them comes in the form of pupils from a private school.

To start up the project, the teachers left the classroom. Some pupils reacted by running around in the corridors, others by catching up on social media. A small number looked for the teachers, and they discovered envelopes of instructions on the teacher's desk in each room, along with a printed extract of the first chapter of the book. They were asked to read it and compare how the pupils in the novel reacted to how they themselves had done when the teachers disappeared. This formed the basis of the opening discussion and setting of the scene. The pupils were then divided into groups of four and created their own teenage character. The key questions on which they worked over the six weeks were as follows, **and we can note that the first three connect with the interdisciplinary theme of public health and life skills in LK20, and the fourth with science:**

1. Who are you and what is your superpower?
   (The book's teenage characters have superpowers.)
2. What are the qualities of a good leader?
3. How should we organize our society?
4. What can we do about the water problem?
5. How can we deal with the spider attack?
6. What is your story?

While the task of the first and last questions respectively was to write about the character and retell what had happened in the character's story, the other questions were tackled through group discussion, resulting in some form of written text – an action plan in the case of key questions 4 and 5. In key question 2, the learners brainstormed the attributes of a good leader, wrote and recorded a speech. These were then voted on by the pupils, and the two groups with the most votes became the leaders, taking responsibility in key question 3 for allocating tasks to the others, based on the characters' superpowers.

While there was initially to be a dual focus on writing and speaking, at the beginning of the third week, the teachers decided to concentrate on speaking. This was partly because writing tasks were taking too much time, but mainly because more learners were becoming increasingly willing to participate in the group discussions.

Results and discussion. In terms of learning, the pupils noted, for example, *cooperation, discussing, confidence, new words,* but also *nothing*. These **words** can be connected with the respective likes and dislikes as shown in Table 1 below. First, it is notable that the same things can appear in both columns. This is in line with classroom observations, that some pupils threw themselves enthusiastically into each task and had animated discussions, while others did not. It could be seen in the seating arrangements: some sat around a table facing each other, or clustered around the computer where all could see it, while others sat in a row, where only one could see the computer. Where the learners had participated with enthusiasm, their self-reported learning was about developments in speaking, learning new words and occasionally in writing. Learners who had not participated actively were, regardless of proficiency, more likely to answer that they had learnt nothing.

Table 1: The pupils' reported likes and dislikes. The most interesting findings concern the pupils' responses to group work. While almost no one expressed a dislike of group work, some would have preferred to work with those they knew. According to the teachers, the less proficient were anxious about exposing their lack of ability in English to those they did not know. However, regardless of proficiency level, for some pupils, working with new people meant they were not carrying baggage – a label, being known as this or that type of person or possessing a particular level of ability. One girl, who normally refused to speak in class, thanked the teacher for grouping her with girls outside her own class.

In general, the more proficient seized the chance to work with new people. At the same time, while some annoyed their group by not taking things seriously, for most it was more than an opportunity to get to know others, it was a challenge: they were not automatically the best in the group. Being grouped with others at the same level also meant they no longer had to drive the group's efforts, explain, or have to feel, as one put it, that the weaker learners were stupid. The more proficient groups were self-starters, using discussion and collaborative effort to produce a text. However, the least proficient, lacking someone to lead, would sit and

Likes	Dislikes
working with other classes	working with other classes
working in groups	working with new people
solving problems/meeting challenges	it went too fast
variety	too much writing
different way of working	chaotic
story	story

wait for the teacher's help, unless one of the members took the initiative to get the task done. In one such group, a learner reported: `My group were terrible, I had to do everything´.

What emerged from the study was the need for more detailed instructions for the less proficient, less demanding tasks as the pupils could not work quickly enough, more support from the teachers and having someone of slightly higher proficiency in the group. Additionally, there is need for more regular review of learning. The teachers had been in the habit of writing learning objectives for their lessons on the whiteboard. In the project they did not do this, and were curious to see how well the learners would be able to identify the learning objectives themselves. However, this happened only at the end of the project, and it was not enough. There is a risk with Storyline

that the fun can obscure the learning, and there is a hint of this in the quotation at the beginning of the article. The word `actually´ indicates surprise on the part of the learner.

Conclusion. It is true to say that while some of the learners enjoyed the role-playing elements of the Storyline, others found it unrealistic. While some liked the story, others found it boring. Some took the opportunity to incorporate knowledge from other parts of the curriculum (such as science when they devised an action plan for the water problem), and others did not. There is no one way of teaching which will suit everyone. At a fundamental level, some learners thrive in group work; others prefer to work alone. Some prefer the excitement of something new, others, the safety and structure of their textbook. Regardless of personal preferences, some commented that in a few months

they would be in new schools and forced to speak in front of and work with strangers, and that the project was very useful practice for this.

After the project, one of the last things the learners did that term was to prepare and present a topic of their choice in front of their class. One of the pupils had previously refused to speak in class – the girl who was grateful for being grouped with those she did not know. After successfully giving the presentation, she said to her teacher: *I was good!* She had been, her teacher told me, the best, in fact. It was an emotional moment for both of them, and perhaps no better way for the teenage learner to end compulsory schooling in English before heading into the next stage in her education.

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