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**Using Collaborative Teaching and Storybooks in  
Linguistically Diverse Junior Infant Classrooms to  
Increase Pupils' Contributions to Story-Time Discussions**

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## **Abstract**

This paper documents the outcomes of implementing a station teaching, oral language intervention in a linguistically diverse, junior infant classroom, in west county Dublin. Storybooks and collaborative (co-)teaching were employed to foster repetitive shared reading and to develop vocabulary, grammar and conversation skills, with the goal of enhancing whole-class story-time discussions. Pupils' oral language contributions were monitored pre-, during and post-intervention, using a contributions checklist, and the study found that ELLs' contributions grew during and post-intervention. Findings highlight the value of storybooks and co-teaching in junior infant oral language development. Resources and lesson planning templates are depicted and evaluated for future use.

## **Key Words**

Classroom participation, oral language, English as an Additional Language, English Language Learners, collaborative teaching, station teaching, action research

## **Introduction**

Irish demographics have changed significantly in recent decades (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2016), which contributes greater linguistic diversity to Irish primary classrooms (Murtagh & Francis, 2012). Pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL), otherwise known as English Language Learners (ELLs), represent 11% of all primary school pupils, a figure which grows in urban areas (CSO, 2016). Having experienced a lack of confidence, knowledge and professional development opportunities in the area of EAL as a primary school teacher, the first author of this article observed that junior infant ELLs were less likely to contribute to whole-class discussions than their native English-speaking peers. Consequently, an oral language intervention was established to support this mainstream classroom with 50% ELLs and 50% native speakers. Oral language activities were derived from current research (Beauchat, Blamey & Walpole, 2009; Massey, 2004) and adhered to language policy and curricula in Irish primary education (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2017a; 2017b; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2015). The mainstream teacher-pupil ratio was reduced by three collaborating colleagues who facilitated station teaching within the classroom. Storybooks were a focal resource at each oral language station, aiming to increase the contributions of ELLs during whole-class story-time discussions. Action Research (AR) was employed as a methodology, which facilitated continuous intervention adaptations relative to pupils' needs and teachers' observations. This paper depicts how this project informed meaningful change in a unique classroom context. Study findings include an evaluation of the intervention and its tools, evidence of increased story-time contributions from ELLs, and details on the experience of

collaboration among teachers. The article concludes with recommendations for current practitioners working within linguistically diverse classrooms.

## **Research Background**

### ***Why EAL and Why Now?***

Young minority language pupils tend to have lower scores in their oral language performances than their native speaking peers (Dockrell, Stuart & King, 2010). The number of preschool and primary school pupils speaking a foreign language in the home has increased by 62% and 106% respectively in Ireland (CSO, 2016). These figures increase the likelihood of pupils who are at-risk of academic failure (August & Shanahan, 2006) in Irish primary schools, thereby strengthening the need for efficient oral language instruction to support ELLs.

### ***Why Oral Language?***

Oral language development prioritises listening and speaking skills (Morrow, Roskos & Gambrell, 2016). Research has proven a strong connection between early oral language skills and subsequent literacy achievements (Murphy, 2014), which solidifies the importance of oral language junior infant classrooms. ELLs require English oral language proficiency to participate fully in Irish classroom activities, which has been identified internationally as a key instructional challenge due to the language barrier that ELLs present in the early years (Kim, 2008). This strengthens the rationale for this oral language intervention.

### ***How to Develop Oral Language***

Language acquisition represents the inherent development and growth of language (Clark, 2016), “a staggering feat” (Saxton, 2017, p. 3) for all language learners, particularly ELLs. The current study focuses on usage-based models of language acquisition, whereby communicative incidents result in language use and learning (Tomasello, 2000), which encourages pupils to actively use language to support their language learning. Previous Irish studies have highlighted the value of enabling children to talk and be heard, resulting in improved oral language competence, coherency and confidence (Cregan, 2012). Nonetheless, the knowledge necessary for teachers to facilitate oral language development is “complex and multi-faceted” (ibid, p. 83), inviting the primary author to delve further into the literature on how to support oral language development within the mainstream classroom to increase ELLs’ pupil contributions to whole-class discussions. These strategies are discussed below.

### ***Primary Language Curriculum: Responding to Linguistic Diversity***

Language policy and curricula have been reviewed recently in Ireland, emphasising foreign languages in education (DES, 2017a) and the integration of languages in primary classrooms (NCCA, 2015). English and Irish are the two official languages of instruction here (Carson, McMonagle & Murphy, 2015) and are now integrated for instruction using the *Primary Language Curriculum (PLC)*. This curriculum recognises additional languages within schools, develops positive dispositions towards language, provides progression steps to support differentiation and enables children to explore, receive and create meaning through language (NCCA, 2015). However, teachers have communicated confusion around the practicalities of integrating languages within the classroom (NCCA, 2018). Therefore, it is important to highlight that ELLs have common underlying language proficiency, which supports cross-linguistic skills from one language to another (Cummins, 2001). The *PLC* recognises this and thereby seeks to integrate language learning by fostering common, language objectives in our increasingly multilingual classrooms (NCCA, 2015).

### ***Co-Teaching and Storybooks – A Solution?***

ELLs require mainstream education, programme coherence, and instructionally focussed collaboration among teachers (York-Barr, Ghere & Sommerness, 2007). Therefore, ELLs need inclusive (DES, 2011), coherent (York-Barr et al., 2007) and collaborative (Travers, Balfe, Butler, Day, Dupont et al., 2010) instructional practices. Irish schools now have autonomy in the deployment of special education teachers depending on children's needs (DES, 2017b), which highlights the possibility of inclusive, coherent and collaborative instruction for ELLs in the form of co-teaching.

Co-teaching reduces teacher-pupil ratios (Ken-Maduako & Oyatogun, 2015), teacher workload (Tasdemir & Yildirim, 2017) and the isolationism of the specialist teacher (Travers et al., 2010). Despite this, there has been an over-reliance on withdrawal language support in Irish classrooms (Murtagh & Francis, 2012), thereby emphasising the need for inclusive classroom practices (Day & Prunty, 2015). Co-teaching supports mainstream teachers in their teaching of linguistically diverse pupils by delivering small-group instruction within the mainstream setting (Travers et al., 2010), thereby facilitating professional development (Mandel & Eiserman, 2016) and enhancing pupils' learning experience (Tasdemir & Yildirim, 2017) through inclusive instruction.

Storybooks are a “powerful medium for language learning” (Conteh, 2012, p. 80), which validates their use in any language learning context. Shared reading of storybooks occurs in most international, early childhood classrooms (Beauchat et al., 2009; Flynn, 2016). Interactive book reading develops early literacy skills in children from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998), while repetitive reading of the same text supports vocabulary accuracy (Penno,

Moore & Wilkinson, 2002). In this study, storybooks are used as a mechanism for teaching vocabulary, grammar and communication skills to junior infant ELLs to enhance their oral language skills and to enable them to better access the *PLC* (NCCA, 2015).

### ***Why vocabulary, grammar and conversation skills?***

Young ELLs, who do not retain the same vocabulary size as their monolingual peers, risk experiencing future academic difficulties, since knowledge of vocabulary contributes significantly to pupils' literacy acquisition (Jalongo & Sobolak, 2011). Vocabulary instruction relies on "questioning, clarifying, repeating, pointing to words, supplying examples, and providing 'child friendly' definitions in words that a young child can understand" (ibid, p. 424). Using visual aids also helps ELLs to acquire new vocabulary and improved English skills (Britsch, 2010). These findings influence the design and development of vocabulary resources for this intervention.

Young children's language learning is contextualized and therefore difficult to divide into single dimensions of vocabulary and grammar. Consequently, storybooks become an appropriate medium for vocabulary reinforcement and the teaching of multiple grammatical constructions (Spencer, Petersen, Restrepo, Thompson & Gutierrez-Arvizu, 2019). They scaffold the use of narrative language, with many popular childhood tales adopting repetitive phrases for interaction (Conteh, 2012). Repetitive read-aloud aids vocabulary development, listening and reading comprehension, and understanding of syntax in both primary and secondary languages (Hickman, Pollard-Durodola & Vaughn, 2004). Such findings influence the design and development of grammar resources for this intervention.

Pupils who participate in rich conversations with adults during their initial school years achieve greater academic success in later years (Dickinson & Snow, 1987), which promotes conversation with adults during instructional periods. Conversational encounters between teachers and students are "planned educational events", essential to oral language acquisition (Massey, 2004, p. 230). Both language and communication skills are central to pupils' capacity to engage in social relationships and participate in learning experiences (Dockrell & Marshall, 2015), thus strengthening the need for a conversational element within mainstream and EAL teaching, which forms an integral component of this intervention.

### ***Station Teaching***

This occurs when a small group of pupils rotate from one learning centre to the next engaging in a variety of tasks at each station (Mohnsen, 2008). Co-teachers provide support at each station and are

advised to integrate speaking, listening, reading and writing, while demonstrating different forms of thinking and learning, to foster proficient learners and thinkers (Nations & Waite, 2013). Co-teaching provides unique, diverse and specialised teachers, models co-operative and collaborative skills and ensures undivided teacher attention which results in more time being spent on task (Thousand, Villa & Nevin, 2006). Teachers enjoy shared workload, professional growth and partnership, while pupils experience broader experiences, complementary styles and teaching dynamics (Cullen, Gaskell, Garson & McGowan, 2009). This supports pupils who respond differently to teaching methods based on learning preferences and aptitudes (Paschler, McDaniel, Rohrer & Bjork, 2009). Small-group settings further enhance ELLs' listening and speaking skills, as the individual needs of pupils are identified and met, while their opportunity for participation is maximised. It also establishes a community of practice (McNiff, 2002) among collaborating teachers to enhance the teaching and learning experience for all involved. Thus, the proposed intervention ensues.

### **Study Design and Methodology**

This study aimed to:

- a) Promote inclusion during whole-class discussions by enabling ELLs to contribute to story-time.
- b) Develop an oral language intervention to further support ELLs in their contributions to discussions.
- c) Build upon school's existing co-teaching practices by devising, implementing, and evaluating an oral language intervention.

The research question was “how can the mainstream class teacher collaborate with the SEN team to support the teaching of oral language for pupils who speak EAL?”

### ***Research Context***

This research was conducted in a co-educational, non-DEIS, Catholic primary school in Dublin, whose vertical school structure accommodated mixed-gender from junior infants to first class, and girls only from second to sixth classes. The research was set in a junior infant classroom of 16 pupils, ranging from four years and eight months to five years and eight months. There were six girls and ten boys, 50% of whom spoke EAL. The first author noted that teaching language was the greatest challenge of a class with these characteristics. Aside from mainstream differentiation, ELLs were further supported by the existing Special Education Team (SET) through in-class and withdrawal support. Teachers taught phonics, vocabulary and writing twice a week through station teaching. The

primary author prioritised the need for oral language instruction, so the SET collaborated to develop oral language stations to support ELLs' speaking and listening abilities.

### ***Action Research***

Action Research (AR) is practitioner-based research, which evaluates personal, professional practice against core values to assess whether daily practice reflects core principles (McNiff, 2002; Whitehead, 2018). Identifying core values enables practitioners to identify whether they are true to such values or a 'living contradiction' (Whitehead, 2018) through conflicting practice. AR is advantageous as it enables reflective teaching practice (Suter, 2006), improved teaching practice and outcomes (McNiff, 2002), and the development of critical friendships within the workplace (Whitehead, 2018), which leads to a "community of enquirers" (McNiff, 2002, p. 25) which contribute developmental change to classroom practice. Participatory AR empowers groups of individuals to improve their lives and ignite social change (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012), thereby deeming AR an appropriate pursuit for the participants of this study, who sought to enhance ELLs' oral language development for greater contributions to whole-class discussions.

### ***Project Implementation***

This intervention was implemented over a five-week period between term breaks, in January and February of 2017. Five books were chosen as weekly focal teaching points (see table 1).

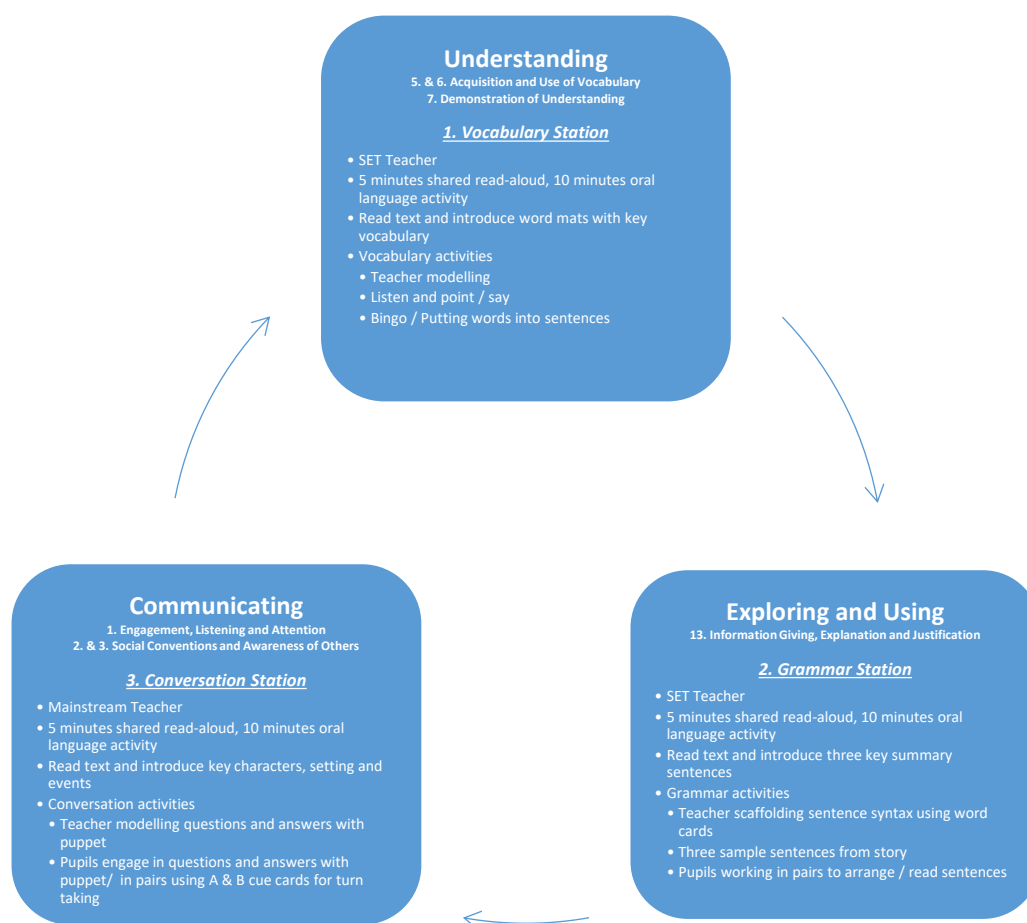
*Table 1: Books used throughout the study.*

<b>Week</b>	<b>Book</b>	<b>By</b>
1.	Goldilocks and the Three Bears	Janet Brown
2.	Snow White and the Seven Dwarves	
3.	Puss in Boots	
4.	The Gingerbread Man	
5.	We are Going on a Bear Hunt	Michael Rosen

Co-teaching lessons (45-minutes) occurred every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. There were three, colour-coded, mixed-ability groups (two groups of six and one group of four), known as the blue, red and yellow groups. Three teachers read the same part of a text to the groups at each station before focusing specifically on vocabulary, grammar and conversation activities respectively. Each group of children rotated every 15 minutes to the next teacher, with the most capable group, as determined by teacher observation and Primary School Assessment Kit results, beginning at the conversation station. The children were exposed to the same text three times during the lesson,

facilitating repetitive, familiar reading. Each of the language activities correlated with the elements of the *PLC* (see figure 1), which include understanding, communicating and exploring and using language (NCCA, 2015).

*Figure 1: Intervention-in-Action and Corresponding Primary Language Curriculum Elements*



Weekly differentiated lesson plans for each group determined the content and activities for that particular group (see table 2). Lesson plans were colour coded and placed on a clipboard with a pen. Rotating group leaders were tasked with bringing the clipboard from one group to the next so teachers could see the group's lesson plan.

*Table 2: Weekly Intervention Resources*

<b>Planning</b>	3 x Lesson Plan Template 3 x Clipboards 3 x Pens
<b>Books</b>	3 x Storybooks (table 1)
<b>Stations</b>	<b>Days 1 - 3</b>
<b>Vocabulary</b>	6 x word mats Cubes

<b>Grammar</b>	3 x sentences cut into word cards
<b>Conversation</b>	Puppet Cue Card A & B
<b>***The content of resources changed each day to correlate with the text that had been read***</b>	

Participating teachers wrote observations onto each template after each session with each group. An observation key with abbreviations quickened the note-taking process. ELLs were labelled A – H on the templates and teachers noted how these pupils performed at each station. Collaborating teachers prepared new lesson plans and resource activities every Friday, based on that week’s observations and reflections.

### ***Data Collection***

This multi-method study captured learning from a range of research tools, including practitioner reflective journal, lesson plan observations, multiple baseline design graphs and interviews with colleagues. Such tools yielded both qualitative and quantitative data which were triangulated to establish a broad picture of project outcomes. Checklists established the quantity of oral language contributions made by ELLs pre-, during and post-intervention. The practitioner reflective journal, lesson plan observations and interviews with co-teachers qualitatively determined the success of designing, developing and implementing the intervention.

Ethical procedures included seeking university approval and gaining entry through the school’s Board of Management. As this was a classroom-based intervention, all pupils were invited to participate in the study, both independently and with their parents’ permission, therefore resulting in convenience sampling. Participating teachers consented to project participation. All participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage during the research process, yet this never occurred. Data was collected in a consistent manner, which contributes to the validity and credibility of this small-scale study.

### ***Practitioner Reflective Diary***

The researcher’s reflective journal highlighted initial concerns and provided a map to inform an appropriate course of action to ensure meaningful, values-based teaching practice. It recorded thoughts throughout the research process, providing hard copy evidence of evaluative and amended practice. The diary proved professional growth, noting ineffective practice, the process of changing that practice and the outcome of practice change.

### ***Lesson Planning Observation***

The lesson planning template included an observation section to facilitate daily teacher notes about intervention strengths/weaknesses and target pupils' progress. These observations informed the following week's lesson plan, so that by week five, the optimum operation of the intervention was established.

### ***Interviews***

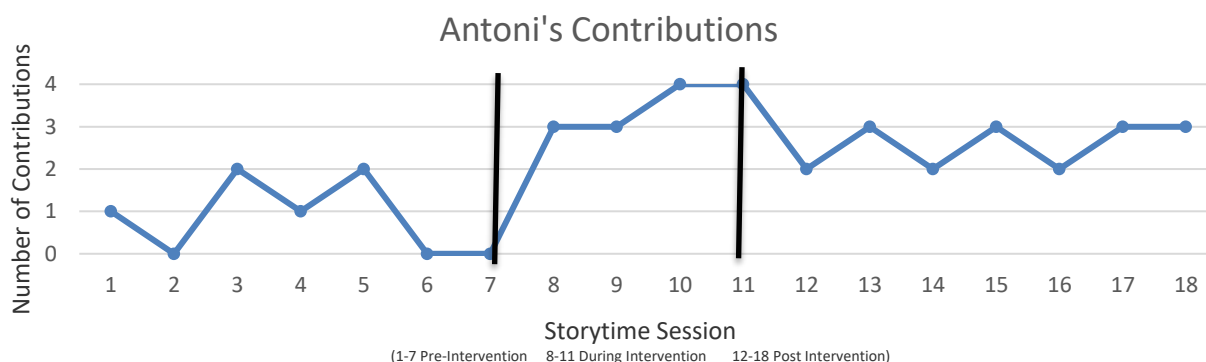
Participating teachers were interviewed following intervention implementation, acknowledging the importance of fostering a 'community of enquirers' within the AR process. Colleagues commented on intervention strengths that remained independent to the researcher's reflective diary assertions. The interviews were recorded in the researcher's classroom, transcribed, and checked to ensure validity. Colleagues' identities were protected through pseudonyms.

### ***Multiple Baseline Graphs***

All eight ELLs (3f, 5m) were monitored during story-time discussions pre-, during and post-intervention to quantify their oral language contributions and participation levels. Contributions were noted on a checklist and plotted on multiple baseline graphs to illustrate pre-, during and post-intervention contributions. Graphs 1 – 8 below illustrate ELLs' oral language contributions. Graphs 1 – 4 represent the weakest cohort of ELLs who were withdrawn for language support, while graphs 5 – 8 demonstrate the remaining cohort of ELLs. Pseudonyms are used to protect pupils' identities.

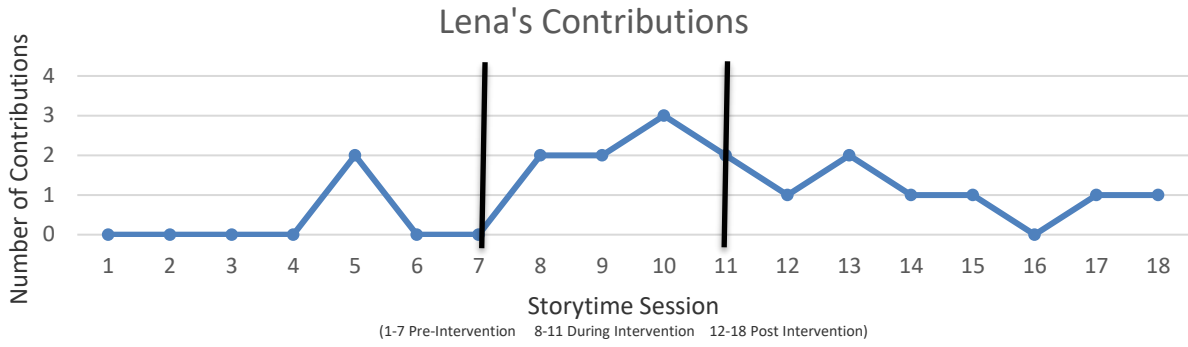
#### ***Graph 1.***

##### **Antoni's oral language contributions.**



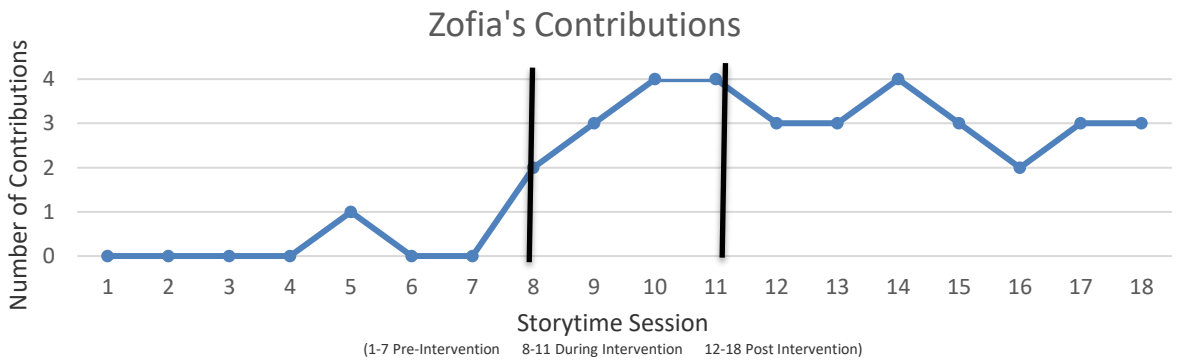
#### ***Graph 2.***

##### **Lena's oral language contributions.**



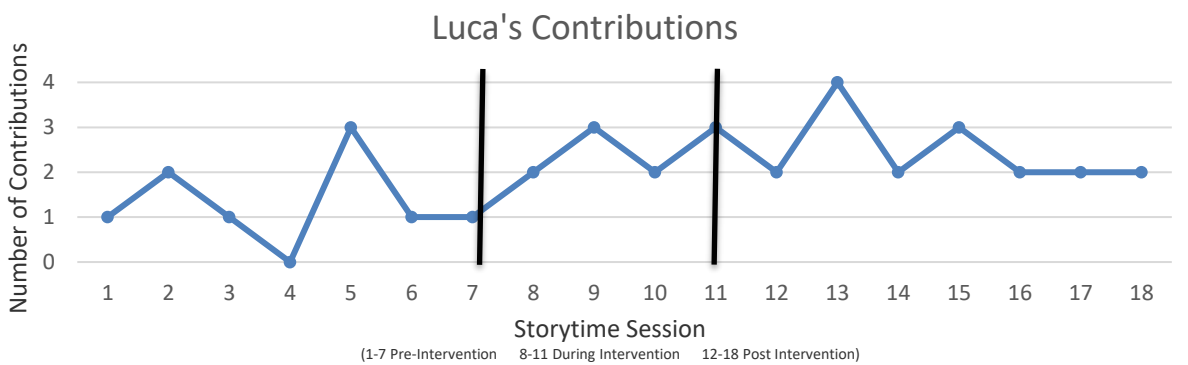
**Graph 3.**

**Zofia's oral language contributions.**



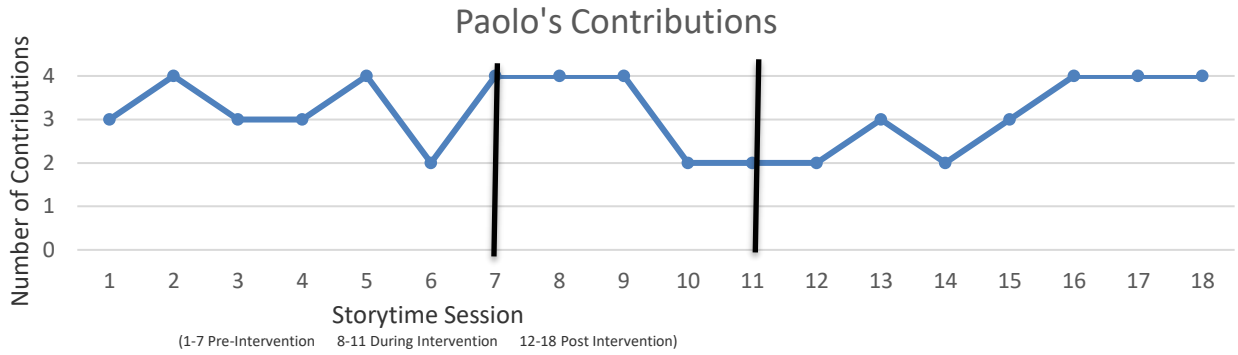
**Graph 4.**

**Luca's oral language contributions.**



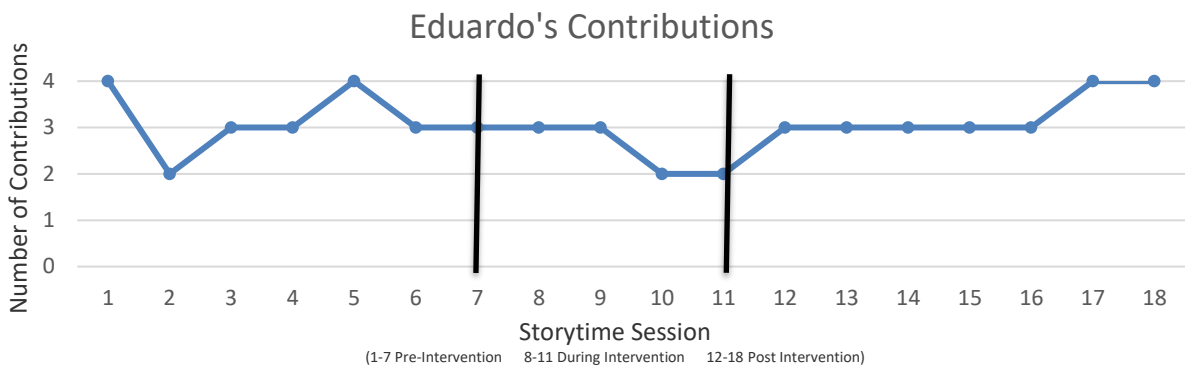
**Graph 5.**

**Paolo's oral language contributions.**



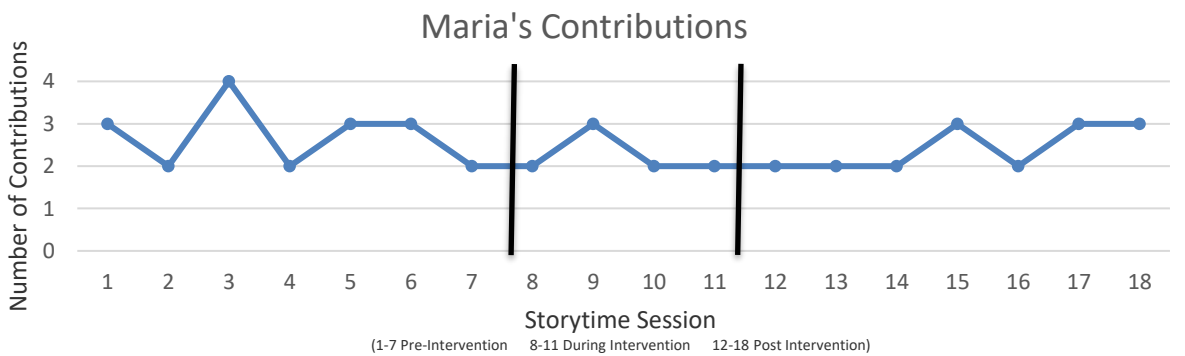
**Graph 6.**

**Eduardo's oral language contributions.**



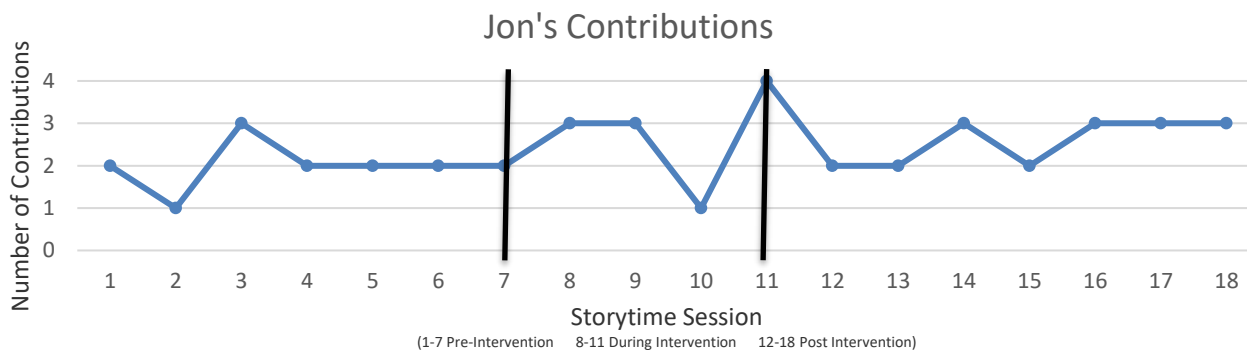
**Graph 7.**

**Maria's oral language contributions.**



**Graph 8.**

**Jon's oral language contributions.**



Detailed discussions of graph findings are conducted later in this article.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

Data analysis was conducted in three strands, including the analysis of lesson plans, pupils' contributions and teacher interviews, while the practitioner reflective diary contributed to each of these analyses. Qualitative data was prepared, explored and reduced (Mertens, 2010) by the researcher in consultation with co-authors. Thematic analysis steps were employed for the reflective diary, lesson plans and teacher interviews to identify emerging themes from the research project, which included familiarisation with the data, generation of codes for the data, searching, reviewing and refining themes and subsequent write-up of findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The oral language contributions made by pupils pre-, during and post-intervention were mapped onto multiple baseline graphs for analysis. Baseline data on pupils' contributions and the practitioner reflective diary outlined the need for explicit oral language teaching in this junior infant classroom prior to intervention implementation. Lesson plan notes and the practitioner reflective diary provided an opportunity for ongoing, reflective practice, unique to this classroom's environment during the intervention. Collegial interviews, post-intervention oral language contributions and the practitioner reflective diary provided data to determine the overall success of the intervention. These data sources were triangulated to identify emerging themes, which included the need for change, an evaluation of intervention tools, project success and the experience of becoming a community of enquirers through collaborative practice.

### ***The Need for Change***

The researcher noted that there were varying competencies among pupils' *oral language ability and confidence*<sup>1</sup> in the opening weeks of the journal, stating that *some are very competent, others non-verbal* (reflective journal). The researcher observed how some ELLs communicated happily with one

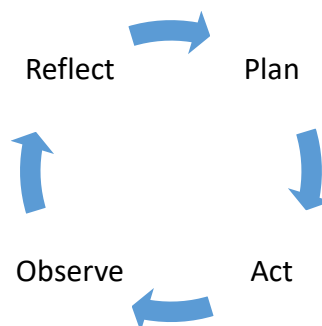
<sup>1</sup> All italicised texts throughout this paper are direct quotes from reflective diary or interview transcripts.

another during playtime using their native tongue, and recorded embarrassment at finding it *unusual to hear their voices*, which challenged her core values of inclusion and equality. She wrote; *This should not be strange for me, surely I should know what they sound like? If not, where is the equal opportunity to learn? Is this inclusive practice? My core values are strained in this instance* (Reflective journal excerpt). Unequal levels of oral language competence within the classroom and subsequent varying contribution levels challenged the core values of equality and inclusion respectively. This powerful moment highlighted an emerging problem for the researcher. Quantitative data of pre-intervention baseline contributions confirmed ELLs' lack of contributions and the urgent need for change. This represents AR's first stage, when practitioners assess their core values in line with existing practice (McNiff, 2002). A contradiction of values instils the need for change, the first core finding of this intervention.

### ***Intervention Tools***

Intervention tools included storybooks and lesson planning templates to aid explicit oral language teaching. Collaborating teachers identified, and instigated, necessary changes at each station to ensure project success. This practice was consistent with Lewin's AR cycle (1946).

*Figure 2: Lewin's Reflective Cycle (1946)*



### ***Storybooks***

This five-week intervention investigated the use of five well-known tales as resources at each station (Table 1). The research findings advise teachers to:

*Use big books with colourful illustrations.* The big book characteristics appeared to be *effective and engaging* (reflective diary) and were commended by teacher participants. One quoted that *the storybooks were big and colourful to keep pupils' attention and the language was appropriate* (interview), while the other stated that they had *lovely illustrations in them*, that they were *a good size* and *felt that they engaged the children's interests* (interview). Therefore, storybook size and illustrations were reported to be effective, engaging and appropriate for the intervention. This

correlates with existing research which supports the use of picture books and engaging illustrations (Ramos & Mattix-Foster, 2017).

*Evaluate storybooks from all perspectives.* The researcher utilised books that were available within the school for the entirety of the intervention. The following extract is taken from week 5 of the intervention;

*The biggest thing that has struck me from today's intervention is the book change...it ticked every box necessary for EAL pupils – repetitive, predictable language, clear illustrations and a simple, easily followed theme. I regret not discovering and utilising similar storybooks before now – yet this epitomises the essence of action research (Reflective journal).*

Despite researcher scepticism, participating pupils conveyed their favour of books used earlier in the intervention, which highlights the importance of evaluating stories from recipients' perspectives to determine resource appropriateness. Furthermore, recent research has confirmed that fairy-tales are particularly effective in early childhood classroom (Conteh, 2012), which can inform storybook choice for linguistically diverse classrooms.

*Use the same stories to teach English and Irish.* The researcher noted an increase in pupil contributions pre-intervention (week 5), in which the pupils engaged with a story that had been taught through Irish in that same week (see graphs 1-8). All ELLs either remained consistent or increased their oral language contributions in that week. This demonstrates the potential of dual-language stories in infant primary education to increase pupils' oral language contributions during story-time discussions, which correlates with international research findings (Spencer et al., 2019). Therefore, Irish primary educators can integrate storybooks in both English and Irish for increased participation levels, while also adhering meaningfully to the *PLC* (NCCA, 2015).

#### *Lesson Planning Templates*

A lesson planning template was carefully devised to ensure efficient and organised intervention implementation. Analysis of these templates post-intervention highlights that their development is a collaborative process, an ever-changing cycle and identifies their many advantages. Template adjustments from start to finish are analysed below to depict the optimum template for future intervention implementation.

*Necessary collaborative traits.* The researcher requested collegial input on the lesson planning template prior to the intervention. One *colleague and critical friend suggested including A-H*

*within the observation section to keep meaningful records of target pupils (reflective journal).* Another colleague commended the collaborative planning process, outlining how *both teachers were very organised and very like-minded to myself so we worked really well together* (interview). Therefore, shared planning, organisation, cohesion and team-work emerge as important factors for co-teaching of this intervention. This corresponds to existing findings in the field of co-teaching (Paschler et al., 2009) and warrants consideration in future oral language interventions.

*An ever-changing cycle.* The lesson planning template changed significantly between intervention weeks one and five. *As we went along, the activities were slightly tweaked to accommodate our suggestions* (interview). *My colleagues and I have noted and implemented ongoing necessary improvements; namely the development of the lesson planning template which includes new sections for observation and new observation abbreviation keys* (reflective journal). The Notes/Necessary Changes section on the lesson plans furnished an opportunity for reflective teacher records. The abbreviations on the observation key were commended as being *very effective for recording notes on pupils during the station and facilitating it to become a working document as opposed to having to write lots of information in a short period* (interview). By the end of the intervention, both collaborating colleagues and the researcher agreed that *there were really no further changes to make* (interview).

*Advantages of the lesson planning templates.* Colleagues' comments regarding the lesson planning templates are quoted below, demonstrating the advantages and appropriateness of the lesson planning templates.

*Table 3 Colleagues' comments about the lesson planning template*

Interview 1	Interview 2
<i>-easy to use</i>	<i>-accurately evaluated the pupils' participation and learning</i>
<i>-met assessment needs</i>	<i>-effective and time efficient abbreviations</i>
<i>-tracked progress from session to session</i>	<i>-a working document</i>

The comments indicate that the lesson planning template meets the practical, progressive, assessment and user-friendly needs of oral language teaching.

*Necessary developments and changes in the lesson plan content.* The changes that were made to each station from the start to the end of the intervention are depicted below.

*Table 4 Comparison of lesson planning template content from weeks 1 to 5*

<b>Station</b>	<b>Vocabulary</b>	<b>Grammar</b>	<b>Discussion</b>
<b>Week One</b>	Average of 15 new words on word mat	Between three and five long sentences with basic punctuation	Questions relative to the specific text
<b>Week Five</b>	Average of seven new words on word mat	Maximum three short sentences with mixture of punctuation	Generic and repetitive questions relative to any text Commended use of puppet

### *Graph Analysis*

#### *Pre-intervention Graph Analysis*

*Withdrawal pupils are least likely contributors.* Paolo, Eduardo, Maria and Jon were more expressive pre-intervention than Antoni, Lena, Zofia and Luca. The latter were being withdrawn from the mainstream classroom for further language support. This practice has been prevalent in Ireland (Murtagh & Francis, 2012), despite its negative effects on pupil self-esteem and class cohesion (Travers et al., 2010). While EAL assessments confirmed that Antoni, Lena, Zofia and Luca did not have adequate language proficiency to contribute to discussions, it is possible that their self-confidence was affected by withdrawal practices, deeming co-teaching for inclusion a worthy pursuit within the classroom setting.

*Beneficial to use dual-language, universal stories.* Lena and Zofia were non-contributory throughout most story sessions pre-intervention, except for week five. *The Three Little Pigs* fairy-tale was read on this occasion and correlated with Irish lessons from that same week which focused on the Irish equivalent of the story, *Na Trí Mhuicín*. Antoni made attempts to contribute in Irish according to the contributions checklist, highlighting his desire to contribute but lack of English language proficiency to participate in previous and subsequent story sessions. Furthermore, it is notable that all ELLs either remained consistent or increased their oral language contributions during week five, which deems the integration of dual-language Irish and English storybooks a likely oral language enhancement approach for linguistically diverse junior primary classrooms.

#### *During-intervention Graph Analysis*

*Increase in oral language contributions during intervention.* The AR project implementation phase is represented by story-time sessions 8-11 on the aforementioned graphs. Antoni, Lena, Zofia and Luca contribute more during this phase of the intervention. Usually accustomed to withdrawal support, they appear to become better at participating in whole-class discussions during the intervention, regardless of language competency. This confirms growing confidence among ELLs for whole-class participation.

*Increased contributions from some ELLs reduce others'.* Paolo, Eduardo and Jon's contributions decrease by story-time session 10, which can be attributed to Antoni, Lena, Zofia and Luca becoming more contributory to story-time discussions at this point of the intervention. Such increased participation results in fewer contributions from others, given time constraints for each story-time session. Tomasello (2000) argues that language use facilitates language learning, so teachers must find new ways for pupils to engage in story-time discussions to ensure all pupils are afforded equal opportunities for participation.

### ***Post-intervention Graph Analysis***

Several conclusions can be drawn when analysing contribution levels pre, during and post-intervention.

*Greater contributions to story-time discussions during and post-intervention.* The percentage of pupils making contributions during all story time sessions was at its highest both during and post-intervention, with 87.5% of ELLs contributing orally to discussions during and post-intervention (see table 5). This suggests that the intervention engaged and sustained pupil participation during and post-intervention.

*Table 5: Findings based on analysis of all graphs*

	Pre-intervention	During intervention	Post-intervention
<b>Pupils making contributions in all story-time sessions</b>	50%	87.5%	87.5%

*Greatest number of contributions per pupil occur during the intervention.* When each pupils' contributions are accounted for individually, 50% make the greatest number of contributions during the intervention (see table 6). This is the highest proportion of pupils contributing across each stage of the AR project, thereby confirming the intervention's ability to heighten pupil contributions.

*Table 6: Findings based on analysis of all graphs*

	Pre-intervention	During intervention	Post-intervention
<b>Most contributions made per pupil</b>	37.5%	50%	12.5%

*Recommend balance of both in-class and withdrawal language support.* Lena emerged as non-contributory post-intervention (see graph 2). Her surge in contributions during the project implementation might indicate that the intervention had been helping her to contribute more to discussions. However, the interview conducted with the EAL teacher surmises;

*I suppose being the EAL teacher, what I would have found is that, eh, some of the pupils that I withdraw, in particular [Lena], I would have seen more progress within a smaller group in relation to her oral language skills (interview).*

This indicates that despite this project's ability to engage, raise, sustain and support pupil participation, this model is non-prescriptive to all ELLs. Teachers must identify pupils' needs and offer both in-class and withdrawal support structures to ensure fair and equitable language support (Fleming, 2016).

### ***Collaborative Practice and Becoming a Community of Enquirers***

McNiff outlines how teachers should work together during the AR process to "become a community of enquirers" (2002, p. 25), which is evident throughout this intervention. Interview data outlines how *we were all working together, eh, on a common purpose with the children's oral language needs in mind (interview)* and *we worked really well together (interview)*. This research found that dialogue, dissemination and reflection were important aspects of becoming a community of enquirers.

*The importance of dialogue among colleagues.* This research relied on collaboration with colleagues and critical friends as the lesson planning template was consistently discussed and revised. The reflective journal documents the collaborative dialogue; *my colleague and critical friend suggested... and my colleagues made the following suggestions for change in next week's set of stations (reflective diary)*. Both colleagues commented on dialogue process, stating *as we went along, the activities were slightly tweaked to accommodate our suggestions (interview)* and *once I suggested it, it was ready for the next session, eh, and that was really useful (interview)*. This constant conversation surrounding the intervention informed ongoing developments that assist its efficient implementation in latter weeks.

*Sharing the experience.* Collegial interviews confirmed that co-teaching was very enjoyable (interview). One colleague commended the process, stating; *I'd certainly be bringing this idea to the rest of the staff, in particular within our Literacy Games intervention that we have in Junior Infants (interview)*. This coincides with reflective notes made within the researcher's journal; *One of my colleagues suggested incorporating it into the existing Literacy Games intervention which implies that this project has been a worthwhile and effective intervention (reflective diary)*. This collaboration associates the wider school community, building on DES recommendations for EAL practice within schools (DES, 2011).

*The role of reflection on, and evaluation of, the lesson planning templates.* As the intervention progressed, the researcher and colleagues became reflective and noted their thoughts on lesson plans. The researcher wrote; *I am delighted with the enthusiasm of my co-teachers who have voluntarily recorded comments on lesson planning templates noting the strengths and weaknesses of the lessons* (reflective journal). One colleague commended the template as a *working document* (interview) which deems the process an ever-changing and reflective one, where adjustments are inevitable. This coincides with Larrivee (2010) who acknowledges that “becoming a reflective practitioner means perpetually growing and expanding, opening up to a greater range of possible choices and responses to classroom situations” (p. 301). This intervention facilitated the professional growth of three colleagues exploring a new way of teaching oral language in an inclusive and collaborative manner.

### **Limitations**

This intervention was developed in response to the researcher’s personal AR values of equality and inclusion, which may not correlate to all practitioners’ values. The consistent reflections on, and amendments to, the intervention, make it difficult to replicate in another setting, which has implications for reliability and validity. This intervention was designed for a class with numbers significantly smaller than the national average (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2018), which limits the generalisability of the results as the sample cannot claim to be representative. The intervention capitalised on the existing SET support, and the timetables being afforded to the class, within a school in which a strong culture of co-teaching was already established through other in-class interventions i.e. Literacy Games, Lift-Off Literacy and Mata sa Rang. The interviews were conducted by the researcher which may have affected teacher participants’ responses. Furthermore, data collected on pupils’ contributions merely recorded the number of contributions made, and did not log the quality or accuracy of such contributions. Therefore, increased contributions from ELLs post-intervention are not indicative of a flawless intervention, but rather a single step in the direction of fostering a more inclusive learning atmosphere that promotes contributions regardless of language competency. It is also important to note that gains recorded post-intervention are not necessarily a product of project implementation and could be attributed to several other factors i.e. maturation in the first year of schooling and the development confidence as the year progressed. Nonetheless, an increase in pupil participation post-intervention is indicative of an increase in language use (Tomasello, 2000), which lies at the core of this research rationale.

### **Recommendations**

There is scope for further research in collaborative oral language teaching. The *PLC* establishes progression milestones for pupils to achieve over the course of their primary education (NCCA, 2015), so the co-teaching approach not only maximises the autonomy afforded to schools with human resources deployment (DES, 2017b), but also provides the grouping platform necessary to differentiate language instruction for individual pupils' abilities. The proposed intervention is current and relevant in an Irish context.

### ***Educational Policy Recommendations***

#### *Tailor in-class and withdrawal support to pupils' needs*

DES (2017b) advises schools to deploy resources based on each pupil's individual learning needs. This research employed in-class station teaching, which resulted in most pupils increasing their oral language contributions following the intervention. However, one pupil performed better during withdrawal sessions (interview), so consideration should be given to pupils' performances, within in-class and withdrawal settings, to determine an appropriate course of action to support learning needs.

#### *Promote collaborative practice*

Nonetheless, collaboration is a "professional necessity" rather than an "optional extra" (Travers, 2011, p. 475). Interventions such as Lift-Off Literacy in Irish primary schools have "empowered" teachers to collaborate to support at-risk pupils and strengthen the value of station teaching (Higgins, Fitzgerald & Howard, 2015). This invites policy makers to encourage collaboration among teaching practitioners. The findings documented in this article deem the proposed intervention a suitable tool for implementing the *PLC*, adhering to SET provision, while also maximising the skills of all collaborating teachers to attain highest academic outcomes within an inclusive learning environment. Three colleagues collaborated to evaluate and adjust the lesson plans, content and conduct. All teachers involved enjoyed the co-teaching of oral language while striving to achieve a common goal. It is highly recommended that co-teaching features among mainstream and support teachers in Irish primary schools to ensure the delivery of high-quality instruction.

### ***Teaching Practice Recommendations***

This study recommends reflection, joint selection of resources among stakeholders, flexible lesson planning and using the final week's lesson plan sample if implementing this intervention in the future (Appendix A).

### *Reflection*

Larrivee (2010) acknowledges that unfamiliar practice “leads to a struggle and ... conflict” (p. 302), outlining the challenge of diverting from current teaching practice. Nonetheless, every class presents new challenges for teaching practitioners, which necessitates change to meet arising needs. Reflection has been a key component in the development of this oral language intervention and is recommended for future oral language instruction.

### *Joint selection of resources*

Catling (2013) advocates for confidence in, and inclusion of, the children when devising lesson content. The researcher was surprised by conflicting evaluations of book suitability, as her criticism of the lack of appropriate resources was challenged by both pupils and colleagues, who felt that the books were appropriate, mainly due to their big book characteristics and colourful illustrations. Future practitioners should seek collegial and pupil opinion when reviewing a resource.

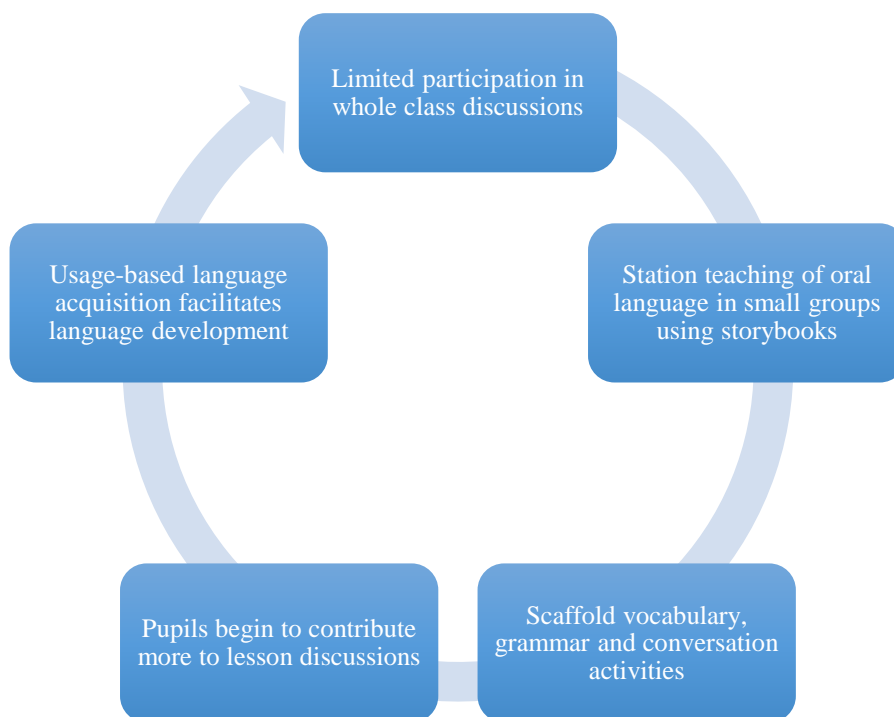
### *Lesson Plan Flexibility*

It is important to be “flexible” with lesson planning and to “open new avenues where this is potentially beneficial to do” (Catling, 2013, p. 448). The lesson plans from this intervention were consistently adjusted in response to ongoing, reflective practice. Therefore, regarding the lesson plan as a working document is recommended to ensure that necessary changes can be made over the course of the project implementation. This will allow the template to best suit the context and needs of future action researchers.

## **Conclusion**

Figure 3 below outlines the framework that has been generated as a result of this oral language intervention. It recognises the value of station teaching in facilitating small-group instruction and raising pupils’ oral language contribution levels, thereby enabling language usage which contributes to subsequent language development.

*Figure 3: Intervention cycle of increased participation (Merrins, 2017)*



This framework can support the implementation of oral language interventions in linguistically diverse, junior infant classrooms. This study set about addressing the issue of varied oral language participation within a linguistically diverse junior infant classroom. This problem was evident by ELLs' lacking contributions. The researcher sought to equip ELLs with oral language skills to become more participatory within whole-class discussions. Small-group instruction within a station teaching setting facilitated this through a more inclusive and conversational classroom atmosphere. Purposeful reflection on lesson plans, storybooks and co-teaching were integral to the development of the intervention. As participants' interaction levels increase, usage-based language acquisition theories unite to highlight the potential for language development through heightened participation levels. This study, despite being small-scale, was a definite step forward for increased contributions to whole-class discussions by the pupils who participated. This inspires all teaching practitioners to address issues raised within their classrooms through the simple acts of pro-activity, reflection and collaboration.

*Ní neart go cur le chéile.*

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Appendix A

**Oral Language Story Stations**

<b>Subject:</b>	English				<b>Strand:</b>	Oral Language				<b>Class:</b>	Junior Infants			
<b>Stations</b>	<b>Vocabulary</b>				<b>Grammar</b>				<b>Conversation</b>					
<b>Element</b>	<i>Understanding</i>				<i>Exploring and Using</i>				<i>Communicating</i>					
<b>Learning Outcome</b>	5. & 6. Acquisition & Use of Vocabulary  7. Demonstration of Understanding				13. Information Giving, Explanation and Justification				1. Engagement, Listening and Attention  2. & 3. Social Conventions and Awareness of Others					
<b>Progression Milestone</b>	<b>5&amp;6. a</b>	<b>C.M.</b>	<b>5&amp;6. b</b>	<b>C.M.</b>	<b>13.a</b>	<b>C.M.</b>	<b>13.b</b>	<b>C.M.</b>	<b>1.b</b>	<b>C.M.</b>	<b>1.c</b>	<b>C.M.</b>		
	recognises people and objects and uses appropriate gestures to refer to an object, linking actions with objects.		uses single words and common phrases and understands common pronouns and prepositions.		chooses objects of reference to show understanding and to share meaning, and extends meaning by linking objects of reference.		tells what they are doing and names and describes familiar people, toys and activities.		attends for longer to interesting or familiar stimuli including: actions, gestures, tone of voice, conversations and stories read aloud, and joins in with rhymes, songs and games.		takes part in conversation using appropriate eye-contact while attending to body language, gestures and tone of voice and uses these cues with context to understand new words/phrases.			
	<b>7.b</b>	<b>C.M.</b>	<b>7.c</b>	<b>C.M.</b>					<b>2&amp;3. b</b>	<b>C.M.</b>	<b>2&amp;3. c</b>	<b>C.M.</b>		
follows one-step instructions and shows understanding in a variety of contexts by attempting to imitate what they have seen and heard.		shows understanding of familiar story content, characters and vocabulary, and of factual accounts and step-by-step processes.						speaks audibly and coherently at appropriate volume, interacting over a short number of turns with individuals and beginning to communicate readily with others in class.		initiates and takes turns in conversation with peers, small groups and familiar adults.				

<b>Story: We're Going on a Bear Hunt by Michael Rosen</b>												
<b>Date: 13<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> February 2017</b>												
	<b>Vocabulary</b>				<b>Grammar</b>				<b>Conversation</b>			
<b>Lesson 1</b> Stop at "Squelch squerch"	Bear, hunt, grass, over, under, through, river, mud				We're going on a bear hunt. What a beautiful day! We're not scared.  <i>Discuss and arrange these sentences.</i>				Where are we going? <i>We're going on a bear hunt.</i> What kind of day is it? <i>It's a beautiful day.</i> What sound does the grass/river/mud make? <i>Swishy swashy/ Splash splosh/ Squelch squerch</i>			
<b>Observations</b>	<b>D</b>		<b>H</b>		<b>D</b>		<b>H</b>		<b>D</b>		<b>H</b>	
<b>Lesson 2</b> Stop at "IT'S A BEAR!"	Forest, snowstorm, cave, tiptoe, shiny nose, furry ears, goggly eyes.				We can't go over it. We can't go under it. We've got to go through it! <i>Discuss and arrange these sentences.</i>				Where are we going? <i>We're going on a bear hunt.</i> What sound does the forest/snowstorm/cave make? <i>Stumble trip/ Hooo Wooo/ Tiptoe Tiptoe</i>			
<b>Observations</b>	<b>D</b>		<b>H</b>		<b>D</b>		<b>H</b>		<b>D</b>		<b>H</b>	
<b>Lesson 3</b> Stop at "We're not going on a bear hunt again!"	Front door, upstairs, downstairs, shut, covers.				Oh no! What is that? We're not going on a bear hunt again! <i>Discuss and arrange these sentences.</i>				Where do we have to run back through? <i>Back through the cave, snowstorm, forest, mud, river, grass,</i> What happens in the end? <i>We're not going on a bear hunt again.</i>			
<b>Observations</b>	<b>D</b>		<b>H</b>		<b>D</b>		<b>H</b>		<b>D</b>		<b>H</b>	
<b>Notes/ Necessary Changes</b>												
<b>Observations Key:</b>												
NC: No Contribution			SC: Some Contribution			GE: Good Effort			NMA: Needs More Attention			
IM: Improved			DC: Developing Confidence			PC: Poor Concentration			CMTD: Contributing More To Discussion			
ROHO: Relies On Hearing Others			CGC: Contributions Grammatically Correct			UPHR: Using Phrases Heard Repetitively						