Why won’t they speak English?

Guidelines for teachers on using pairwork to enhance speaking in the EFL primary classroom

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Introduction

In this booklet, we focus on the powerful impact of pairwork speaking practice activities in English language teaching in primary classrooms. Rooted in the principles of Competence, Agency, and Relatedness (CAR), as described by Ryan and Deci in 2000, this guide offers practical insights and a structured approach to help teachers foster a positive classroom environment where young learners can develop their speaking skills with confidence. Finding the balance of competence, agency, and relatedness is the cornerstone of effective learning, and in the pages that follow, we provide guidelines designed to empower both teachers and students. Through research-based strategies and real-life examples from primary classrooms in Egypt, this booklet aims to equip teachers with the tools they need to create a classroom atmosphere where every child feels capable, empowered, and valued, thereby enhancing their English language speaking proficiency.
Ryan and Deci (2000) described three ingredients necessary for all learning:

1. **A belief in one's own **COMPETENCE **I can do this!**

2. **A sense that one is choosing one’s own behaviours **AGENCY **I make my own decisions!**

3. **A feeling of RELATEDNESS to other people **I belong and I am valued!

Learning occurs only with the combination of all three ingredients = competence + agency + relatedness

The learner feels competent AND
They exercise choice [agency] AND
They can relate to and are valued by others.

CAR principles to enhance speaking in the EFL primary classroom using pairwork

Classroom pairwork speaking activities provide an excellent way to help young learners practise and develop speaking skills as pairwork allows them to enjoy their Competence, Agency and Relatedness (CAR).

In this booklet, we illustrate how teachers can use dialogues from students’ course books for classroom pairwork speaking activities that support young learners’ CAR.

The following framework of 7 STEPS supports teachers to use pairwork speaking activities by drawing on children’s Competence, Agency and Relatedness (CAR).

What we mean by Pairwork is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1:
A drawing illustrating children engaged in a pairwork speaking activity. Notice that all pairs are speaking at the same time and that the teacher is observing the children’s work quietly and from a distance to ensure that the children are not intimidated by the presence of the teacher.
Seven simple steps to improve speaking English through pairwork

خطوات بسيطة لتحسين تعلم التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية من خلال العمل في ثنائيات

STEP 1:
Teacher starts by demonstrating a simple dialogue (that the children can read in their books, for example) in front of the whole class.

[NOTE: Make sure that all children can see the dialogue written down and are familiar with new vocabulary and can say the dialogue with some ease.]

خطوة ١:
يبدأ المعلم/ المعلمة بعرض محادثة بسيطة (مثال: محادثة من الكتاب الذي يدرسها الأطفال).

ملاحظة: يجب التأكد أن جميع الأطفال يمكنهم الإطلاع على المحادثة بشكل مكتوب، كما يجب التأكد من معرفة وقدرة الأطفال على قراءة الكلمات الموجودة في المحادثة.

STEP 2:
Teacher models the dialogue with one of the young learners, in front of the whole class. Repeat this step once or twice.

[NOTE: Don’t always use your best pupils to do this! Give others a chance and then praise them, to boost their sense of Competence and make them feel they can speak English.]

خطوة ٢:
يقرأ المعلم/ المعلمة المحادثة مع أحد الأطفال أمام الفصل. تكرر هذة الخطوة مرة أو اثنين.

ملاحظة: يفضل أن يختار المعلم/ المعلمة الأطفال الأقل تحصيلا ويثني على مشاركتهم، فذلك من شأنه أن يعزز إحساسهم بالكفاءة وقدرتهم على التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية.

STEP 3:
Teacher provides help to the chosen child only when the child seems uncomfortable (e.g. help the child with saying difficult words only if they are struggling).

[NOTE: There is no need to correct all mistakes as it might undermine the child’s sense of Agency and Competence. Instead, you could repeat the sentence with the correct pronunciation and praise the child for her/his work.]

خطوة ٣:
يقدم المعلم/ المعلمة المساعدة للطفل فقط عند الضرورة (مثال: مساعدة الطفل في قراءة الكلمات الصعبة إذا عجز عن قرأتها).

ملاحظة: لا توجد حاجة لتصحيح كافة الأخطاء لأن هذا من شأنه أن يقلل من إحساس الطفل بالكفاءة والاستقلالية. بدلاً من التركيز على تصحيح الأخطاء بشكل مباشر، يمكن للمعلم/ المعلمة تكرار الجملة بالنطق الصحيح، والثناء على الطفل/ الطفلة لمشاركتهم.
STEP 4:
Divide the children into pairs.

[NOTE: Before they start speaking together, check that everyone knows who their partner is e.g. by asking each child to be either A or B. Every pair must have an A and a B. Children can hold up their hands to show their AB pairs.]

STEP 5:
Teacher invites them to practise the dialogue in pairs. All pairs talk at the same time, to provide maximum speaking and practice time for all the children.

[NOTE: The children may sit or stand to talk in pairs. Don’t worry that the classroom is noisy! A noisy classroom is a learning classroom.]

STEP 6:
Teacher goes around the class and observes the pairs from a distance.

[NOTE: Observing children during pairwork is a very sensitive task. Do not let your children think that you are assessing them. Do not correct them! This may inhibit their Competence and Agency as well as Relatedness to other children. Provide support only when they call you to help them.]

STEP 7:
When all the class has practised speaking, praise them for their work.

[NOTE: You could show that you value all children’s work by sharing, for example, how one pair used new and interesting words in their dialogue.]
How to choose pairs

Pairing students together is a very sensitive task. It is essential to pair each child with someone they can easily work with and feel at ease to ask for help. For example, pairing children who have different competences in English may not be beneficial as the less competent child may feel humiliated. Figure 2 below illustrates two boys engaged in pairwork.

أختيار الأقران للعمل في ثنائيات هو أمر غاية في الدقة ويتطلب عناية خاصة. من الضروري أن يعمل كل طفل مع زميل / زميلة يستطيعون التواصل معهم وطلب المساعدة منهم. فعلي سبيل المثال: وضع أطفال في ثنائيات من الذين تتفاوت مهاراتهم اللغوية بشكل كبير، قد لا يكون أمر مفيد وقد يشعر الأطفال الأقل مهارة بأنهم أقل كفاءة.

رسم 2 يوضح صورة لطفلين أثناء العمل في ثنائيات، يبدو من الرسم أن الطفلين يشعرون بالسعادة ويستطيعون تقديم الدعم لبعضهم البعض.

Figure 2
A drawing illustrating how pairs collaborate and offer support to each other.
Ask the children to choose who to work with, therefore supporting their Agency and Relatedness. A child will usually select a partner they trust and feel comfortable to work with. This will allow them to learn and improve their English.

Pairs can also choose which role in the dialogue they want to start with. Children choose the role that is easier or more interesting for them. Children can also change some words in the dialogue and use words they know or would like to practise (and you can provide a range of alternative words on the board if necessary). This provides good support for Agency and makes the activity more fun.

أطلب من الأطفال أن يختاروا زملاءهم الذين يستطيعون العمل معهم فهما من شأنه أن يدعم إحساسهم بالاستقلال والترابط. سيختار الطفل زميل/ زميلة يثق فيهم ويشعر بالراحة معهم.

كما يمكن للأطفال أيضا إختيار أي الدور في المحادثة للبدأ بها. سيختار الأطفال الدورات الأسهل أو الأكثر إمتاعا بالنسبة لهم.

يمكن للطلاب تغيير بعض الكلمات في المحادثة بكلمات أخرى يودون التدرب عليها. يمكن للمعلم كتابة مجموعة من الكلمات على السبورة ليختار منها الأطفال. كل ذلك يدعم استقلالية المتعلم ويجعل العمل في ثنائيات أكثر تنوعا ومنتجة.
Through our research carried out in primary schools in Egypt, we investigated how pupils experience learning to speak English during classroom pairwork activities. We also invited suggestions from these pupils on how to improve their experience of learning to speak English (Elhawary and Hargreaves, 2023).

Children identified factors related to peers and teachers that were not helpful for their learning during classroom pairwork speaking activities.

### A. Negative factors related to peers during pairwork

1. Peer ridicule when a child made a mistake.
2. A child feeling less competent than other children in class.
3. Peers’ impatience and reluctance to support each other.

Figure 3 below provides a vivid illustration of how peer ridicule during a pairwork speaking activity could obstruct learning. In this drawing, the child drew herself in tears while the other children in class were laughing at her because she failed to answer correctly. The child wrote, ‘I feel afraid when I don’t know how to answer in front of my classmates, and everyone starts laughing at me. Then, I feel broken!’

Feeling less competent, in comparison to other peers, was another source of peer pressure that children underscored as negatively impacting on their learning to speak English. Figure 4 illustrates a child in tears because she could not provide her partner with the correct answer and therefore perceived herself to be ‘less’ competent, and of a lower status than her partner. The child wrote, ‘Rehana, my classmate, asks me about the meaning of a word and I whisper quietly to myself that I don’t know the answer’. This will obstruct her learning to speak English.

A third example of peer pressure is illustrated in figure 5 below. In this picture, a child drew herself stuttering and unable to speak English correctly because her partner showed impatience, rather than support, and urged the teacher to find her another partner who could speak English faster. The child drew herself stuttering as a reaction to this pressure and feeling less competent than her partner. This will obstruct her learning English.

It is interesting to note that the teacher in this picture showed impatience as she was urging the child to speak rather than noticing and assessing the child’s need for support.

The above three drawings strongly suggest that for pairwork to enhance speaking, teachers need to, directly and indirectly, adapt practices that place value on participation, collaboration and language practice rather than competition and language accuracy and correctness. Teachers need, for example, to encourage rather than criticise children’s English speaking and to make intelligent decisions about when and how to correct errors.

**Figure 3.** A picture showing peers laughing at a child who could not speak correctly.

**Figure 4.** A picture showing a child in tears for not knowing the correct answer.

**Figure 5.** A picture showing a child stuttering and unable to speak.

ماذا اخبرنا الأطفال عن العمل في ثنائيات؟

لقد تجرينا من خلال البحث الذي قمنا فيه في مدارس المرحلة الابتدائية في مصر، خبرات المتعلمين الصغار عند تعلم التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية من خلال أنشطة العمل في ثنائيات، كما سعى البحث إلى الوقوف على مقتراحات هؤلاء المتعلمين حول كيفية تحسين تلك الخبرات لدعم تعلمهم التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية (2003). Elhawary and Hargreaves.

أ. عوامل متعلقة بالآقرين لها تأثير سلبي على التعلم من خلال العمل في ثنائيات

هناك ثلاثة عوامل من نوعها ضعف الأقران، 1) ضعف الأقران، عندما يركز الطفل على النطق، يشعر بالكفاءة أقل من الأطفال الآخرين في الفصل، 2) قلة صبر الأقران وإحجامهم عن دعم بعضهم البعض. يقدم الشكل 1 رأيه آلاء لأنها توضح أنها تحترم سترشدا من تجربتها الإنجليزية أثناء نشاط التحدث الثنائي، في هذا الرسوم، رسمت الطفلة نفسها نسجها وهي تبكي بينما كان الأطفال الآخرين يضحكون عليها لأنها فشلت في الإجابة بشكل صحيح، وكتبت الطفلة: "أشعر بالخوف عندما لا أعرف كيف أجيب أمام آقراي، وبدأ الجميع في الضحك على أني لا أعرف أي شيء في الكلمة، وثم أشعر بالخوف.' هذا يعترض التعلم.

من المثير للاهتمام أن المعلمة في هذه الصورة أظهرت نفاد صبرها لأنها كانت تحث الطفلة على التحدث بشكل آخر من ملاحظتها، وتمكين الطفلة للعمل، يبدو أن الصورة تشير إلى أنه من أجل أن تعزز التحدث من خلال العمل الثنائي من المهم دعم الأطفال بالكفاءة والاستقلالية والتعاون، وهذا يعترض التعلم.

الشكل 1 صورة تظهر طفلة تكبح على طفلة لعدم صبر الآقرين.

كانت الشعور بضعف الكفاءة مقارنة بالأقران الآخرين، مصدرًا آخر لضعف الأقران، يوضح الشكل 2 طفلاً تكبح عليهما لأنهما لا أعرف كيف أجيب أمام آقراي، وبدأ الجميع في الضحك على أني لا أعرف أي شيء في الكلمة، وثم أشعر بالخوف. هذا يعترض التعلم.

الشكل 2 صورة تظهر طفلة تكبح على طفلة لعدم التحدث بشكل صحيح.

تعكس رسومات الأطفال أهمية الاهتمام بالمتعلم بقيم التعاون والمشاركة والاشتراكية اللغة، وقارنة بالمارسات الصغيرة التي تدعم التوازن والأدلة اللغوية، فعلى سبيل المثال، فإن الصور تعكس أهمية التفاعل في التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية بدلاً من التفاعل اللغوي بشكل منكير، وكذلك تيبر كيف ومتى يتم تصحيح الأخطاء اللغوية.

الشكل 3 صورة تظهر طفلة تكبح على طفلة لعدم التحدث بشكل صحيح.

د. تعكس رسومات الأطفال أهمية الاهتمام بالمتعلم بقيم التعاون والمشاركة والاشتراكية اللغة، وقارنة بالمارسات الصغيرة التي تدعم التوازن والأدلة اللغوية، فعلى سبيل المثال، فإن الصور تعكس أهمية التفاعل في التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية بدلاً من التفاعل اللغوي بشكل منكير، وكذلك تيبر كيف ومتى يتم تصحيح الأخطاء اللغوية.

الشكل 4 صورة تظهر طفلة تكبح على طفلة لعدم التحدث بشكل صحيح.
B. Negative factors related to the teacher during pairwork

1. Children’s fear of making mistakes in front of the teacher.
2. Failing to gain teacher’s approval that the child was ‘good’.

Many of the children’s drawings illustrated classroom situations during which teachers’ actions were perceived to trigger anxiety and fear. The most frequently illustrated situation was that of fear of making mistakes and thus being reprimanded by the teacher or failing to gain teacher’s approval and certification that a child was ‘good’. Children’s illustrations revealed how children’s participation was often curtailed by the prospect of being unable to provide the correct and expected ‘model’ response. This emphasises our point that correction of mistakes is not helpful during pairwork, where fluency, confidence and just sheer practice are sought rather than accuracy.

Figure 6 below shows a teacher monitoring a pairwork speaking activity. The child described her feeling about the teacher’s monitoring by saying: ‘... when the teacher is around and I say one word incorrectly, I start to feel nervous, and I feel that the teacher will think that I am useless’.

Figure 7 shows the teacher urging the child to speak in English and the child is in tears for fear of the prospect of the teacher’s reprimand. The child commented: ‘I feel very afraid, and I stutter because I think that the teacher will shout at me and hit me. Then I cannot speak, and I tremble’.

The drawings of the children seem to strongly reflect competitive classroom contexts. In these contexts, pupils tended to be concerned with proving themselves to the teacher and to other pupils in class. Fear of making mistakes and thus appearing less competent than other pupils in class and being subjected to the teacher’s reprimand and peer ridicule could curtail pupils’ participation and eventually constrain their ability to develop speaking skills in English. A child who is in tears, or stuttering or who feels broken, as illustrated in these drawings, would find it difficult to engage in the lesson, or to learn and grow. To avoid such obstructed learning, please attend to the advice given in our seven steps, above.

Figure 6. A picture showing a teacher monitoring pairwork.

Figure 7. A picture showing a child in tears for fear of the teacher’s reprimand.
What children told us about pairwork

As children told us about pairwork, they reported several negative factors related to the pairwork method. Children mentioned that pairwork can cause anxiety and fear, especially when they fear making mistakes. They also noted that children may avoid participating in pairwork because they believe their mistakes might lead to criticism and punishment from the teacher. Children described feeling nervous and stressed when they fear making mistakes, as it might lead to negative feedback from the teacher. They also mentioned that the teacher might show preference towards certain students, which could make other students feel left out.

Children also mentioned that pairwork can create a competitive environment, where children feel pressure to perform better than their classmates. This can lead to anxiety and fear of making mistakes, which might affect their participation and confidence in the language acquisition process. Children reported that they feel anxious and stressed when they are not sure if they are performing well in pairwork, as they fear being criticized or punished by the teacher.

Children also highlighted the importance of having a supportive and encouraging environment, where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities. They mentioned that a positive and supportive classroom environment can help reduce anxiety and fear, and encourage children to participate in pairwork.

In conclusion, children told us that pairwork can have both positive and negative effects on their learning. It can be a valuable tool for language acquisition, but it also requires careful consideration of the classroom environment and teaching strategies to ensure that children feel comfortable and motivated to participate.