Level 4 LOTE - Taking Risks in Talking Italian

PEEL in Practice: 1300 ideas for quality teaching
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This is part of a longer article available on the PEEL database PEEL in Practice.

Getting students to feel confident to 'have a go' in talking Italian is a constant problem. Having helped reintroduce a language at our school in the last couple of years, I am now confronted with students’ disappointment at not being able to speak fluently.

- 'What's the point of this? I can't even speak in Italian!?
- 'We did this last year and I can't even remember the words!

As a NIT (Non-Instructional Time) language teacher working with students in Years 3 to 7, I find helping students to remain focussed on the task is a key to effective language learning.

…How can I encourage students to take risks in talking in Italian?
How can I build a 'sense of progress' so that students can feel they are achieving something?

…With the Middle Primary classes I decided to use a thematic approach that linked with class topics and allowed for student input and ideas. Students indicated a preference for a cultural focus which slightly disheartened my attempts to get them talking in Italian! A research task provided a good opportunity for students to pursue a topical area of interest (volcanoes in Italy), use the Internet as a research tool and present their work in a variety of ways. I was happily surprised that what was predominantly a cultural project presented many relevant opportunities for talking in Italian. Finding Internet sites in Italian, looking at place names and even incorrect spelling on websites had students using Italian without realising it. Suddenly, I was hearing students interacting with their peers in Italian as I observed them working.

Encouraging students to talk in Italian (or any other language) requires a classroom environment that supports risk-taking. I asked a group of Year 4/5 students how they thought they could get better at speaking Italian. Most of their responses were positive, indicating they thought they could (and would like to) get better at speaking Italian. These responses reflected my own beliefs about effective language learning:
'Maybe if we talked in small groups and the teacher said it first.'
'Having more than 1 lesson a week.'
'Practice. Having little conversations. When the teacher says it first I feel more confident.'
'It would make it easier if everyone had to say something in Italian so people wouldn't feel embarrassed.'

One strategy I implemented to encourage risk-taking was to set aside at least 10-15 minutes of each lesson for games. Students see this as something to look forward to and I think feel much less threatened to 'have a go'. Language-based games such as 'Who wants to be a millionaire' in Italian provide a great link to students' own
experiences. I find that over-exaggerating and dramatising the activity myself, helps show students that making mistakes in languages is normal and acceptable and that we learn from these mistakes.

…Student comments such as, 'I am still nervous, but I feel more confident' and 'It is fun and I like small groups', are affirming. With increasing confidence to talk in Italian, hopefully students will be motivated to continue learning languages and see the relevance to their lives and their futures.

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