

LITERACY AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF THE RECIPROCAL TEACHING STYLE

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INTRODUCTION

National frameworks in England place the expectation on all new teachers, including physical education (PE) teachers, to develop pupils' literacy and language skills. The *Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework* (ITTECF) (Department for Education [DfE], 2024), the *National Curriculum* (DfE, 2013a) and the *Teachers' Standards* (DfE, 2013b) require teachers to explicitly teach vocabulary, promote high-quality talk and support reading and comprehension. The Oracy Commission (2024), established to place oracy at the forefront of the educational agenda, similarly stresses that all teachers must be equipped to develop pupils' spoken language and address diverse communication needs. However, PE teachers face particular challenges in meeting these expectations. The subject is predominantly practical, which limits opportunities for reading, extended talk and explicit vocabulary instruction. Many teachers also lack confidence and training in language pedagogy, making it difficult to integrate literacy and oracy meaningfully into movement-based lessons (Jones, 2025).

National policies (DfE, 2013a; 2013b; 2025) also emphasise differentiation, equal access and adapting teaching to ensure that all pupils, regardless of language background, can participate and make progress. A critical aspect of literacy and language development is therefore effectively supporting over 1.7 million pupils in England who use English as an additional language (EAL) (The Bell Foundation, 2025). In PE, a practical subject traditionally dominated by physical activity, integrating literacy and language development presents a distinct pedagogical hurdle (Jones, 2025). PE teachers, both trainees and experienced practitioners, frequently report difficulties in teaching EAL pupils, citing language barriers, cultural differences and a lack of specific training in language-learning pedagogy (Jones, 2024; Furuta *et al.*, 2022; Sato & Sutherland, 2013). Consequently, there is a clear need for pedagogical approaches in PE that embed literacy and oracy, provide structured opportunities for talk, reading and comprehension, and align with national requirements for inclusion and language development.

The reciprocal teaching style is one approach that may help to address these inter-related challenges within the practical context of PE. This pedagogical summary introduces the reciprocal approach and evaluates its use in promoting literacy and language development. It suggests that the reciprocal style may be one way to overcome language barriers and help teachers to meet the learning needs of an ever-changing and increasingly diverse pupil population.

THE RECIPROCAL TEACHING STYLE

The reciprocal teaching style is one of the approaches on Mosston and Ashworth's (2008) spectrum of teaching styles. It is a collaborative, peer-mediated teaching strategy where pupils work in pairs to develop motor skills, cognitive understanding and social interaction. The approach is characterised by structured peer interaction and the use of a reciprocal card that presents the key teaching points alongside images of the skill (Byra, 2004; Tones & Jones, 2009). The approach decentralises instruction, placing responsibility on pupils to observe, analyse and communicate feedback, thereby promoting interdependence and a wide range of possible learning outcomes.

USING THE RECIPROCAL STYLE

Teaching through the reciprocal style involves developing pupils' ability to perform a motor skill and, crucially, their capacity to observe, analyse and provide feedback to their partner. In this sense, the teacher teaches the content twice: first by instructing pupils how to execute the skill and then by teaching them how to evaluate performance and support their partner's learning (Jones, 2024; Tones & Jones, 2009).

The process begins with the teacher modelling the target motor skill. During this demonstration, the teacher uses carefully selected verbal cues to highlight the key teaching points that define effective performance. The precision of this language is important, as clear and focused cues help pupils to understand and begin to replicate the critical features of the movement (Chatzipanteli & Dean, 2020). Pupils are then given time to practise the skill themselves. During this rehearsal phase, the teacher provides feedback explicitly linked to the previously identified teaching points, enabling pupils to develop their understanding and perform a basic movement pattern.

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Once pupils demonstrate an initial level of competence, the teacher introduces the second phase of the reciprocal style: learning to observe and analyse performance. The teacher again demonstrates the same motor skill, but this time pupils are asked to evaluate the performance using a reciprocal card to guide their observations and support accurate judgement. The reciprocal card is a useful scaffold that presents sequential images of the motor skill, along with the teaching points already introduced in the first phase of teaching (Iserbyt, 2015). To further prepare pupils for their observational role, the teacher deliberately includes common errors in the demonstration. This strategy exposes pupils to common performance faults and helps them to distinguish between correct and incorrect execution (Byra, 2004; Iserbyt, 2015). Through this guided analysis, pupils become familiar with the reciprocal card. They use the teaching points as evaluation criteria, thereby strengthening their ability to provide meaningful and relevant feedback.

Pupils then work in pairs, adopting the roles of doer and observer. The doer performs the skill, while the observer uses the reciprocal card to compare the performance against the established teaching points. The observer then provides feedback intended to support improvement (Chatzipanteli & Dean, 2020). The feedback may be positive, reinforcing successful aspects of performance, or corrective, identifying specific features that need adjustment. Although both forms

of feedback are valuable, focusing on one type at a time can enhance clarity and reduce cognitive demand for both the observer and the performer (Byra, 2004).

After receiving feedback, the doer is given time to reflect and attempt to incorporate the suggestions into subsequent performances. The pair then switch roles so that each pupil experiences both observing and performing. This structured role exchange ensures that all learners engage in analysing movement, articulating feedback and responding to it.

Overall, the reciprocal style is characterised by a systematic progression from teacher-led demonstration and practice to peer-supported observation and feedback. By explicitly teaching pupils to use performance criteria and communicate constructive feedback, the teacher creates a collaborative learning environment that promotes both motor learning and the development of evaluative and communication skills (Byra, 2004; Jones, 2024).

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The reciprocal style is valued for its potential to promote learning across technical, cognitive and social domains through structured peer interaction. One of its main strengths is the availability and immediacy of feedback. Each pupil works with a partner who observes their performance and compares it to clear teaching points. This means that feedback is readily available and directly linked to the success criteria, which can help pupils to refine their technique (Byra, 2004; Kolovelonis *et al.*, 2011). This peer-based feedback is claimed to make the reciprocal style at least as effective as practice and self-check approaches for developing motor skills (Goldberger & SueSee, 2020).

The process of observing and analysing a partner's performance also supports cognitive learning. When pupils compare what they see with the teaching points and decide what feedback to give, they engage more deeply with the skill. This leads to a clearer understanding of how the movement should be performed and better recall of key performance cues (Byra, 2004). As a result, cognitive gains are often greater than those produced by more traditional, teacher-led methods (Goldberger & SueSee, 2020).

A further strength of the reciprocal style is its emphasis on collaboration. Pupils take turns to perform and observe, communicate their judgements and work together to solve learning problems (Mosston & Ashworth, 2008). This

shared responsibility encourages cooperation, dialogue and positive interdependence, as each learner's progress depends on their partner's support (Goldberger *et al.*, 2012). Such interaction creates opportunities for social learning, including the development of communication and language skills (Chatzipanteli & Dean, 2020).

However, the reciprocal style also has limitations. It is more complex than many traditional approaches and can be challenging to introduce. Teachers must prepare resources, such as reciprocal cards, and spend time teaching pupils how to observe and provide effective feedback (Byra, 2004). The quality of learning also depends on the competence of the observer. If pupils are not adequately trained, their feedback can be vague or inaccurate, which may limit technical improvement (Escalié *et al.*, 2022). Nevertheless, once pupils become familiar with the reciprocal style, the process becomes more efficient and accurate. They can use the approach in different lesson contexts to provide more precise and helpful feedback (Byra, 2004; Escalié *et al.*, 2022).

In summary, the reciprocal style offers rich opportunities for technical improvement, deeper understanding and social development. Its effectiveness, however, depends on careful preparation and on giving pupils sufficient time and support to learn how to observe, analyse and communicate feedback effectively.

LITERACY AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Language learning in PE is often underestimated, yet the subject offers a rich, authentic context in which pupils can practise subject-specific vocabulary and engage in purposeful dialogue (McGuire *et al.*, 2001). Within the reciprocal approach, pupils are required to read reciprocal cards, interpret key teaching points, discuss performance and provide feedback to peers. This process integrates oracy, reading and comprehension in a meaningful way, embedding literacy within physical activity rather than treating it as a separate or add-on component of learning (Jones, 2024).

Reciprocal cards act as an important linguistic scaffold for all learners. They typically present concise written cues alongside images of the movement skill, and their use in lessons allows pupils to revisit and process information at their own pace (Jones, 2024). The combination of pictures, text and verbal information supports comprehension by helping learners to link technical terminology to concrete movement patterns (Chatzipanteli & Dean, 2020). This multimodal approach is particularly valuable in PE, where abstract language such as 'follow-through' or 'weight transfer' can be difficult to grasp without visual reference. Repeatedly exposing pupils to these terms in different contexts helps them to understand and internalise the vocabulary and use it accurately when giving feedback (Lundin & Schenker, 2022).

The structured peer dialogue inherent in the reciprocal approach also provides authentic opportunities for language use. Pupils negotiate meaning, listen carefully and respond using appropriate subject-specific terminology, all within a low-stakes environment (McGuire *et al.*, 2001). As feedback is exchanged between peers rather than delivered publicly to the whole class, pupils are less anxious about

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making mistakes and more willing to experiment with new vocabulary and sentence structures (Salvador-Garcia *et al.*, 2018). Such interaction aligns closely with policy expectations in England (DfE, 2013a; 2013b; 2024), which emphasise the teaching of vocabulary and the centrality of high-quality classroom talk. By embedding reading, speaking and listening within physical practice, the reciprocal approach contextualises literacy and demonstrates that language development is integral to learning in all subjects, including those that are primarily practical (Jones, 2024).

These features are particularly beneficial for pupils who speak EAL. For these learners, access to curriculum content can be hindered by detailed teacher talk and transient verbal instructions. Bilingual reciprocal cards, which present key teaching points in both English and the pupil's first language, along with sequential images of the movement, help to reduce this linguistic barrier (Jones, 2025). They allow EAL pupils to access the same conceptual and technical content as their peers without lowering cognitive or physical expectations, an important principle given that EAL learners should not be conflated with pupils who have learning difficulties (Conteh, 2023; The Bell Foundation, 2025).

The use of bilingual resources also supports translanguaging, whereby learners draw on their first language to make sense of new information (Conteh, 2023). By reading instructions in their first language and then encountering the equivalent English terminology, pupils can map meaning across languages and gradually internalise subject-specific vocabulary (The Bell Foundation, 2025). This process of repeated, contextualised exposure validates pupils' linguistic identities while also supporting their acquisition and understanding of English (Jones, 2024).

Furthermore, the collaborative structure of the reciprocal approach creates a socially supportive environment for language development. Talk is a normalised and expected component of the lesson for all pupils, rather than a feature directed solely at EAL learners. Peer-to-peer interaction is typically less intimidating than whole-class questioning, providing a safer space for EAL pupils to rehearse new words and phrases and receive immediate, meaningful feedback (Salvador-Garcia *et al.*, 2018). Such conditions promote high motivation and low anxiety among EAL pupils, which are widely recognised as optimal for second-language learning (The Bell Foundation, 2025). Finally, the discreet use of translated reciprocal cards also avoids singling out EAL pupils for additional support. Their use helps to maintain inclusion while reducing the risk of stigmatisation (Jones, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The reciprocal approach enables PE to function not only as a site for physical skill development but also as a valuable context for literacy and language learning. By integrating visual scaffolds, structured talk and, where appropriate, bilingual resources, teachers can meet the requirement to adapt teaching for all learners and promote equitable access to the curriculum (DfE, 2024). The use of the reciprocal style as a pedagogical strategy allows PE to transcend its traditional physical focus and contribute meaningfully to wider educational goals of language acquisition, inclusion and social participation. ■

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