

## We need to talk: a reciprocal approach to literacy and physical education

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# We need to talk: a reciprocal approach to literacy and physical education

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** This study explores how the reciprocal teaching style can support literacy development in secondary Physical Education (PE), particularly for pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL). Set within the context of initial teacher training (ITT) in England, the research addresses the challenges PE Associate Teachers (ATs) face in meeting the literacy development requirements outlined in the Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (ITTECF).

**Method:** The study generated qualitative data from 47 PE ATs from three consecutive cohorts in a postgraduate ITT programme in north-west England. All ATs were introduced to the Reciprocal Style through university training and supported in applying it during school placements. Data were gathered through post-implementation questionnaires and follow-up semi-structured interviews with 15 ATs at the end of their training. The questionnaires captured immediate perceptions, while the interviews provided deeper insights into the ATs' experiences and reflections. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, identifying recurring themes and patterns that reflected the ATs' perceptions of the reciprocal teaching style's impact on pupil literacy and communication skills.

**Results:** The findings revealed that ATs adopted the Reciprocal Style as a strategy for inclusion, particularly when teaching EAL pupils. Key outcomes included: (1) The Reciprocal Style integrated oracy, reading, and comprehension into PE lessons, and enabled pupils to practice keywords in context. (2) Bilingual reciprocal cards, combining pictures and text in pupils' first and second languages, minimised language barriers and maintained cognitive challenge for EAL pupils. (3) Structured peer feedback provided authentic opportunities for active language practice and development. (4) EAL pupils experienced a meaningful, low-pressure environment for language learning, where they could access support without being singled out.

Despite its benefits, the style was underused due to preparation demands and pupil readiness. ATs often reserved it for high-need groups, highlighting a tension between pedagogical potential and practical constraints.


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**Conclusion:** The reciprocal teaching style was perceived by PE ATs as a valuable method for integrating literacy into a practical subject. It was particularly effective for EAL pupils due to its combination of visual cues, structured interaction, and adaptable resources. Although the style requires preparation, it aligns well with ITTECF requirements and the aims of inclusive pedagogy. The Reciprocal Style may be one way of overcoming language barriers and helping PE ATs meet the learning needs of an ever-changing and increasingly diverse pupil population.

## Introduction

This study is set within the context of initial teacher training (ITT), where ATs (also known as trainee or pre-service teachers) undertake a year-long post-graduate programme to qualify as secondary physical education (PE) teachers. The ATs' progress to qualified teacher status is governed by the requirements of the *Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework* (ITTECF) (Department for Education [DfE] 2025). In England, the framework outlines the minimum entitlement of ATs and describes the content that ITT providers must include when designing and delivering their programmes. In addition, the ITTECF is used, together with the Teachers' Standards (DfE 2013b), to monitor the progress of ATs as they move towards qualified teacher status. As such, the ITTECF is the main document for ATs. It outlines the wide range of essential knowledge, skills, and behaviours that they need to develop at the start of their careers (DfE 2025). More importantly, in the context of this paper, it outlines the different aspects of literacy that all ATs, regardless of subject, need to know and know how to do in the classroom.

According to the DfE (2025), the ITTECF framework is wide-ranging, as it aims to capture all the attributes relevant to new teachers. In relation to literacy, it emphasises the need for ATs to improve pupils' communication by explicitly teaching reading, writing, and oral language skills. The framework also includes specific requirements to help ATs develop pupils' literacy, such as teaching unfamiliar vocabulary, promoting high-quality oral language (oracy), encouraging reading and comprehension, repeatedly exposing pupils to key vocabulary, and providing scaffolds for pupil talk to enhance the quality of dialogue (DfE 2025). These requirements pose a significant challenge to PE practitioners, as the predominantly practical nature of the subject limits opportunities for teaching reading, comprehension and other aspects of literacy. Moreover, ATs and established PE teachers can lack the knowledge and skills needed for effective language learning (Jones 2024).

In addition to the challenge of developing students' literacy, the ITTECF and the Teachers' Standards documents clearly outline the need for ATs to adapt their teaching through differentiated and responsive approaches to support the progress of all learners (DfE 2013b; 2025). These aims are consistent with those of the Oracy Commission (2024), which was established in alignment with the Labour government's pledge to place oracy at the forefront of its educational agenda. In its report, the commission states that ITT should equip new teachers with the skills to address the diverse linguistic and communicative challenges their pupils may face (The Oracy Commission 2024). PE

ATs are, therefore, expected to cater for the diverse language needs of all pupils, including those with English as an additional language (EAL) (DfE 2013b). EAL pupils are a heterogeneous group who have been exposed to a language other than English at home or in the community (The Bell Foundation 2024). In England, there are more than 1.7 million EAL pupils in state schools funded by the local authority (The Bell Foundation 2024), and PE ATs, along with more established teachers, often experience difficulties when trying to teach them (Jones 2024). As such, this study will examine how PE ATs can improve the communication and literacy skills of an ever-changing and increasingly diverse pupil population. More specifically, it will examine the perceived impact of the Reciprocal Style, from the Spectrum of Teaching styles (Mosston and Ashworth 2008), on pupils' language skills and identify how ATs can use it to meet the broader literacy requirements of the ITTECF.

### The reciprocal style

PE ATs are typically introduced to teaching styles (Mosston and Ashworth 2008) and teaching models (Metzler & Colquitt, 2021) during their ITT year. Exploring a wider range of approaches helps to enhance the ATs' subject and pedagogical knowledge and provides them with a broader range of options to use when teaching the subject (Chatoupis 2018). The spectrum of teaching styles is well-established within ITT and retains relevance despite the more prominent use of teaching models (Metzler & Colquitt, 2021). The spectrum was introduced in Mosston's 1966 book, *Teaching Physical Education*, and is still used as a guiding framework for teacher training programmes (Chatoupis 2018). A total of 11 teaching approaches are included in the spectrum, organised in a continuum from a style at one end where the teacher makes all the decisions to one at the other end where the pupils make all the decisions. No single approach is positioned as being better than another, but it does highlight the different ways that ATs can move beyond the more traditional teacher-led decision-making approaches that tend to dominate the subject (Escalié, Legrain, and Lafont 2021; Jones, Tones, and Foulkes 2023). Indeed, the spectrum is designed to provide options, allowing PE teachers to adopt a more deliberate approach and select a particular style based on its appropriateness, given the context and individual needs of the learners in the lesson (Goldberger, Ashworth, and Byra 2012). The Reciprocal Style is positioned more centrally in the spectrum and leads to a range of relevant outcomes. It includes characteristics of teacher-led decision-making styles, such as pupils replicating movement skills and known information, while also featuring aspects of pupil-led decision-making styles that address additional aspects of social learning (Tones and Jones 2009).

Teachers who adopt the Reciprocal Style teach pupils twice. They use verbal and visual cues to teach pupils a particular motor skill, and then they teach them how to observe and analyse their partner's performance of the skill and provide feedback to help them improve (Jones 2024; Tones and Jones 2009). More specifically, teachers begin by modelling the motor skill. They narrate their demonstration of the skill to highlight the teaching points that guide the performance. The choice of appropriate teaching points is important as the teacher's careful language selection can help pupils understand and accurately replicate the motor skill (Chatzipanteli and Dean 2020). Pupils are then given time to rehearse, with the support of the teacher, who provides feedback specific

to the teaching points presented during the demonstration. Once they have shown a basic understanding of the movement pattern, the teacher moves on by teaching them to observe and analyse a partner's skill performance and subsequently offer feedback about the performance. The teacher begins this process by demonstrating the same motor skill again, but this time, they ask the pupils to analyse their performance using a reciprocal card. The reciprocal card features images and words that align with the previously introduced teaching points (Iserbyt 2015). The reciprocal card is a useful scaffold. It helps pupils to analyse the teacher's performance and identify the aspects executed correctly or incorrectly. At this stage, the teacher deliberately includes errors in their demonstration to prepare pupils for the common mistakes they are likely to encounter in each other's performances (Byra 2004; Iserbyt 2015). The pupils are now ready to serve in the roles of doer and observer. The observer analyses the doer's motor skills in relation to the teaching points on the reciprocal card and provides feedback that helps to refine performance (Chatzipanteli and Dean 2020). When acting as observers, pupils can provide positive and corrective feedback together, although focusing on one type at a time affords greater clarity (Byra 2004). Finally, after allowing the doer to respond to the observer's feedback comments, the pupils switch roles and engage in the opposite way (Byra 2004; Jones 2024).

The different roles pupils adopt in the Reciprocal Style can challenge their learning and lead to various technical, cognitive and social outcomes (Byra 2004). The Reciprocal Style is thought to improve technique, as each pupil has an observer who can provide immediate feedback about the specific teaching points (Kolovelonis, Goudas, and Gerodimos 2011; Mosston and Ashworth 2008). The collaborative aspect ostensibly enables pupils to learn at a faster rate. Research indicates that the Reciprocal Style of teaching is at least as effective as practice and self-check teaching styles in developing and refining motor skills (Goldberger and SueSee 2020). In addition, when pupils observe and analyse their partner's performance and compare it to the teaching points to decide on appropriate feedback, they better understand the motor skill (Byra 2004; Mosston and Ashworth 2008). The style is claimed to enhance pupils' understanding and recall of the teaching points, leading to more significant cognitive improvements than traditional teaching styles (Goldberger and SueSee 2020). Finally, the collaborative peer work that is central to the Reciprocal Style provides opportunities for social learning outcomes (Kolovelonis, Goudas, and Gerodimos 2011). When pupils collaborate, they take turns to provide feedback and help solve their partner's learning problems (Mosston and Ashworth 2008). They develop interdependence as their progress relies on their ability to cooperate and learn from one another (Goldberger, Ashworth, and Byra 2012). As such, the Reciprocal Style of teaching creates conditions that support interaction, communication and interdependence as pupils are asked to work cooperatively and support their partner's progress (Chatzipanteli and Dean 2020).

The claimed outcomes of the Reciprocal Style, which include motor skill development, cognitive understanding, and the capacity to learn from working with others, are consistent with the aims of the National Curriculum for Physical Education in England (DfE 2013a). As such, the potential of the Reciprocal Style of teaching to combine experiences and develop a range of abilities, whether physical, cognitive, or social, does give it relevance in contemporary PE. That said, it is a more complex approach, and teachers can face difficulties when introducing it into their lessons (Byra 2004). Producing task

cards for a Reciprocal Style episode takes time and adds to the workload of teachers. In this study, the ATs were shown examples of reciprocal cards and received help in their first three attempts at using the style with peers and then with pupils. This may be a limitation, as Joyce et al. (1992) report that teachers need 10 or more attempts at using a strategy before becoming comfortable in its use. Introducing the style during a lesson also takes time and subsequently reduces the duration of motor skill practice. This deficit means that while pupils develop motor skills when teachers use a Reciprocal Style, their learning is claimed to be less significant than when other, more traditional approaches are used (Kolovelonis, Goudas, and Gerodimos 2011). That said, while motor skill learning may be affected, overall learning in the Reciprocal Style does include the additional development of observation, analysis and feedback skills. Initially, the observer can provide more ambiguous and less helpful feedback, especially if they have not been adequately prepared. This limitation can similarly inhibit motor skill development and reduce feelings of self-efficacy (Escalié, Legrain, and Lafont 2021). However, while pupils need to be taught how to observe and provide feedback, the process becomes familiar and easier to repeat with different motor skills after it has been experienced for the first time (Byra 2004). Learners who have been taught to observe, analyse and provide feedback do develop their coaching skills. They can give more complex guidance, leading to higher levels of self-efficacy, satisfaction and motor skill learning (Escalié, Legrain, and Lafont 2021).

## Methods

This research aimed to examine the perceived impact of the reciprocal teaching style on pupils' literacy skills and identify how ATs can use it to meet the broader literacy requirements of the ITTECF. ATs from three consecutive PE cohorts agreed to take part in the longitudinal project. All ATs were undertaking a year-long postgraduate qualification in secondary PE, with 60 days of the programme spent at university and 120 at partnership schools. In total, 22 female and 25 male ATs participated in the project during the final phase of their ITT programme. Purposive sampling was used to recruit the ATs, where potential participants were selected based on their relevance to the purposes of the study (Clark et al. 2021). Thus, the ATs were invited to participate in the study, as they had all been introduced to the Reciprocal Style while learning to teach PE at the same university ITT partnership in north-west England. They were all introduced to the style during university sessions and supported by the tutor in their first use of the approach with other ATs and then with pupils at a partnership school. The sampling strategy allowed the researcher to examine the participants' use of the Reciprocal Style. It provided a valuable means of developing an understanding from the perspectives of the ATs as they could all share their experiences about their first and ongoing use of the Reciprocal Style and also their perceptions of its impact on pupils' literacy and communication (Jones, 2022). Finally, all ATs provided appropriate informed consent, and ethical approval for the study was gained from the University of Chester School of Education Ethics Committee (Reference: 12523RTPE) on the 12th of May, 2023.

The study used questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with the ATs to generate data and develop an understanding of their experiences and perceptions of reciprocal teaching. All 47 ATs completed the questionnaire after being introduced to the style and

using it for the first time in schools. It was designed to capture the ATs' immediate perceptions of reciprocal teaching as open questions were asked about their experiences of learning to use the style and the impact it had on pupils' literacy when they implemented it in their PE lessons. Questionnaires are commonly used in evaluations of teaching and learning (Jones, 2022), and they were adopted in this research as an efficient and convenient method of capturing the ATs' immediate thoughts about using the Reciprocal Style. However, while this was a useful starting point, the approach was somewhat limited, as the ATs were unable to elaborate or clarify their responses (Clark et al. 2021). As such, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 15 ATs who provided their consent to participate by ticking a box at the end of the questionnaire. The interviews, each lasting 41 min on average, were all conducted in a quiet office space at the end of the postgraduate programme to provide the opportunity for additional reflection and sharing of insights (Jones, 2022). The interviews revisited the initial areas of inquiry and included additional questions that asked ATs to reflect on the nature of their experiences of teaching literacy, especially to EAL pupils.

Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to capture the views of the ATs and understand the context and constraints that influenced their use of the Reciprocal Style (Clark et al. 2021). They allowed a deeper level of insight as the interviewer could ask follow-up questions and elicit data that may otherwise have remained hidden (Jones, 2022). While the latitude offered by semi-structured interviews may have provided additional insight, it also created the difficulty of comparing non-standardised responses (Clark et al. 2021). In this study, the transcribed audio recordings of the semi-structured interviews were organised alongside the data from the original questionnaires. A process of reflexive thematic analysis was then used to identify, examine, and report patterns in the data (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2019; 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen to analyse the experiences and perspectives of the ATs, as it is a commonly used approach within qualitative studies that generates insights and provides a detailed and nuanced account of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). To begin with, the data were read and re-read, with any initial thoughts captured as additional written notes. Next, the data were coded to identify ideas or concepts relevant to the study's aims. Finally, these codes were clustered into themes that could be reviewed to test interpretations and clarify their content (Braun and Clarke 2019; 2021). By rearranging and reconnecting the data into themes, higher-level patterns were identified and used to write up the analysis of the data. In the following findings section, representative quotes used to construct the themes are shared, with individual ATs identified by a pseudonym.

## Findings

### *Initial use*

All ATs had been introduced to the Reciprocal Style as part of their postgraduate teacher training programme and had been supported in its first use with other ATs and with pupils at a partnership school. Of the 47 ATs, 45 then opted to use it in their own teaching while on their school placements. While some claimed that they had done so to explore a novel approach or to develop pupils' understanding, over half had used the Reciprocal Style as a scaffold to address a particular need. One noted that they 'were a

low-attaining group, and I wanted to see if this would help them understand the teaching points of doing different shots in badminton' (Flo), while another thought 'it was the easiest way, with the particular needs in the group, to have it translated at the bottom' (David). The Reciprocal Style was seemingly adopted to address a diverse range of needs and include all pupils in PE lessons. Indeed, over half of the ATs first included the style when teaching groups that were thought to be 'low ability' (Matthew) or where 'there was a lot of EAL' (Carl). The ATs typically adopted the Reciprocal Style to facilitate effective inclusion, particularly with younger and previously less able pupils. One AT noted that they used it with a 'low ability additional needs group of year 7 students' (Sue) because they 'hoped to simplify the content and support their understanding' (Sue).

### *The nature of the pupils' learning and the ATs' teaching experiences*

When considering the nature of their pupils' learning experiences, the ATs referred to a range of different outcomes associated with the Reciprocal Style. One noted, for example, that 'the peer feedback means more interaction, more help to develop the skill, and better understanding' (Paul). While the ATs associated the Reciprocal Style with various outcomes, the cognitive aspect was the most prominent. The Reciprocal Style was thought to help those 'who may struggle to know what to do in the lesson' (Mo) as it 'scaffolds the skill to make it easier for students to understand how to perform it' (Mary). The same was thought to be true for EAL pupils, as 'with the two translations, you know that they understand what you want them to learn' (Rory). In this regard, the Reciprocal Style was thought valuable, as 'providing a visual and text scaffold helped to develop their understanding of the skill and the words' (Andy). While the ATs mainly noted the positive outcomes for pupils, they also recognised that there could be limitations. One AT noted that if pupils have 'not done it before, they can struggle to understand how to peer assess each other' (Jane), while another similarly claimed, 'if they aren't sure how to do it, then they aren't really able to help their peers' (Jill). This was seen to be the main limitation, but they also recognised some more pragmatic barriers, such as 'it is hard to apply to all skills and techniques' (Peter) and 'the environment may not be suitable. If the lesson is outside on a cold, windy day, it will be difficult for students to use resources and engage' (Ali).

While the ATs recognised some limitations to student learning, the overall response of the ATs was very positive. This was similarly the case when considering the impact on themselves as teachers. There were some issues relating to the style, as one noted that it 'takes time to prepare' (Matthew), while another recognised that it 'can be difficult to organise' (Cara). This was particularly problematic on the few occasions when pupils failed to engage: 'It can be disheartening when you've spent all the time preparing, and they just don't want to know' (Kelly). While there were some issues with time, organisation and engagement, the ATs did consider the Reciprocal Style to be of value for themselves as teachers. Firstly, while preparing the reciprocal card was thought to be time-consuming, many recognised that doing so was 'good research. It really helped me develop my subject knowledge' (Flo). In addition, the ATs recognised that the style enabled effective classroom practice. One claimed that it helped her 'get teaching

points across' (Anjali), while another noted that it 'gives me more understanding of where the students are at' (Rory).

### *Literacy*

When asked how they teach literacy in their lessons, most ATs referred to the use of a 'whiteboard at the start of lessons with questions for students to discuss and answer' (Amy). The use of the whiteboard as a teaching aid was seen by ATs to be the 'easiest way to tick the literacy box' (Peter). Indeed, it was often included as part of a wider range of more easily implemented teaching approaches; 'It's turn and talks, and questioning for oracy, and whiteboard at the start of the lesson for lesson objectives' (Steve). In contrast, reciprocal cards were less commonly mentioned and were often included as part of a range of strategies. One AT noted, for example, that they 'explicitly explain any new vocabulary and sport-specific terms, as well as giving opportunities for oral discussion. I also have used resources such as reciprocal teaching cards with descriptions and instructions on' (Jim).

While reciprocal cards were used less frequently to support literacy, ATs still recognised their value. One AT noted that 'it offers opportunities within a PE lesson to work on all aspects of literacy in one go: oracy, reading, comprehension and listening. You can also add in a writing element if wanted by getting them to evaluate with a feedback comment on the card' (Maya). More particularly, the ATs valued reciprocal teaching as a means of extending pupils' vocabulary and developing their understanding of keywords. One stated that it 'helps students understand the keywords that are used within the skill' (Abebi), while another noted that you can 'address key terminology and embed key teaching points' (Karen) through the Reciprocal Style. An understanding of keywords was thought to develop through the combination of 'visual aids and text' (Adam), and the opportunity for 'peer learning, as they will learn and use key terms with each other' (Ben). Most importantly, ATs recognised that in this teaching style, pupils 'have to read' (Mark). They are 'challenged to read and understand in a way that's otherwise difficult to do in a PE lesson' (Cerys). The Reciprocal Style was used less often than other, more easily implemented approaches, but it was still valued by ATs, particularly as it 'gives an explicit opportunity to provide written vocabulary for students to read and comprehend' (Ali).

### *English as an additional language*

When asked how they teach EAL pupils, the ATs referred to a narrow range of approaches, including 'physical demonstrations' (Mark) and 'scaffolding using simple terms and teaching assistant support' (Anjali). However, the most widely used approach was the Reciprocal Style, with cards that had been 'translated into their own language in order to allow them to fully understand the task' (Cerys).

Once introduced to the Reciprocal Style, it seemed to become a favoured approach to teaching pupils with EAL, with ATs giving three main reasons for its use. Firstly, the Reciprocal Style was thought to help EAL pupils 'understand through diagrams rather than only using verbal instruction' (Miller). This was valued by ATs, with one explaining that they 'find reciprocal cards good to use as I see a lot of pupils overcoming problems

together. They use talk in a positive way to develop better technique and understanding' (Iman). Secondly, the Reciprocal Style was valued as it 'provides an excellent scaffold for EAL pupils as it's a simple approach that breaks down complex skills with bullet points and visual aids' (Jill). More specifically, ATs recognised that the style was an effective inclusion strategy, as you can 'easily change language to support understanding' (Mark) and that 'resources can be easily adapted in non-invasive or embarrassing ways to help EAL learners' (Matthew). This adaptation was valued by ATs, as 'EAL students can still learn the same way and have the same opportunities as other students by simply translating the reciprocal card' (Ali). Finally, ATs also recognised the opportunity for language development offered by the Reciprocal Style. One claimed that it is 'highly effective for EAL learners as it enhances comprehension, supports oral language development, and builds confidence' (Helen). While another noted that the Reciprocal Style provided an opportunity 'to help EAL pupils develop their vocabulary and specific terminology' (David) as they could 'practise speaking with peers' (Cara) and 'engage in small group discussions' (David).

## Discussion

The findings show that ATs sometimes used the reciprocal teaching style as an explicit means of teaching literacy and, more frequently, as a strategy for supporting pupils with EAL. At times, they purposefully adopted it as an approach that has the potential to combine learning experiences and develop pupils' physical competence alongside other linguistic abilities. Indeed, four themes were generated from the ATs' interview and questionnaire data to show its perceived impact and the reasons for its use in PE lessons. The style was found to serve as a multidimensional literacy tool, a linguistic scaffold, a facilitator of active language development, and a means of ensuring safer participation for EAL pupils.

### *A multidimensional literacy tool*

While the Reciprocal Style was not the most frequently cited literacy strategy, with simpler methods like whiteboard tasks being more common, the ATs still recognised its capacity to impact learning in different ways. The Reciprocal Style is organised in a unique way to include a visual support and structured peer interaction. This means that ATs can use the style to teach a combination of oracy, reading, and comprehension, and integrate multiple literacy skills into the lesson. More specifically, using the reciprocal cards requires pupils to read and comprehend, while structured peer interaction involves them speaking and listening. The latter is particularly important within the context of ITT, as the Oracy Commission (2024) claims that teacher preparation should prioritise speech, language, and communication needs so that teachers are equipped to address the diverse linguistic and communicative challenges pupils may face.

In this study, the ATs found that using the Reciprocal Style allowed them to integrate multiple literacy skills into their teaching, which, in turn, allowed pupils to practice using keywords in context. The style fostered a deeper engagement with written and spoken language, as the pupils could read, discuss, and apply key terms (Jones 2024). Indeed, it enabled them to advance their use and understanding of the subject's core concepts

and terminology. As such, using the Reciprocal Style allowed ATs to meet broader learning requirements of the ITTECF, as language skills could be developed alongside physical abilities within the context of PE (DfE 2013a; 2025).

### *A linguistic scaffold*

Most ATs used the Reciprocal Style during their school placements as an inclusive strategy, notably when teaching groups with a high proportion of EAL pupils. Reciprocal cards are useful scaffolds that can be adapted to enable pupils with different needs to engage more fully in lessons (Jones 2024). They are designed to include sequential images of the motor skill alongside clear teaching points. This format, which combines pictures and text, is thought to be particularly effective in promoting pupil learning and literacy, as a clear visual aid helps them understand, acquire and use key terminology (Chatzipanteli and Dean 2020). Moreover, the structured nature of reciprocal tasks, with clear and available peer feedback prompts, reduces the linguistic demand that is often present in solely teacher-led explanations. Put simply, the pupils can study and reread the reciprocal cards for as long as needed for the words and content to be fully understood (Iserbyt 2015).

In this study, the ATs built on the idea of using visual aids as a scaffold to develop understanding by creating bilingual reciprocal cards to provide specific support and challenge for EAL pupils. The bilingual resource cards were designed to include a combination of pictures, text in English and text in the pupils' first language. The format provided a multimodal scaffold as it allowed EAL pupils to understand through diagrams, rather than only relying on verbal information, and it allowed for 'translanguaging', where pupils could draw on their first language to make sense of their second (Conteh 2023). The ATs frequently highlighted the value of translated reciprocal cards as visual aids that could help minimise language barriers and ensure comprehension while maintaining cognitive and physical challenge. This is important as pupils should not be regarded as having learning difficulties because they have EAL. Indeed, their language skills should be valued, and cognitive challenges should be kept appropriately high (Conteh 2023; The Bell Foundation 2024). Providing bilingual reciprocal cards meant that EAL pupils could engage with the same lesson content and experience the same challenge as their peers, and avoid the need for separate, simplified tasks.

Finally, the collaborative element of reciprocal teaching was also viewed as a useful scaffold by the ATs. It was seen to be instrumental in fostering a deeper understanding for all pupils, as they could receive more personalised feedback to reinforce technical knowledge during motor skill practice (Mosston and Ashworth 2008). This aligns with existing literature on scaffolding in PE, which emphasises the importance of structured peer interactions as an effective differentiation strategy in mixed-ability classrooms (Karmani et al. 2024).

### *Active language development*

The emphasis on structured peer discussion within the Reciprocal Style was also thought to facilitate active language development. In particular, the ATs noted that the peer feedback component normalised the expectation for pupils to engage in discussion and

practise subject-specific vocabulary. This was particularly important for EAL pupils as the Reciprocal Style was experienced as a naturally occurring opportunity for talk, despite being deliberately chosen by ATs to ensure their active engagement in discussions with others. In this way, the style aligns with theories of language learning, which stress the importance of social interaction in internalising new language (Conteh 2023; The Bell Foundation 2024). In addition, pupils had a reference point for their interactions. The ATs noted that the reciprocal card provided prompts and reminders that helped structure and support the discussion.

The structured peer feedback element of the Reciprocal Style, supported by the use of a resource card, fits with the expectation in the ITTECF for ATs to consider the factors that will support effective collaborative or paired work (DfE 2025). In the ATs' experience, the approach fostered a sense of peer collaboration rather than dependency on the teacher. ATs observed EAL pupils overcoming problems together, which not only built language skills but also social capital within the class. In this way, language development was embedded in collaborative subject-based tasks where EAL pupils could contribute meaningfully and seemingly develop a sense of self-worth and belonging.

### ***Safer participation***

A recurring theme in the ATs' responses was the Reciprocal Style's ability to include EAL pupils without singling them out. Unlike some EAL strategies, such as withdrawal groups or Teaching Assistant support, translated reciprocal cards allowed pupils to access support discreetly and alongside other pupils in the class. As one AT noted, the resource cards could be easily translated and given to pupils in a non-invasive or embarrassing way. Similarly, the Reciprocal Style's paired or small-group structure provided a safer space for EAL pupils to experiment with language compared to more public approaches such as whole-class questioning. In this way, PE, taught using the Reciprocal Style, may provide a high-motivation, low-anxiety setting that is optimal for language learning. The purposeful practice of language in an engaging context, where there is little pressure and minimal apparent focus on literacy, may provide favourable opportunities for its development (Jones 2024).

Finally, adopting the reciprocal teaching style was believed to allow for more targeted in-lesson support. While the pupils were engaged in giving and receiving feedback, the ATs were freed to provide individual attention to EAL pupils without disrupting the learning experience of others (Byra 2004). The teacher is not supposed to directly assist the doer in a reciprocal episode; instead, they monitor and provide feedback to the observer. The capacity to do the latter, and provide more discreet, individualised support to EAL pupils as they observed their partners, aligns with adaptive teaching principles (Karamani et al. 2024) and was particularly valued by the ATs. Overall, adopting the reciprocal teaching style allows ATs to meet the language development requirements of the ITTECF (DfE 2025). It provides a rich opportunity for low-stakes practice that enables EAL pupils to use keywords in context and develop their technical and conversational language.

### **Conclusion**

The ATs valued the reciprocal teaching style as a pedagogical approach that can move pupil learning beyond the physical and bridge the gap between the subject's practical

demands and the literacy expectations of the ITTECF (DfE 2013a; 2025). Its strengths lie in its adaptability for EAL learners, particularly in its capacity to include bilingual reciprocal cards and structured peer feedback. The combination of visual information and verbal interaction enhances the learning of pupils who are still developing fluency in the language of instruction. Moreover, the Reciprocal Style provides accessible learning pathways without singling out individuals. It offers an opportunity for meaningful, contextualised and active engagement in language development, without the pressure of more direct and public approaches.

The findings suggest that the Reciprocal Style has significant potential as an EAL strategy in PE, but its practical adoption was sometimes limited by preparation demands and pupil readiness, leading some ATs to reserve the approach for high need groups. The tension between pedagogical aspirations and practical constraints may be overcome by integrating reciprocal tasks into ITT as a core strategy for EAL. This could include additional practice time and support for inexperienced PE ATs, such as using translation software, guidance from EAL/language specialists, and the development of resource-sharing networks to reduce the preparation load. Future research could use a wider range of data sources to explore the longitudinal effects of the Reciprocal Style on EAL pupils' language proficiency and motor skill acquisition, as well as the structural solutions used to mitigate workload barriers for new teachers.

The Reciprocal Style is not a universal remedy, but its possible adaptation to focus on skill acquisition and language development offers a compelling model for EAL pedagogy in PE. By foregrounding peer interaction and multimodal scaffolding, it challenges the assumption that physical and linguistic learning are separate endeavours. Exploring strategies that combine learning outcomes is seemingly more important in an era of increasingly diverse classrooms, as the effective use of the Reciprocal Style could help support the progress of all learners in PE, regardless of their language background.

## Disclosure statement

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