

Developing language in the mainstream classroom

Five key principles should underpin planning for the language development of EAL learners in the classroom:

Activate prior knowledge

What we get out of a text is partly determined by what we bring to it: knowledge of the world, knowledge of texts – how they work, how writers construct them. All children come with previous experiences that they can usefully draw on in understanding new ones. Student teachers need to help their pupils connect what they know with what they are being asked to learn.

Provide a rich contextual background to make input comprehensible

Student teachers should exploit multi-media technology to provide the child with multiple ways in to the topic, such as pictures, film footage, and recorded sound material, which the child can replay to aid understanding. Highlighting text to identify keywords, providing links to (online) bilingual dictionaries, etc.

Actively encourage comprehensible output

This may begin with simple ‘yes/no’ questions to build-up confidence and become more elaborate as time goes on. The questions, too, can grow in complexity from a straightforward assessment of the child’s factual understanding, using closed questions such as, ‘How many...’, ‘When did...’, ‘What is ...’ etc, to higher order questions such as ‘Why did...’, ‘How does...’ and ‘What would happen if...’

Draw the learner’s attention to the relationship between form and function, making key grammatical elements explicit

Children are actually quite interested in understanding the nuts and bolts of language. This needn’t be dry and tedious. A discovery approach to identifying past tense markers or when capital letters are used in texts, for example, can involve the child working as a ‘language detective’ to discover the rules for themselves. Other languages have different rules (for example, in German all nouns start with a capital letter), and making links with the child’s own language can help them focus on similarities and differences.

Develop learner independence

Essentially, our key task as teachers is to help the learner how to learn. This may begin with such ‘simple’ skills as how to hold a pencil or use scissors and develop as the child’s needs grow to include using dictionaries, searching the Internet, making notes, etc. It should be remembered that students with a fractured formal education may have gaps in their skills and it may be necessary initially for student teachers to include activities at a lower level than might be expected in terms of age. It is important not to assume that the child is therefore of lower potential ability. It is also vital to convey to learners an expectation that, with appropriate support, they will bridge the gap between what they can currently do and the normal expectations.

Listening and Speaking

Learning a language takes time; remember how many lessons in school it took before you felt able simply to say your name and ask someone else theirs in French, German, or Spanish. Imagine trying to understand or explain convection, feudalism, Pythagoras. EAL learners not only have to learn to talk in English but to learn through English. This dual task provides both challenges and opportunities. In this section I will discuss some practical ways to organise speaking and listening to do just that.

Listen who’s talking

Everyday language surrounds children in the playground, streets and shops, and comes at them from the television and radio. Besides the teacher, who will inevitably do most of the talking in class, the new arrivals will also encounter other students and adults, all of whom will shape the language they hear in different ways.

A good place for talk

The first thing for the student teacher to consider is how to make the classroom a supportive environment for spoken language. This includes planning:

- where the child should sit (preferably near the front to ensure they can hear everything the teacher says)
- who they will sit with (ideally a child who speaks the same first language but is more advanced in English, or supportive English speakers)
- visual support for oral language (by having pictures and keywords on display)
- how the child can access their first language (e.g. through taped stories, the deployment of bilingual assistants and the involvement of parents to translate key words and discuss key concepts).

Listening in, not tuning out

When setting up activities, the student teacher should make sure that pupils have opportunities to:

- listen in to peer talk about an activity as they do it
- do practical activities such as surveying people's birthdays or favourite colours, measuring each other's height or finger span, all useful for helping new arrivals get to know their classmates whilst using a restricted range of language over and over again.
- take part in collaborative tasks that involve purposeful use of language, such as info-gap games (such as battle ships) where children have to ask for and share information in order to complete a task.

Model language

A great deal of emphasis in NC documents has been placed on introducing pupils to technical vocabulary. This is, of course, important, but the everyday language of the classroom can also be confusing. What, for example, is a new arrival to make of such common classroom instructions as 'Pull your socks up,' or even, 'Pull your finger out'?! Pupils need to understand such language, of course, but at least initially the student teacher should monitor their use of idiomatic language to help avoid misunderstandings,.

All teachers have their particular ways of starting lessons, marking transition points and drawing things to a close. These routines are amongst the first things the EAL learner will need to tune in to in order to make sense of what is going on. Student teachers should focus on making such language and indeed all exchanges clear, concise and consistent. We do not only communicate through words, of course; clear body language and gestures are important in getting a message across, remembering that body language varies widely from one culture to another, as do such things as eye-contact, volume, and physical proximity when talking vary.

Other adults (see [Working with EAL specialists](#))

Mention has already been made of the role of bilingual assistants. Their ability to move between one language and another (code-switching, as linguists call it) is a vital resource not only in helping the child feel secure in knowing what is going on but also to convey the message that being bilingual is a positive asset. Student teachers need to develop the skills of working with other adults and deploying them to best advantage.

Where EAL teachers are available, student teachers should involve them in advance planning which will allow them to prepare additional resources and suggest strategies and activities which will help EAL learners to develop their skills in this area. EAL teachers and teaching assistants also have a valuable role in providing detailed formative assessment feedback to the class teacher on the child's progress.

Parents are a much under-used resource, particularly those of bilingual students who may not speak much English. With some goodwill on both sides, however, they can be usefully drawn on to help the child settle in, to support them through use of their first language, and as a resource for the school if they are able to act as interpreters and translators for other parents and students.

Drawing them in

To the newly arrived EAL learner, the gentle stream of the teacher's speech may at first appear more like a turbulent ocean of noise occasionally interrupted by islands of tranquillity inhabited by a few castaway words and phrases they understand. The student teacher's task is to build bridges between the islands and help the children gradually reclaim more and more of the land.

- A good starting point is to use the child's name whenever they are addressed. Student teachers need to practise the skill of name-learning and make sure their pronunciation is correct.
- Research has shown that even allowing just a few seconds longer for a child to answer has dramatic effects on response rates. The child not only has to think of the answer but also how to say it in an unfamiliar language. This extra time can seem like an age in a hushed classroom and may seem even more unbearable to the student teacher.
- Allowing the child to become familiar with the language and content in a small group setting first gives them an opportunity to hear other children model answers and rehearse their own efforts. The student teacher can train up the fluent English-speakers in the group so that they are aware of simple techniques, such as repeating and emphasising key words, making use of visual supports, using body language and gestures, checking for understanding, etc. to support their less fluent peers.

Leading them on

Talk is often most productive when it is not the focus of attention. Games and practical tasks can provide a natural and relaxed context into which effective language practice can be built. The computer is particularly useful, as it provides an inexhaustible and non-judgmental environment and feedback. When children work on a task around the computer as part of a small, mixed language group then they will have a real purpose for communication and conditions under which it is likely to thrive, if scaffolded appropriately.

Reading and writing

A number of issues need to be borne in mind when approaching reading and writing in a second language.

Previous experience of the written word

Literacy is not neutral, it is bound up with our home background and wider culture. Some children will have experienced literacy in a narrow range of settings, others in a wide range. This makes a difference in their expectations of the uses to which literacy can be put and their view of themselves as a consumer or producer of texts. It is therefore essential to make explicit the wide range of literacy practices required in school, and to provide models and opportunities to practise and acquire them.

It's not just a matter of what people are used to reading and writing, however, it's also important to consider how it is approached. Different communities have different literacy practices. Many Afro-American communities, for instance, emphasise reading to learn and as a social activity shared with the group rather than as a private pastime; Muslim children learn whole passages of the Qur'an by heart in 'maktabs' or religious schools; Chinese children also attach importance to repetition and memorization in community classes. Valuing and building on the child's previous experiences provides the surest foundation; starting with familiar text types and gradually extending the range will offer the child a comfortable point from which to explore less familiar terrain (Gregory et al. 2004).

Transferable skills

If children are literate in another language then they may well have transferable skills that they can draw on to develop their abilities in English, such as:

- * knowing that print carries meaning
- * being able to identify discrete words on the page
- * using images to predict the content of a text

If the child's first language uses Roman script and is written from left to right then they are likely to have fewer problems in producing legible work than if they are only familiar with a non-Roman script that is written right to left, for example. Legibility and intellectual ability do not go hand in hand, however, and it is important not to confuse the mechanics of writing with ability. That said, students who are literate in another script may well have a significant advantage in understanding that there is only an arbitrary connection between a word and the way it is written and so be better able at the 'form and function' level than those with experience of only one language or script.

Planning children's learning

Maggie Gravelle (2000) has devised this simple but very powerful matrix to help teachers plan to meet the needs of bilingual learners:

	What does the learner bring to the task?	What does the task demand of the learner?	What support needs to be planned for?
Social			
Linguistic			
Cognitive			

The left hand column reflects the fact that children's language development does not take place in a vacuum and is affected by both social factors (which includes everything from how the child behaves in a group to their experience of prejudice and racism) and the match between the child's cognitive abilities and the demands of the curriculum. The top row reflects the need to consider and activate the child's prior experiences, abilities and skills, to place these in the context of what the task demands and to devise appropriate ways of bridging any gap.

Putting it into practice

Visual support

In the early stages it is particularly important that student teachers choose texts that provide plenty of visual support. Photographs and drawings can convey or provide clues to meaning without making heavy language demands. Wherever possible and appropriate, familiar images from the child's homeland context should be incorporated into the activity to help the child connect with prior experience and know that their own background is validated.

Diagrams and tables can also be similarly useful (particularly for non-fiction texts) but have their own conventions which pupils might not initially be familiar with.

Other adults

Where available, bilingual assistants can provide excellent one-to-one support to new arrivals by translating and summarising texts in the child's first language. If the child is literate in the language then they can also assess the child's writing in that language and translate it, if appropriate, or help the child to do so as their English gradually improves.

EAL teachers and Teaching Assistants who do not speak the child's language can also offer direct help in making sure the child understands the task and helping scaffold their learning. In order to do this effectively, the student teacher needs to ensure their involvement in the initial planning so that they understand the intended outcomes and how they might be achieved with the child or children they will be working with.

They can spend time in small group work to provide an opportunity for oral practice prior to reading and writing tasks being undertaken. New arrivals are likely to find whole-class work difficult to focus on and take part in, especially in the early stages, and so opportunities to rehearse the required language and content as part of a small, supportive group can be vital in building confidence, self-esteem and fluency and providing access to the curriculum.

Because of their close focus on the individual pupil, classroom assistants can also play an important part in assessing the child on other aspects of learning that throw light on their development such as:

- how they behave in a group and contribute to it
- whether they show signs of leadership when working in a group
- their ability to share resources with others
- their motivation and interest in a task
- their perseverance in the face of difficulty
- their ability to ask for help when required
- their confidence in approaching tasks and overcoming challenges
- their creativity and evidence of lateral thinking
- their enjoyment and satisfaction in learning.

Parents and homework

Children are expected to benefit from homework, which provides practice and an opportunity to consolidate learning. The setting of homework is also recognised as a valuable way of involving parents in their children's schoolwork. Parents who do not speak or are not literate in English clearly need to know how to support their child and, wherever possible, the student teacher should structure tasks in such a way that parents are able to understand what is expected and how they can help.

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References

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