

Language Demands

Teachers of bilingual learners will need to understand the nature of the challenges inherent in learning a second or additional language, and the ways in which they can develop mediational tools to support bilingual pupils in facing these challenges. They will need to become skilful in analysing the language demands of the content they are teaching, and be aware that these demands are not simply to do with an understanding of vocabulary, sentence structures or text types, which all students will need to become familiar with, but also how language is related to the context in which it is being used, the purposes it is used for and the ways in which it is constructed in different social situations which are taken for granted by native speakers. The multi-faceted nature of this challenge for bilingual pupils in English schools has been conceptualised as 'Learning Language, Learning Through Language, Learning About Language' (Gibbons 2002).

The task for the learner

The language demands of the curriculum can be understood at a variety of levels – at the level of vocabulary, syntax and discourse, as well as the demands of interpreting embedded contextualised meanings. Linguists such as Halliday (1975) have argued that language is always used within both a 'context of culture' – where users share assumptions about the way things are done within a particular culture – and a 'context of situation', i.e. the occasion on which the language is being used, which will vary according to the relationship of those involved, the subject of the interaction and whether it is spoken or written language. Thus, in acquiring new vocabulary for example, the second language learner's task is not a simple one as words have multiple meanings and are used with different emphases. Native speakers of a language acquire knowledge of variation in word meanings through their use in different contexts. For example, the word 'match' has three common meanings in English, calling upon different schemata: a sporting game ("Did you see the match?") something to light a candle with ("Be careful with the match") and a verb which instructs pupils to find similar objects ("Match the pentagons"). A second language learner has to have all three schemata available to make sense of the word in context.

The learner also needs to develop an understanding of how language is used in discourse. Meaning conveyed through words may be much more than 'the sum of the parts'. McWilliam (1998) sets out the challenge for EAL learners in acquiring control of lexical items: 'Words change their meanings according to the context in which they occur and EAL pupils must develop the "semantic agility" – the propensity actively to seek meanings to cope with this' (p.75). Teachers must help in this process by encouraging children to be enquiring and to develop 'positive "meaning-seeking" attitudes' (p.75). The author quotes studies that show that the classroom is full of metaphorical and figurative uses of language which are open to misunderstandings, and suggests that:

children's success in curriculum learning depends on active involvement in building a complex network of linguistic meaning. Children's vocabulary development is not just a matter of acquiring more colourful adjectives for story or poetry writing, or a collection of technical terms for science and mathematics, important as these are. It is more to do with developing a mental lexicon that is powered by semantic curiosity and the confidence to share ideas about the world. The development of vocabulary is linked both to cognition and to cultural experience: words always mean more than we think (p.xi).

Acquiring this richness in language use is part of what it means to be a member of a 'speech community'. Understanding meaning in context therefore requires, among other things, background experience which gives access to the full range of language use within a speech community. Developing a second or additional language to native speaker level requires time, exposure and opportunities to understand meanings through interaction and to internalise them. For example, many EAL learners will be at a disadvantage when trying to use semantic cues to predict meanings in texts. This may be because the text describes something which is beyond their current experience. Learners interpret the meaning of new input by drawing on information based on experiences stored in their minds and new information that they have understood. Schema theory offers an explanation of how information is stored and used to make sense of new experiences. Difficulties may also be based on much more complex differences between literacy practices and views of learning. As Gregory (1996) points out in a number of case studies of EAL learners as readers, the view of 'learning', 'reading', 'play', 'work' etc. and the role of the learner are conceived differently by different cultural groups, and she poses the question 'If views of home and school are very different, how will home/school reading programmes take account of this?' (p.79). In considering literacy development for EAL learners, it is important to remember that they will almost certainly have had access to a range of literacy practices before they come into the school situation, and the challenge for the teacher is to build on these experiences without taking a deficit view of the differences. In the EAL context, it may be helpful to think of multiple 'literacies' rather than the monolithic view of literacy that seems to be put forward by the National Primary Strategy. Cope and Kalantzis (2000) coined the term 'Multiliteracies' to counter the view that language is simply a 'stable system based on rules such as mastering sound-letter correspondence' (p5), which they see as leading inevitably to a transmission - based pedagogy. 'A pedagogy of Multiliteracies, by contrast, focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone. These differ according to culture and context, and have specific cognitive, cultural and social effects' (ibid).

In her study of the writing of EAL learners at Key Stage 4 and post-16, Cameron (2003) comes to the conclusion that even high level EAL learners have difficulty in judging nuances of style, and are still experiencing some of the same problems as their less proficient EAL peers with the use of articles, choice of the correct preposition in fixed phrases, and subject-verb agreement. A further area of difficulty is with what Cameron calls 'delexical' verbs, i.e. verbs that are 'so frequently used and in so many different contexts that the link between the verb and its meaning become quite weak' (p34), such as put, do, have, make, go. Examples she gives from students' writing include sentences such as 'make a stop to this', instead of 'put a stop to', and 'they will do more fun' instead of 'they will have more fun'. Cameron also identifies a range of difficulties in the use of sentence grammar by EAL learners, often shared by underachieving mother-tongue English speakers. Most of these relate to length of clause constituents and use of adverbials and sub-ordination to develop more complex sentence structure. ([see research summary](#))

Views of language and literacy

The view of language expressed in national guidance does not take this complexity into account. It seems to be based on the notion that there is a linear progression to learning and that language can be compartmentalised and perceived at the word, sentence and text level, with a corresponding emphasis on the building blocks that make up language – phonemes, graphemes, common words, etc. – rather than on discourse in context. The assumption in this model is that literacy is neutral and culture-free rather than being made up of 'socially constructed conventions, developed within specific social traditions' (Street 1984, p4). Street calls this the 'autonomous' model of literacy, which 'generalises from what is in fact a narrow, culture-specific literacy practice' (p.2) and fails to recognise the culturally-embedded nature of literacy practices. As Barwell (2004) points out, in much of the guidance emanating from the Primary and Key Stage 3 National Strategies, the view expressed seems to be that it is 'EAL that requires curriculum modification, rather than the mainstream that needs adjusting to be more appropriate for bilingual learners. The teaching of EAL is ... portrayed as a minor modification of the mainstream teaching of English, rather than as a specialist subject area' (p.7). There is little recognition, for example, in the guidance on teaching mathematics to EAL learners that anything more is needed than the teaching of mathematical vocabulary, omitting aspects of mathematical language, such as the grammar of mathematical reasoning in structures such as 'if ... then', or the importance of the word 'a' to indicate 'every'. Similarly, in Key Stage 3 guidance on science, 'the focus on vocabulary, key terms and symbols avoids more complex aspects of scientific English, such as the language of causal explanation' (p 19).

Barwell also finds the guidance implies that 'once pupils are able to join in discussions, there is little else to do'. This is contrary to considerable research suggesting that learners may acquire fluency in conversational English quite quickly (approximately 2 years), but that it takes much longer (7 years or more) to acquire the level of proficiency in academic English which is required for learning and production within the school curriculum. Cummins (1984) has distinguished between BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency), and elaborated the distinction between them in a framework relating to the linguistic, cognitive and contextual demands made by particular tasks (see [BICS/CALP](#)). Learners need to progress along an axis moving from work that is embedded in context and is cognitively relatively unchallenging, through increasingly challenging but still context-embedded tasks, towards work that is both cognitively and linguistically challenging and offers little contextual support. Hall (1995) has adapted this framework as a tool for planning and differentiating the curriculum, giving examples to show its use in practice.

Integrating Language and Content

In order to plan for the integration of language and curriculum learning, the challenge for teachers is to identify the thinking skills involved in a particular activity and link the language to them - what Gibbons (2002) terms 'finding the language', viewing the curriculum 'through the lens of language, to help you hold language up to the light, to look at it rather than through it' (p.121). This can mean explicit comment on forms, structures and functions of the language that is used to convey the content, as well as in more indirect ways of calling attention to language, while at the same time keeping a focus on meaning.

Another approach to this task has been developed in Canada in response to the needs of EAL learners. 'The knowledge framework' proposed by Mohan (1986) is a systematic framework which relates the thinking skills found in the school curriculum to the corresponding language skills. In addition, Mohan introduced a third component, the 'key visual', arguing that representation of knowledge through various types of graphic organisers and visuals can support learners of EAL. Used as the basis for an activity or task, such 'key visuals' can assist understanding of concepts and also the development of related language skills. For an example of the use of this planning framework see '[Classroom Practice and Pedagogy: using the Knowledge Framework approach in the classroom](#)'

Gibbons (1993 and 2002) sets out planning frameworks that integrate content knowledge with the development of thinking and language skills ([see Gibbons framework](#)). For examples of the application of planning frameworks see '[Using Pauline Gibbons Planning Framework: Examples Of Practice](#)' In "The Distinctiveness of EAL: a cross-curriculum discipline" (1999), the authors explore the additional factors in terms of planning and curriculum knowledge, as well as teaching and assessment strategies and activities, that teachers will need to focus on when planning for EAL learners in their classrooms. (see [NALDIC planning and teaching framework](#))

An important feature in the development of EAL is the active encouragement of comprehensible output, both spoken and written, by EAL learners from an early stage. This is important for both cognitive and linguistic development. The active use of language provides opportunities for learners to be more conscious of their language use, and to process language at a deeper level. It also brings home to the learner and teacher those aspects of language which will require additional attention. Thus, the classroom needs to be a place where there are opportunities for learners to become active participants, and to initiate spontaneous talk in meaningful situations. Learners of course also need 'comprehensible input', in which the learner is given opportunities to draw on additional contextual support, such as visual aids and key visuals, to make sense of new information and language. The scaffolding that EAL learners need is typically thought of as provided by an adult, but studies such as those by Gibbons (2002) and Swain and Lapkin (2004) have focused on peer-peer interaction, with peers taking on the expert and the novice role concurrently. Gibbons has looked at this type of 'collective scaffolding' as a way of moving from speaking to writing; Swain and Lapkin set up situations where peers reformulated each other's texts, providing numerous opportunities for collaborative dialogue. They found that this was 'an effective technique for stimulating noticing and reflection on language' (p 20). 'Their collaborative efforts, mediated by their dialogue, reveal what cognitive steps they took to be able later to use their constructed knowledge individually' (p6).

Conclusion

It is evident that there is a need for an added dimension to and expansion of planning for EAL learners which is distinctive in terms of the type of learning activities and breadth of strategies the teacher needs to draw on, and that these approaches need specialist expertise and intervention to be fully implemented. Teachers will need therefore to challenge some of the assumptions they bring to the learning context. Language learning is not a linear process, nor can language and skills and curriculum content be transmitted from teacher to learner in a one-way process. The challenging three-pronged task for the learner outlined above must be seen as a collaborative endeavour, with teachers and learners actively participating in the process if it is to be effective, so that the transformative pedagogy of 'joint interactive construction through collaborative enquiry', envisaged by Cummins (2001), becomes a reality.

Author

Helen Abji

Last updated 2nd October, 2005

References

- Barwell, R. (2004). *NALDIC Working Paper 7 - Teaching Learners of English as an Additional Language: a Review of Official Guidance*. Watford : NALDIC
- Cameron, L. (2003). *Writing in English as an additional language at Key Stage 4 and post-16*. London : OfSTED
- Cope, B. and Kalantzis M. (Eds.) (2000). *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. London : Routledge.
- Cummins, J. (1984) *Bilingualism and Special Education: Issues in assessment and pedagogy*. Clevedon, England : Multilingual Matters.
- Cummins, J. (2001) *Negotiating Identities; Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society* (2nd Ed.). Los Angeles : CABE
- DfES (2002) *Key Stage 3 Access and Engagement in English*. London : DfES
- DfES (2002) *Key Stage 3 Access and Engagement in Mathematics..* London : DfES
- DfES (2002) *Key Stage 3 Access and Engagement in Science*. London : DfES
- DfES (2004) *The National Primary Strategy*. London : DfES
- Gibbons, P. (1991) *Learning to Learn in a Second Language*. Newtown, Australia : Primary English Teaching Association
- Gibbons, P. (2002) *Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning: Teaching Second Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH : Heinemann
- Gregory, E. (1996) *Making Sense of a New World: Learning to Read in a Second Language*. London : Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd.
- Hall, D. (1995) *Assessing the Needs of Bilingual Pupils: Living in Two Languages*. London : David Fulton
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1975) *Learning how to mean*. London : Edward Arnold

McWilliam, N. (1998) *What's in a Word: vocabulary development in multilingual classrooms*. Stoke-on-Trent : Trentham

Mohan, B. (1986) *Language and Content*. Reading, MA : Addison-Wesley

NALDIC (1999) *Working Paper 5 - The Distinctiveness of English as an Additional Language: a cross-curriculum discipline*. Watford : NALDIC

Street, B. V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge, UK : Cambridge University Press

Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (2002) 'Talking it through: Two French immersion learners' response to reformulation' in *International Journal of Educational Research* 37, pp. 285-304

Van Lier, L. (2004) *The Ecology of Language Learning*. Paper presented at the UC Language Consortium on Theoretical and Pedagogical Perspectives.

Copyright NALDIC 2011