Overcoming barriers to learning in literacy

A great deal has been written on the assessment and teaching of children with reading difficulties and dyslexia, but it very rarely refers to children learning EAL. At the same time publications on learning to read in one's second or third language very rarely refer to learning difficulties. Reviewing the literature on learning difficulties in second language literacy Cline and Shamsi (2000, p. 58) concluded that it is "very limited in quantity, reports little empirical research and focuses on basic reading skills to the exclusion of other aspects of literacy". Their review focuses on identification and assessment. For the full text see: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR184.doc

Researchers and teachers concerned with learning difficulties in literacy have often oversimplified what is involved. "Curriculum and assessment that reduce literacy to a few simple and mechanistic skills fail to do justice to the richness and complexity of actual literacy practices in people's lives." (Street, 2002, p. 52) Remember that warning when reading what follows.

Here is a list of the skills and knowledge that are required of a competent reader. Teachers need to consider what additional challenges each item might pose to those learning EAL compared to monolingual readers. A key question for those working with learners who are struggling is which items might be expected to be the most challenging for this group.

- Automatic perceptual/identification skills at the level of the visual features of print, the letter and the word, e.g. pattern recognition, letter identification

- Phonological awareness

- Knowledge of the structure of the language that is being read, including its syntax and morphology

- Knowledge about the uses, purposes and conventions of literacy and of how texts in different genres are organised

- Vocabulary knowledge

- Ability to access lexical memory

- Content and background knowledge

- Activation of relevant concepts and prior knowledge

- Synthesising information in the text and evaluating it against other sources of information/knowledge

- Metacognitive knowledge ("knowledge about our own thinking processes and the ability to adopt appropriate strategies to achieve particular goals")

- Monitoring own response to the text, e.g. recognising problems of comprehension

(From Cline and Shamsie (2000) p. 14)

Basic strategies in teaching pupils with EAL who show learning difficulties in literacy involve a mix of building on existing strengths and compensating for areas of comparative weakness:

a) Examples of strengths and achievements that might be a foundation for further learning include:

- Competence in other languages, including literacy knowledge and skills

- Breadth of cultural experience

- Phonological awareness and skills

- Motivation

- Self-esteem

b) Strategies for compensating for areas of comparative weakness might include:

- Offer consistent, predictable routines and demands in the reading curriculum as well as in other classroom practices

• Offer culturally appropriate choices of reading material to enhance motivation and self-esteem

• Provide practice (and, where necessary, explicit instruction) in metacognitive and cognitive strategies

• Activate/introduce appropriate schema through pre-reading discussion and retelling

• Help pupils to develop the habit of organising in advance by skimming or previewing headings, pictures, summaries and text

• Undertake constant checks on oral and reading comprehension, making clear the teacher's concern for comprehension and engagement rather than simply for accurate reading aloud and speed

• Help pupils to develop the habits of slowing down their reading rate to aid and check comprehension, using context to sort out a misunderstood segment, and using key visuals and mind mapping to organise information during reading

• Employ multi-sensory approaches

• Stress the value of over-learning (e.g. for spelling) - but in meaningful contexts

• Modify tasks to enable pupil to show comprehension of what is read in a way that does not place heavy demands on expressive language or writing skills

• Use collaborative approaches through pair and group work that will enable peers to scaffold emerging skills and knowledge with a struggling reader

Adapted from the chapter by Deponio, Landon and Reid in Peer and Reid (Eds.) (2000) and from McCarthy (2004). See also Carrasquillo et al (2004) and Kormas and Kontra (2008).

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References and Further Reading

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