

Spoken Language

We use spoken language to express our ideas, opinions and feelings. We also use it to make sense of and confirm our understandings, to question and test our assumptions and to explore meaning. Children who have been learning English since birth will have developed and honed their speaking and listening skills in English through their contact with trusted adults and peers and learnt to use English to support their developing understanding of the world. They will have learnt to use spoken language to interact with others for different purposes and have begun to develop their understanding of different registers, tones and the use of expressive language. Children who have learnt another language from birth will have done all the same things but in a different language with different conventions and within a different cultural context. It is important to note that for most children they learn to listen before they learn to talk and it is therefore no surprise that opportunities to listen to a new language are also critical in learning to talk in that language.

Talk for social interaction

At whatever age children begin to learn English, they need to learn quickly how to convey their knowledge and understanding in English and to engage with new learning through English. Developing their speaking and listening skills in English will be a key to their success. For many children developing spoken English for social communication inside and outside the classroom will be relatively unproblematic. There will be plenty of opportunities to listen to language, non-verbal support such as gestures or facial expressions, contextual clues to meaning and interactions which in turn will provide opportunities for negotiation, rehearsal and experimentation. Cummins (1984) referred to this as Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) - see [BICS/CALP](#). The language for basic social interaction will be heard often in the playground and learnt because it is needed to establish relationships, satisfy basic needs and survive. It is also likely to be the language that it is directly taught by teachers and other pupils through constant repetition and prompting when children first start learning English. Often, for communication purposes, the form of the language used is less important than the ability to communicate meaning. In their desire to communicate teachers may simplify their language and learners may acquire unusual or grammatically incorrect forms. The desire to communicate in English and elicit a response, sometimes before the learner is willing or ready to do so, may therefore lead to problems later on as it can be very difficult to unlearn previous learning.

Talk for academic learning

The language that learners need in order to develop their knowledge and understanding and participate fully in learning in classroom contexts is much more demanding and complex. Cummins (1984) refers to this as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) - see [BICS/CALP](#). Children are less likely to hear this language in the playground or in their own homes. In classrooms complex language is used for teaching purposes and pupils are expected to be able to use and reproduce a range of language forms and functions for different purposes. However, there will be few opportunities for the learner to practise and consolidate this type of language. Learners of EAL, therefore, need considerable exposure to the different forms and functions of language in classroom contexts. Teachers need to be aware of the lexis, syntax and semantics of the different discourses they use and introduce and of how learners can be supported in acquiring them. An understanding of subject specific vocabulary, sentence structures and text types will help but teachers also need to be aware of the messages the language they use conveys and the different ways of constructing meaning in different contexts and curriculum subjects.

Classroom discourse

Analyses of classroom discourse and teacher – pupil interactions in particular suggests that much of the language that children will hear is associated with directives (instructions, requests and commands in particular). Teacher use this type of language to organise what the children have to do. Teachers also use questions, mostly of the closed variety to confirm children have understood what to do. Research suggests that many teachers ask questions that they already know the answer to - to check children's understanding they initiate a question, a pupil responds and the teacher then provides feedback – what is sometimes referred to as an IRF sequence (Mercer 2001, van Lier, 2001). Whilst teachers may use this approach to explore understanding and ask questions to which there is no preconceived answer this is rare. Teachers also tend to do a lot of the talking in classrooms with the emphasis on whole class teaching in National Strategies. These language interactions will be repeated often in many classrooms but they do not in themselves help bilingual children to develop the linguistic repertoires they need to learn curriculum subjects. Bilingual pupils need opportunities to engage in genuine dialogue with other pupils and teachers if they are to develop their understanding of how language is used for different purposes and how these differ in different areas of the curriculum. Talk needs to play a major part in the planned curriculum if pupils are going to be enabled to become active learners and extend their language repertoires. Sometimes teachers will also need to plan for opportunities for explicit teaching of language forms and functions.

Government guidance

The publication 'Speaking, Listening, Learning, working with children in Key Stages 1 and 2' (DfES/QCA, 2003) is designed to provide guidance for teachers in an area that was neglected in the introduction of both the National Literacy Strategy and the original National Primary Strategy. Many of the suggested approaches and activities draw on previous suggestions from the National Oracy Project in the 1980s and early 1990s and on collaborative activities for additional language support developed by teachers in schools (Norman, 1992). There are many useful suggestions for teachers in the publication but little explicit guidance on supporting children learning English as an additional language. One general comment 'Most children try out ideas in talk long before they are able to pin them down in writing' is of critical importance for teachers to consider in their planning for children learning English as an additional language. Constructivist approaches to learning were influential in the development of many of the strategies which focus on providing children with opportunities to explore meaning through talk. For bilingual pupils talk is essential for language learning and for learning curriculum content. However, for bilingual pupils the socio-cultural context for the talk is equally important. EAL learners will only be able to make meaning if teachers take account of the cultural context and the situation in which the talk is to be carried out and are aware of what learners bring to the situation in terms of their cultural knowledge and understanding and their language proficiency.

Talking to learn

Talk that is connected to doing something, solving a problem, designing something, carrying out an experiment, is often called exploratory talk. This involves thinking aloud, pondering, speculating, formulating ideas, reasoning, explaining, justifying, evaluating – the types of language that children need to be able to communicate their understandings. Bilingual pupils may need support in order to engage in this kind of talk. For a further discussion see '[Learning through Dialogue](#)' by Steve Cooke. A more experienced adult or peer may be able to provide support through the first language, adults or peers may be able to model language forms or scaffold children's understanding through questioning, probing, recasting, explaining and discussion where the use of language is conscious and directed. Contextual support may be provided through the use of key visuals, pictures, video, computer, equipment, props or artefacts. Group work can provide a context for supporting the development of listening and speaking skills. It can provide opportunities for listening to others, interaction, speculation, repetition, hearing appropriate responses; it can provide a secure and supportive environment where risks can be taken. However, the reverse can also be true. Teachers need to plan for talking in terms of language and learning outcomes, consider their groupings carefully, and plan to teach language forms and functions explicitly in order to support pupils' cognitive and linguistic development (see Gibbons, 1993, 2002).

What teachers need to do

Opportunities for [extended talk](#), with support if necessary, are needed in all areas of the curriculum and across all key stages. Bilingual pupils are also likely to need opportunities to experiment with and support in understanding different registers and in the differences between spoken and written English. Teachers will need to model forms and functions of spoken and written language, and provide opportunities for oral presentations and representations so that pupils can develop their understanding of how language changes when it is presented in different ways and in different contexts. Successful learning is highly dependant on the social conditions in which it occurs and on the learner being able 'to engage with the cultural dimensions of the language through which the school curriculum is imparted' (McWilliam, 1998).

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