

Teaching language and curriculum

Research (Cummins 1981, Collier & Thomas 1989) indicates that it takes as long as seven years for pupils learning English as an additional language (EAL) to acquire a level of English proficiency comparable to native English speaking peers. Teachers cannot wait for EAL pupils to develop this high level of English language proficiency before tackling the demands of the curriculum. Readings in this section highlight why and how teaching can enable pupils to participate in curriculum content learning while they are simultaneously learning English by ensuring that academic content is linked to language objectives and that language objectives are compatible with academic content.

Cummins conceptualised the language and learning difficulties that pupils with EAL face in school as the gap between conversational fluency in a new language and academic language proficiency. He referred to conversational fluency as basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and to the language needed for academic work as cognitive/academic language proficiency (CALP). EAL pupils can become conversationally fluent and engage in routine classroom activities using clues in the immediate environment and context. Curriculum activities which are intellectually unfamiliar and abstract are more difficult to grasp and manage. Cummins has observed that EAL pupils acquire conversational fluency within about two years of initial exposure to English but require at least five years to catch up with native English speakers in academic language proficiency. (see [Bilingual Language Acquisition](#))

Met suggests that teachers of EAL pupils plan to sequence academic content objectives according to their language demands, differentiating concepts that can be shown from concepts that can be talked about. Met describes how to effectively support EAL pupils, teachers must design teaching approaches to "make the abstract concrete" through visuals, realia and hands-on activities. Teachers should also recognise the important role of purposeful active language use in language development and ensure that EAL pupils have frequent and sustained opportunities to produce language through collaborative group learning activities. EAL pupils should not only be asked to think about the right answer from a content perspective, they should also be asked to express their responses accurately and appropriately. (see [summary](#))

Language use in school differs in important ways from language use outside of school. In addition, different academic subject areas have specific genres or registers. An important aspect of an inclusive curriculum is that the mainstream class teacher and the EAL specialist should work together to ensure that academic content is linked to language objectives and that language objectives are compatible with academic content. The rationale for this approach is the observation that language development of EAL pupils often reaches a plateau in the middle primary years of school, and pupils learning EAL struggle through secondary school - where academic content is much more demanding - with a limited set of language skills. Snow et al argue that teachers need to distinguish between content-obligatory language and content-compatible language. Content-obligatory language is the language that is so closely associated with specific content objectives that pupils cannot master the objectives without learning the language as well. For example, pupils can not explain in English when to add or subtract without first knowing the terms such as 'and', 'add', 'take away' and 'subtract'. Content-compatible language is the language that can be taught through a content lesson. However the same content could be taught and learned without specific vocabulary, grammar or language functions. Pupils can discuss citizenship with a wide vocabulary (e.g. liberty, despotic) but can also learn the concepts of democracy with less formal, more everyday language (e.g. free, fair) (see [summary](#))

Pupils learning EAL are often disadvantaged by the 'natural' approach to language teaching and learning in the primary school where children are immersed in a stimulating spoken language and print environment. Davison argues that EAL pupils need methodical language development, not just opportunities for language use. Language and learning are not synonymous for EAL pupils because their first language is neither the language of school nor the medium of teaching. Their needs can not be met by immersion alone but require explicit and planned language programmes integrated with general class work. (see [summary](#))

In her book 'Learning to Learn in a second Language' (1993), Gibbons argues that for many children, not just those with EAL, the language of the classroom takes a long time to develop; it is frequently abstract, with few concrete visual clues in the immediate environment to support meaning. Non-first-language speakers of English are at a disadvantage in this scenario. They are not only learning a new language, but they are learning in that language as well. They must begin to use English to develop new and abstract concepts as well as literacy skills. As Gibbons points out, the language of the playground does not offer children opportunities to use such language as "if we increase the angle by 5 degrees, we could cut the circumference into equal parts." (p.3); therefore, children learning EAL would benefit from classroom teaching based on the integration of language and content. (see [summary](#))

Pupils with EAL are often in UK mainstream classes before they develop the language proficiency to compete on an equal footing with native speakers of English. Yet the ever-increasing presence of language minority pupils demands better integration of EAL and mainstream curriculum content and teaching approaches. Harklau's 1994 US based study follows a group of pupils with EAL as they make the transition from separate 'ESL' classes to the mainstream.

Although EAL pupils are not generally withdrawn for 'sheltered' (specially adapted) instruction in UK schools, this study has implications for their teaching and learning.(see [summary](#))

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