

Primary geography: working with student teachers in developing strategies for supporting EAL learners at all stages of the acquisition of English

QTS Standards

Q1 Q2 Q10 Q14 Q15 Q18 Q19 Q22 Q25

Geography has been a compulsory part of the primary National Curriculum since its inception in 1989, yet it is one area of the curriculum that teachers often approach with some trepidation (OfSTED 2005).

The QCA clearly outline the value of teaching geography, stressing that:

“Children can be given a stronger sense of their own identity and their place in the world around them if they can make sense of how places and countries have developed; the interrelationship between them and the global issues that impact on their lives.”

(http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_7346.aspx)

For non specialist geography teachers achieving this can seem intimidating but when one considers this in the light of the three principles of the National Curriculum’s inclusion statement:

- setting suitable learning challenges;
- responding to pupils’ diverse learning needs; and
- overcoming potential barriers to learning and assessment for individuals and groups of pupils,

the perceived challenge for making effective provision for geography is further complicated.

This guidance will consider effective and inclusive teaching of geography and provide some practical examples of how student teachers of pupils in Key Stage One might be supported in dealing with issues around English as an Additional Language (EAL) during their geography taught sessions. The content of this guidance draws from taught sessions and classroom observations during the Primary PGCE programme at the University of East London.

Student Experience 1

A student on the Primary PGCE programme set up the sand area in their placement Year One classroom. During the lesson observation a range of pupils from a variety of different backgrounds and a range of first languages were observed playing in the sand. They were creating their own world by making roads for vehicles. During this time the children scooped out holes and used sand to make a hill; they poured water into the hole to make a lake and sticks were used as trees. The children named the roads that they had made and used a watering can to make rain.

The student observing this session noted the sustained nature of the play and the focus and dedication that the pupils showed as their world was created. However, upon further analysis the student was encouraged to see from a geographical perspective how this play also indicated the pupils’ knowledge and growing understanding of the world around them.

An Initial Problem in Geography Teaching

Geography has been recognised by OfSTED as being one of the weakest subjects in the primary school in terms of the quality of teaching and learning (OfSTED, 2005). There are various possible reasons for this but it could be explained in part by students who come to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) with a negative attitude to geography as a result of their own experiences in school. This attitude was identified by Waldron et al. (2007) who showed that a student’s attitude to prior learning can produce a challenging context for teacher educators.

Working with a cohort of Primary PGCE students has revealed that much of their personal experience of geography has consisted of sessions with an over reliance on worksheets, the overuse of text books and intensive, language based, decontextualised activities. This has meant that students often find it difficult to explore the potential for geography to be an exciting and stimulating subject. It also raises significant concerns in terms of the ability of students to support EAL learners effectively in this subject, as these teaching approaches pose particular difficulties for this group.

In all of our sessions, a total of two full days across the PGCE year, we strived to redress this negativity and show students that geography can be context embedded and developmental and encourage them to consider how their own planning can support inclusion for all.

Student Experience 2

A student working in a Year Two class where all of the pupils had EAL was given the school's scheme of work to use as a starting point for her own planning. The theme was the school grounds but on only one occasion did it ask for the pupils to go outside. The remaining three weeks involved the pupils in colouring in worksheets, matching vocabulary to pictures and, for one lesson, copying a poem from a text book. This confirmed the student's own experiences of geography in school and encouraged her to reflect on the nature of such activities. In our sessions we share examples of such decontextualised work, looking through text books and schemes and thinking critically about the contents and the language demands of sessions, and how they might be amended or adapted to suit the needs of pupils.

Geography at Key Stage One

It is important, before we begin to consider ways in which students can be made aware of issues of inclusion, and examine some specific activity suggestions, that we consider the nature of the geography curriculum and the challenges it might impose on pupils new to English.

At Key Stage one the National Curriculum states that:

“pupils investigate their local area and a contrasting area in the United Kingdom or abroad, finding out about the environment in both areas and the people who live there. They also begin to learn about the wider world. They carry out geographical enquiry inside and outside the classroom. In doing this they ask geographical questions about people, places and environments, and use geographical skills and resources such as maps and photographs.”

(DfEE, 1999:110).

In doing this we need to provide a supportive and inclusive learning environment, which takes into account the prior learning of all pupils and builds upon their own understanding of the world around them. For example, EAL learners may have significant knowledge and understanding of one or more countries other than the UK and may, as their knowledge and understanding of the UK context increases, overtake their peers in terms of comparative geographical study. However, they will only have the opportunity to show and develop this if the teacher is flexible enough to adapt activities to take account of this previous knowledge rather than, as is often the case, a country or area being chosen for the whole class to compare with the UK.

Students also need to be aware of the language used during their teaching. During geography sessions we ask all students to analyse a lesson, identify specific language demands and consider how this might be adapted to fit the needs of the pupils they are working with. An example of the proforma used for this can be found [here](#) (Sneddon 2007).

When considering the language demands of geography activities we ask students to think about:

- key subject specific vocabulary;
- tenses (in particular the use of the simple present tense);
- language of classification;
- language of comparison.

There is a danger, as Cooke and Pike (2000) identify, for Geography to become information heavy. There is a temptation for teachers, even at Key Stage One, to present pupils with a large amount of information, often in a written format. Published schemes and non fiction books, if not chosen with the needs of EAL learners in mind, can prevent pupils from accessing concepts effectively, and it is important that students develop criteria to support them in evaluating the appropriateness of materials to use in the classroom.

During sessions we ask students to create their own evaluative tool for identifying useful and appropriate resources. The criteria identified as part of this could include: the relevance to teaching; suitability of content in terms of vocabulary; use of pictures or diagrams; and level of reading required to fully engage with what is being written. Once sure of the criteria, students then spend time creating reviews of materials which are posted on our virtual learning environment.

It is also vital for students to consider that presenting material in visual form does not necessarily make it accessible to pupils learning EAL. At the early stages of their training, students often explain that they will use a video, or clip downloaded from the internet which can be displayed on the interactive whiteboard, to support pupils with EAL.

While it is often useful to employ these strategies, the materials need to be considered carefully and how they are shared needs to be taken in account. Guidance from the QCA (http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_7346.aspx) argues that visual resources can be as challenging for pupils as written texts, as they may not have the contextual information to interpret them. The example they give is that of the inclusion of police officers in the category of people who help in the UK. In some countries, and in the direct experience of some children, the police force might not carry that connotation. Therefore, care needs to be taken with visual resource selection and in supporting individual children in terms of accessing resources effectively.

It is important to recognise that the National Curriculum assumes prior contextual knowledge of this sort in its objectives. For example, pupils are asked, in the examples given to support teachers' interpretation of the objectives for geography, to identify:

- pedestrian crossings (4a);
- seasonal changes (4a);
- positions of places on a map (3b); and
- different jobs in the area (3a)
(DfEE, 1999:110-111).

With this in mind, it is important to recognise that the cultural and physical environment of Britain may feel very alien to newly arrived pupils, and teachers cannot always assume that pupils will be aware of what may seem to them to be basic concepts.

For the rest of this guidance we will focus on one of the main themes of the Key Stage One curriculum: 'The School Environment', exploring how the curriculum could be made more accessible to EAL learners at different stages of language acquisition.

The School Environment

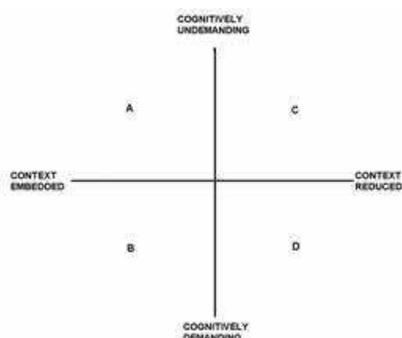
Student Experience 3

A student on placement created a treasure hunt for a group which included a child who spoke little English. They were given a variety of photographs of the school grounds taken by the student. These photographs were taken from unusual perspectives, or were of aspects of the grounds that were not obvious and required pupils to search for the location of the photograph. The group of pupils were then taken on a walk around the school grounds to deduce the locations of their set of photographs.

The child learning English, who had been withdrawn in the classroom, was very engaged by the activity and was able to support the others in locating the photographs initially through gesture and "physical persuasion" and eventually basic vocabulary. The child participated on an equal footing with the rest of the group in inferring and sharing his own understanding in a confident manner.

'EAL learners have to learn a new language while learning through the medium of that new language. To ensure they reach their potential, learning and teaching approaches must be deployed that ensure both access to the curriculum at a cognitively appropriate level and maximum language development.'
(DfES, 2004:40)

For the purposes of this discussion we will use Cummins' (2000) Quadrant model. Initially introduced during a lead lecture, it is then reviewed in a smaller group session later on in the year. This model is introduced as a tool to support planning; this is also advocated by the Primary National Strategy (DfES, 2006:27). The model below shows how cognitive challenge and context need to be taken into account when planning across the curriculum for EAL learners at different stages of the acquisition of English. This framework supports the students' understanding and analysis of tasks set and we ask them to consider planning in accordance with the child's needs, using this model for support.



The relationship between language proficiency and academic achievement (Cummins, 2000: 68)

The starting point for early learners of English includes activities that are context embedded and cognitively undemanding to support learning. These would be placed at point **A** of the model above. At these early stages of learning English, activities could include an emphasis on fieldwork (NC geography 2b/e), such as drawing sketch maps of the school and labelling key features. At this stage pupils are being asked to record what is there rather than make judgements or create hypotheses. The vocabulary introduced will be related to the context they are in and as such there is less linguistic challenge for the pupils as language is restricted to things they can see, point at or sketch (nouns). A digital camera can be a very powerful tool to create images which can be used with all pupils in the class. These can be employed effectively at this point to encourage pupils to record their own experiences, and to provide materials for supported discussion when back in the classroom. During sessions in geography we ask students to participate in activities such as these and design their own, highlighting ways in which they can introduce key vocabulary and concepts in a context embedded and meaningful manner.

Student Experience 4

A student took a group of Year One pupils out into the grounds of the school to create a rubbings trail. One child had a plan of the grounds and marked where each rubbing was made. Another of the children, who had just started at the school and had demonstrated very little English, was given the digital camera. This child had to record the rubbings being created. The student highlighted key vocabulary by showing flash cards with the names of areas in the school the child might need, such as toilets, hall, cloakroom, dining room, playground, gate and placing them on the map. Once back in the classroom, the student incorporated the images with key vocabulary to create a book to go in the class book corner.

As pupils become familiar with the vocabulary and basic sentence structures, it becomes necessary to increase the cognitive demand of the tasks. This will move the types of task from what Cummins (2000) calls Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), which is the language that pupils develop naturally and relatively quickly, to Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), which takes time to develop and involves the teacher in direct facilitation. Tasks of this type can be found at Point B in the quadrant. At this point it might be appropriate to include some element of hypothesising, sorting or inferring, but to keep the task very context embedded. This (at Key Stage One and working to the same theme of the school environment) might include collecting samples of materials from around the school grounds and sorting them according to their properties; reflecting with a group about aspects they liked or disliked; completing and interpreting the results of a traffic survey to find out about road usage; recording land usage around the school premises; and recording information on a plan. All of these activities could be perceived as being more cognitively demanding as they ask pupils to use vocabulary/ language structures in a specific purposeful way, but they still rely heavily upon the context of the learning.

The third quadrant (Point C) relates to activities that are context reduced and have a low cognitive challenge; this step is important in moving the child forward in their learning as it provides consolidation of the context embedded work completed previously, and lays the foundations for applying knowledge to other, more abstract, activities. Relevant activities that fit into this category might include filling in a grid about their likes and dislikes in the environment; talking with a partner about a route they took around the school ground; or colouring on a plan specific areas given to them.

Student Experience 5

One student, working with a class of year 2 pupils carried out the following activity that he felt fitted into this category:

Pupils had spent time in the field becoming familiar with their environment by drawing maps and making field sketches. The group of pupils with EAL had been out and taken photographs of the school grounds and basic vocabulary had been highlighted through the use of flashcards, labelling of maps, and the creation of a class book of places. The class were split into five different groups and each group was allocated the role of a member of the school community. Each group then had to discuss what they used the school grounds for and identify three things they thought of it. The EAL pupils used a mixture of their home language and English for this.

Following the discussion the groups were then mixed with one representative from each group feeding back to their new group about who they were and what they thought of the school grounds. The pupils returned to their original groups and, as a group, prepared a speech about how their school grounds might be improved.

The class responded enthusiastically and a good level of discussion was evident. This work was not as context embedded as previous activities in that it required pupils to discuss, without the aid of pictures or being in the field, the key features of their own environment. The discussion was informal and yet pupils were thinking reflectively. The support given to the pupils learning EAL, and the opportunity to converse in their first language, meant that all pupils were participating appropriately.

The importance of ensuring appropriate academic challenge is vital. The DfES (2002) guidance 'Access and Engagement in Geography' (which focuses on Key Stage 3) highlights this aspect, stressing that cognitive challenge is an essential factor that enables bilingual pupils to develop their English successfully. The case study above recognised that some pupils may need to converse in their home language in order to fully participate in the activity at a cognitively appropriate level. This allowed those more fluent in their home language to talk through more challenging concepts in this language, with a bilingual teaching assistant focused on supporting them in acquiring the vocabulary and language structures in order to express these ideas in English. The emphasis of the lesson was therefore, first, upon the geographical learning and, second, the associated subject specific language which may have proved a stumbling block for some members of the group.

To conclude, from birth, regardless of where this might be, children show a natural curiosity for the world around them. As future teachers, our students need to recognise this and be prepared to think creatively about issues of inclusion to extend and support future learning. Through developing an empathetic relationship with the children they are teaching, and reflecting on activities, language use, and resources, geography can be taught in a way which supports all pupils in developing their natural curiosity in a structured and creative manner.

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