

Pauline Gibbons: "Teaching as mediation: scaffolding second language learning through classroom interaction"

Dr Gibbons' address considered ways in which EAL could be advanced by individual teachers, and focused on the nature of teacher-pupil talk. In particular, she referred to ways in which, in the context of the curriculum, classroom talk could be enabling not only of curriculum learning but also of second language development.

She began by placing her talk in the broader historical context of the two major competing educational ideologies of schooling; that of education as a form of socialisation, with the teaching and learning relationship as one of transmission and reception of knowledge; and that of progressive or child-centred education, where the organising principle is the individual child's active construction of knowledge, and the teacher's role to stage-manage appropriate learning experiences for the learner. In the first model, language is seen as transparent, with little emphasis on it as a conduit or carrier of the body of knowledge; in the second model, a child's language abilities are seen as a result of more general underlying cognitive structures, and talk is seen as serving primarily for the expression of what the students are thinking about and not the medium by which thought itself is developed.

Both orientations have been critiqued from the standpoint of EAL and other minority learners. The transmission model tends to work against one of the central principles of language learning, i.e. that using language in interactions with others is an essential part of the process by which it is learnt. Dr Gibbons gave the example of a typical initiation/response/feedback (IRF) interaction in which the teacher asks a question to which she already knows the answer, the pupil replies and the teacher gives evaluative feedback. But learners need opportunities to produce extended stretches of discourse for themselves and opportunities for 'stretched' language – the sort of language used when a learner is pushed to the outer limits of what she is able to say, beyond the comfort zone. The IRF exchange deprives learners of many factors that are most enabling of better language learning – the negotiation of meaning that occurs in ongoing dialogic talk. Progressive pedagogies have also been criticised, especially in recent years, for a lack of explicit language teaching which, it has been argued, disadvantages those already unfamiliar with the language and assumptions of a middle class curriculum. It is also criticised for its focus on the processes of learning to the detriment of broader societal demands, which require that students learn to control language associated with the powerful genres and text-types of the dominant society.

In reality, both orientations exist in schools, and co-exist uneasily side by side in some classrooms. Both orientations have individualistic views of learning, with the learner seen as independent and self-contained, and knowledge as an individual possession. In neither is there a recognition of the collaborative nature of learning and meaning-making. Dr Gibbons proposed an alternative model with fundamentally different theoretical roots, a model which does not separate teaching and learning, but foregrounds the socially situated, essentially collaborative nature of learning, the interrelated but differential nature of the roles of the teacher and learner, and the active roles of both in the learning process.

This theory, proposed by Vygotsky and others who took a socio-cultural approach to teaching and learning, views human development as intrinsically social, not biologically determined as Piaget suggests. Individuals' development is significantly a product, not a pre-requisite of education. From the point of view of language learning, although we are all pre-programmed to learn language, whether and how well we learn and the purposes for which we are able to use it are dependent on the social contexts we find ourselves in. The educational basis of this is captured by the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) – the distance of the cognitive gap between what a child can do unaided and what she can do with help. Learning occurs by assisted performance in the context of joint activity. This socio-cultural view of learning sees the development of cognition as a result of participation with others in goal-directed activity. If the premise is that external dialogue is a major resource for the development of thinking, it follows that we must consider seriously the nature of the talk in which children are engaged in the classroom. The debates in Australia and elsewhere about groupwork versus whole classwork miss the point: it is the nature of talk that goes on in these activities, not the way the classroom is organised per se that makes the difference.

Dr Gibbons argued that teachers' mediation in school involved communication between two different orders of discourse: on one hand, the current levels of pupils' knowledge and second language abilities and on the other the broader knowledge into which they are being apprenticed, and the appropriate language by which this is expressed. In the examples she presented, teachers build linguistic bridges to span that difference. Through the mediation of the teacher, the pupils' contributions to classroom talk are progressively transformed into the specialist discourse of the school curriculum. This process is neither the teacher-directed discourse of transmission nor the non-interventionist discourse of some forms of progressive education. The teacher's aim in the examples is to hand over knowledge and control to the pupils and this occurs through the kinds of 'scaffolding' support that the teacher provides. Dr Gibbons defined 'scaffolding' as help which will enable the learner to accomplish a task which they would not have been able to manage on their own. It is future-orientated: the notion of eventual handover to the pupil is crucial.

Dr Gibbons presented classroom examples of this notion, taken from a science lesson in an upper primary classroom where all but two of the pupils were EAL learners. For these second language learners, the construction of curriculum knowledge must go hand-in-hand with the development of the second language. EAL learners become adept at using English in face-to-face contexts, where talk relates to what occurs around them, but often have difficulty in the more written-like subject specific registers of the school, especially for learners who are not already fluent in these in their first language. If they are not to be disadvantaged in education, English language support needs to be given long after it normally ceases to be provided. Dr Gibbons described a situation in Australia where federal policies grossly underestimated the need for ongoing EAL support for children going to school unfamiliar with the language and dialect of the classroom, and where the situation is compounded by the fact that EAL is being legislated out by being subsumed under the umbrella of literacy.

The examples that Dr Gibbons presented showed students being given the opportunity to develop their second language in the context of learning about other

things. They illustrated the collaborative nature of meaning making and knowledge construction, and the active roles of the teacher and the learner in the learning process. The teacher used the Hallidayan model of language to inform the way she designed the programme, with activities which would produce the kind of language that would move learners along a continuum from face-to-face doing to written language. A recurring cycle of experiment →talk with teacher →written work in journals, was designed.

The work exemplified was on the properties of magnets. The first exchange recorded is typical of face-to-face language, with not many linguistic demands being made. In the second stage of reporting back on what they had learnt, the discourse is more like a recount about what students did. In the third stage of teacher-guided reporting, the students are being asked to thematise the actual scientific knowledge itself. Students as actors have now disappeared in this text, and the language is gradually shifting towards the more academic register of science. The final written version uses generalisations and field-specific vocabulary, and sounds more like the language of science.

Dr Gibbons sees this teacher-guided reporting as a linguistic bridge, a scaffold by which students move from face-to-face language to written discourse. There is ongoing reconstructive recapping of what the pupils have done, where experiences and events are re-represented or re-contextualised by the teacher in a way which fits the broader pedagogic requirements of the curriculum. The teacher's recast version is thematically very closely related to the children's version, though different linguistic items are used, e.g. stick/attract; push away/repel. This recasting and extension of student-initiated meaning depends on the adults' contribution being closely related to, and therefore following the student's contribution – in a sense leading from behind. The pupil initiates, teacher responds and provides access to the language students have not yet learnt. The teacher's responses suggest the notion of ZPD and comprehensible input – she takes as a starting point what the pupil is able to contribute, but scaffolds the language they will later be expected to use.

In a further example, a pupil clearly has no problem with working in a group and understanding the task but finds difficulty in explaining. In this interesting example of scaffolding in action, the student is allowed to enter the discourse on her own terms. The teacher is in charge of the overall discussion, but individual exchanges locate the choice of topic in the pupil's contribution. She does not simply recast for the student but hands back responsibility to the learner to have another go herself. The help she gives is very specific: she draws attention to specific grammatical features and uses very short but effective questions. The pupil's final attempt shows very great improvement linguistically, and the pupil talks much more than the teacher throughout. The teacher's requests for clarification result in increasingly more explicit information from the student.

This is a very effective piece of discourse in terms of enabling language development, showing all the elements required: support of the speaker to clarify meaning; a degree of negotiation; responsibility put back on the learner to 'have another go'. This exemplifies teacher-guided reporting, not just reporting back. The examples show the collaborative nature of meaning making and knowledge construction, the active role of the teacher and learner in the learning process. Teachers allow room for learner initiative as a new task is grasped, but provide

intervention when learners begin to falter. They provide very specific scaffolding questions and support, and when they perceive that the pupils are able to do it on their own, they hand it over. Contingent responses are anchored in what the learner has said. They are responsive to current understanding but also push learning forward.

The teacher talk in the examples is not the transmission approach of the traditional classroom or the non-interventionist approach which has been the focus for criticism in the so-called 'learner-centred' classroom. All the examples illustrate the socially situated and collaborative nature of learning. Learners' achievements and educational failure are not solely because of a child's innate ability and background but also the nature of the interaction that occurs in the educational context. This moves away from the notion of language deficit located in the individual. It focuses on the need to provide a broad range of socially situated contexts for learning development, and the linguistic support learners have been given. It calls into question the debate as to whether the teacher-centred or pupil-centred classroom is more effective. It is not a question of what participant structures are more effective, but the notion of what is happening within the structures, and the quality of the talk going on. It foregrounds the relationship between the teacher and learner rather than individual pupil learning or teacher methodology. We need a different language to talk about learning; we need to talk about learning and language development as the co-construction of meaning, as social mediation, or as dialogue. Rather than polarise debates between small group/whole class, whole language/phonics, the more important question is: how can the nature of talk between teachers and pupils be improved so that opportunities are increased for meaning making and the collaborative construction of knowledge?.

While transformation and support at the macro level of school and systems policy is critical, there is a need to focus much more on the possibilities of the micro-nature of interactions. Dr Gibbons' talk had given pointers to the ways in which this could be achieved and had emphasised the importance, in looking for ways in which EAL learning can be advanced, for finding points of leverage that will make a difference to the kinds of discourse that occur in the classroom.

It was clear from the reaction of Conference delegates that they identified many similarities between issues of concern Dr Gibbons referred to in the Australian situation and those in the UK context.

Participants felt that Dr Gibbons' stimulating and challenging address reinforced, clarified and restated much of the practice they were trying to develop in EAL, and also contributed to developing their confidence and expertise by clearly focusing, in line with the theme of the Conference, on translating theory into practice.