

EAL learning and teaching in Religious Education

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This guidance is based on my experience of working with secondary school (11-16) Religious Education. The challenges of secondary Religious Education affect all stages of EAL learners. Good general guidance is given in the DfES (2002) booklet 'Access and engagement'. This article aims to build on that to enable 'analysis of the language demands' of the subject and give some directions for development of learning activities that provide cognitive challenge as well as language support in order to make effective provision for EAL learners.

What approaches to RE are helpful for EAL pupils?

Probably the most helpful approach to Religious Education with EAL learners is that of the Westhill project Read (1988) which reminds RE teachers to draw on three areas of the field of Enquiry – Traditional Belief Systems, Shared Human Experience and Individual Patterns of Belief. The emphasis on 'Shared Human Experience' should mean that all learners should start by drawing on their experiences as human beings. This coincides with the first principle of EAL pedagogy : Activation of prior knowledge. This is particularly important in the context of some RE where much of the material is based on Christian teachings – and those of other faiths and none need to be reassured that this lesson is for their learning.

Many EAL learners come from families where a religious tradition, whether Muslim, Christian or Hindu, is highly valued. This should mean that they also bring to RE plenty of personal experience of a faith tradition on which they may build a more academic understanding of their own and others beliefs and experiences. Creation of a classroom that recognises through display and openness to their backgrounds and experiences is therefore an important starting point. It is important to note at this point that Religious education should include experiences of faith that the learners can recognise as similar to their own. Janet King et al's (2001) 'Global Perspectives on Christianity' can be a useful resource to assist in this.

However the study of Religious Education also demands thinking processes and skills that are not necessarily part of a child's religious heritage. This may especially be the case in traditional approaches to faith where religious texts are primarily to be recited or retold rather than applied or interpreted. However [research](#) suggests these literacies have their benefits in the development of a child's linguistic skills.

Learning English within RE

Learning within RE has several content strands to it including: -

- Religious account and interpretation.
- Religious Practices.
- Religious objects and buildings.
- Religious symbols and symbolism.
- Ethical teachings.
- Theological beliefs.

I shall briefly outline ways that Religious Education Teachers can enable EAL learners to develop their use of English as they develop their knowledge and understanding of the subject.

Religious account and interpretation

Underpinning much Religious Education are religious stories or accounts. These may tell learners about recent believers' lives or may be drawn from the texts that are part of the religious tradition. Typical features of this sort of writing will be a past tense narrative, using expressions to show passing of time. It may sometimes be academically appropriate to use the present simple narrative – as used in literary recounts and blurbs – particularly when only referring to a part of a story. This sort of storytelling may also be useful to make stories more accessible to early stage EAL learners when accompanied by illustration and careful use of vocabulary. As part of the interpretation of these accounts learners need to express moral values. The language of expression of moral values often uses modals (must, have to, should, ought to, It is right to...) which are more commonly the language of behaviour in school rather than required for writing. So this needs attention drawn to it, and opportunity made for explicit teaching of some of the differences between them.

Religious place, practice and ceremony

Accounts of religious place, practice and ceremony can also be a reasonably accessible area within RE. These can be effectively presented with clear illustration. (Photographs and video may be quite hard to interpret whereas a purpose drawn line drawing or diagram may be more effective). Such accounts tend to be full of new language for religious items. It is generally better practice to limit the number of new specialist terms used for objects or actions. Good Religious Education is far more than labelling.

Ethical and theological beliefs and teachings

Whereas religious story and religious practice are easily supported with visuals, film and photographs, ethical and theological beliefs and teachings can be harder to access when expressed in a purely conceptual way. The reassurance for RE teachers is that religious traditions have often used story and example as well as art and music when teaching these matters. As RE teachers, we do however need to teach learners how to approach reading and writing tasks that are more abstract. – These are the processes highlighted in the higher levels of attainment.

Language Challenges

A reminder of the language challenges of good Religious Education can be found in the descriptor of Level 5: Attainment target 1 in the QCA's 'National framework for Religious Education'

"Pupils use an increasingly wide religious vocabulary to explain the impact of beliefs on individuals and communities. They describe why people belong to religions. They understand that similarities and differences illustrate distinctive beliefs within and between religions and suggest possible reasons for this. They explain how religious sources are used to provide answers to ultimate questions and ethical issues, recognising diversity in forms of religious, spiritual and moral expression, within and between religions."

There is then a need both to develop subject specific vocabulary and to develop writing skills to make causal links between believers' ideas and actions. They also need to develop their ability to comment on and explain similarities and differences. Other tasks involve evaluation of beliefs

Classroom activities for EAL learners

The Religious Education classroom can be made a lot more EAL – friendly by ensuring that it is rich in visual support. This will include objects, posters and photographs that invite questions. It may be appropriate to have some key words displayed in a variety of the major languages in the school as well as English.

Introducing specialist vocabulary

Whether in spoken or written English Religious Education has a large and new vocabulary required by its content. It also uses a lot of general vocabulary that may be of an unfamiliar register or completely unknown to EAL learners. The practice of putting up key words for learners to see and learn is better practice if they are displayed on card throughout a unit of work rather than only on a board lesson by lesson. Ensuring that the new words get reviewed and spoken by students regularly is also a necessary part of learning them. Apart from explaining the words – which may be quicker but gives less time to focus on the explanation– it can be useful to make available suitable dictionaries – including bilingual dictionaries and dictionaries designed for learners of English as a second or foreign language - to look them up. It can also be useful to use online dictionaries of this kind such as the Cambridge Essential Learner's Dictionary of the Cambridge Advanced Learner's dictionary which also link to a visual thesaurus and a Turkish and Spanish dictionary. At the end of a unit it is helpful as a starter to use a card matching activity that reviews the new vocabulary covered – especially if you want to see it used in written work for assessment.



The screenshot shows the online dictionary entry for 'worship'. It includes the word 'worship', its phonetic transcription /wɒːʃɪp/, and its part of speech as a verb. The definition is 'to show respect for a god by saying prayers'. A secondary definition is 'to love and respect someone very much: She worshipped her mother.' Below this, it lists 'worship' as a noun (no plural) and defines it as 'a place of worship (= a religious building)'. There is a link to a visual thesaurus and a list of related words under 'Browse the Dictionary', including worry, worse, worship, worst, and worth.

Listening and Speaking

The foundation for building vocabulary and language skills is talk. Whereas whole class talk can model how ideas can be expressed and explained, paired and small group discussion activities that ensure that every learner has an extended opportunity to develop and express their opinion are also needed. These activities can be stimulated in a variety of ways: Pictures to interpret, compare or sequence; statements or words to sort according to given criteria or to make a personal response to. For example a worksheet, currently found at the [Damaris website](#), based on response to the film 'Ray' has a series of statements with words to associate with them. Other ways of supporting paired / small group discussion can be found in Bazeley (2002), though you will need to develop your own. By adding statements in a learner's mother tongue you can encourage the involvement of bilingual students who are literate in their own language but need encouragement to take part in discussions.

Reading

Reading can also create opportunities for language development. However many textbooks for Religious Education can be challenging. This may be because of use not only of specifically religious vocabulary but also unusual vocabulary beyond an EAL learner's current vocabulary range. As an example I have selected two texts from Ina Taylor's Foundations in RE – Christianity which is published in two editions – Core (general readership) and Essential (for weaker readers). The text below introduces a two page spread on Places of Worship.

Foundation or Essential

*Christians believe that God is everywhere. **That means that** he can be worshipped anywhere.*

*Some people feel they are closest to God outside when they have all God's **creation** around them.*

*Some **services** are **held** in the open air. Jesus **would have done** most of his teaching outside.*

Here there are firstly specifically religious terms – worship (as a verb), creation and services. Then there are the challenges of grammatical language: the text uses the phrase '*That Means that*' to introduce an implication for action rather than to explain the meaning of 'God is everywhere'. The more tentative, though possibly confusing 'would have done' is used rather than 'did'. The use of the superlative form 'closest' may also challenge a weaker reader. Finally a less common meaning is given to a common word. Here, there is the use of 'are held' to mean 'are done' or 'happen'.

Core

*Christians believe that God is everywhere so that means that he can be worshipped anywhere. Some people feel closest to God outside **surrounded by nature**. The **sight** of a beautiful sunset, a walk along a windy sea-shore or through woodland when the sun is **glinting** between the leaves, might move a person to worship the creator. Christian services can be held outdoors depending on the country and its weather. Jesus would have done most of his teaching outside*

In this edition the basic concepts are the same, but the difficulty is increased by the use of one paragraph rather than breaking the ideas into three paragraphs. In addition to the issues I raised with the first text. Sentences are longer, using the linking word 'so' and in a subsequent sentence a series of phrases to evoke the beauty of nature. The use of a wider general vocabulary, (in bold above) is for effect and illustration. There is again the use of a word in a less common sense. 'Move', which in my dictionary has ten meanings, is used to mean 'to cause someone to have strong feelings'.

However, I would advise the supported use of the second text in a mixed ability class. The second text takes the reader into a world of shared, visually supportable experiences in a way that the first does not. You could use a PowerPoint slide with three appropriate pictures and reference to an illustration of smaller group worship outdoors (the text shows a crowd at a service welcoming the Pope). This text also gives an example of ways of writing ideas in RE.

A further issue is that the text written for greater accessibility also reduces cognitive challenge. The harder text activity section asks, "Why do some people like to worship outside?" as the first of several questions seeking explanation of religious practices. In contrast the easier text offers two gap filling tasks involving selection of words from the text. It only then offers a good overview task "How does a Christian choose a place to worship in?" To achieve a longer, more thoughtful answer would, however, need scaffolding not provided by the text.

Use of 'foundation' texts can be useful - however they need to be reviewed on a case by case basis. Texts designed to achieve the same or similar goals, as, for example, Libby Ahluwalia's Foundation Edition of 'Christian Perspectives' KS4 text are more accessible than the original – but still really suitable for those working at or above National Curriculum level 4 in English. One way to make sure that learners are supported in their reading of an extended challenging text is to create short (one sentence) cards that summarise each paragraph's key idea. These can then be matched to each paragraph – either as an independent exercise or after reading the text together.

The processes labelled DARTS are a useful way to enable access to texts in Religious education as in any subject demanding use of extended texts. The use of first or community language texts may also be helpful – both to affirm the value of the languages spoken in the classroom and to enable mother tongue literate students to understand the religious text better. Religious texts are widely available in translation.

Writing

A concern for many Religious Education teachers is the lack of time to create space for extended writing as well as teaching content. The tendency is to try to achieve more in terms of knowledge of content than a learner is able to respond to intellectually and learn from reflectively. Use of writing frames as found in Wray and Lewis (1996) and (1998) as well as Bazeley (2002) to support extended writing can support and speed the process of developing the writing skills required. This is especially the case for writing that requires more than a sequence of time. Writing frames are best used initially to model the writing style – demonstrating writing on the whiteboard using an OHP or electronic whiteboard. They can then be steadily withdrawn as learners start to internalise the requirements of the genre of writing. You will often find that they are often not usable 'off the peg' – or need careful selection to choose the right sort. However, at least one exam board (OCR) uses a standardised form of exam and coursework questioning. For more extended writing in coursework an example of a specific rather than generic frame is available to download on this site.

Mother tongue texts and well illustrated texts

The Bible is available in numerous languages. For example online from <http://www.biblegateway.com/>. If you wish to buy Bible texts they can be bought from the UK Bible Society at <http://www.bibleresources.org.uk/> or at more reasonable prices from the evangelical 'Kitab Books'. You will need to be careful to get a version that is easily understood – many languages have some translations that are the equivalent of the 17th century 'King James' Authorised version and its successors.

Translations of the Qur'an into several languages can be found, for example, at <http://www.theholyyquran.org/>. I have not been able to find a good source of paper copies of these. Some interpretations are deliberately archaic in style as a way of communicating the style of the Classical Arabic.

There are similarly plenty of well illustrated versions of faith stories for faiths other than Islam. Amar Chitra Katha publishers cover Sikh, Hindu and Buddhist stories. There is a useful Graphic Bible published by Lion Hudson, which retells most of the bible in recognisably graphic novel format. (including all upper case text).

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