

# Amal

**Contributed by Jean Marshall**

Amal is seven years old and was born in England of Turkish parents. Her mother, who does not work, has very limited English skills. Her father works in a local restaurant and is more competent in speaking English at a conversational level. When there are parent teacher meetings at the school, it is Amal's dad who attends to discuss her progress. Amal has an older brother who left his primary school in the summer of 2002 and is now attending a local secondary school. Her younger brother was recently admitted to the Early Years class.

The school Amal attends has 260 children on roll, of whom 11% speak English as an additional language and come from a variety of different language and cultural backgrounds. When Amal first arrived in the Early Years class, she had a very limited understanding of basic every day English. Turkish was, and still remains, the first language spoken at home though it is likely that, even at that time, some English would have been 'imported' through her elder brother's attendance at school. Amal went through a silent period of some four to six months where she was content just to watch and listen to her class mates. While not appearing uncomfortable or distressed, she demonstrated little expression or emotion which made it difficult for staff to gauge her feelings or level of understanding regarding her new learning environment. Her attendance was somewhat erratic to begin with and this had repercussions in establishing class routines and practices for her to follow. Both her class teacher and the class teaching assistant at the time were very experienced in working with early Stage 1 EAL children and gradually over time Amal settled into school life. The school's specialist EAL teaching assistant also worked with Amal, supporting her individually and within small groups of native English speakers, both in class and on a withdrawal basis. The general objectives, planned in partnership with the class teacher and EMAS Advisory Teacher, were to help Amal:

- communicate and interact with her peers;
- feel confident enough to attempt speech;
- build up a basic vocabulary to enable her to function in the classroom;
- follow simple instructions and fulfil basic tasks.

These objectives were addressed through supported tasks and structured play activities. These included turn taking, copying and repetitive and accumulative listening games. By the end of her first year, Amal had acquired a basic vocabulary covering body parts, colours, 2D shapes and some letter sounds. She was using isolated words and some 'chunks' of speech to communicate with her peers although she was not confident enough to do this other than within a 1-2-1 or small group situation.

Amal is now in her second term of Y3 and continues to make very good progress. She mixes freely with both monolingual English speakers and EAL pupils in the classroom when working and outside during play. She has integrated well into the school community and when asked responded that she likes all aspects of life there. Although Amal doesn't initiate conversation about her home background, she has become a little more willing to discuss it. There is a strict divide between the two languages so English is the language used at school and Turkish is the language used in the family environment. Amal speaks Turkish fluently at home but has always been reluctant to use it in school. She is able to name some familiar words in Turkish but finds it extremely difficult to do so out of context. She has other Turkish relations living in England and in the past when she has visited them she has been taught to write some common words which she is happy to demonstrate at school.

Amal uses English quite well on a conversational level with her peers, tending to use the Essex dialect models of speech with which she is surrounded, e.g. "Pass me them scissors" or "Get off of that chair."

Listening to her at a superficial level she seems quite fluent and she is generally able to get across her intended meaning. However, on closer inspection it can be seen that she encounters small difficulties in a number of areas:

- Correctly using prepositions and pronouns, e.g. "I got up because I couldn't sleep from our beds."
- Applying verb tenses correctly, e.g. "He is making a tent for her going to sleep."

She is not so confident in the classroom when using speech in a more formal setting to discuss aspects of the curriculum. In these instances she is less likely to initiate speech and has to be drawn into discussion through careful questioning. Using her oral examples as models to inform her writing serves to highlight more clearly the inaccuracies which are present in her speech. Amal uses a story narrative approach to her written work and finds non fiction writing difficult to compose. Firstly, there is the difficulty of accessing specialised vocabulary specific to the content of the subject. Secondly, this technical terminology has to be embedded in a particular layout, form and style.

Amal receives EAL support once a week in a small literacy group made up of E1 speakers and one other EAL pupil. On-going work continues to support her oral skills in the form of modelling the appropriate language structure in response to questions or to forming statements. However, the general objective focus within the literacy support group is now shifting towards helping her to compose non fiction writing, in particular reports, explanations, and instructions. These forms have been highlighted as key styles of writing occurring in the curriculum areas she is studying in her year group. To that end, strategies for teaching and learning greater independence and proficiency in non fiction writing are listed below:

- At the planning stage specific language is targeted and then modelled both verbally and in writing.
- Pupils are encouraged to use the target language in their oral work to inform their writing.
- Pupils are encouraged to support each other by providing simple definitions for unfamiliar terminology.
- Contextual pictures/clues/gesture/concrete referents are provided wherever possible to support both language and form.
- A range of good written examples are provided with specific vocabulary highlighted, e.g. nouns, verbs, conjunctions, etc.
- Examples of the same genre but with different subject content are used to familiarise the form, thus providing opportunities for repetition and consolidation.
- Texts are broken down into meaningful and manageable chunks to aid comprehension and to provide a framework for composition. Each chunk has its own title declaring its specific purpose plus a question to further clarify its intention. One example might be to divide a report into:
  1. Opening: what is it about?
  2. Description: what is its shape, size, colour, etc. like?
  3. Location and function: where is it and what does it do?
  4. End statement: what final comments do you have about it?
- Tasks are made as purposeful as possible so that the accompanying writing has some meaning and relevance. Where appropriate, pupils are engaged in a practical activity which involves talking about and performing the actions contained within the writing, e.g. making a simple book and then writing the directions for its construction inside.

When I questioned Amal about whether she had any specific learning problems, it was interesting to note that she didn't choose a language or literacy focus. Her worries were more concerned with maths and solving number calculations involving two and three-digit numbers. Reviewing some of last term's literacy work together, Amal was aware of some of her errors but didn't regard these as being particularly difficult to overcome. In fact, while

discussing the written comments I had made on some of her work samples, Amal viewed these in much the same way as she views her other class targets. She told me that she very much enjoys her literacy sessions, partly because the group is small so there is a higher turn-taking frequency and also because she feels less inhibited when speaking in front of the others. In addition, there are more opportunities to revisit any areas of difficulty or to pre-empt a future whole class lesson so that unfamiliar terms and forms will have been discussed in advance. Amal is happy for her literacy support to carry on but would not feel disadvantaged if it was discontinued. Within whole class situations she has become more confident at seeking help through her peers or her class teacher when she doesn't understand something rather than waiting for someone to check with her that she knows what to do. Although Amal can recall working with particular adults on specific practical activities from her Early Years class onwards, she doesn't equate this with being helped with her learning to speak English as an additional language. She views it merely as extra help which many of her peers receive for a variety of reasons. She describes her first days at school as being both "scared" and "happy" but she has no clear recollection of not being able to speak the English which she now regards as her first language in school.