

Amanullah (Aman)

Contributed by Catharine Driver

Amanullah who is just 14, was born in Afghanistan near Jallalabad. He left there when he was 12 years old and came to Britain to join his older brother. He says that he left because his parents feared for his life; they were living in a strongly Taliban area, but were supporters of the king of Afghanistan.

Aman's first language is Pashto, but he also speaks Dari, another of the official languages of Afghanistan and he can understand Urdu. He attended school in Jalalabad for 7 years and studied in Pashto and Dari so he is fully literate in both these languages. Here he is talking about his school experiences in Afghanistan:

"Pashto they start from A-Z like Primary school. They show the name of things. We start with 'aleph, bat' ...like Arabic. Pashto is the same like Arabic, but speaking is different. After that you going to go to the secondary school....the teacher told you to write then you'll be writing and I think English lessons start from year 6. In school, like after school, there were English lessons you can stay for the English classes...you pay for the teacher, everyone went to there.

Aman also is proud of his ability to read the Koran in Arabic and talks admiringly of his cousins who are Hafiz; they have memorised the whole Koran.

Although highly literate and educated, on arrival at school in London, Amanullah was very quiet and shy. Teachers seemed unaware of his existence and nor did he ask for extra help. He depended on his few friends for both social and academic support. However, he listened attentively in all lessons and read widely, so that all the time he was developing his receptive language.

The school is a mixed comprehensive in inner London. 23% of the school roll is from a refugee or asylum seeking family. Over 80% of students speak English as an additional language. The school has high mobility and pupils join and leave the school throughout the school year. The school has good procedures for the admission and induction of students with EAL.

Amanullah started school in January of year 8. At that time there was only one other Afghani student in the school, in the Sixth Form. He was placed in a class with a Farsi speaking Iranian student with whom he could communicate. They quickly became firm friends. Shortly afterwards, another two boys from Afghanistan joined the school and were placed in the same class, so the four of them spent a lot of time together. This certainly helped Aman settle in socially, but it meant that he spoke very little English in the first year.

During that year Aman attended an EAL induction class 3 times a week. He made rapid progress in his comprehension and quickly outstripped many of the other students in the class. However, after a year he was still quiet and reluctant to speak. In mainstream lessons he received some EAL support in Maths and Science, and an SEN teacher helped him in English. A detailed Maths assessment was carried out – using the Dfes EAL and Maths folder (Assessment in Mathematics toolkit to support pupils for whom English is an Additional Language [Ref Dfes 0284/2003]) It was through using this that it became clear that his cognitive level in Maths was high and he was moved into a higher set with his Iranian friend (whose English was by this time quite good). Unfortunately, it was over a year before it became clear that Aman also had a good knowledge of Science. In fact he had studied Physics, Chemistry and Biology as separate subjects in Afghanistan and his cousin had been a Science teacher. Since then Aman has had more support in Science and he got level 3 in the KS3 SAT and then completed a good piece of investigative work in preparation for his GCSE course.

Having spent a year listening and reading English, about half way through year 9 Amanullah had gained enough confidence to start speaking more. He began to ask teachers for help, encouraged by his more talkative cousin. Here is an extract from recording of him talking to his EAL teacher about learning Science in Afghanistan.

"I study Science, Physics, Chemistry, Biology. We write, more writing. He write on the board. We can't do experiments because no equipment. Our science teacher he was a doctor. My cousin he was a teacher he live near to us he was helping me everytime. I went to his house he help me."

This extract and the previous one show that Aman is now fluent in the basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and can make himself understood in both social situations and classroom learning contexts. There are still some errors in his speech for example with prepositions (e.g. *he live near **to** us*). Amanullah's pronunciation is very clear, although it still shows the distinctive 't' and 'd' sounds of the languages of the sub-continent. He is still fairly shy and does not initiate conversations with people he does not know well. But since the beginning of year 10 he has gained a lot of confidence in his science lessons and now answers questions and offers information all the time. It seems that at last he has a wide enough vocabulary to be able to communicate his existing knowledge about Science in Pashto into the English context.

Amanullah's written English is not far behind his spoken English now, but it displays a number of inter language errors. The following piece was written just after Amanullah had had an argument with another student. He had walked away saying, 'I hate bloody London'. I asked him if it would help to sit quietly and write something about his life. This extract is a first draft, written in quite an emotional state and I think there are more errors than usual.

My name is Aman. I am from Afghanistan. I born in Jalalabad. Now I am in the UK but I have to learn and make my doctor this is my father wish. Then I help to Afghanistan. Because Afghanistan need some intelligent people now we have to help with every Afghani because they had 23 years fight with Russia and after the Russia they stopped, the Taliban came to Afghanistan and they make Afghanistan wrong. They broke every school and they close the school the girls were band from. So how can you make yourself intelligent person and everyone live Afghanistan. Then they retuned to Afghanistan now.

At text level Aman knows how to open a piece of biographical or narrative writing. He does not yet organise his work in paragraphs. He uses a variety of sentences, simple, compound and complex. He uses some connectives (because, after, and, so) but he is not yet secure in his use of commas to demarcate clause boundaries. Full stops and capital letters are mostly secure. Aman uses the past tense accurately with one exception in the final sentence. His spelling is good for both familiar and longer words. One of errors is phonetically plausible ('band' instead of 'banned') the other is caused by his accented pronunciation ('live' instead of 'leave')

Amanullah is ready to work extensively on his Cognitive academic language. (CALP) He is starting year 10 and will soon have to cope with the complex written demands of GCSE coursework. The following areas need to be explicitly taught as far as possible within a curriculum context:

- Become more familiar with a wider range of text types, in particular that of argument (as attempted above) and analysis of graphical data (useful for Maths, Scinece and Geography)
- Secure his ability to manipulate clauses within complex sentences, using a wider range of subordinating connectives.
- Extend the repertoire of verb choices. He needs to use the past and present perfect tenses and also start to use passive forms, particularly in the context of Science and Geography when explaining processes.

- Show how pronouns are used to refer forward and back in written texts and increase the cohesion. Text marking is a useful strategy for this.
- Explain use of prepositions in different contexts; for talking about time and location and in phrasal verbs (*put on, put out, put up with etc*)

Amanullah is able to reflect on his learning in a very mature way. He is aware for example that minor spelling errors are not anything to worry about as long as the meaning is clear. He feels that it is not necessary for teachers to help him with reading because he can take a book home and read at home using the dictionary. He has excellent independent study skills and often asks for extra work to take home. He is very conscious of how much he needs to learn in order to get high grades at GCSE, particularly in Maths and Science, and it is in these subjects that he asks for support. In the past he has been placed in lower sets and has come to the EAL teacher to ask if he can be moved to a higher group because he knows the work already. He is poised to make a dramatic leap forward in his language ability, and the only thing holding him back now is a lack of cognitive challenge. In recent lessons I have sensed his frustration with other students who disrupt the learning. As he says, *'they know English, they can do the work at home, I need to understand before I can do the writing'*