

Anna

Contributed by Peta Ullmann

Anna is nine years old. She was born in Poland and Polish is her first language. She came to England with her parents and her older sister, Diana, in August 2003. She was admitted to a small Catholic primary school on the edge of a small town in September 2003. Meanwhile her sister, who is a more outgoing character, was admitted to a Catholic secondary school in a large seaside town. There were several pupils at Diana's school who spoke both English and Polish and who could provide immediate support within the classroom situation.

In Poland, Anna had started formal education at the age of seven. Initially, very little information was available about her previous education although the school later learnt that Anna had been a confident pupil who had enjoyed reading and who had always participated well in whole class activities.

When admitted, Anna was in the very early stages of learning English and she was the only pupil with English as an additional language (EAL) at the school. There was no-one in the immediate locality who could provide bilingual support and staff at the school had no recent experience of EAL pupils especially those who were new to English.

Anna's parents had a very limited command of English and communication between the school and home was restricted at first. The family were isolated within the community until the school made contact (shortly after Anna's admission) with a group of Polish families who meet at weekends in the South East area of the county. This group was able to support Anna's parents in a various ways by supporting them in their communication with their children's schools and providing information generally about the locality. The group has also helped to provide a further opportunity for Anna to maintain and develop her skills in Polish outside the home situation.

At the beginning of the term, Anna watched everything intently. She watched her teacher and her peers. She looked for visual clues and copied the actions of her peers. When general classroom instructions were given, she noted the other children's responses and paid particular attention to any supporting gestures and concrete references that were provided. She seemed very keen to participate as far as she was able. She responded very well to instructions supported by gestures, visual clues and examples set by peers. She showed that she had a little knowledge of some very basic noun vocabulary but could not interpret everyday commands, questions or statements. The other children were encouraged to show Anna what to do through their actions and examples of work. They were also encouraged to talk to her normally but not to bombard her with too much attention or questions. Several of her peers found this difficult and initially swamped her with too much attention especially at break times.

Anna appeared nervous and self-conscious. Although very willing to join in and participate, she seemed more than a little aware of her inability to join in the conversations of her peers. She was neat, careful and organised in her actions. She took time over tasks (sometimes to keep busy) and demonstrated a very good ability to compute with numbers. (In many ways, her ability to do this was superior to several of her peers.)

Fortunately, thought had been given about where Anna would sit in the class and with whom she should be grouped. She was placed in groups and paired with children who could present a good model of language and behaviour. These children were patient and attempted to learn several words and greetings in Polish. They were not overly dominant and tried to guide her through tasks and activities. They also provided friendly support outside on the playground.

In whole class situations, Anna sat towards the front of the group where she could hear and see easily. She remained very focused and dependent on visual support and, although at times it was evident that she could not follow extended discourse, she adopted a manner of

behaviour which suggested that she was following all that was said. She relaxed a little when tasks were given which were enjoyable, practical and enabled her to demonstrate her skills other than her language skills in English. She enjoyed producing detailed drawings and excelled at art and craft activities. She also enjoyed PE lessons especially those which involved rule governed games which she could learn by watching and copying. PE lessons which required following very specific, varied instructions were more difficult.

Anna continued to stand back, listen and watch for some time and rarely spoke over and beyond quietly answering her name on the register. She made regular use of bilingual resources (bilingual dictionary and the internet). She was encouraged to write in Polish and over the term, she produced an illustrated biography about herself and her family in English and in Polish with the assistance of her teacher, a teaching assistant and some of her peers. She became familiar with classroom routines although it was not until five weeks after her arrival in the school that she visibly became more relaxed in terms of general behaviour. Smiles were less forced and became more natural. She was less frozen in her movements and increasingly began to use gestures and actions to indicate small wants and preferences.

There were two anxious people in the classroom when Anna was first admitted: Anna and her teacher. Anna's teacher was a very experienced teacher of monolingual English speaking children. She was concerned when Anna was first admitted that she would not be able to meet Anna's needs adequately. She was apprehensive about being able to spend a sufficient amount of time talking to Anna. In addition, she felt uneasy that she would not be able to teach an appropriate curriculum that would meet Anna's language and general learning needs.

As Anna began to relax, so too did her teacher. Anna received a little additional support from a teaching assistant who mainly worked with Anna in the classroom situation. Very occasionally, she was withdrawn with a small group of children to share a range of texts and to play game. Members of the group were always selected carefully.

Anna's teacher adapted her general approach as a teacher. She increasingly used more visual materials, gestures, actions and concrete referents when speaking to Anna and in the whole class situation. She organised activities of various kinds that were both cognitively challenging whilst being less linguistically demanding. She also organised collaborative group activities whereby Anna was grouped with very able peers.

Without the pressure to speak, Anna learnt quickly and became familiar with very everyday classroom commands and instructions. She always checked her understanding though by watching the other children in her class before responding. By the end of her first term at the school, she began to produce single word utterances and occasionally used a few short everyday phrases. It was noted that she would speak in informal situations but rarely spoke in larger group situations. It was clear that Anna felt very self-conscious about making mistakes in front of a large audience.

Anna wanted to learn. Her literacy skills in Polish were developing well before her arrival in England and she quickly mastered the names and sounds of the English alphabet and a range of high frequency words in English. In December, she was beginning to spell several high frequency words as a writer. However, she was still not able to write independently in sentence form and will continue to need considerable support and differentiated materials for some time. It's clear that she possesses a good aural and visual memory and the use of computer software, taped materials and games have helped her to further develop her skills at a basic level. As with so many EAL learners, her mechanical skills as a reader are developing more quickly than her comprehension skills. Staff are aware of this and regularly check and support her understanding through reference to illustrations, demonstration, gestures, actions and simple oral explanations.

By Christmas, Anna had established real friendships within the class. She tended to gravitate towards quiet, orderly peers and avoided noisier members of her class. Whilst interacting with her peers, she used a great deal of facial expression, nodding and shaking of the head, gesture and pointing to express her feelings and to respond to remarks, comments and

questions. She had also acquired a few useful expressions to demonstrate to her peers that she was listening, e.g. 'Oh no!', 'Okay', 'Yeah' and 'All right'.

Over the next two terms, Anna needs to:

- Further develop her understanding of names of common objects/actions associated with school and the home. She will also learn subject specific vocabulary for mathematics and literacy within routine contexts and become familiar with key vocabulary associated with other curriculum areas.
- Develop her confidence when responding to everyday commands but she will need contextual clues for more complicated instructions.
- Begin to produce telegraphic sentences whilst further developing her ability to use short formulaic types of social speech.
- Respond to straightforward question forms (who/what/where) in single words and with short strings of words.

- Be able to provide everyday basic personal information including particular likes and dislikes.
- Read simple, well-illustrated texts which contain high frequency words.
- Be able to respond to simple questions about the texts with prompting and support.
- Produce short pieces of writing with scaffolded support.

Some strategies for Anna's teacher to employ:

- Provide plenty of listening time
- Regular inclusion in groups of children who speak clearly
- Encourage speech when it occurs. Respond to the content of what is said rather than grammatical correctness.
- Identify key vocabulary and language structures of a text/activity
- Model/demonstrate the language for her
- Use practical experience in the classroom to build on familiar language
- Ensure that language is used consistently and there are organised opportunities for target language to be repeated, reinforced and practised through listening, reading and writing activities.
- Support writing, e.g. copying/labelling, matching pictures to names/sentences, filling in missing words, sequencing, matching sentence halves, filling in tables using given words, writing frames, sentence banks and true/false responses.
- Encourage Anna to keep her own word lists in English and Polish as well as using bilingual dictionaries.
- Give oral feedback in a constructive manner.
- Provide opportunities for shared reading situations (with adults and peers). Use audio tapes/software where available.
- If Anna is still shy about speaking in whole class situations, organise small group activities which will encourage purposeful talk and provide valuable rehearsal time for social speech.

In this situation, both the pupil and staff at the school needed support and the situation is not uncommon in rural areas. EMAS staff will continue to visit the school to meet with the class teacher, additional support staff and Anna. Resources and training opportunities will be provided although its relevance for the whole staff is hard to justify given that the school has only one EAL learner at present.

How did Anna interpret her experience?

Anna felt frightened when she was first admitted to the school about how she would cope. She was afraid that the other children would think that she was stupid. The first few weeks at the school were very tiring. Minutes seemed like hours as she watched to understand. It was a relief to go home and be able to speak to someone in Polish. She felt lonely at first. Gradually, things became easier. She knew what to do at different times of the school day

and became used to classroom routines. She met with other children at weekends who spoke Polish and began to feel less isolated.

She wants to be able to say what she thinks. She thinks in Polish and speaking English in many situations is difficult. Sometimes, she pretends that she understands so that people will not ask her any more questions.