

## Finding a common language for EAL and mainstream teachers - functions and concepts in curriculum content

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When I first trained as an EAL support teacher, it became apparent that there were two essential sides to the language support we offered to pupils: ensuring ‘Access’ and developing ‘Expression’. For both of these, pupils needed to understand and use the language of education.

For me, in language terms, ‘Access’ was about Listening and Reading, and ‘Expression’ was about Speaking and Writing. The national curriculum ‘language’ subject orders did not divide language in this way but rather into Speaking and Listening, Reading and Writing, or Oracy and Literacy. The other subject orders made little explicit reference to language use, but rather focused on subject content.

Not being able to use the many languages of the pupils I taught, ensuring ‘Access’ involved using whatever means possible to communicate meaning – drawings, diagrams, gesture, demonstration, using simplified English that the pupils could understand, or asking classmates to interpret through a shared language.

Developing ‘Expression’ involved finding ways to extend pupils’ linguistic repertoire to enable them to express what they understood through English. This too required the use of drawings, gestures, demonstrations etc. but this time used as ‘hooks’ to hang language onto and as a ‘bridge’ to developing into more extended sentence patterns using language-based activities like sentence starters, cloze texts, substitutionary vocabulary etc.

BUT ... two things constantly frustrated this work:

1. Finding time to liaise with subject teachers to discover what was being taught in subsequent lessons and plan constructively
2. Being unable to predict what language would be required to help my pupils gain access to the subject content and give expression to what they knew.

By language I mean ‘structure’ as well as ‘vocabulary’. Most good subject teachers use lists of key vocabulary but our pupils need to learn how to integrate it into comprehensible, well-structured English. I remember an Ofsted report in the mid-90s which noted that pupils didn’t have difficulty with key subject vocabulary so much as ‘the bits in between’.

Through connections in NALDIC, I discovered Bernie Mohan’s ‘Language and Content’, Pauline Gibbons’ ‘Learning to Learn in a Second Language’ and Wray and

Lewis’s ‘Writing Frames’. Following up the Antipodean lead, Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics and two wonderful books by Gerot and Wignell on making sense of functional grammar, made things even clearer but the language was still in ‘linguistics-speak’. There had to be a way of combining the language of linguists with the language of the national curriculum orders that would make sense to both EAL and mainstream subject teachers. Earlier work by Brumfit and Finnocciaro on ‘functional, notional syllabuses’ gave me the idea that we could perhaps examine the curriculum in terms of ‘functional’ behaviours (what pupils had to do) and ‘notional’ concepts (concepts they had to access or express).

In the mid-90s, I began to analyse the language of the KS3 curriculum orders for Wales [*From 1995-1999, the curriculum orders in England and Wales were almost the same apart from some adaptations to include a Welsh dimension in some Wales subject orders. Since 2000, although much core content remains, there has been increasing divergence between the two countries to reflect their own national priorities*].

There were three main reasons for the analysis:

1. To identify the language demands of each subject area to support lesson planning and liaison
2. To compare the language demands of each subject area to identify differences between subjects
3. To clarify what I suspected was a disparity between ‘*what teachers were told to teach*’ in the Programmes of Study, and ‘*what pupils were expected to demonstrate*’ in the Attainment Targets.

I set about identifying the verbs which described the functional behaviours, and counted how many times each verb occurred in the curriculum orders. A first analysis revealed 203 different verbs in the Level Descriptions for all subjects, 109 of which occurred in *only one* subject. In many cases, one verb distinguished between a number of different kinds of behaviour e.g.

- analyse links
- analyse reasons
- analyse relationships
- analyse results

These ‘behaviour verbs’ fell into one or more of four categories: Cognitive, Practical, Graphic and Linguistic. The cognitive verbs, such as ‘consider’, ‘recognise’ or ‘understand’, present a difficulty when assessing performance because they describe only

cognitive behaviour. How do you assess that a pupil has recognised something? The vast majority of cognitive behaviours need to be demonstrated or expressed linguistically, practically or graphically. A pupil has to *do*, *say* or *write* something to show that they have 'recognised ...'. This is not always made clear in the level descriptions. Also, in the classroom, cognitive, graphic and practical behaviours are 'surrounded' by language functions and frequently need to be elaborated on using language.

Comparison between the Programmes of Study and the Level Descriptions revealed some significant differences, particularly in subjects like science which focused very much on content in the PoS; and comparisons between subjects also revealed substantial differences. Table 1 shows a small selection of the most common function verbs occurring in the English, Maths and Science Level Descriptions

Clearly, different subjects have different emphases on certain functions. The differences across all subjects were so marked that it raised the old question of 'Where are pupils taught language, in English or in all subjects?'. Any English teacher will tell you that the lack of occurrence of the verbs 'describe' or 'explain' in the subject order does not reflect the quantity of language fulfilling those functions that is taught through poetry, literature and other forms of writing but another question remains: 'Is it the same kind of description that is used in other subjects like science?'. Even after all the developments in 'Literacy' and 'Use of Language' across the curriculum, are we sure that the description taught in one subject is transferable to another?

Science AT 3 Level 2: "*Describe ways in which materials are changed by heating or cooling or processes such as bending, stretching*".

It is unlikely that pupils would have many opportunities to engage in this kind of description in an English lesson.

With some amalgamation the occurrences of 'describe' in science can be divided into the following:

- describe cause and effect
- describe changes
- describe events
- describe features of objects and living things
- describe ideas
- describe own actions
- describe processes

- describe properties of materials and substances
- describe relationships
- describe states
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**Table 1. Occurrences of Function Verbs in English, Maths and Science**

Function verb	English	Maths	Science
Identify	7	5	18
Describe	1	9	37
Compare	2	2	6
Explain	2	8	27
Predict	0	0	7
Justify	1	7	1

Each kind of description links to associated 'concepts', for example in 'describing features of objects and living things', pupils need to refer to things like:

- size
- shape
- colour
- texture
- pattern
- temperature
- moistness
- transparency
- presence or absence of features

Each **concept** has associated vocabulary which is as specific as key subject vocabulary but which teachers often 'assume' is known, for example: *transparent, clear, see-through, opaque, cloudy*. These words may also be qualified by degree, for example: *completely transparent, fairly clear, slightly opaque*. Yes, many of these words are cross-curricular but their combination and use to fulfil specific functions related to subject content are not.

In combining the functions and concepts it is possible to tailor language to the proficiency levels of pupils because each **function** can operate at differing degrees of complexity. 'Description' can be fulfilled by using single words, or phrases, full sentences, paragraphs and even whole texts which incorporate descriptive sentences and paragraphs. And each function can utilise a range of grammatical structures or 'sentence patterns' in which to set the key subject and concept vocabulary (Table 2).

<b>Question form</b>	<b>Sentence patterns</b>	<b>Concept reference</b>
What colour is ...?	<i>yellow</i> - flower	colour
	<b>The leaf is green.</b>	colour
What is a ... ?	A mouse <b>is a</b> <i>small</i> animal.	size
	A snake <b>is a</b> <i>long, thin</i> reptile.	shape, length, width
What are ... like ?	Fish <b>are</b> <i>cold-blooded and scaly</i> .	surface
What... has ... got?	The mouse <b>has</b> <i>short, grey</i> fur.	presence, length, colour
	Snakes <b>haven't got</b> <i>any</i> legs	absence, quantity
What is ... ?	An earwig is an insect <b>with</b> <i>six</i> legs <b>and</b> a <i>forked</i> tail.	number, shape
	A bat <b>is a</b> mammal <b>which has</b> wings <b>instead of</b> fore-legs.	

Some functions are very clearly linked to grammatical structures – like ‘hypothesis’ using conditionals, or ‘prediction’ using future tenses. Others like ‘identifying’, ‘classifying’ and even ‘describing’ utilise many similar sentence patterns to fulfil their different functions. These sentence patterns can be used in specific language-focused activities which not only satisfy curriculum content demands but also extend pupils’ language use. So, there may be a way to find a common language for EAL and mainstream teachers which incorporates the substance of subject content whilst identifying the functional and conceptual language demands of a lesson. For example by knowing in advance that the next lesson will be about ‘*Variation within species and between species*’, it is possible to anticipate that the following language functions will be required:

- *identify objects and living things*
- *describe features of objects and living things*
- *compare objects and living things*
- *classify objects and living things*

By getting a quick overview of the species to be covered in the lesson, it is possible to unpick some of the concept and key subject vocabulary ahead of time and plan some activities which have a clear language focus linked to the subject content.

Although it will never be possible to predict all of the language required for pupils to gain access and express themselves in lessons, this approach may help to ensure that more of our inclass support time is spent meaningfully developing pupils’ language proficiency aswell as their understanding of subject content.

*Jonathan Brentnall is currently completing his analysis of the 2000 curriculum orders and producing a language directory for teacher reference based on the functions, concepts and associated sentence patterns and vocabulary groupings linked to curriculum subjects.*