Using Identity Texts with EAL Learners

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In January 2017 there were over 1.5 million students in UK schools with a first language other than English (DfE Census, 2017) and the number is increasing year on year. They have to learn the content of the national curriculum whilst learning the English language. Drawing on research and many years of experience teaching students with English as an Additional Language (EAL), the author demonstrates tried and tested approaches which encourage EAL pupils, at different stages of English proficiency, to use their identities and prior knowledge to gain confidence, raise self-esteem, accelerate English acquisition, and ultimately improve their attainment.

Keywords: EAL learners, prior knowledge, effective teaching strategies, attainment

Introduction

For more than 16 years, the author was the English as an Additional Language (EAL) and Literacy Coordinator in a British state-funded Muslim girls’ high school in the City of Bradford, in the industrial north of England. Most students, aged between 11 and 18, were born in Bradford and have had all their education in the English state system. However, their ethnic origins are mostly in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, and most have English as an additional language to at least two others, such as Urdu, Panjabi, Hindko, Pashto, Mirpuri, and Bengali, as well as Arabic, the language of Islam. Thus, they are regarded as “more advanced bilingual learners” (DCSF, 2009), although some of their languages are only spoken and many students are only literate in English yet have little experience of academic English in their home environment. Most staff are English-born but from similar ethnic origins to the students and about half are non-Muslim, including the author.

Compared with some Bradford secondary schools, relatively few students are totally new-to-English but, throughout each year, a few students are admitted from a variety of overseas countries, such as Algeria, Hong Kong, Iraq, Japan, Jordan, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Tanzania. In recent years three new arrivals were refugees from Syria and two were Somali Oromo speakers from a refugee camp in Kenya. The school values their diverse cultural backgrounds, varying experiences and first language (L1) skills.
According to NALDIC, the (British) national subject association for EAL, five principles underpin good practice for pupils learning EAL (Table 1):

Table 1 NALDIC Principles of Good Practice (South, 1999)

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<td>1.</td>
<td>Activating prior knowledge</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Providing a rich contextual background to make the input comprehensible</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Actively encouraging comprehensible output</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Drawing the learner's attention to the relationship between form and function</td>
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<td>Developing learner independence</td>
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This paper demonstrates some of the ways these basic principles have been integrated into mainstream teaching and learning to enable both EAL and more advanced bilingual learners to gain confidence and raise self-esteem, accelerate English acquisition and ultimately attain more of their potential.

**Initial Assessment**

As part of the admission process, the new arrival’s listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in her L1 are assessed by a teacher, learning support assistant (LSA) or older student with a shared L1. Where no such support is available, the EAL teacher is usually able to assess how advanced a student’s L1 literacy skills are by observing the speed of writing, fluency, quantity, size and neatness when asked to write in L1 about herself. Where necessary, careful question and answer techniques, gestures and pictures are used to ascertain what has been written in L1. A student with some English skills will be asked to write the same story in English (Figure 1 below). These language assessments are then recorded as starting points on a framework of language steps such as: Bell Foundation, (2018) or NASSEA (2015), linked to the UK English Proficiency codes (DfE, 2017):

- Code A: New to English
- Code B: Early Acquisition
- Code C: Developing Competence
- Code D: Competent
- Code E: Fluent

The descriptors on the frameworks are then used to set targets for language development and recorded to show progress.

In Figure 1(a), “my live” is an indication that Al-Maha from Saudi Arabia has age appropriate literacy skills in Arabic, whereas in Figure 1(b), Samiya’s L1 written work indicates weaker skills in Bengali. Their translated versions indicate weak areas in English skills for both students. Al-Maha’s English proficiency could be recorded as within Code B and Samiya’s between Codes A and B. This information is shared with
mainstream colleagues along with an Individual Language Plan (ILP) using targets for progression from the descriptors in the EAL Assessment Framework.

**Initial Development Stages**

If there is a written version of a student’s L1, she is given a bilingual and/or illustrated dictionary to use as reference at home as well as at school. The *100 Word Exercise Book* series by GW Publishing (2006), with versions in, e.g. Arabic, Urdu, and Panjabi, has helpful flash cards and scenarios about school, home, clothes, body parts, etc. in both English and first language. Digital tools such as *Google Translate* might also be employed although, beyond single words and phrases, its use may be limited (Excell, 2015).

**Figure 1 Two Initial Assessments: (a) Al-Maha; (b) Samiya**

![Image](image-url)
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The school library has many bilingual story books and digital resources, which also aid language acquisition in the initial stages. Reading skills in both L1 and English can be assessed as the student reads both versions of the text and encouragement can be given by praising the student’s ability to switch between languages, especially if the teacher or LSA only speaks English.

LSAs and other students who share a L1 are invaluable for instant translation to aid access to teaching and learning in mainstream classes. LSAs may also use L1 in 1:1 sessions used to either prepare a student for future lessons or to consolidate what has been taught, thus ensuring that the student understands both the work and the homework set.

**Case Study: Use of L1 and Identity Texts with a Reluctant English Learner**

May came to Bradford from Saudi Arabia when aged 10. After one year in primary school, she was still within the “Early Acquisition” stage (Code B) of English Proficiency. Lack of cultural vocabulary hindered development in listening, so instructions such as “draw”, “colour” and “tick”, prepositions and colours posed problems. Speaking was restricted to short understandable responses using single words and phrases and pronunciation was inaccurate. With support, she could read short pieces of text aloud, although her refusal to use phonics reduced her ability to decode and she often reversed words. Her writing in English was immature compared to her fluent Arabic. She could copy words but confused “bp” and “bd”. With support, she was beginning to recognise some English grammar and syntax in sentences. Her lack of achievement suggested that she may have learning difficulties. However, although she was a reluctant English learner, she was able to achieve an A* in Arabic GCSE when aged 13.

After not making expected progress in the mainstream, she was withdrawn for language support during timetabled Arabic lessons, which were too basic for her. The EAL teacher had successfully used stories from Gordon Ward’s (2007) ‘Racing to English’ CD with previous EAL learners. Written in simple language by newly arrived children from many countries, these stories share their own experiences. Beginning with a story and picture to read and discuss, the four-sided booklets contain several enjoyable related activities which follow NALDIC’s five basic principles:

1. sequencing - the story cut into strips ready to re-order;
2. key words, based on the story, which can be translated;
3. questions requiring “Yes” or “No” answers (orally);
4. questions requiring “Yes I have” or “No, I haven’t” (orally);
5. questions requiring a longer answer (rehearsed orally, scaffolding answers before the student writes them);
6. longer writing task, encouraging students to write in their home language and English;
7. a wordsearch of key words;
8. making up questions which don’t have an answer in the story;
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9. writing a longer story, using the new questions to add detail.

The *Spider in the Shoe* story had been particularly popular with students from diverse linguistic backgrounds because all had prior knowledge of spiders, so May was encouraged to read the story with an EAL teacher who used gestures and illustrations to provide context to aid understanding. Afterwards, activities 1 to 5 in Gordon Ward’s sequence were completed. For activity 6, May was asked whether she had ever been frightened by a spider. She said she had, so the teacher actively encouraged comprehensible output by discussing the experience with her in English, using actions and prompting answers with “who?”, “where?”, “when?”, to ensure that she understood May’s story. When writing her story in Arabic, May wrote quickly, neatly and fluently. After more questioning to elicit the story, the teacher scribed the English version of *Spider in the Bathroom*, making the grammatical elements explicit. Later, the Arabic teacher confirmed that the English translation of the Arabic story was accurate (Figure 2). Bernhard and Cummins (2004) (slide 14) refer to the creation of such stories as “Identity Texts” which “hold a mirror up to the students in which his or her identity is reflected back in a positive light”.

Figure 2 *Spider in the Bathroom in Arabic and English*
May was pleased with her achievement and was keen to type up the story in Arabic and English. At that stage she was reluctant to use phonics for letters, so, as she typed, the teacher spelled out the words phonically and the only errors were with vowels. To extend May’s English cultural knowledge, the EAL teacher explained the nursery rhyme *Little Miss Muffet*, about a spider. She enjoyed the story so much that she typed it up, finding illustrations on the internet. Mounting her efforts on a wall display raised her self-esteem. She selected key words in the story to create a wordsearch and solution, developing learner independence. Her English teacher made copies for the other students in the class to solve.

Active learning continued with “When I hurt my brother”, a story in Arabic and English, about a time when May’s parents were angry that she had fought with her brother when he took her mobile phone. Without encouragement she was eager to follow Gordon Ward’s (2007) sequence of related activities. Bernhard and Cummins (2004) (Slide 11) explain that, by “promoting active learning”, the teacher allowed May to take “ownership of the learning process”, investing her identity in the outcome of her learning, which suggests that “the resulting understanding will be deeper than when learning is passive”.

The stimulus for the activities in Figure 3 was a true BBC news story (March 2009) about a sandstorm in May’s home city of Riyadh –something she had experienced many times. Building on prior knowledge and supported by the EAL teacher she read the news page and wrote a simplified version of the story in English with minimal help. She was encouraged to rehearse the sentences out loud at each stage so that they could be corrected and typed. Her ICT skills enabled her to add a few pictures from the BBC story. The booklet that followed included all the features in Gordon Ward’s –sequence, key words, longer questions and some extra activities, including the Arabic version of the story – which was evidence of how much she had progressed into English Proficiency Code C.

Bernhard and Cummins (2004) (Slide 14) state that: “When students share identity texts with multiple audiences (peers, teachers, parents and grandparents) they are likely to receive positive feedback and affirmation of self in interaction with these audiences.” This certainly was the case when the finished versions were shown to May’s English teacher. She asked her to teach the whole class about the sandstorm in both languages -which she did very confidently, leading the activities. As a consequence, all the students in the group wanted to write their own stories. The English teacher changed her lesson plans to allow the students to produce similar books and the EAL teacher supported individuals in the same way as she had with May.
Although many students only had spoken knowledge of their first language, they still managed to include relevant L1 vocabulary such as places and people’s names. They used their ICT skills to integrate pictures and WordArt titles. As Bernhard and Cummins say, “Technology can increase the audience for the students’ books and provide reinforcement for students’ literacy practices.” The students took turns to “teach” the rest of the class about their language and culture. From Pakistan there was a Factfile which included cities, mountains, languages, currency; fashions such as salwar kameez, dupatta and chunni; foods such as naan, gulab jamun, jalebi, halwa and chapattis; flooding events which involved place names Attock, Balochistan and Turbat; and weddings with nakkah, mehndi, matai and rukasti. From Bangladesh students learned about Cyclone Sidr and Dhaka - using Sylheti; how to write Bengali letters; foods such as paratha, rasmalai, thoya, khoi, lassi, panta; and Bengali poetry. They also learned about the school day in Saudi Arabia with students such as Abdulatef, place names including Jeddah and Mecca and festivals such as Id ul-fitr.
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a “Literacy Specialist” said (Bernhard and Cummins, Slide 19) “…they shared it with
the class and they just beamed. They were so excited to show their book and felt so
proud.”

The Development of More Identity Texts

The EAL teacher worked with a group of students from Bangladesh, Libya,
Pakistan, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, working within English Proficiency Code C,
“Becoming Competent,” to produce PowerPoint Identity Texts about their home
countries. The students decided on the slide titles to explain aspects such as scenery,
climate, animals, cities, government, food and clothes. This was detailed, meaningful,
cross-curricular work involving independent learning. Internet searches and other ICT
skills allowed them to check spellings and grammar, although teacher-supported if
necessary. These were shared with their classes as PowerPoint presentations and then
with the rest of the school and visitors (via plasma screens) with the same sense of
excitement and pride.

An innovative programme of learning making form and function explicit was
developed from a British Council competition “Old Tales Retold”, for a 100-word
story which included 10 words in L1 or another language (Table 2). This provided
Year 8 students with an opportunity to use their identities and L1 creatively in a range
of English schemes of work – creative writing, play scripts, persuasive writing,
collaborative group work, speaking and listening, drama… allowing students in
English Proficiency Codes B and C to progress to Code D, Competent.

- Stage 1 of this activity involved creative writing: individual students
  choose a traditional story; rewrite the story changing the context,
  setting, names etc; use 10 key words in another language; write a
  glossary; share the story with the class; explain the moral of the story;
  create an activity to consolidate the learning (e.g. quiz, word search,
  gap fill…)
- Stage 2: Convert the story into a playscript
- Stage 3: Advertise the play with a poster
- Stage 4: Collaborative Group work to choose one playscript to
  dramatise with stage directions, music, costumes, props…; rehearse;
  perform; vote for best playscript, play, actor, costumes, make up etc;
  role play an academy awards ceremony; video the performance and
  include Oscars, red carpet, vox pop, ‘and the winner is…’

Some members of the school’s senior management were invited to the final
outcome of Stage 4 and were astonished by the language learning that had taken place
and the self-esteem gained by the students.
Table 2 Old Tales Retold. Can You Guess the Original?

- The Elves and the Curry Maker
- Akbar’s New Clothes
- Yusuf and His Grandfather
- Salma and her Silly Slipper
- Arooj the Slave Girl
- Hamza and the Cornfield
- Hoicconip
- Ruby in Dubai
- Badsha Akbar and the Ice Touch
- Dumpunzel
- Killing and Karma (Macbeth)
- Harris and Amirrah (Romeo and Juliet)

Identity texts allowing students in English Proficiency Codes C and D to progress to Code E, Fluent, came through the literacy charity “First Story”, whose strap line is “Changing lives through writing.” A writer-in-residence is provided to work with a group of students as an extra-curricular activity, eventually leading to the production of a professionally published anthology of their best work celebrated by an official launch and book signing event (Figure 4). The Anthology titles were chosen democratically by the students: “Into Our World”, “Where Thoughts Can Lead”, “The Boombox of Words”, “Spilt Ink”. The blurb always reads: “First Story believes that there is dignity and power in every person’s story and here you’ll find young people expressing themselves in their unique voices.”

Figure 4 Examples of “First Story” anthologies

Throughout the year there are other stimulating opportunities -events with other schools in universities, galleries, museums, competitions, residential, … Student
experiences, identities, concerns, opinions etc. are encouraged and explored in the writing activities (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Poem by a Year 8 Student Revealing Her Thoughts on Being a Muslim

Into our world
Walk with us and see what the truth is behind the veil...
Don't judge us, we will surprise you.
The truth is really different from your stereotypical view.
Our mind has dark secrets but not what you expect.
At every turn you will see something new.
Don't block us out, we always find a way to break down those walls
by showing our true thoughts.
A question arises in my mind.
We have our own belief but are linked in a way that is unknown to humanity so tell me
why the discrimination?
Why the isolation?
Look for the correlation.
Me and you ... what is the difference?
Our DNA may not match but we all have a heart.
Let me show you the real truth.
Not what you perceive to believe.
Your eyes show a blanket of mystery but behind it is curiosity.
Curiosity... what for?
We hold no secrets
but that is what you choose to ignore.

Confidence and attainment are evidenced by several students having been winners or runners up in national writing competitions; some students have read their work on the stage in university lecture theatres, the O2 Arena in London, primetime on BBC Radio 4 and one student was invited to a reception at 10 Downing Street, residence of the British Prime Minister.

Bernhard and Cummins (2007) explain on slide 19 that in identity texts, the essential elements are that “children see themselves” and “talk about themselves.” There is “identity investment” and “increased pride,” which develops an “affective bond to literacy” and “cognitive engagement.” It is therefore rewarding to see that other English teachers have now included identity texts into the Year 9 curriculum in the form of holiday brochures, information posters and persuasive texts to advertise features of their home countries. Self-esteem is created when students identify with work displayed on classroom walls or more widely on the plasma screens around the school. Furthermore, a Heritage Project in Year 7 English uses group work to explore Pakistan’s Heritage, as part of Southeast Asia, ranging from The Harappans, Silk
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Routes, Spread of Islam, Mughal Emperors, The East India Company, The Raj and Independence. For these, an additional audience has been created by taking groups of students out to local primary schools to “teach” them about their shared heritage and recently two students were filmed for a Teachers’ TV programme on Community Cohesion, (Dickey, B. 2010).

Evidence of attainment is demonstrated by the school’s ability to unlock the potential in its students as shown in Figure 6. Students arriving in Year 7 have achieved below national average scores in the final primary school assessment tests (KS2 SATs). Five years later, in GCSE exams, their progress is well above the national average.

Figure 6 Student-Created Graph to Show Cohort Improvement Over 5 Years

Conclusions

Effective and successful classroom interventions in a school predominantly containing EAL students have been presented and discussed. Evidence of the effectiveness has also been presented. Experience of this type at the working face of the education system is essential in developing strategies for developing the performance of this increasingly important class of students.

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