

How Can a Regular Class Teacher Recognise and Develop an English Learner's Literacy?

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This paper discusses issues for teachers of regular classes that include English learners. Research-based strategies are considered for teaching students who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL). The implications for teachers in regular classes include recognizing the academic language demands of the subject and the texts, including abstract concepts, technical terms, genres and grammar. Further, understanding the literacy and language skills the students bring to the classroom are discussed along with strategies that can be employed to assist student learning.

Keywords: English as an additional language; English literacy; EAL learning needs; scaffolded literacy learning; regular class teaching

Este artículo discute asuntos para los profesores de clases regulares que incluyen estudiantes de inglés. Se consideran estrategias basadas en la investigación para enseñar a los estudiantes que hablan Inglés como un Idioma Adicional (EAL). Las implicaciones para los profesores en las clases regulares incluyen el reconocimiento de las demandas del lenguaje académico del tema y los textos, incluyendo conceptos abstractos, términos técnicos, géneros y gramática. Se discuten además la comprensión de la alfabetización y las habilidades lingüísticas que los estudiantes traen al aula, junto con las estrategias que se pueden emplear para ayudar al aprendizaje del estudiante.

Palabras clave: Inglés como idioma adicional, literacidad en inglés, necesidades en el aprendizaje de EAL, andamiaje en el aprendizaje de la literacidad, enseñanza en clases regulares

Introduction

The impact of the global movement of people means that many students need to learn English to operate in the modern world. However, English language classes with specialist teachers are not always provided for students with little English, which results in English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners placed in regular classes' struggle to understand. EAL students need support to fully understand the language of their texts and the classroom. Students who learnt English as a foreign language or who were born in their adopted country often have good oral language skills and may speak with the local accent, so that teachers do not recognise their struggle with the complex English language understandings required within the classroom. The demands of other curriculum subjects, including the language for abstract concepts, technical terms, genres and grammar will also be unfamiliar. With this in mind, this paper will address the following:

Recognizing EAL students' literacy and language learning needs; identifying the language demands embedded in subjects and lessons; how to scaffold EAL learning; and useful literacy strategies.

Problems Faced by Teachers

Regular class teachers are faced with multiple difficulties. Frequently there are many different languages spoken by a range of students. Students can be from different economic backgrounds with differing levels of parent support. There will be different levels of understanding in English. Added to this, literacy itself has changed. Technology is inherent in society, so to be literate a student needs to be digitally competent. Literacy is required in every subject in the curriculum, even Mathematics, so a student's capability in English will impact on learning and all outcomes. Teachers also have to deal with a packed curriculum. Added to all of these factors most regular class teachers have insufficient training in how to teach EAL students, as many teacher training courses only include one subject about that area, and in some cases this is a non-compulsory, selective subject.

The Australian Context

In Australia, one in four school students are from a non-English background, according to the most recent Australian census (ABS, 2016). Students new to Australia are provided with one to two years of intensive English classes. However, not all new arrivals take advantage of the specialist classes either through being uninformed, the distance required for students to travel or other reasons. In many cases students are enrolled in their local schools within a regular class. In any regular Australian classroom there can be speakers from ten or more different language backgrounds, with students who have lived in Australia for differing periods of time ranging from their whole lives to a few months (Gibbons, 2002). Even those born in Australia, may not have been exposed to Standard Australian English at home, which impacts on their depth of understanding of English. Further, they may speak different dialects of English, such as Singapore English or Aboriginal English. Each different English has its own set of grammatical rules and vocabulary meanings which differ from Standard English. This can easily lead to miscommunication in the classroom.

Regular Class Teacher Knowledge

Students with parents in the professions who value education will frequently see expert reading and writing practices modelled in the home. The parents have similar expectations of their children and are able to create a bridge between home literacy practices and their children's formal learning. Students come to school well prepared for schooling and find the transition to the literacy demands of schooling within their capabilities (O'Neill & Gish, 2008). Children from families in which schooling is not highly regarded, with parents who did not undertake secondary schooling, or who are living in poverty will be less well prepared to take advantage of schooling, especially at the secondary level. While these factors also apply to monolingual English students, it is amplified for students who are undertaking their schooling in another language (Gibbons, 2009). The home language of the

students can also impact on literacy development. For example, there are differences in sentence constructions, pronoun types (*she, him, it, them*), verbs (*to throw, skipping, said*) and prepositions (*in, above, around*) and the way they are used in different languages. The impact can be recognised by looking carefully at an English learner's writing and noting unusual sentences that a monolingual student would not use. Other clues include trouble following directions or using words incorrectly when speaking during classroom tasks. English learners can usually understand more aurally than they can speak and read at a more complex level than they can write. They understand and use the content words, i.e., nouns (*flower, Geography*), verbs (*hop, bounce*), adjectives (*large, colourful*) and adverbs (*quickly, joyfully*) more easily than function words, e.g. prepositions (*in, on beside*), conjunctions (*and, so, but*), or articles (*the, an an*), as most of the meaning is contained in the content words; however, the function words are often critical to elucidate meaning.

Research into the language of English learners in the elementary grades found they use little descriptive language; confused tenses; sentences lacked complexity; they had difficulties with auxiliaries, articles and pronouns. In reading, they over-relied on visual cues and missed key words, and comprehension was literal and incomplete. Prediction and inference were also difficult (Hook, 2009). Secondary English learners had lower levels of vocabulary knowledge, expressions lacked precision, and they misunderstood cultural references. Also, their writing had grammatical errors and lacked cohesion (McKay, 2000).

As well as recognising the English language skills and learning needs of EAL learners, teachers need to recognize the academic language demands of the subject and the texts, including abstract concepts, technical terms, genres and grammar. For example, the language used in subject area texts is often abstract and dense, with uncommon words and the passive tense (Cummins, 2007; Cummins & Man Yee Fun, 2007). Use of the passive voice tends to turn verbs into nouns ("*use*" becomes "*utilisation*", "*hibernate*" becomes "*hibernation*"). These nominalisations are often used to pack more information into a sentence with the result that they add to the lexical density and complexity of a text. Language tasks include predicting, hypothesising, classifying, explaining, describing, generalising and inferring (Gibbons, 2005). Students also need to keep abreast of changes in English with new vocabulary, symbols and discourse conventions evolving via new communication media (Lotherington, 2007). Hammond (2006) discusses the "double field" that exists in each school subject (the subject and the language) and the need for explicit teaching of both. While most subject teachers spend some time on new and technical vocabulary they may not explicitly teach the range of English needed for academic literacy. Academic literacy encompasses knowledge and understanding of the terminology of the subject, understanding of complex grammatical constructs and language functions and the ability to read with understanding and accurately utilise those understandings in oral and written discussions of ideas and concepts. Further, if the teacher frequently uses idioms, such as "pigs might fly" and colloquialisms, for example, "no worries", it will add to EAL students' difficulty in learning English. Further, speaking rapidly and using complex sentence patterns with embedded clauses or giving complex verbal directions make the job of learning very difficult for EAL students. Audio

recording and reviewing a lesson is a good way to identify the ways in which teachers might be making lessons difficult.

Monolingual students in upper elementary and secondary classrooms, on the other hand, understand the local accent, cultural and idiomatic language and are learning new content at a fast rate. They are aware of the cultural and social nuances around language use and are able to bootstrap the new knowledge and academic language onto their current knowledge and language base, often without specific instruction about how to do so. However, EAL/D students may not see a way to do this without explicit teaching because it may not be obvious to them how their understandings about their own culture and home language relate to academic English and subject content (Milton, 2013).

Academic Language Demands and Teaching Strategies

Teachers of EAL learners in regular schools need to ensure that they provide scaffolding and opportunities for repeated practice in different contexts, as those students have more to learn than their monolingual and fully bilingual peers. One strategy that provides repeated practice is “Jigsaw”, in which small mixed groups of students research and develop knowledge about one question or aspect of the content being studied. Groups reform, with one student from each original group in the new groups. Each student becomes an “expert” and tells the others about the area researched by his/her group. Another common practice that provides repeated practice is “Think, Pair, Share”, which can be both oral and written. “Collaborative Problem Solving” is an effective way to combine targeted topic content knowledge in oral and written forms as students work together to solve a problem. The small group and whole class discussion provide English language modelling and repeated practice.

Teachers need these understandings along with knowledge about suitable research-based strategies that can be employed to assist student learning. Thorough planning for English learners is necessary in a regular class environment. For example, those students could be given a list of new terms and meanings to learn prior to the whole class lesson. Then they could work in a mixed team, with monolingual and bilingual peers, followed by teacher-led small group work. With the diversity of the student population, the variety of Englishes they speak, and the range of language backgrounds, developing the English language skills needed in the classroom alongside subject knowledge and understanding is complex. According to Cummins and Man Yee Fun (2007), English learners become adept at social, everyday, language within 1-2 years; however it takes them at least 5 to 7 years to learn academic literacy. For students who have had interrupted schooling, it can take longer than this (Brown, Miller & Mitchell, 2006). What some regular class teachers do not recognise is that English learners will have knowledge they gained through their first language and life experiences and may have literacy skills in other areas, e.g., translating and blogging, which teachers can build on to develop students' academic literacy.

Subjects such as Mathematics and Science not only have distinct vocabularies. To understand the content of those subjects, it is necessary to understand the associated vocabulary. Hirsh and Coxhead (2010) examined the way we use words

in different contexts to provide different meanings. In an examination of the language in secondary tests in Mathematics it was noted that words such as “*face*”, “*die*”, “*mean*”, and “*product*” have completely different meanings to those in their everyday usage. Some of these words can have more than one meaning within the subject and a word such as “*square*” can have different functions when used as a noun, a verb, or an adjective. Often, several different words can be used to denote the same thing, such as “*multiply*”, “*times*”, and “*product*”. In Mathematics, students also need to understand the meaning of a number of prefixes such as “*bi*”, “*di*”, “*sex*” and “*hex*”, as in “*bisect*”, “*diagonal*”, “*sextet*”, “*hexagon*”, all of which adds to the complexity of the language they need to understand to successfully complete mathematical problems (Quinnell & Carter, 2010). In Science, many high frequency technical words are common across different fields such as Biology, Chemistry and Geology, so learning those words, their meanings and applications would be beneficial especially as there is not enough class time to teach all of the new terms needed by students (Hirsh & Coxhead, 2010).

The vocabulary students need to learn in the subject areas has an important role, as “using the appropriate terminology is integral to the concepts being learned” and enables students “to express concisely and precisely the complex ideas and concepts that are embedded in the subject and that are essential for learning in that subject” (Gibbons, 2009, p. 5). Two strategies to teach vocabulary are semantic webs and semantic grids in which students suggest words related to the topic that are written in the form of a spider’s web or grid. These activities can be undertaken by the whole group as a brainstorm at the beginning of a topic, or part way through to provide repeated practice and sharing of knowledge, then at the end as a check of accuracy and understanding.

The type or genres of text found in the subject need to be identified and the inherent language structures analysed. For example, “Procedure” and “Report” are often used in Science, as in a procedure for conducting an experiment and a report for presenting the outcomes of the experiment, whereas in English, students are more likely to encounter narratives and a range of fiction genres. In western culture there is a tendency to use particular genres in certain ways that seem natural to those enculturated into it; however, students from other cultures will not automatically pick it up. They may not, therefore gain full meaning from reading the text, nor be able to write that type of text at an age-appropriate level.

Teachers need to identify subject genres the students have to read and write. For example, are the students reading narratives but writing arguments? What if they are reading mixed genres, for example an information report on the coal industry that includes both a timeline and an exposition on the impact on the environment (Gibbons, 2005)? The teacher then needs to determine the students’ familiarity with the genre and decide the level of support to be provided. For example, do they simply need to read several examples of the genre, or does the teacher need to deconstruct it and model how to write it (Derewianka, 2007)? Further, different texts and genres may have different top-level structures within them, depending on the purpose of the text. The top-level structure is the organization of the text at the paragraph level, and can be identified through finding the signal words, as distinct from the grammar which is the organization

of the text at the sentence level. The top-level structure of a report on climate change, for example, may be Cause/Effect, and can be identified through the signal words *"because of this"*, *"as a result of"*, *"the cause... the effect"*. Other top-level structures include Problem/Solution, Compare/Contrast, Time Order, List, and Description. Being able to recognise the top-level structure will assist students in comprehending the text, especially as it is often difficult to understand or explain the meanings of some of the signal words and yet they are integral to making meaning in the text. Examples of the signal words used in a text with a Time Order top-level structure are *"first"*, *"next"*, *"then"*, *"following that"*, and *"finally"*. For Compare/Contrast some signal words are *"however"*, *"although"*, *"while"*, or *"whereas"* (Meyer, 1975).

Each genre also tends to have particular language forms or grammar that goes with it. For example, a narrative usually uses simple past tense verbs, i.e., walked, said, whilst a procedure uses timeless present tense verbs as imperatives or commands, such as blend or adjust. A procedure also uses instructions such as *"next"* or *"then"*, and elements of time such as "stir for 3 minutes", which has the same meaning as "combine for 3 minutes" or "mix for 3 minutes". First language English speakers will understand the meanings through a tacit understanding of the grammatical functions of words in a range of contexts. This means that even though first language English speakers may not be able to tell that a procedure uses the timeless present as an imperative, they will be able to follow the procedure correctly and understand that words such as stir, combine, and mix, have the same meaning in this context and may have different meanings in everyday contexts. It cannot be assumed that an EAL student will have the same understanding and therefore may not be able to follow the procedure correctly. This could be problematic in Science experiments. A strategy to teach text type and structure is Genre Analysis.

Planning Lessons

In order to plan a lesson, teachers need to assess the subject content, vocabulary to be learned, oral tasks, reading tasks, writing tasks, online component, creation, product/output. They then need to decide which tasks will be done with the whole class, in small groups, in pairs or individually. Finally, to plan for EAL learners, teachers should ask:

- Is a meta-language (language to talk about language) needed?
- Is there an opportunity for repeated practice in different contexts?
- What are the best strategies to ensure EAL learning?

Further, teachers need to ensure that while the content is cognitively demanding and age appropriate, the learning is thoroughly supported at every level. Cummins (2007) indicated that teachers often teach the class without any extra support for EAL learners, and when those students have difficulty in understanding, teachers give them easier material and demand less. Students then become bored and stuck at lower levels of achievement. Milton (2017) suggests that teachers begin with cognitively demanding, but highly supported material and lessons, and ensure that

there are sufficient supports at every stage of a lesson, from oral to pair and group work through to individual written work.

Conclusion

While there are many demands on regular classroom teachers who have EAL students in their classes, investigating the language and literacy skills students bring to the classroom and understanding the language demands of each lesson are essential before planning lessons and choosing strategies. Several useful and research-based strategies have been highlighted, but teachers also need to ensure the content is cognitively appropriate and challenging and provide visual supports, printed vocabulary or key words, graphic outlines, definitions or procedures for EAL students.

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