

Language and literacy for children who are English language learners(ELLs): developing linguistically responsive teachers

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Language and Literacy for children who are English Language Learners (ELLs): Developing linguistically responsive teachers

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Introduction:

Teaching children who come from language backgrounds other than English is increasingly common both in the UK and globally. The changing nature of 21st century migration, and the flight of refugees from areas of conflict, has impacted profoundly on schools, both urban and rural, and in ways not seen in earlier decades. Thus, those of you setting out on your teaching careers are very likely to need to understand what effective pedagogy for teaching English Language Learners (ELLs) might look like. Central to this is knowing that success in English literacy for children with English as an additional language (EAL) is inextricably tied up with their understanding and use of spoken English. With this in mind, in this chapter I focus on: stages of children's proficiency in English; some theory that relates to these; and how teachers can take account of children's funds of knowledge about language and literacy in planning engaging classroom activities. During the chapter reference is made to two research projects which have explored teachers' responses to Polish children, and to a set of case studies where teachers explored their teaching for their ELLs, so that discussion has a real classroom context.

In this chapter the term EAL (English as an additional language) is used because this is the convention in UK classrooms. However I also use the term ELLs (English Language Learners) which is common among practitioners in the US and elsewhere. The term ELLs is useful because it encourages us to think positively of our children as speakers of other languages who happen to be learning English. I use the term 'linguistically responsive teacher' (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008) to describe practitioners who aspire to teach their ELLs successfully.

'THE EAL CHILD': DISPELLING SOME MYTHS

Perhaps the most important feature of your practice to take into account when planning for ELLs is your own preconceptions about who they are and what their prior experiences of language and literacy might be. Too often we hear the phrase 'the EAL child' as if any non-native speaker of English conforms to one standard. Be advised that your ELLs are as varied in their personalities and home lives as your first language English (FLE) users, and that their experiences of language and literacy at school and at home will be very diverse indeed.

Pim (2010) usefully draws our attention to the breadth of differences between our ELLs. For example children may have been born in the UK or have come to England as a new arrival from their home country. The circumstances under which they arrived may have been relatively peaceful if part of a planned migration with family or it might have been seriously traumatic if associated with flight from conflict, separation from family or bereavement. Children's education may have been stable or interrupted and it may be either certain or uncertain whether their family intends to remain in the

UK. All of these differences are further compounded by the fact that your ELLs may or may not be literate in their home languages, and may or may not have received schooling in their home countries. Finally, your ELLs are likely to have differing experiences of using English and other languages depending on a range of variables such as their parents' use of languages, use of languages for faith and other purposes, access to pre-school education and so on.

Examples of some of the differences outlined above can be found even within one group of ELLs. Polish children started arriving in the UK in significant numbers after 2004 when Poland was granted accession to the European Union (EU). Teachers in schools in the early years following accession were likely to have children in their classes who had been born in Poland where children do not start school until 6-7 years old and who arrived in their classrooms with little or no English (Flynn, 2013). More recently, teachers of Polish children in England will have children in their classes who were born in the UK but who will come to school with very varying levels of proficiency in English depending on, among other things, their access to an English-speaking pre-school and whether their parents have had opportunities to learn English (Flynn, 2016). Thus, within just a few years, teachers' perceptions of and support for this one migrant group will have changed substantially.

The potential dissimilarities between your ELLs mean that as their teacher you need to know as much about them as possible; perhaps more than you need to know for your monolingual English speakers. Additionally, effective teachers of ELLs will be reflective practitioners – linguistically responsive teachers - who challenge their own thinking about their children in order to uncover unhelpful preconceptions. Research tells us that certain pupil groups attain better than others, but that this is to some extent an outcome of teacher expectations (Strand, 2007). In some cases teacher expectations may depress pupils' potential (as in the case of Black boys, which is discussed widely in research) and in other cases teacher expectations may do the opposite. There is evidence that some groups are perceived by teachers as a 'model minority' - most notably Indian and Chinese students (Li, 2005; Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007). This means that teachers think that some groups will do well simply by virtue of their nationality or ethnicity, and this in turn is likely to lead to better relations with pupils from these groups than others: after all, teachers like children who work hard. More recently there is a suggestion that this 'model minority' response is happening in the UK with Polish children (Flynn, 2014; Kitching, 2011)

Before moving on to look at how you can support your ELLs' language and literacy development, take a while to reflect on your current knowledge of and responses to them using the questions below.

REFLECTIONS FOR LINGUISTICALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHERS

- Do I know the place of birth and home languages of my ELLs?
- Do I know how the home language and literacy are used in the home?
- Do I know if they are literate in their first language?
- Do I know whether they went to school in their home country?
- Do I assume my ELLs will do well/ will not do well depending on my unconscious assumptions about where they come from?
- Do I celebrate the fact that my ELLs are multilingual and possibly gifted and talented users of languages?
- What can I do to ensure that my responses to all of my ELLs are rooted in respectful relationships that foster their potential fully?

UNDERSTANDING ELLS' LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Having considered the rich range of language experiences your ELLs bring with them, the next stage in becoming a linguistically responsive teacher is to understand something about how ELLs acquire English and become literate in it. It is generally accepted among researchers that a first/home language is 'developed' while a second or subsequent language is 'acquired'. This would be different for children who are raised by parents with two languages and who develop full bilingualism in two languages from birth. However, for the majority of practitioners reading this chapter it is assumed that the pupils with whom they are working are acquiring English while at school.

The work of Jim Cummins does a great deal to make clear for teachers how ELLs develop language and literacy and, therefore, how best to support them. Taking second or subsequent language acquisition Cummins' research identifies that children come to a new language with some underlying knowledge about how languages work; this is referred to as his 'iceberg theory' (Cummins, 1980). In other words, ELLs are not a blank slate, and linguistically responsive teachers will tap into the funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) about language and literacy that their ELLs have. Furthermore, key to responding appropriately is bound up in a second of Cummins' theories which related to types of language use by ELLs. Referred to as BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills) and CALP (Cognitive Academic Learning Proficiency) Cummins' explains that in acquiring their new language children may develop BICS (playground English) relatively quickly over about two years, but that CALP (the language of the curriculum) takes five to seven years to develop (see table below). The implications of this for teachers is that children who are ELLs need explicit introduction to the vocabulary of the subject they are learning in order that they can make progress academically in line with their English speaking peers.

BICS and CALP (Cummins, 1980)

BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills)	CALP (Cognitive Academic Learning Proficiency)
Conversational fluency in a new language; the language of the playground and social interaction.	Students' ability to understand and express, in both oral and written modes, concepts and ideas that are relevant to success in school. The language specific to the academic content of subjects.

PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH AS A STARTING POINT FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Having found out as much as you can about your ELLs' language and literacy backgrounds in their home language(s) the most useful starting point for planning their literacy experiences lies with assessing their proficiency in English. Proficiency in English refers to how children use English both orally and in their reading and writing; it is more than a measure of 'fluency' which refers just to use of spoken English. You may be accustomed to thinking in terms of attainment against National Curriculum attainment descriptors for all of your children, but including English proficiency in your assessment will support a more fine-grained response to your ELLs' needs and one that transcends governments' changes to national assessment criteria.

Until very recently teachers of ELLs worked with their preferred measures of English proficiency in the absence of national guidance, but there now exists a set of proficiency scales published by the Department for Education in England (see below). Teachers are required to use and report on these

in a summative way, but they also, potentially, provide a tool for formative assessment and target setting.

The DfE (2016) EAL Proficiency Scales (for further detail refer to the most recent DfE Census Guidance)

Code	Description
A	New to English May use first language for learning and other purposes. May remain completely silent in the classroom. May be copying/repeating some words or phrases. May understand some everyday expressions in English but may have minimal or no literacy in English. Needs a considerable amount of EAL support.
B	Early acquisition May follow day to day social communication in English and participate in learning activities with support. Beginning to use spoken English for social purposes. May understand simple instructions and can follow narrative/accounts with visual support. May have developed some skills in reading and writing. May have become familiar with some subject specific vocabulary. Still needs a significant amount of EAL support to access the curriculum.
C	Developing competence May participate in learning activities with increasing independence. Able to express self orally in English, but structural inaccuracies are still apparent. Literacy will require ongoing support, particularly for understanding text and writing. May be able to follow abstract concepts and more complex written English. Requires ongoing EAL support to access the curriculum fully.
D	Competent Oral English will be developing well, enabling successful engagement in activities across the curriculum. Can read and understand a wide variety of texts. Written English may lack complexity and contain occasional evidence of errors in structure. Needs some support to access subtle nuances of meaning, to refine English usage, and to develop abstract vocabulary. Needs some/occasional EAL support to access complex curriculum material and tasks
E	Fluent Can operate across the curriculum to a level of competence equivalent to that of a pupil who uses English as his/her first language. Operates without EAL support across the curriculum.
N	Not yet assessed

To understand how children with differing levels of proficiency might present, the two studies of Polish children in English primary schools give us the following examples. In 2009 Ewa was a newly arrived 9 year old Polish girl in Year 5. When I spoke with her teacher Peter, Ewa was at the early acquisition stage (code B) and could follow some classroom discourse, but Peter was well aware that she was not working at the level of which she was capable because of the language barrier. To counter this her teacher made the activities in class talk-based wherever possible and he gave Ewa a Polish-English dictionary to support her in using her first language to access the vocabulary of her new language. He also drew on the advice and guidance of his local education authority's EAL team. In 2016 I met Agnieszka, a 9 year old Polish girl born in England, whose use of English was competent (code D), and her class teacher Anne considered her as able in her English usage as her native-speaking peers. However, Agnieszka's teacher also observed that in learning mathematics her pupil found it difficult to hear and understand the differences between 'hundreds' and 'hundredths': this is a classic example of where more proficient speakers of English still need support with academic

vocabulary and with tuning into very small differences between English words that carry with them very significant differences in meaning.

The examples above hopefully make clear for you the value of using proficiency scales to assess your ELLs: they support you in responding to them as individuals and work against the generic 'EAL child' response noted at the beginning of this chapter. In addition to the DfE scales there are assessment tools in use from a range of well-regarded providers and these are listed in the resources section at the end of this chapter

KEY FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE LITERACY PEDAGOGY FOR ELLs

The features of effective pedagogy for ELLs listed below take account of what research tells us about the teaching of ELLs and how best to draw on the resources children bring with them. They bring together the research of Lucas et al (2008) and the thinking of Conteh (2015). Notice how many of the suggested teaching strategies involve talk-based activities; as with your monolingual English speakers, literacy development for your ELLs is best founded on a 'sea of talk' that can support comprehension beyond the literal in reading, vocabulary for writing and oral rehearsal of ideas or sentence structure for writing.

- A safe and welcoming language environment with minimal anxiety about performing in the new language is essential.
- ELLs need access to activities that are just beyond their current language proficiency and opportunities to use language for meaningful purposes.
- Pre-teaching vocabulary (through homework or additional small group support) that is relevant to each lesson can significantly support access to curriculum content.
- Social interaction in which ELLs participate can support both conversational (BICS) and academic language (CALP).
- Maintenance of the home language is essential because strong native language skills are associated with greater success in acquiring a new language.
- Explicit instruction in the form and function of language (e.g. grammar, sentence structure, formal/ informal tone) supports additional language and literacy learning.
- Before writing, ELLs need plenty of opportunities for collaborative discussion, practical experiences and time to rehearse orally what they might say in their writing.

For the purposes of demonstrating how practitioners might use these effective features of ELL pedagogy to support the literacy development of their ELLs, and taking into account their proficiency in English, the remainder of this chapter is divided into three broad stages which we will call New to English, Developing Competence in English and Advanced Bilingual Learners. Do remember however, that within any broad range of differentiation for your planning you will still need to take account of the individual differences we noted at the beginning of the chapter which will influence the content of activities that you create. The case studies in each section will help you to see how this looks in practice; you can find the full versions of these online at Flynn, Pim and Coles (2015).

SUPPORTING LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT FOR NEW TO ENGLISH LEARNERS

As already noted, new to English learners are not a 'blank slate'. They already have understanding about language and how it works from the development of their home language (Baker, 2011; Cummins, 1980). However, where pupils arrive in school in year groups later than the normal school

starting age they are subjected to a curriculum that requires them to read and write in English at a level likely to be far ahead of their proficiency in English. For this reason, regardless of age, ELLs need explicit phonics instruction in order that they can understand the letter-sound system in English which may be very different from that in their home language. Research identifies that where pupils have limited vocabulary in English they cannot make good progress in developing literacy in English (Schmitt, 2008) and thus you will notice that the activities below have a strong focus on the spoken word.

Language and literacy activities for new to English learners:

- Speaking frames (Palmer, 2011) that focus on developing language for interaction through sentence starters.
- Talk-based activities with a very specific focus/ question to build up specific vocabulary.
- Working with talk-partners who model good spoken English
- Working with talk partners who share a home language in order that children have a language for thinking
- Drawing/ mind-mapping responses to tasks – rather than written output
- Access to texts with repetitive language and rhyming words
- Activities that embed the teaching of phonics alongside reading for meaning
- Audio books in home languages and in English
- Use of picture books for oral story re-telling
- Role play
- Using talking pens and talking books in first language and in English (Mantra-Lingua)

Case Study: ELLs phonics group, Year 1 (5 – 6 years old)

Clare, a year group leader for Year 1, worked with a group of ELLs from two classes who needed support with phonics. The children had different home languages and there was some variation in their proficiency levels, but all were at early stages in their understanding of phonics. Clare chose to mix three ELLs with three monolingual English speakers whose phonic knowledge was slightly in advance of the ELLs but whom she felt would benefit from having to articulate their understanding within the group. Clare was drawing on effective ELL practice by using native-English speakers as models for her ELLs. She was also using children's English proficiency, and their stage of phonic knowledge, as her starting point for planning with a group of children who each had different home languages. Furthermore she was ensuring that all of the children were engaged in social interaction for meaningful purposes.

Clare's focus for her six week intervention was to explore aspects of her own pedagogy for teaching phonics, which she did through the introduction of a range of phonics games, but also through reflection on the children's responses. Her observations are summarised as follows:

- Working with a mixed monolingual/bilingual group was supportive of the ELLs who drew on their English-speaking peers for help with decoding.
- Clare became aware of her ELLs' need for more help with segmenting and blending sounds—something she had not noticed before in whole-class lessons.
- The smaller group size was particularly successful at encouraging a shy, new-to-English Portuguese speaker to feel brave enough to say things aloud and make mistakes in a risk-free environment.

- Activities needed to be playful/ games-based and free from the demands of writing in order that the ELLs could experiment with sounds and letter-sound matches.
- A more detailed understanding of her ELLs' needs meant that she took more careful account of who to pair or group them with when they were part of the larger class; overall she became more fluid in her groupings in response to their developing literacy in English.

While Clare noted improvement in her ELLs' understanding of phonics she commented also on their social development and increased confidence generally. In this way her classroom had provided the safe and welcoming language environment that research identifies as crucial to effective pedagogy for ELLs.

SUPPORTING LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT FOR CHILDREN WHO HAVE A DEVELOPING COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH

ELLs who have developed some beginner confidence in using English for speaking and writing will need explicit support with their understanding at word, sentence and text level. ELLs at this stage of English language acquisition are likely to make errors with verb tenses, determiners and sentence order (syntax) and need targeted activities and feedback in developing their understanding of each of these. This may come in the shape of supported proof-reading, and peer or practitioner one-to-one review that highlights errors and clears up misconceptions.

Language and literacy activities for English learners with some proficiency:

- Speaking frames (Palmer, 2011) which focus on analysis of text for the development of correct use of tense, understanding use of determiners etc.
- Opportunities to speak and write about aspects of home and school that particularly interest them.
- Some pupils may acquire phonic knowledge and be able to decode quickly, but their skills in comprehension take longer and need explicit attention.
- Targeted questioning in guided reading that supports ELLs' capacity for inference and deduction.
- Pre-teaching of vocabulary to support access to curriculum content; particularly where words relate to knowledge and concepts that are outside the child's current experiences.
- Role play such as hot seating and freeze frame to develop understanding of character, plot and motive
- Introduction to the structure and features of different non-fiction text types
- Use of audio books in home language and in English
- Use of dual language texts matched to the pupils' interests and stages of literacy in their home languages

Case Study: Miguel's writing development, Year 5 (9 – 10 years old)

Miguel was a recently arrived 9 year old Mexican boy who arrived in Sean's Year 5 class with some conversational English (BICS) but considerable difficulty with writing at an age-appropriate level in English (CALP). With support from a Spanish speaking Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO*) Sean ascertained that Miguel was literate in Spanish and that he had attended a dual-language school shortly before leaving Mexico. In his initial assessment of Miguel, Sean identified the following aspects of written English that he found problematic:

- Lack of variety in sentence structures

- Accurate demarcation of sentences
- Maintaining consistent tense
- Maintaining consistent ‘person’ – 1st, 2nd or 3rd
- Accurate use of prepositions to denote possession
- Homonyms and homophones

In order to facilitate progress towards Miguel’s targets Sean worked with the SENCO and together they planned weekly one-to-one sessions in Spanish. These allowed Miguel to demonstrate how much he was understanding of the English input in class and made explicit for him the grammatical and syntactic differences between English and Spanish. In normal class time Miguel was given additional visual prompts to support new vocabulary acquisition and Sean started to include use of oral rehearsal for writing as a skill with all of the class. This combined approach to Miguel’s support, which included carefully planned activity time with the SENCO to work on grammar activities that matched the learning intentions for the rest of the class, ensured that Miguel made rapid progress.

Interestingly, at first Miguel had been reluctant to speak in Spanish in school in England – he had felt as if this might be a backward step for him. Sean however noted the significant value for his own teaching because it gave him insight into Miguel’s understanding of subject matter be it debating the existence of aliens or looking at the poetic features used in Ted Hughes’ *The Iron Man*.

Sean’s practice to support Miguel reflected the key features of effective pedagogy for ELLs because he was: using Miguel’s first language as a scaffold for learning his new language; giving Miguel explicit teaching relating to the form and function of written English; planning opportunities for oral rehearsal which ensured talk was used to develop ideas and vocabulary for writing

**It is important to note that, although Sean was working with a SENCO, teachers should not equate EAL with SEN. Children with a home language other than English need to learn a new language; this is not the same as having a learning or literacy difficulty.*

SUPPORTING LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT FOR ADVANCED BILINGUAL LEARNERS

When ELLs become very fluent in their use of spoken English (BICS), and appear to be making good progress with their written English, it can often be the case that they are perceived as not needing support. This is an erroneous assumption that can lead to ELLs under-achieving because they do not have the sufficient breadth of vocabulary related to academic spoken and written English (CALP) that is needed to attain in-line with their native-speaking peers. If we term these children Advanced Bilingual Learners their status as still requiring support for literacy is helpfully made apparent. Advanced Bilingual Learners (ABLs) will benefit from support as follows:

- Pupils need continuing support in extending their vocabulary and language of expression for both their spoken language and written English.
- Continued explicit introduction to the structures and features of different text types to support both reading and writing.
- Explicit teaching of grammar and syntax to support access to complex texts and to support text cohesion in writing.
- Activities that pre-teach and develop specific curriculum knowledge prior to reading texts related to the subject.
- Role play in order to access inferred meaning and character development in fiction.

- Continued reading in the first language to maintain love of reading and allow proficiency in first language reading to support development in reading English.
- Pupils may have difficulty retaining multiple instructions for a task and may continue to benefit from visual aids to support understanding.

A useful research report from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER, 2007), exploring teachers' work with advanced bilingual learners, presents practical examples of the above strategies in action.

Case Study: Developing Reading Comprehension for Amrit, Year 2

Amrit was 7 years old and was born in England to a family who were Punjabi speaking. Amrit's class teacher Alison felt that, although his attainment in reading was at age-expected levels for English-speaking children, he was probably under-achieving because of some limitations in his vocabulary that interfered with this reading comprehension. Alison sought ways of expanding Amrit's vocabulary and found the following strategies useful:

- Speaking with Amrit's parents about the kind of colloquial and academic English that was in his reading books so that they could concentrate on those at home with him.
- Pre-identifying and pre-teaching vocabulary in texts for guided reading, and as part of other lessons, that might present difficulties for Amrit's comprehension.
- Using group activities in guided reading to encourage deeper text comprehension. In particular Alison found the activities described by the British Council EAL Nexus Project and from NALDIC very helpful (each of these associations and their websites are listed in the resources section at the end of this chapter).

Note how the strategies are not so very different from those you might use with a new-to-English learner: what does differ are the details of language and literacy that are being targeted, and these come from knowing your children's levels of attainment in terms of their proficiency in English.

Following Alison's targeted literacy intervention Amrit exceeded age-expected levels in reading comprehension in national tests for children at age 7 in England. In her reflections on what had really made the difference for him Alison noted the following changes to her practice:

- Focussing in lesson planning, and in planning for guided reading, on pre-identifying the vocabulary in texts that will give children access to comprehension and new knowledge.
- Using guided reading sessions for 'jigsawing' whereby children become experts on one aspect of a text that they are reading and must report orally to the group on their understanding. Their understanding is also enhanced by the expert input from their peers.
- Using non-fiction texts in guided reading to support access to curriculum content and new vocabulary.
- Using highlighters to mark-up texts in seeking answers to questions requiring inference and deduction; additionally this gave Alison clear insight into how much Amrit was understanding both of the text and of what the question asked of him.

Alison's practice mirrored the key principles of effective pedagogy for ELLs by: ensuring that activities that were beyond Amrit's current language proficiency but gave him opportunities to use language for meaningful purposes; making activities in guided reading sessions socially interactive focussed on vocabulary development and curriculum content related; valuing the role his family played in his education. Perhaps most importantly Alison's starting point was one of high

expectations for her pupil. Rather than remaining satisfied with Amrit's attainment at age-expected levels she saw his potential to go further and supported him in realising this aim.

Indeed, a feature of the practice of all the teachers presented in this chapter is that they had high expectations of all of their children. Thus, to end this discussion of how you might go about supporting your own ELLs, I add one more important principle to the key features for your practice, and for this I return to Jim Cummins:

If you want students to emerge from schooling ... as intelligent, imaginative, and linguistically talented, then treat them as intelligent, imaginative, and linguistically talented from the first day they arrive in school. (Cummins, 2016)

Useful websites:

<https://eal.britishcouncil.org/>

<http://www.naldic.org.uk/>

EAL assessment tools (other than DfE proficiency scales):

Hounslow Language Service EAL assessment <http://www.ealhls.org.uk/product-category/eal-assessment/>

NASSEA EAL Assessment Framework <http://www.nassea.org.uk/nassea-eal-assessment-framework.html>

Solihull EAL assessment tracker <http://socialsolihull.org.uk/schools/sab/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/EAL-Tracker-KS1-2-with-strategies-May-2015-version-2.pdf>

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