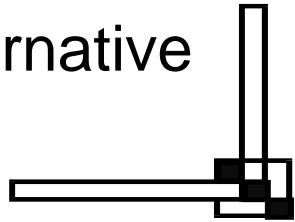
A decorative graphic element consisting of a vertical line and a horizontal line meeting at a right angle, with a small square at the intersection.

Supporting Learners of
English as an Alternative
Language

A decorative graphic element consisting of a vertical line and a horizontal line meeting at a right angle, with a small square at the intersection.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is in response to the need to offer guidance and support to establishments who are required to make educational provision for pupils for whom English is not their first language

It therefore contains advice on both principles and relevant methodology with advice on contacts with the authority and further reading.

First Principles:

- Communication with pupils is the basis of all teaching and so it is a natural professional reaction to be very concerned when faced with teaching a pupil who appears to know little or nothing of the language of the classroom
- It is important to appear calm, friendly and very patient. Give the learner sufficient time to tune in to the pitch, tone, pace, intonation and stress in English generally; and to the accent and dialect spoken locally. This may take a term or longer in many cases.
- It is also important to remember that the pupil may be experiencing a profound change in the social conventions and cultural norms to which he/she is accustomed. These differences can be subtle. The expression of emotions can vary significantly between cultures – so tread cautiously and be wary of making quick judgements about pupil's ability to learn.

- Time must be spent with parents initially sharing the educational aims and objectives for the school. Within the 5-14 curriculum some of the targets we work towards, for example, listening and talking in language may not be valued or encouraged within other educational systems. The teacher should therefore be sensitive to these issues when reporting pupil progress.
- It may be that the pupil has learned some English, either formally or informally, but is reluctant to use this knowledge because of the differences in the English now being spoken around him. His awareness that the rules for social interaction in the classroom have changed may inhibit or discourage communication and active participation in learning. Remember that understanding will always outstrip expressive skills. The first indications that the pupil is absorbing the English around him may be his ability to respond to simple instructions rather than to talk to you.

Bilingualism is a Strength not a Learning Difficulty:

English as an Alternative Language (EAL) is a current terminology used to describe learning of English across this range

- Bilingualism, as a term does not infer equal competence in two or more languages but covers the spectrum of oral and literate competences. In most parts of the world bilingualism is the norm and not the exception. Because in this country most people are monolingual there is a tendency to perceive the learning of an alternative language as a significant difficulty rather than a natural process for which we are all equipped. Recent research in the USA* has shown that pupils who are taught in a second language, in addition to English, do significantly better in English, after eight years of schooling, than pupils who have been taught only in English.
- Our self perception and self esteem is inextricably tied up with our culture and language. It is very important that we do not create the impression, for the learner or his peers, that the acquisition of English is a “problem”. A lack of English is not an indication of a lack of learning ability. It is important that pupils do not inadvertently pick up the wrong message. Try to encourage the other pupils to take an interest in, and non judgemental attitude towards, the pupil’s mother tongue and culture by capitalising on the rich cultural and linguistic diversity. This can be done through careful choice of environmental studies, expressive arts topics, suitable fictional studies and RME.

*See bibliography – Page 15

- At a more detailed level it is important to remember that languages can vary quite dramatically in more than just word order and grammatical convention. The pupil learning English may be faced with a language whose tense system, ways of qualifying nouns and conventions of formality and familiarity are very different to the system with which he is familiar. Do not assume that misunderstanding is always simply the result of a lack of knowledge of vocabulary or grammar.

First Language Proficiency in Relation to EAL Progress:

- As a rule of thumb the rate of acquisition of any second language will depend upon the level of oral proficiency and literacy skill in the mother tongue. Pupils who have already developed concepts of numeracy and literacy in one language more readily transfer these concepts in English quicker than the pupil who has yet to acquire these concepts in any language.
- The age at which a pupil enters formal education, and the curriculum provided in the early stages, vary enormously from country to country. Do not assume that our expected relationship between a pupil's age and their experiences of formal learning will hold true for the bilingual learner.

Don't discourage First Language use in the Classroom:

- Teachers sometimes think that it is in the pupil's best interest to encourage the use of English at all times. This is in fact not the case. Communication between pupils in their first language is not only natural but can help with the development of abstract concepts in numeracy and literacy. Efforts to restrict, or prevent, the use of the first language can also create the impression in the pupil, and his peers, that his own language and consequently his culture, has an inferior status.
- In Argyll and Bute it is often the case that for the EAL learner there is no other pupil in the class or school with the same mother tongue. In this case the pupil should be encouraged to use his/her mother tongue to consolidate and confirm their learning in English where appropriate. For example, if a pupil is learning expressions of greeting in English, it is helpful to the pupil's learning if he were occasionally encouraged to share parallel formal and informal greeting in his own language. This also provides a learning opportunity for the rest of the class.

Simple Strategies – The Classroom as an EAL Learning Environment:

- It is important that suitable contexts and situations are used to help the pupil acquire English. The primary classroom is an ideal environment in which to learn English as there are a range of activities, themes, games, toys and pictures to illustrate the language to be learned. The environmental/language themes commonly used in schools e.g. Myself, The Local Area, The Hospital, Shopping etc are ideal vehicles for learning English in context.
- Older pupils should also be exposed to as many situations as possible which involve interactive learning. It is important that the pupil's peer group is used as a model for support. However the teacher will require to structure the situation in order to control the complexity of the language used and to encourage the use of other contextual supports (e.g. gesture, materials, ordering of activities) to help clarify the language being used.
- Where appropriate bilingual pupils on first joining the secondary school should be given focused language support from support for learning staff. Thereafter phased introduction of the wider curriculum should be planned. This planning should include regular periods of focussed language input. Consideration should be given to a whole school approach and policy for the provision of coherent support to bilingual learners.

- The strategy which requires a pupil or young person to fulfil a task, rather than simply display understanding of an instruction will always be more successful.
- Stories and activities which incorporate simple vocabulary and repetition are very useful. Teachers should initially identify and encourage the use of the repeated language structures. Infant stories such as 'The Hungry Caterpillar', 'The Elephant and the Bad Baby' and 'The Enormous Turnip' offer rich contexts. These structures should then be used in a variety of meaningful contexts. There is a wealth of multi-cultural literature in translation which if known to the pupils in mother tongue can be a supportive link for English language again.

Simple Strategies – The Classroom as an EAL Learning Environment:

- Acquisition of vocabulary can be helped by labelling objects in the classroom. It is important that nouns are learned within a simple identifying structure which relates to the use of the object and a task in hand (e.g. if the label 'door' was used, refer to it in the context of a structure such as an instruction 'close the door', do not simply get the pupil to repeat the name.
- Instructional language should be systematically developed in conjunction with the acquisition of basic vocabulary and simple verbs.

Early Acquisition Skills:

- A pupil can display a reasonable competence in social and playground language before being able to use English Language for learning. There is a period of silent absorption where the child is consolidating language internally before expressing themselves unselfconsciously. The length of this period varies from pupil to pupil. This is a normal process and teachers should not confuse a pupil's ability to interact in the playground with the ability to follow a class lesson and acquire a skill or concept in a language other than mother tongue. Using language to make inferences, deductions and draw conclusions (language as a thinking tool) is a much more sophisticated linguistic skill than expressing needs, preferences etc. in a familiar context.
- The following are some of the initial language skills which need to be acquired before the pupil will be competent in English as a language for learning:-

Identification – These skills includes **naming** (nouns), **Simple Structures** (it's a; that's my.....; it's not a ...; etc.)

Question Forming – Simple structures to allow the pupil to **ask** questions are required. Initially the pupil will be required to respond to a simple question but should be encouraged to move on to asking questions as quickly as possible.

Positioning – This involves the use of prepositions to describe relative positions in space and time. (in, on, under, beside, before, after...etc.) It is important that these concepts are taught using picture, LDA cards, or suitable story books and games (including computer games).

Ordering – This includes the use of ordinal number, words and phrases such as ‘second in the queue’ and ‘the first ten people’. Maths contexts and workbooks often provide suitable examples for the acquisition of this language skill.

Sequencing – The two main headings here are the sequencing of events and time. The sequencing of events uses phrases such as first, then, after that, lastly etc. The sequencing of time involves using phrases such as today, tomorrow, yesterday, last year, next week.

Descriptive Language – This type of language should include examples of both visual description (e.g. appearance) and emotional description (happy, afraid, angry, confused, lonely etc.)

Tenses – Initially confine the pupil’s experience to a few simple tenses; present, present continuous, simple past and future. A conditional tense, either future or past, should be introduced only when the pupil has a competence of the former and demonstrates through attempts at imitation a need to use conditional structures.

Involvement of Parents:

- As in all areas of teaching and learning research clearly shows how useful and important the involvement of parents can be in supporting the acquisition of an alternative language. Good home-school links are vital here as elsewhere in ensuring that the pupil does not view home and school as separate entities. Where the pupil views the ethos and culture of the school as being very different from his home and previous school experience this can affect the motivation to learn.
- The parents, on the other hand, may be very unfamiliar with our methodology and classroom organisation and may not feel comfortable in approaching the school or contributing actively in their pupil's formal learning. Everything possible should be done to counteract these anxieties and cement a bond between home and school.
- Schools should consider the use of translators for parents if available and efforts where appropriate should be made to encourage parents to attend social events such as a school concert or outing. Inviting parents to observe in the classroom may be helpful. Once parents are confident about the learning situation, they are able to answer the pupils' questions and allay anxieties about the day to day routine of the class.
- It may be possible to involve parents with a reasonable competence in English in support language development at home. Care should be taken to ensure the methodology used at home reflects that of the class i.e. activities in context, and that a strict time limit for this homework is agreed.

- One of the issues that frequently concerns parents is the question of which language should be used in the home. Current research now indicates that sustaining and promoting the mother tongue at home contributes greatly to the pupil's concept formation and long term linguistic competence in languages. The quality of language used is much more important than which language is used. If the parent is confident and competent in the use of English then a bilingual home environment would be both natural and beneficial.

Available Support

- Initially contact should be made with the Area Network Support Team (ANST) who will offer advice and support and may request a language assessment of the pupil, involving Elaine Fraser, Quality Improvement Officer. Ms Fraser will advise schools on implementing suitable strategies and use of resources.
- Should the ANST Co-ordinator consider it necessary then some time may be allocated from the Learning Support Team, at least in the initial stages of language acquisition. The co-ordinator may contact the Quality Improvement Officer or the Head of Service for further advice.

