Planning to Teach with Walking Talking Texts

English-Additional-Language students in the Middle Years of School:
Students in a Muddle?

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Thursday March 19th was National Closing the Gap Day in Australia. For many, the identification of a national day ‘to close the gap’ prompted reflection on the nature and meaning of the ‘gap’ in education outcomes. How do we define ‘the gap’? Whose ‘gap’ is it? What is in the ‘gap’? How do we work with (in) the ‘gap’ in teaching English as an Additional Language/Dialect Indigenous students? ¹

EAL/D students in the middle are students adding English as a language for learning to their already established repertoire of home/community languages. They are multilingual learners. Multilingual learners engage in learning, and need to be taught, in significantly different ways than do monolingual learners, depending on their linguistic backgrounds, the context for learning, the degree of linguistic distance from the target language etc.

Multilingual students in the process of learning Standard Australian English as the language of school are often labelled as ‘illiterate’, especially those from oracy-based cultures, and sometimes those from literate cultures. Students, who are developing academic English at the same time as they are expected to use English for learning, come to new information in a new language from a different base than do students who speak English as a first/home language.

Multilingual students have a ‘silent’ schema of knowledge and language operating – one that is invisible to the teacher. There are learning behaviours occurring in the classroom to which the teacher can be oblivious.

New concepts and content presented through English, are inevitably interpreted through, mapped onto, compared to, rejected by, integrated into multilingual students’ knowledge of the world as created and transmitted through their home language(s). This takes time, (between 5-7 and even more years) for academic achievement in second language (L2)². For multilingual students, the exploration of knowledge, is deeper and more complex, and cognitive application to learning is necessarily broad and flexible.

The percentage of EAL/D students with age-for-grade cognitive ability and potential in home language is the same as in the L1 English-speaking student group. How then can curricula and pedagogies that are seen to be appropriate for English language students, applied in a minimalist and deficit manner for multilingual students be justified?

As EAL/D students go through the Australian schooling system, the pattern is a predictable one. Young children in the schooling system generally cope at ‘age-for-grade’ levels as the demands of learning in L2 are embedded in the here and now, the concrete, with the characteristic re-visiting of new information that is the hallmark of early learning.

Thus, accessibility to the curriculum through English is supported through extra-linguistic environmental inputs – visual, dramatic, auditory, musical, physical engagement. In addition, in the early years of school, daily and weekly activities move quickly, however, the concepts and processes being learned span a greater length of time in developmental ways than do those for older children in the system. The latter are quite rightly treated as having developed the cognitive ability to grasp...
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abstract concepts, apply them with minor scaffolding and move to the next domain of learning in a short space of time compared to the early learner. It takes young children a long time to learn to read for example. If we consider that young children coming from an English-language-speaking literate background where the cultural practices of reading begin in babyhood, the age at which children begin to use literacy for learning in a de-contextualised manner (no extra-linguistic scaffolding), in unfamiliar fields of knowledge is anywhere from aged 8 to around 10 – 11 years. Functional literacy of course occurs earlier and comprehension is limited to developmental cognitive ability to engage with the range of concepts presented through the written word.

For older learners of EAL/D who come from literate backgrounds, the scenario is generally similar for the development of literate behaviours in L1. These learners bring an already developed repertoire of literate practices to learning through a new language, and where literacy in L1 is operationally age-for-grade, the literate practices learned through English are not a sign of illiteracy. These home-language literate students need to learn English and to learn about English. In this scenario, students will gradually become biliterate as they become bilingual/multilingual. The same applies to students from oral cultures who learn initial literacy through home language in formal bilingual programs.

These multilingual students come from oral cultural backgrounds where knowledge is generated, transmitted and archived in different forms down the generations. The efficiency of values building, concept development and knowledge transmission, is equivalent to but different from those of literate cultures. Literate behaviours as we know them have been privileged in the Australian schooling system as a reflection of western world dominance, and as a result, this has sidelined other forms of engagement in learning.

Our current education landscape favours uniformity over the acknowledgement of the diversity that students bring to learning. One size in fact, does not fit all….and can result in failure in relation to age-grade achievement for multilingual learners...

This is not an argument to forsake the teaching and learning of English oracy and literacy, but rather to accept the challenge of becoming intercultural in our teaching and learning practices.

All Australian students have the right to learn English as the national language, and the right to access education through English. However, when we treat all learners the same in relation to delivery modes and set standards of the same levels of English use at the same level of schooling, we defeat our own purposes and leave these students ‘in the gap’.

The first principle for teaching EAL/D students in the middle years is to recognise the multilingual strengths that students bring to learning through a curriculum that takes students from the known to the vast potential of world knowledge. This means working at the cognitive levels of age-appropriateness - teaching English as a language simultaneously with the content and process of integrated learning and specific fields of learning areas.

Minority low status language speakers are the most vulnerable in the middle years where capabilities with academic English³ determine progression to the senior years of schooling and subsequent life choices.

In the context of the education provision for Indigenous-Language-speaking students living in very remote areas in the NT, words and phrases prevailing in the discussion include:

- normalisation,
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- bridging to English
- same input = same outcomes
- failure to meet national testing standards

Multilingual learners, this case, those who begin to learn another language after they have one language, necessarily use their first language(s) (L1) to learn additional languages. Thus, effective additional language pedagogies create a place for the role of L1.

What does this mean for the Middle Years of Schooling for students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds?

For Indigenous-language-speaking students in very remote areas in Australia, school is more often than not, an unfamiliar place teaching unfamiliar concepts in an unfamiliar language timed and sequenced according to the learning pace of students with Standard Australian English (SAE) as a home language (HL). In this context, students do not need to use English for any purpose outside school. There is, therefore, the possibility of fossilizing English to that which is used only within the classroom.

Where students’ EAL/D abilities provide the ‘evidence’ for judging cognitive ability, emotional maturity and academic potential, the result is more often than not, the application of a reductionist curriculum and diminished pedagogies. This happens because the English language used cannot reveal the full range of knowledge and skills of the students’ with home languages other than English.

In examining the pedagogies used in many of the above contexts, the following dichotomies have merged to become minimalist positions:

- difference in performance through English is seen as deficit and requiring isolated ‘pull out’ or ‘replacement’ programs where the micro skills of literacy are ‘taught’ out of context
- age-grade cognitive capabilities are invisible, thus content and delivery is ‘dumbed down’ to primary or even early childhood levels
- linguistic and socio-cultural diversity within the learning group is seen as a difficulty for schools to manage
- language learning and teaching has been replaced with the content and skills of English literacy teaching, ignoring the teaching of spoken English and its socio-cultural knowledge
- informed pedagogy is replaced by repetitive practice of disjointed skills, hoping that EAL/D students can transfer these skills across the curriculum
- engagement in learning through authentic learning experiences is seen as effort in teaching the basic skills
- measurement of progress of EAL/D students is reduced to measurement of performance against age-grade norms for monolingual English language speakers
- students’ achievement is seen as quantitative accountability where the ‘gap’ between EAL/D students and English L1 students is seen as needing intervention.

From Muddle to Middle!
How can Middle Years curricula and pedagogy meet the age-appropriate cognitive levels of multilingual students who are in the process of acquiring English as a language for learning?

The analogy of the bridge where students traverse from Language 1 (L1) to Second Language (L2) and back again, from Culture 1 (C1) to Culture 2 (C2) as needed, provides a philosophically effective frame for teaching multilingual learners.

This approach requires:

- the identification of the English language forms and functions within the content;
- the relationship of these to the students’ L1;
- enabling the use of L1 in learning;
- knowledge of the English language context and socio-cultural embeddedness of content and learning requirements;
- clarity around the context of learning through English - knowledge of the structure of the English language and the forms it takes in the variety of socio-cultural contexts linked to learning content, processes and targeted goals in relation to the students’ L1.
- the recognition of and ability to teach in a way that EAL/D learners reach Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency.

Specialist knowledge of the pathways of learning that typify multilingual learners' acquisition of English, and deep knowledge of the English language, as well as how to teach this across the curriculum is not readily available to the majority of teachers.

The move from Learning Area focus and the delivery of content in what was the junior secondary curriculum to an integrated approach, places additional demand on many teachers in very remote contexts where the perception, upon arrival is ‘they can’t even read’ (so, how can I teach a Middle Years Curriculum?)

The challenge faced by teachers new to this learning context is that of teaching students how to learn in a culturally different mode, through English, while they are in the process of learning English, at same time as engaging in deep learning of specialist content in authentic cross-curricula contexts.

The natural reaction is, understandably, to revert to the safe and easier option of implementing repetitive practices linked to early literacy, limited concrete exercises in numeracy (generally

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worksheet based), and a range of other activities around these daily sessions. I will emphasise that this is understandable when faced with the seemingly complex task of teaching students in the Middle Years who have perceived limited English language and literacy capabilities.

The alternative is to teach LANGUAGE (intercultural knowledge, listening, speaking, reading and writing) across the curriculum where age-appropriate concepts can be learnt through L2 and explored through L1, using effective ESL pedagogy.

The example below demonstrates the implementation of ESL informed pedagogy to Middle Years Students who have a range of developing levels of Standard Australian English. This program was planned with teachers in a large remote coastal NT school where 100% of students speak an Indigenous language.6

IMPLEMENTING EAL/D INFORMED PEDAGOGY WITH MIDDLE YEARS STUDENTS

The process involves several stages.

Planning for Teaching

• The language of the topic and context is identified, and linked to the language targets (based on prior assessment) for the cohort of students. The fields of knowledge in this case come from the Humanities and Social Sciences Learning Area. The stimulus for learning is the novel ‘Storm Boy’.7 The language analysis below is representative of the language in this text. The page references are a link to Derewianka’s “A Grammar Companion…”8 for the purposes of providing teachers with a metalanguage for the grammar of English.

• At least two of these aspects of English grammar are identified as focuses for the teaching-learning program. These are determined by the assessed levels of ESL development (ESL SCALES/similar state based document) and will represent the range of achievement in English for the learning group e.g. Levels 2 – 4 Speaking; Levels 1 – 3 Writing.

• Learning targets i.e. next level of identified achievement on the EAL/D continuum, are established for the cohort and are reflected in the identified language items.