

Developing writing among Advanced Bilingual Learners in secondary schools

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Camden has been involved in the EAL Secondary programme since its inception. In this article, Alison Pyle, the Secondary consultant explains how the project has been developed in one secondary school.

Advanced Bilingual Learners

Advanced Bilingual Learners (ABLs) arrive in secondary school with profiles that illustrate the challenges they face but, evidence suggests, they are likely to make accelerated progress. Many of these students have been born and fully educated in the UK, but although fluent speakers in a wide variety of contexts, they may still be unfamiliar with the academic genres of secondary education. Lynne Cameron in her report for Ofsted on Writing in English as an additional Language (2003) found that 'problematic features of writing occurred in all subject areas'.

The key to ensuring that these pupils do make progress lies in the balance of subject challenge and literacy development. As the EMA Consultant for secondary schools in Camden, I meet students who are able to communicate their subject knowledge at a particular level, but are unable to produce clearly structured extended prose, especially under pressure in exam conditions. With this in mind, I have worked with EMA and subject specialists to strengthen students' skills in effectively communicating their subject knowledge without detracting from the rigour and the progression of ideas. In this article, I will share some of the developmental work in science departments.

In primary education, ABLs may lag behind their peers, but by the end of KS4 they have often outperformed other groups of pupils. What happens in their secondary education is critical in enabling them to accelerate their progress. The prior attainment of ABLs helps to identify them as a group in themselves, although some of the challenges they face in education may be shared with a portion of their classmates. Having achieved level 4 in KS2, many ABLs will struggle to achieve level 5 in KS3 tests, for example. Others may have achieved level 5 at KS2 but make little progress at KS3, while some only achieve level 3 in English at KS2, but higher levels in Maths and Science. Pupils who arrive late in KS2, or early in KS3, but are literate in their first language and have had continuous previous education, will usually

progress at an accelerated rate and can be described as advanced bilingual learners within two years of arrival. All of these pupils will benefit from the explicit teaching of aspects of language as well as clarity of subject progression and expectation. Once mainstream teachers fully understand this, they can have high expectations of pupil progress and set more challenging targets for ABLs.

Context

Nearly half of all secondary students in Camden are ABLs and for this reason, schools have to be strategic in their deployment of EMA expertise. Coaching and modelling have proven to be effective mechanisms for extending the teaching repertoire of mainstream teachers, who then form coaching relationships with other mainstream staff, further sharing EMA strategies. I have observed that, with increased confidence in delivering EMA strategies in their classrooms, subject teachers are not only planning for progression, but are explicit with pupils about *how* they need to demonstrate their knowledge. Furthermore, they are identifying opportunities where they can equip pupils with the tools they need to demonstrate their knowledge *effectively and at higher levels*. As a result, pupils not only make progress in the subject, but their writing levels also improve.

All good teaching begins from pupils' current understanding, adds new concepts and offers opportunities to apply that learning. In order to ensure that ABLs benefit fully from these learning opportunities, teachers need to be clear about where barriers are likely to appear. As EAL specialists, we are aware of the speaking and listening, reading and writing skills ABLs will need to develop to become successful learners. The use of academic language in speech enables ABLs to contribute confidently to group discussions around inductive thinking. Neil Mercer (2000) discusses the importance of *exploratory talk* as an opportunity for pupils to share, critique and evaluate each other's ideas and perspectives. But he also feels that 'the ground rules which are used for generating particular functional ways for using language- spoken or written- are rarely taught.'

Where this is done, it offers a powerful opportunity for the ABLs to extend their conceptual understanding as well as to develop their use of academic language. Schools where this has taken off have established clear ground rules in the classroom and modelled the use of language, and the pay off in terms of moving into more formal writing is considerable.

Below is a plan for a science lesson where teachers planned for the use of exploratory talk.

Year 9 Science - Rocks and Acids

Curriculum target: To understand the conventions of scientific writing.

Science Objectives:

- To understand how and why acids affect rocks
- To apply that knowledge to the selection of building materials

Literacy Objective:

- To reinforce the use of exploratory talk to develop reasoning skills

Expected Outcomes:

- Everyone should be able to explain the process of **acid + metal carbonate = salt + water + carbon dioxide** and how this relates to erosion
- Some will be able to justify why they have chosen a particular building material

Starter:

Explain the process of erosion (**acid + metal carbonate = salt + water + carbon dioxide**).

Show pictures of 3 statues with different degrees of erosion:

- One statue has been protected from the environmental factors
- One is located near a factory
- One is located near a factory but remains unharmed

Activity 1:

Groups test the reactivity of acids on rocks:

- groups conduct experiments of acids on 3 different rocks
- groups discuss and agree which rock is affected most and why
- groups discuss and agree which rock is affected least and why

Take feedback

Activity 2:

Groups read, discuss and sort the cards into 3 columns:

- One set of cards with information about the materials of the statues and their locations
- One set of cards describing the effects on the statues
- Blank cards to be filled in with justifications of the best choice of materials for statues, given their locations

Take feedback.

Activity 3:

Teacher model how this information could be structured into an explanation (why):

I want to explain why.....

This is because.....

As a result.....

A further reason is

Consequently

Plenary:

Written explanation of how and why acids affect rocks (best answers will provide evidence to justify their choice of material for a statue)

In an effort to engage pupils in the use of academic language further, some schools have introduced the use of props to encourage pupils to put themselves in role as an academic. For example, two schools in Camden have designed plenary activities in science where pupils prepare and rehearse an explanation collaboratively and when it has been fine-tuned, one pupil puts on the lab coat and reads the explanation *in role*. This works because pupils enjoy the approach and it is memorable. The following lesson illustrates how group discussion and opportunities for rehearsing academic language can be planned into a science lesson.

Year 8 Science – Light

Curriculum target: To understand the conventions of scientific writing

Science Objective:

- To understand what happens when light hits something

Literacy Objectives:

- To understand the meaning of key words by building on knowledge of familiar words
- To construct scientific sentences using key words

Starter:

- Instruct pairs to discuss the misconceptions evident in former students' diagrams of the direction/path of light.
- Take feedback
- Hand out the KWL sheet and instruct pairs to write down what they know about light and two things they want to learn

Activity 1:

- Explain the learning objective and the focus on academic language.
- Instruct pairs to list as many words as they know starting with:
 - **Trans....**
 - **Re...**

- Take feedback with discussion of the meanings of prefixes.

Activity 2:

- Demonstration of the words **translucent, transparent, opaque, transmitted and reflected**

Activity 3:

- Instruct pairs to fill in the last section of the KWL sheet (what they have learned).

Plenary:

- Instruct students to read (2-3) sentences written in ordinary English on the board and reconstruct them using scientific language. When pupils are confident with their new sentences, they may present them to the class wearing a **lab coat**.

Homework: construct scientific sentences using the key words (highest level use all words)

Evaluation

The impact of this activity was high pupil engagement in learning and pupils remembered the concepts and language months later. Likewise, reading between the lines, or reading as a writer, will support the progression of learning through enhanced comprehension, but strategies may need to be explicitly taught for ABLs.

We are also aware of the common word, sentence and text level errors that EAL learners are likely to make in their writing. With explicit teaching of these aspects of language, EAL learners will develop the tools they need to effectively convey the subject understanding they are developing. This is sometimes used as the “selling point” for pupils who are reluctant to spend time in science lessons focussing on literacy. In this way, teachers need to be explicit about why they are introducing new strategies, what the expected outcome is and how it will enhance pupils’ subject learning. The following lesson provides an example of how this might look in a science lesson.

Year 8 Science, Competition and Population

Curriculum target: To understand the conventions of scientific writing

Key words: *adaptation, population, competition, germinate, habitat*

Science Objective:

- To understand how plants adapt and compete in a habitat.

Literacy Objective:

- To build confidence in using causal connectives in scientific explanations

Starter:

Estimating population size

- Recap field research: each group counted different numbers of clover in their field squares
- Find the average of each group’s results: Add results, divide by number of groups
- Estimate of clover in the field: Size of field divided by size of square
- Pairs discuss: Why would an ecologist need to know the population of a habitat? Why would they study the changes in population over time?

Activity 1:

How do plants adapt to a habitat?

- Study the diagram of the dandelion
- Match statements about the features of a dandelion with statements about adaptation

Activity 2:

Explain why a dandelion’s adaptation has enabled it to compete successfully.

- Remind the class that scientific causal explanations (why) use the following connectives: **therefore, as a result, consequently, for this reason, in this way, which means**.
- Teacher models matching statements from activity with a connective to create a scientific explanation:

Dandelions produce seeds that germinate quickly **which means** they can make new plants more rapidly.

- Class make their own sentences
Dandelions produce many more seeds which are spread by the wind.....
(What statement is this matched to? Which connective could we use here?)
....Therefore, dandelions spread quickly to new places. (Notice the comma)

Teacher models a further development of the original explanation.

Dandelions produce seeds which germinate quickly, which means

they can make new plants more quickly than other species. (what evidence do we have from our field research? What connective could I use show a link?) **For this reason, I would expect to see more dandelions grow on a fresh patch of soil.**

- Instruct pairs to create scientific explanations using this model.

Activity 3:

Extension task to develop a longer explanation
Instruct pupils to use the following sentence starters to write a longer explanation about why a dandelion's adaptation enables it to compete successfully.

Start by stating what you are trying to explain.

Follow this by using connecting words and

phrases like these below:

I want to explain why.....

This is because.....

As a result.....

A further reason is

Consequently

Plenary:

Pupils read out statements to the class (optional use of an ecologist's sunhat and net as props for role play).

Effective teachers plan opportunities for pupils to engage with the structures and features of academic writing. Here is an example of a lesson plan where the teacher highlighted the features and then students practiced using connectives in the context of a sequential text. This method was used within the final sessions of a unit on photosynthesis.

Year 9 Science - Photosynthesis

Curriculum target:

To understand the conventions of scientific writing

Science Objective:

- To sequence and explain key processes in photosynthesis

Literacy Objective:

- To understand features of sequential writing

Expected Outcomes:

- Everyone should be able to sequence key processes in photosynthesis.
- Most will be able to use sequential connectives to link explanations of these processes
- Some will be able to write a sequential explanation of the processes of photosynthesis and link this to respiration and energy transfer

Introduction:

- Remind the class that in the last lesson they were able to identify key processes in photosynthesis. Explain that today's lesson will develop their explanations of these processes and sequence them.

Starter:

- Explain that sequential connectives help the reader understand the order of events and how they are connected. Identify sequential connectives. Display three short sentences. Ask the class to use sequential connectives to connect the three sentences.

Activity 1:

- Display an explanation of respiration. Identify the scientific and literacy features that make it a powerful explanation. Highlight and discuss the use of sequential connectives.

Activity 2:

- **Card sort:** Pairs sort pupil explanations of processes (gathering food, transferring food, using food) in the correct order in which they occur during photosynthesis.
- Take feedback and agree a flow chart. Discuss what might occur simultaneously.

Activity 3:

- Pairs use sequential connectives to link these processes. Pairs share as a group of four and agree best explanation. Take feedback.

Plenary:

- Groups agree three features of an effective explanation of photosynthesis.

Science lessons can combine scientific challenge with clarity about expected outcome with opportunities to explicitly teach aspects of language. It is a fine balance that belongs within a clearly structured lesson.

Year 9 Science - Rocks

Curriculum target: To understand the conventions of scientific writing

Science Objectives:

- To understand that rocks have different characteristics
- To apply this understanding to “real” situation

Literacy Objective:

- To use comparative language

Starter:

Find out what pupils know about rocks...

- 2 statues (1 made of limestone and 1 made of granite)
- “Look at these two statues and discuss why you think one has survived better than the other” (characteristics/properties/features: be explicit about what these words mean)

Introduction:

Characteristics/features/properties tell you how the rock was formed

- “Did you know that pencil lead and diamonds are both made of carbon? What differences can you see?” Explain that rocks have different characteristics
- Feedback (hard vs soft, shiny vs dull)
- Instruct pairs to write comparisons between the properties of diamond and graphite (point out the comparative connectives: whereas, unlike, on the other hand, however, similarly)

Activity 1:

Pupils apply what they understand about properties of rocks:

- Pairs handle an assortment of rocks, make observations, compare and contrast differences verbally and create a recording grid

Identifying rocks according to their properties

- Teacher model the use of the key (card with specific questions) for chalk, starting with its reactivity to acid
- Pairs use the key to identify the other rock samples and record them

Activity 2:

Writing a comparison

- Highlight the conventions of an example of a scientific comparison
- Instruct pupils to compare two rock samples using what they have understood about their properties.

Plenary

Recap what has been learned about the characteristics of rocks. Apply:

“You work for MFI (kitchen work surfaces). The boss has discovered that limestone is a cheaper rock than granite. You have to justify why he should pay extra for granite to be used as a kitchen work surface. Use the evidence from today’s lesson to justify your reasons”.

As these examples show, there are numerous strategies that underpin the development of writing. Many of these will also support the writing of monolingual pupils and can be part of all mainstream lessons. They support writing because they help pupils generate ideas and check understanding. They offer examples of what is expected in an answer and equip pupils with the tools to demonstrate their knowledge.

Evaluation

When these strategies are used in the classroom, the response of pupils is quite interesting. In several of these lessons, the use of exploratory talk in lessons has lowered the noise level as pupils become focussed on the task and the need to listen. Likewise, I noticed that ABLs, in particular, take advantage of opportunities to redraft their writing and timing in lessons needs to allow for this learning to take place. Teachers have noted that the lessons take longer allowing for more talking time, but the written outcomes are much improved. Above all, what this tells us is that the explicit teaching of language at the word, sentence and text level empowers learners in a way that enables them to make real progress. In this way, the focus shifts from teaching to learning.

Cameron, L. 2003. Writing in English as an additional Language at Key Stage 4 and Post -16. HMI 1094 Ofsted 2003

Neil Mercer (2000) Words and Minds. Routledge, London 2000