Developing writing skills in EAL

Pupils learning to write in EAL for academic purposes, just like all other novice writers in English, have to learn to use the following:

• the Roman script representing the language in print

• the spelling conventions of words

• the sentence level grammar (including punctuation)

• the selection and structuring of information for different purposes/text types (e.g. narratives and reports)

• the use of a range of different language expressions to convey appropriate levels of formality, politeness, directness etc. for the purposes at hand

The first three of these require a knowledge of the formal language system, the last two are related to social practices and cultural conventions. Needless to say, for some pupils learning EAL some aspects of the formal language system and social uses are more or less familiar because of their language background (e.g. literate Spanish-speaking pupils would have a knowledge of the Roman script) or their community background (e.g. bilingual pupils from a British minority language community would have various degrees of familiarity with the uses of written English); for some other pupils all, or almost all, formal aspects of English are likely to be new (e.g. a pupil arriving from Korea with schooling experience in Korean) but they may have a high level of awareness of differences in the way/s the languages are used. It is therefore important, as suggested earlier, to take pupils' first language knowledge and experience into account.

In addition to these five areas of knowledge and skills involved in writing, pupils have to develop an awareness that written language is not always spoken language written down. In other words, written language is not simply speech transposed.

Written English in the curriculum

The ability to write effectively for academic purposes across the curriculum cannot be taken for granted in the sense that many pupils do not automatically acquire it without assistance. In fact, many first language English speakers have poor writing skills. This shows that writing in English requires additional knowledge and skills. But many of the additional knowledge and skills involved in the process of writing are sometimes 'hidden', so to speak; only the outcomes are visible. In the school curriculum writing tasks tend to be about representing 'developed' thoughts or 'established' ideas, e.g. telling a story and reporting on the results of an experiment. (Pupils are generally not invited to produce 'unfinished' work.) The purpose of a great deal of writing in school is to show that one can communicate one's understanding and thoughts without the benefit of either contextual support or immediate contributions and feedback from others (as in a conversation). In other words, pupils are often expected to draw on their existing knowledge and expertise to package ideas and produce a piece of language on their own. This is a complex process. Beyond the level of understanding vocabulary, learning to write involves learning to use sentences to represent ideas which are then organised into paragraphs; it also means learning to select, organise and present information and ideas in conventionally practised ways. Very often it also involves harnessing knowledge and understanding achieved through classroom activities mediated by the spoken language.

Written English differs from speech in a number of ways; some of them are related to vocabulary and grammatical choices and others are related to information structuring and whole-text organisation. These differences reflect, in part, the different functions served by spoken and written language in different contexts.

Meaning in speech in social situations can be interactionally built up. Imagine the following:
Pupil 1: What do we have to do?
Pupil 2: Miss said we have to write a story.
Pupil 3: Like that one last week.
Pupil 1: What, the one about the owls.
Everyday conversations are full of examples of this kind of focus forming and meaning making. This is indeed one of the main characteristics of everyday spoken language. Furthermore, spoken language is often informal in that it is not necessarily made up of well-formed sentences; the phrase or the clause is more likely to be the unit of utterances. (Kress, 1994)

Spoken language in social situations tends to use lots of referring and pointing words such as 'it', 'this', 'here' and 'there', e.g. 'It's probably better to move this from here and put it there'. Here the speaker could be standing in a room discussing the spatial arrangements of furniture with another person. The participants' knowledge of the immediate context makes it possible for them to understand the referential meanings of pronouns (e.g. this) and adverbs (e.g. here). A space planner presenting a particular scheme in a formal written document would have to be

more linguistically (and graphically) explicit, e.g. 'To maximise access space, the filing cabinets should be located 10 metres from …'.

Gibbons (1998. p 101) provides a highly illuminating example of how language features change as pupils move from group talk to individual writing:

> 'Text 1: (spoken by three 10-year-old students and accompanying action)
> this … no it doesn't go … it doesn't move …
> try that …
> yes it does … a bit … that won't …
> won't work it's not metal …
> these are the best … going really fast.
>
> Text 2: (spoken by one student about the action, after the event)
> We tried a pin … a pencil sharpener …some iron filings … the magnet didn't attract the pin …
>
> Text 3: (written by the same student)
> Our experiment was to find out what a magnet attracted. We discovered that a magnet attracts some kinds of metal. It attracted the iron filings, but not the pin …'

In spoken English speaker meaning can be expressed through intonation. For instance,

> Hena was asked to take the **books** home. (Prominence on 'books', meaning Hena was asked to take the books but not other things.)
>
> **Hena** was asked to take the books home. (Prominence on 'Hena', meaning Hena was the one who was asked, not another person/people.)

In written language these differences in meaning have to be handled through the use of different syntax and additional information. For instance,

> It was Hena who was asked to take the books home.
>
> Hena was asked to take the books home; she was not asked to take the pictures.

In spoken English intonation is used to signal emphasis and the interconnections between different parts of an utterance. First language speakers do this without necessarily being conscious of it. In writing this aspect of information organisation and presentation is carried out by the use of punctuation. For example, full-stops and commas help to mark out information units such as sentences and clauses within a sentence; exclamation marks provide a clue as to how a sentence should be 'read'. Thus punctuation can be seen as a sort of 'tonal' marking.

There are occasions when written English is similar to or the same as its spoken version. The extent to which written English resembles speech depends on the purpose of writing and the context of use. For instance, when we write a dialogue as part of a play script, we would try to be as speech-like as possible; when we write a science report, we are expected to try to use formal and subject-based specialist terms and expressions appropriately. Writing the script of a science presentation, to be delivered orally, would require a judicious selection of vocabulary and expressions which provides the immediacy of face-to-face communication and the detached authority of 'objective' content. In a great deal of curricular-related tasks, the writing component requires pupils to show increasing ability to produce non-personal, non-speech-like 'public' texts across the subject range as they move up the school years. One example of this requirement can be found in the National Literacy Strategy (1998: p 47):

> '[Year 5] Pupils should be taught …
> to convert personal notes into notes for others to read, paying attention to appropriateness of style, vocabulary and presentation;
> … to plan, compose, edit and refine short non-chronological reports and explanatory texts … focusing on clarity, conciseness, and impersonal style …'

Pupils have to learn to be aware that they have to provide appropriate information, such as topic or focus, action, time, place and social relations, explicitly in their writing. The implications of all this for pupils learning to write in EAL will be discussed next.

Writing to mean in EAL

The areas of knowledge and skills mentioned in the last section suggest a multi-level development ranging from the so-called basics, e.g. knowledge of the alphabet and spelling patterns, to the context sensitive knowledge of appropriate genres and tones. From the standpoint of the EAL pupil learning to write in school, real time constraints and curriculum demands do not allow for a 'basics first' approach. For many it is simply not desirable or possible to spend weeks and months on learning the basics exclusively. These pupils, irrespective of their age, with the possible exception of very early stage beginners, are expected to engage in a variety of curriculum-related writing activities. This does not mean that teachers do not make allowances and pay special attention to their needs. But it does mean that the different areas of knowledge and skills are being called upon at the same time.

Seen from the pupil's perspective, writing tasks tend to have a purpose, e.g. telling a story or reporting observations. With the possible exception of some of the highly language form-focused activities in specific parts of the

curriculum, e.g. Literacy Hour activities concerning spelling, most writing tasks are (subject) curriculum-derived and therefore have a content meaning. Indeed, knowing what one has to write about is the first of the challenges for many EAL pupils. Unlike fluent first language speakers of English, EAL pupils may not fully understand the curriculum meanings expressed through spoken English. The lack of understanding of content meaning often causes major difficulties in information selection and inclusion in writing tasks. This is a specifically EAL issue in the mainstream context. It also highlights the fact that learning to write in EAL is inextricably linked to learning English and curriculum content through spoken English at the same time. And given that spoken English is not necessarily the same as the written form, it means that it is important to pay attention to bilingual pupils' writing in English even when they seem to understand spoken communication reasonably well.

This suggests that writing tasks should be preceded and supported by teaching and group activities which make meanings comprehensible by using spoken English in conjunction with relevant visual materials, realia and hands-on experiential learning tasks. The purpose is to lower the potential linguistic barrier to understanding of content meaning. Learning and writing about magnetism by first using a magnet to find out its behaviour is an obvious example of this approach. Working with picture cards or acting out a (part of) story before writing a narrative is another example.

This curriculum-oriented perspective on writing does not preclude the possibility of writing to express personal meaning or engaging in other kinds of creative writing. It merely suggests that, for novice writers, the content meaning, be it about geography or personal emotions, has to be understood first.

This way of thinking about writing, and learning to write within the curriculum, suggests that knowing the basics such as spelling patterns of words and aspects of grammar is important and necessary, but it represents only a part of a complex development. In order to develop pupils' writing ability it would be helpful to take a 'message first' approach. In other words, we should consider grammatical accuracy and other formal features of English with reference to what the pupil is being asked to do in writing. Practically this means asking a number of questions when thinking about pupils' writing.

Some Questions

The following questions are intended to be diagnostically helpful to student teachers. There is no pre-fixed teaching order or recipe. Teachers have to make case-by-case decisions as to how to respond.

Does the content of a piece of writing match with what is expected?

If it does not, there may be a problem with the pupil's understanding of the content, or with knowing what to include in the writing, or both. The use of visuals (e.g. pictures, drawings and diagrams representing key information) can assist pupils to become more aware of what the key content is.

If there is a reasonable match in terms of content between what is expected and what has been written, then the next question is:

Does the pupil's writing meet the requirements of the appropriate norms/standards?

If it does not, the following questions may be diagnostically useful to identify the areas of learning needs:

Is the information structured appropriately?

This is a question about text types or genres. It is often observed that in English there are a number of curriculum genres with more or less conventionalised structures. For instance, a recount is expected to have a structure showing:

orientation (place, time, people etc.) – events – conclusion

and an argument showing:

theme/thesis – argument – counter argument – conclusion.

Supplying pupils with sample texts on a topic such as the arguments for and against caged birds and asking them to sort the texts into the 'for' and 'against' categories may help to promote this kind of awareness. The use of writing frames to highlight the different stages of text development may be helpful to some pupils to structure their writing.

Is the writing presented in the expected form?

Different types of text tend to follow conventionalised formats and layouts. For instance, a report is expected to have headings (and sub-headings) and a dialogue in a play script is expected to be marked by quotation marks and line breaks. Following explicit models and samples for different types of text may be a helpful way for some pupils to familiarise themselves with this aspect of writing; a teacher-guided but joint class construction of a text based on a shared experience, say a recipe after a cooking activity, may also promote this kind of awareness of the importance of formatting and layout.

Does the text provide a continuous flow of clear and connected information?

This is a question of thematic development and cohesion across different parts of the text. At the sentence level it is generally expected that the key or new information, as perceived by the writer, is given the prominent head of sentence position:

'Sounds come from objects which are vibrating .
Amplitude - this tells us how large the vibrations are .
Frequency - this is the number of vibrations .'
(Reading About Science, Book 5, Unit 5.5, p14)

The correct use of word order, subject-verb agreement, count and non-count nouns, and articles contribute to clarity of meaning at the sentence level. Across a text the effective use of signpost words such as 'therefore', tenses to mark time and chronology (e.g. 'I had been to Scotland before, but the visit last month was particularly memorable.') and pronouns to indicate linkages of information across sentences (e.g. 'Susan and David are away on holiday. **They** have gone to …') and other aspects of grammar contribute to the cohesion of a text. Many of these features of writing can be made more understandable if pupils already know what they are saying or intend to say in writing. One way of teaching or reinforcing this aspect of writing is to present pupils with a selection of texts that they have produced which could be improved for group or individual discussion.

Does the language used create the 'right' tone?

This is a question of selecting and using appropriate vocabulary and expressions conventionally associated with a particular type of text in specific subject areas such as history and geography. Often this aspect of language use is referred to as register. The forms of address in a letter is a clear example: 'Dear John' in a personal letter as opposed to 'Dear Mr. Smith' in an official letter. The use of specialist jargon such as 'RAM' in a report on a new product in a computer magazine is another example. The 'right' tone can also be realised by the appropriate use formality and directness, e.g. disagreement may be expressed as 'This is rubbish' in a dialogue of a play and 'The decision is unsound …' in a dispassionate argument. With younger pupils we can ask them to look at teacher-made or published materials, again say on the topic of caged birds, to identify the 'powerful' words (in bold) in texts such as 'Many birds **transported** from **overseas** do not **survive** …' and to compare these words with more 'ordinary' expressions such as 'brought here', 'other countries' and 'live'.

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