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WRITING IN ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE AT KEY STAGE 2

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Introduction

Researchers from the University of Leeds were commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to conduct research into the writing of pupils at Key Stage 2 (KS2) who use English as an additional language (EAL) and who are defined as 'advanced learners', in that they have been in the UK for at least five years. Scripts produced by 264 pupils for the 2003 English National Curriculum Test (Writing) were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively to identify features of writing that pupils learning EAL handle less confidently than their peers who use English as a mother tongue (EMT). This research adds to previous evidence gathered about EAL writing at Key Stage 4 (KS4) in an earlier, Ofsted-funded, project by the same author (Cameron 2003).

Key Findings

- The best writers at this age, using English as a mother tongue (EMT) or English as an additional language (EAL), were found to employ the resources of English - grammar, vocabulary, direct speech, punctuation, rhetorical features - with flexibility and adaptability to create strong story characters and plots, and effective persuasive writing.
- However, many EAL learners, even high achieving pupils, handle adaptation to a variety of genres less confidently than their EMT peers.
- Two features of language show statistically significant differences between EAL and EMT writing: the use of prepositions and the composition of short, fixed phrases. EAL writing contains more errors in both features, which also caused difficulties in writing at KS4.
- EAL learners write stories that include more metaphors and similes than EMT stories, for pupils achieving both level 4 and level 5. EAL writing at level 5 used most figurative language, with animal metaphors and similes the most popular.
- Certain features of language are handled less confidently by lower achieving EAL writers. In particular: use of Adverbials, modal verbs, Subject-Verb agreement, verb tenses and endings, and subordinators to link clauses.
- In many ways, EAL writing at KS2 was more fluent and more accurate than the writing seen at KS4. These differences would seem to be linked to the teaching that the younger children have received through the National Literacy Strategy.

Background and Aims

Until recently, it has been assumed that learners of English as an additional language who have been in the country and the school system for five years or more will have developed their language skills to a sufficiently high level to achieve to their potential in school education. However, attainment data show a pattern of under-achievement in National Curriculum tests from Key Stage 1 through to GCSE for pupils with English as an additional language (DfES, 2003).

A research project also carried out by the first author and funded by Ofsted (Cameron, 2003) investigated differences in writing at Key Stage 4 (KS4) between advanced bilingual learners and their peers who have English as a mother tongue. The KS4 study found differences in accurate use of some types of words and phrases, and that some pupils seemed to have problems using their additional language to express their ideas in writing. Lower achieving EAL and EMT learners shared a tendency to lack sufficient content in their writing and not to use paragraphing to organise content.

The research reported here aimed to investigate writing skills of younger children at Key Stage 2, and to see if similar patterns were evident. Specifically, the project aimed:

- To identify key features of language that pupils learning English as an additional language appear to handle less confidently than English mother tongue speakers.
- To analyse these features according to level of ability in English (as measured by national tests).
- To strengthen existing evidence provided by Ofsted research into older pupils' writing by adding to our understanding of writing development.
- To inform the EAL strand of the Ethnic Minority Achievement Strategy by providing information and guidance on the teaching of bilingual primary and secondary students (by pulling together both pieces of work).

Methodology

264 scripts from the 2003 National Curriculum Test (Writing) were provided by 13 schools from 8 LEAs. The schools varied in socio-economic context and proportions of EAL pupils. Scripts were provided from

pupils attaining each of levels 3, 4 and 5 in the Writing test, giving six groups (2 language background x 3 attainment level) for comparison.

Each script comprised a story and a radio advertisement. The prompt for the story writing was a set of pictures leading to a problem for the main characters, which pupils then had to resolve and conclude. The shorter task was to write an advertisement for local radio to persuade listeners to buy a new toy.

Texts were analysed using an integrated framework for writing that examines both the text as a whole, in terms of control and use of the genre (narrative and advertisement), and language use at the levels of sentence, clause, phrase and word. All the story texts and a sample of 40 radio advertisements were analysed in depth. Story texts were rated for the amount and type of development of four key narrative components: Setting, Characters, Problem and Resolution of problem. The first 100 words of each story were grammatically analysed for use of clauses, and errors of various types were counted (agreements, articles, prepositions, formulaic phrases, spelling and punctuation). Statistical analyses of numerical ratings and scores were complemented by descriptive analyses of error types and figurative language in the stories, and of the radio advertisements.

Findings

- **Formulaic phrases:** EAL learners made a greater number of errors than EMT learners in the use of formulaic phrases (a formulaic phrase is a group of words that are 'bound' together, in that certain words must, or tend to be, accompanied, by certain other words, e.g. *his best friend* rather than *his best of all friend*). The greatest difference was found in writing by learners attaining level 4, where EAL stories contained significantly more errors than EMT stories.
- **Prepositions:** Overall, and at level 3, EAL writing omitted significantly more prepositions than EMT writing. Both EAL and EMT groups at level 3 used some prepositions incorrectly. EMT writing improved in terms of incorrect use between levels 3 and 4; EAL writing at level 4 contained significantly more incorrectly used prepositions. For pupils at level 5, there was no significant difference in numbers of preposition errors.
- **Use of Genres:** Expertise in writing requires learners to develop knowledge of a range of genres

and how language is used to create the format, style, voice, purpose and stance that characterise a particular genre, combined with skills to select from and adapt language resources as required for the genre. In some ways, EAL learners handled the genres less confidently than their EMT peers, and this seems to become more obvious in the writing of higher achieving pupils, perhaps because they use word and phrase level features more accurately:-

- **Story endings:** For the group of pupils attaining level 5, more stories written by EAL learners had endings that were rated as 'incomplete', and fewer had endings rated as 'original' or 'creative' in some way.
- **Narrative components:** For the group of pupils attaining level 5, writing by EAL learners developed the story components of Characters, Problem and Resolution less than stories by EMT pupils. Stories by EAL learners did more development of the Setting.
- **Radio advertisements:** Adverts written by EAL learners attaining both level 3 and level 5 were less likely to open with a catchy 'hook' to attract the attention of listeners. Instead, a full sentence was often used. Adverts by EAL learners attaining level 5 contained less variety in sentence types and vocabulary than those by their EMT peers.
- **Length and paragraphing:** Both EAL and EMT learners wrote stories that were usually long enough and, at levels 4 and 5, were making good use of paragraphing.
- **Sentence grammar:** The amount of subordination was not significantly different between groups, other than between EAL writing at levels 3 and 4, where the mean for level 4 was significantly higher. However, type of subordination varied, with 'advanced' subordinators (while, until, after etc) being used more in EMT writing and by pupils attaining higher levels.
- **Clause structure:** EAL learners attaining level 4 overall showed statistically significant differences with EMT peers in their use of clause slots. They used:
 - more Subjects that were single nouns
 - more and shorter Verb phrases
 - more and longer Objects/Complements

- fewer words in Adverbial slots.

Put together, these suggest EAL writing at this level uses more short clauses, in which information is concentrated towards the end.

- **Adverbials:** In writing by pupils attaining level 3 overall, the mean number of words used in the Adverbial slot in EAL writing was significantly lower than EMT, as with level 4 (above). At both levels 3 and 4, therefore, writing by EAL learners is likely to be including less information about time, place, manner and purpose.
- **Verbs:** EAL learners attaining level 5 made some errors with advanced verb tenses that show the relative timing of two events, such as the past perfect tense e.g. he had queued
- **Figurative language:** Use of figurative language was limited to a subset of pupils in each group, with more use by higher level groups. EAL stories used more metaphors and similes than EMT stories, for pupils achieving both level 4 and level 5. EAL writing at level 5 used most figurative language.
- **Spelling and punctuation:** EAL learners attaining level 4 made significantly fewer spelling errors than their EMT peers. At the other levels, there was no significant difference in spelling or punctuation errors.

Comparison with findings from EAL study on KS4 Writing (Cameron 2003)

- At both KS2 and KS4, the strongest differences (quantitatively) between EAL and EMT writing were found at word and phrase level, in formulaic phrase errors and the use of prepositions.
- In many ways, KS2 writing was more fluent and more accurate than the writing seen at KS4. Length and paragraphing were better; there were fewer errors with agreements and articles; commas were used more accurately by KS2 EAL writers attaining level 5 than by sixteen year olds predicted A or B in their GCSE English. These improvements would seem to be linked to the teaching that the younger children have received through the National Literacy Strategy.
- At discourse level, the lower achieving EAL writers at KS4 had more difficulties with handling genre than EMT peers. The narrative genre at KS2

was handled quite confidently, probably because it is the earliest acquired genre for children and in many ways the most basic. However, some EAL writers at KS2 did not adapt their language to the demands of the radio advertisement genre as readily as their EMT peers.

- **Subordination:** At KS2 and KS4, lower achieving EAL learners and their EMT peers made less use of advanced subordinators than higher achieving EAL and EMT learners. In addition, higher achieving EAL learners at KS2 used fewer advanced subordinators than EMT learners.

Summary of key recommendations

- Schools need to ensure that EAL learners have extensive opportunities to encounter and work with a range of genres of written English.
- EAL learners might be helped with handling formulaic phrases through a focus, across the curriculum, on phrases as whole units rather than only on words.
- Higher achieving EAL learners could benefit from exposure to, and direct teaching about, more advanced tenses that show the relative times of events, and more advanced subordinators to create more varied sentences.
- EAL learners, even those attaining level 5, could benefit from noticing different ways in which well-written stories are brought to an end, and from trying out various story ending techniques.
- Level 3 story writing is characterised by lack of development of narrative components, and both EAL and EMT writers could be helped to increase the amount of development of story setting, characters, and plot, by thinking about the imagined readers of their stories, what they might want to know and how this could be made interesting for them to read.
- Explicit attention to certain features of language such as modal verbs, Adverbials and prepositional phrases seems especially important for lower achieving EAL writers, who seem less likely to discover the grammatical patterns by themselves than higher achieving EAL learners.
- Pupils' individual vocabularies offer a rich resource for classroom activities, since many of the less

common words used by individual pupils may not be known or used by others.

- Figurative language allows some children opportunities to create vivid images in their stories. Some level 4 and 5 EAL writing makes interesting use of figurative language that could be used as a resource for teaching all pupils.

References

Cameron, L. (2003) *Advanced Bilingual Learners' Writing Project*. London: OFSTED
DfES (2003) *Pupils attainment in National Curriculum Tests*:
<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000448/table33-36.xls>

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (RR586) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

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