

More advanced learners of EAL at Key Stage 4 and post-16

Lynne Cameron
University of Leeds

L.J.Cameron@education.leeds.ac.uk

On 16 March 2003, OFSTED published two reports on EAL at Key Stage 4, an inspection report and a research study. The reports resulted from concern that these students, who had spent many years in the education system, might still be under-achieving in English language skills. The inspection report is titled “More Advanced Learners of English as an Additional Language in Secondary Schools and Colleges” and surveys practice in a range of contexts. It gives an excellent picture of the experiences of more advanced learners and examples of best practice. The research study, “Writing in EAL at Key Stage 4 and post-16”, was linked to this survey and was carried out at the University of Leeds.

As a result of sharing the findings of the research study with consultants preparing KS3 Literacy materials, the grammar analysis that we developed has been incorporated into KS3 materials. NALDIC members may have already seen these as they have been in use for a couple of months already. The OFSTED report includes an explanation of the grammatical framework and the method used to analyse pupils’ writing, with sample scripts and analyses. It also contains a set of guidelines for evaluating writing in EAL at secondary level, designed for teachers to use and covering a fuller range of aspects of writing that the project showed to be problematic for lower-achieving EAL pupils.

In the remainder of this article, I summarise the research project and its findings, drawing heavily on a summary prepared for OFSTED for inclusion in the inspection report.

The Research Project

The project investigated the writing skills of a particular group of students in schools and colleges – those who use English as an additional language and who, although at an advanced stage of formal education, may be under-achieving in English. Over three hundred pieces of writing, from English language and other subject areas, were provided by schools and colleges across England, and analysed to find features of writing that cause particular difficulties for this group.

Writing is a key skill for both formal education and for life beyond school, and without good levels of writing skills in English, bilingual learners are likely to be at a disadvantage. While, at one level, successful writing requires knowledge and application of the conventions of written texts, it also is a complex skill in which thoughts and ideas become concrete written words, sentences and paragraphs, and are organised into a text that is accessible for the intended readers. Furthermore, a written text is not only an encoding on paper or screen, but also represents the writer to others as a socially, culturally and historically-situated person with his or her own experiences, affiliations and opinions. For students of 15 or 16 years of age, issues of identity and stance cannot be ignored.

The focus group of school pupils were between 15 and 16 years of age, in key stage 4, used English as an additional language, and had been in UK education for at least 5 years. Major home languages were Gujarati, Bengali and Punjabi, with small numbers of a range of other languages. Their writing, at the GCSE C/D borderline, was compared with higher grade EAL writing and EMT (English as mother tongue) students’ writing at the GCSE C/D borderline.

Mock GCSE scripts in English and a Humanities subject were analysed for each pupil. The analysis considered the quality of the whole text – use of genre, ideas, paragraphing – and the use of English in developing ideas at sentence, clause and word level. We also looked at accuracy in articles, word endings, spelling and punctuation.

The scripts of a similar, but smaller, group of college students (16-19 year olds) were also analysed, with largely similar findings.

Differences and similarities found between the groups

- ◆ At whole text level, less successful EAL and EMT writing both lacked content, and did not use paragraphing well to organise content. The less successful EAL group had more difficulties in finding and using ideas in writing.
- ◆ Some less successful EAL writers seemed to have ideas but did not express them clearly.
- ◆ Within the text, the writing of both less successful EAL and EMT groups tended to lack detail, and used simple sentence and phrase grammar to express connections.
- ◆ The strongest differences between the less successful EAL writing and EMT writing were found within texts, at the level of words and phrases, particularly in the use of ‘small’ words

such as prepositions, delexical verbs (e.g. *do*, *make*, *put*) and in aspects of word grammar such as agreements and endings.

- ◆ EAL and EMT writing at the C/D borderline showed similar patterns of problems with punctuation – quite severe and including problems with capitals and full stops – and spelling, where a few pupils produced the majority of errors.
- ◆ High EAL writing was characterised by having more content and developing content to a more detailed level, although there was room for more effective use of paragraphing and of supplementary materials in English exams.
- ◆ As well as being more accurate, High EAL writing made greater use of grammar resources, with more variety of clause and sentences types.
- ◆ A small number of within text language features remained somewhat problematic in some High EAL writing: prepositions, articles and Subject-Verb agreements.

Writing as a cross-curricular issue

The scripts show that problematic features of writing occur in all subject areas. While English requires the longest texts, the problems of generating and organising content are not restricted to English. For example, pupils who cannot develop topics into detail and use sentence grammar to explain the connections are likely to under-achieve in Geography and History, as well as in English. Similarly, the use of modal verbs to show hypothetical or conditional meanings is central to writing and thinking in science, as well as in the humanities.

Improving writing would have an impact across the curriculum. English departments could take the lead in schemes to improve writing but ideas would need to be accepted and adopted consistently in all subject areas. Furthermore, the close relationship of writing with thinking and with reading suggests that all three need to be addressed in an integrated way in any scheme for improvement.

Writing at length

- ◆ Very few of the C/D borderline texts were of the length required by the English Language exam.
- ◆ It is highly likely that writing fast and at length to produce ‘extended texts’ is a distinct skill that needs to be practised – i.e. it is not the same as writing several short texts.

- ◆ We were led to question how far the writing tasks and genres set in English examinations realistically require extended texts.
- ◆ The use of paragraphs links to the writing of extended texts. The organisation of texts through indicating main and supplementary topics or ideas, and use of paragraphs to display this organisation, is clearly one where teachers could help all students.
- ◆ Pupils should be taught techniques to expand and develop the content of their writing, taking what comes to mind and making it more useful for writing at length, particularly in English Language. Useful work would help students with strategies to generate ideas for given topics and to access ideas from source materials, e.g.:
 - brainstorming and mind-mapping around key words
 - using personal experience to add to content
 - developing topics by making links, breaking topics down to more specific sub-topics
 - extracting key words from sources, and using them to generate content, even if some of the text is inaccessible
 - organising ideas into a logical linear sequence.

Writing in a range of genres

- ◆ The requirement to write in very specific genres in the English Language tasks led to a need for pupils to adopt and use multiple layers of voices which caused great confusion for all groups. Apart from formulaic openings and closings that seemed to have been learnt by rote, pupils seemed unclear about their purpose in their role as writer, about who exactly was their audience, and how to address them.
- ◆ It may be that pupils can be helped to think themselves into their roles on such tasks as part of the writing process, although a stronger view might urge that students be given less complex tasks that require more straightforward genres and that allow them to write as themselves.
- ◆ Ideas from source materials have to be found and understood, and changes made to genre and register. Students need to be taught how to do this.
- ◆ Explicit discussion of the stance that a writer needs to take in different genres, and examples of how stance is shown in written language, might help pupils make more effective use of their knowledge of Islam in RE writing

Use of language resources

- ◆ Less successful writing is likely to remain at a general level, or at a specific level. Students can be helped to use a wider range of vocabulary in the development of ideas.
- ◆ The organisation of texts through indicating main and supplementary topics or ideas, and use of paragraphs to display this organisation, is clearly one where teachers could help students.
- ◆ All writers, but particularly the Focus and EMT groups, could be helped to write more complex clauses and sentences, by
 - using longer noun phrases
 - using more Adverbial phrases to add detail about *when, where, why* and *how*
 - expanding phrases into clauses
 - using more advanced sub-ordinators (e.g. *although, until*) to connect ideas
 - making more use of participial non-finite clauses (e.g. *by riding bikes...*)
- ◆ Individual, explicit corrective feedback on the use of modals (e.g. *may, would*) to express conditionality or hypothesis may be appropriate at key stage 2 onwards.
- ◆ Punctuation should be taught alongside how to use sub-ordination. For example, non-finite clauses are usually separated from the rest of the sentence with a comma; use of the comma would be part of learning about non-finite clauses.
- ◆ As regards the finding that prepositions (e.g. *with, of, in*) and delexical verbs (e.g. *make, do*) caused particular problems for EAL writers, it may be that unimportant inaccuracies in their spoken English become more noticeable and problematic in writing, and that these types of lexical errors reflect the process of learning English through mainstream participation, where meaning can be understood without noticing small details at word level. It may also be that some strategies used by teachers to support the meaning of EAL in subject classes, such as highlighting key words, may contribute to this phenomenon.

Learning to write offers opportunities to notice these small features of English that might pass unnoticed in talk. Encouragement of accuracy and corrective feedback on these features in formal spoken language tasks and in writing from key stage 1 onwards may be helpful.

- ◆ Errors resulting from over-generalisation are ‘positive errors’ in that they show pupils’ internal grammar development. Explicit feedback on errors on an individual basis may be helpful in highlighting exceptions to rules and over-generalisations. Group or class language

awareness work that explicitly elicits, displays and discusses patterns, such as word class and meaning links, could be done when writing errors suggest it is appropriate.

- ◆ Errors in articles, agreements and endings may sometimes benefit from explicit group or class teaching, but are more likely to respond to corrective feedback on an individual basis so that pupils can see how the correct form is needed to express their meaning precisely.

Planning for long term writing skills development

Some of the problems identified in the report may respond to direct instruction, for example, comparative forms and how to qualify them, and expressing conditionality. Others aspects of writing would seem to need long-term development, i.e. from key stage 1 or 2 onwards:

- writing regularly at length, with support e.g. guided writing
- extensive reading to become familiar with styles and genres.
- noticing how writers use subordination and other resources to present ideas
- encouragement and support to try more ambitious phrases, sentences and texts.
- development of signposting phrases and linking terms e.g. *another point; While some people think x, others disagree.*
- drawing attention to correct use of prepositions and delexical verbs.

Copies of the two reports are available from Ofsted Publications Centre
 Tel: 07002 637833.
 E-mail: freepublications@ofsted.gov.uk
 Web site: www.ofsted.gov.uk