3| EXPLORATION OF METHODS TO IMPROVE READING COMPREHENSION IN PUPILS WITH ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE (EAL)

Isobel Apsey
Kidbrooke Park Primary School

1. | INTRODUCTION

Background

Learning and using foreign languages in every day circumstances is a skill I have great interest in. Having lived abroad to study and work I have found myself in situations where, although I have been able to read the main idea of a sentence, I have not understood the true meaning of individual words therefore limiting my understanding of the text. I enjoy the search to find the translation of words but in the context of a multilingual primary school classroom, where my action research project took place, effective and dynamic actions must be taken to support children to understand English texts for true comprehension.

I began my teaching career in this school and have taught across Key Stage 1 and 2 for three years. I am a year 2 class teacher of a class of 28 children for whom some use English as an Additional Language (EAL). This work was carried out in larger than average primary school in South East London. A total 33% of pupils on roll are recorded as being children who speak English as an Additional Language which is higher than the national average. In my classroom, the competency of the pupil's comprehension of English varies and I had only a small understanding of some of the children's understanding of texts in their home language. 'Home language' in this report refers to the language spoken by their families which may be their strongest language.

Aim

This project aims to improve the reading comprehension of EAL pupils in my class. My action research project is trying to find effective methods to advance the comprehension skills in reading of children with EAL.

In my class I identified that EAL pupils were not achieving as well when they were required to not only decode but also comprehend the text, therefore I thought that I would focus on this skill specifically and identify which methods were most effective in improving their understanding of English texts. This mirrored the trend from data analysed by NALDIC (National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum) (NALDIC, 2013) which demonstrated that fewer EAL pupils in Key Stage 1 achieved the expected level in Year 2 SATs (Standard Achievement Tests) comprehension assessments in comparison to monolinguistic pupils. This was despite the fact that data from 2012 showed that when these pupils were in year 1, there was no notable difference between the decoding skills on bilingual and monolinguistic pupils.

Objectives

1) To understand the extent to which EAL students comprehend their home languages.

2) To explore methods of encouraging the use student's home languages to improve their comprehension of English texts.

3) To use data from my project and wider literature to improve my practice.

2. | METHODOLOGY

I used Action Research to conduct my project. Action research involves a number of cyclical stages at illustrated in figure 1. I followed these steps in order to carry out my project.
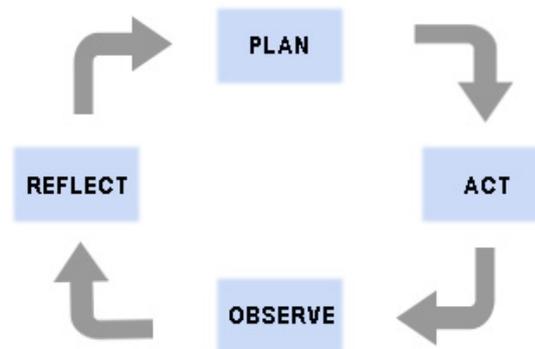

Fig.1 -The action research cycle (Warwick University, 2012)

My concern while planning my project was my awareness that EAL pupils in my class were able to decode texts fluently but were having difficulty with comprehending what they had read. This is a concern as comprehension of a text is a key skill as noted by Speizman Wilson and Smetana (2011) who stressed that a meaning-based approach develops literacy skills.

In order to inform my action I read a number of articles relating specifically to the teaching of EAL pupils from which I recognised the theme of high quality teaching and Mistry and Sood (2010) encouraging teachers to "celebrate EAL pupils" which led to my further research in how I could undertake this in my classroom. From my reading I took action from from Chumak-Horbatsch (2012) where I followed recommendations for the set-up of my classroom.

From these actions I observed EAL pupils in my class with the intention to see if having their home languages celebrated at school in a number of ways would lead them to improve their comprehension of English. Furthermore, I engaged in semi structured interviews with some parents of the EAL pupil's to gain understanding of the child's use of their home language in order to compare this with their comprehension of English.

From these observations I would reflect on my practice in the classroom in order to judge if the pupils felt more comfortable celebrating their home languages and if their comprehension of English had improved.

I have conducted action research to achieve the aims of my project. Action research has been defined by Carr and Kemmis (1986) as "self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out." In addition to this, it has been argued by Bogdan et al (1992) that action research "seeks to improve social issues affecting the lives of everyday people." As my action research was concerned with improving pupil's comprehension of texts, my project is an example of how action research improves the lives of participants. This corresponds with the belief of Henson (2013) who provided multiple reasons how action research carried out by teachers "has been directly linked to the professional growth and development of teachers." Action Research as described by Heller (1993) is able to create new knowledge by providing solutions to concerns noted by practitioners. These solutions must be based on theory which then has its value determined in order to inform any further practice. The solutions carried out by the researcher within Action Research are able to fulfil a number of roles in creating knowledge as it advices practitioners according to how the actions affected the participants and it contributes to theory in the area being studied.

3. | FOCUS OF THE STUDY

At the beginning of the year, I conducted an exercise in my classroom to hear the children share their home languages with each other. I observed who was willing to share and what words they could translate. I invited all the children to speak another language and would ask the children questions regarding their use of the language. There were children in the class who I have heard speak their home languages with their parents when they are collected who did not raise their hand to offer any examples of this. When I discussed this event with other colleagues from the action research group at a meeting I was convinced that that an exercise had been ineffective and seemed to only provide anecdotal evidence of children's knowledge of another language as not all children had wanted to share their language skills. Nevertheless, through discussion with the group, I realised that I could use my research to establish a way of celebrating children's home languages in the classroom.

In order to contextualise my study, I performed a literature review about EAL. Evidence from Gillborn and Gipps (1996) asserts that some EAL children make good progress throughout their time at school. This was not in evidence from the data collected at my school. My analysis of the whole school data would be that there is a strong emphasis on decoding in Year 1 where children's level of comprehension of the text is not the main skill being evaluated, however as the children progress through the school, their comprehension is tested which shows little improvement throughout their time in Key Stage 2. Collier (1992, 1995) and Cummins (1993) claim that EAL pupils make good progress academically if their cultures are "valued and incorporated into the school curriculum." In the school there is a trend of higher than average reading levels for EAL students in Year 1. I interpret this data to demonstrate how EAL children have been taught effectively to correctly decode texts. This is monitored in the phonics assessment when pupil's phonetic decoding skills are tested. However, in the subsequent years, the pupils are assessed on their comprehension of a text and these levels are below the national average. Comprehension skills are different from phonetic decoding skills and require a deeper level of understanding of what they have read and also require the students to respond to the text. By analysing the data of the school, I recognised a trend that when there is more emphasis placed on comprehension of the text, EAL pupils were scoring below the national average. These concerns followed the trend noted by Burgoyne 2009, that "reading achievement is lower for this group of learners."

25

As a class teacher my role is to remove barriers to learning for EAL students. For EAL students, this barrier may directly relate to their comprehension of the English language rather than their ability to complete the work independently. For children who have no knowledge of spoken or written English, support can be provided through differentiated resources or working closely with an adult to achieve an appropriate outcome for their ability of written or spoken English. Through my assessment of children's learning and further reading, it is key to remember that while children may be able to engage in "playground English" (Flynn 2007) this may conceal their lack of technical knowledge of English which will allow them to use the language to its full effect to communicate and develop "culturally, emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually" which is set out as a key aim of the 2016 literacy curriculum. A further aim of the curriculum is to improve children's knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. For children who can use "playground English" to communicate and comprehend texts in the classroom, it is recognised that their depth of understanding of the language is limited. Therefore, being able to confidently and successfully use 'language about language' to demonstrate their understanding may be limited.

Reading is assessed in separate strands of phonetically decoding the words and comprehending the text. I noticed in my class data that EAL children were spread throughout my reading data as poor decoders with poor comprehension, good decoders with poor comprehension or competent in both skills. Through interviews with the children I noticed a trend which is supported by the views of Mistry (2010.) This finding that children who engaged in reading activities in their home learning were likely to be better at comprehending English texts correlated with Mistry who states that "EAL may find it easier to transfer skills, knowledge and understanding as they already have a base language" This led to a key aim within my project to celebrate the home literacies of EAL children. Through developing their engagement with their home language, I wanted to track how they may improve their reading comprehension of English. By engaging with multiple literacies, it is accepted that EAL pupils have a heightened understanding of the structure of language or metalinguistic awareness which can be used to develop greater understanding of meaning (Flynn 2007). This led to my primary focus on how I would focus on children with good decoding skills but poor comprehension.

A further responsibility as a class teacher is to contact parents and keep them informed of their child's progress. For families who cannot communicate in English, it may be difficult to get support from school about how they can best support their child's learning. Moreover, the school, which is required to provide verbal and written feedback throughout the year, may not be able to let parents know about their child's achievements or needs without the use of a translator.

In order to encourage pupil's engagement with their home language, the reading of Chumak-Horbatsch (2012) gives examples to practitioners of how to set up a classroom environment that encourages children to use their home languages. One suggestion put forward by Chumak-Horbatsch is to share food with their packages and containers as this can be a method of creating a multilingual classroom by sharing what can be similarities among speakers of varied languages. Chumak-Horbatsch intends this "housekeeping centre" (2012) to be used in such a way that a teacher "plans a discussion" about what has been brought in.

4. | DATA COLLECTION TO INFORM THE ACTION

Interviews with the parents

I conducted eight informal interviews with parents that lasted up to fifteen minutes. I planned a short interview with a combination of open and closed question to guide the conversation while inviting open discussion. The interviews were conducted at school at convenient times for the parents. I wrote field notes during these conversations.

The semi structured interviews I held with the parents were useful because I was able to compare what the children had said with the parent's view of their use of the home language. Although there were key questions that I used to structure the interview I chose a more natural manner of asking questions as the role of a class teacher is to have a positive relationship with the parents of pupils. This correlates with the view of Sapsford and Jupp (2006) who explain how unstructured interviews can be used to appear like a "conversation between equal participants." While I have a professional understanding of how to improve pupil's comprehension, only the parents would be able to fully inform me of their children comprehension of their home language.

A disadvantage of using this method of data collection is the differing assessment of how parents report their child's understanding of their home language. I asked a series of questions about their assessment of the child's level of understanding when reading or being read to in their home language. As these were the parent's separate assessments of their child's comprehension it was not possible to measure them against each other and therefore a strong correlation was not possible as some of the parents may have been biased. This mirrors the disadvantages of semi structures interviews as explained by Walsh and Wigens (2003). They explain that reliability is sometimes compromised as comparing responses is complex. A further limitation of having a parent asses their child's skill in reading is that I was not able to speak to all the parents and carers of the EAL pupils in my class as some of them cannot speak English. This made the sample smaller.

Focus group with the pupils

I held a focus group within the setting of my classroom. All members of my class participated of which 16 use EAL and 12 are monolinguistic. I created a question guide for the focus group in order to assess their use of home languages. I used an audio recording device and then transcribed and made field notes of the focus group. I chose this technique because it is a method of qualitative research that enables participants to have a collaborative discussion as stated by Walsh and Wiggens (2003) I was able to identify themes within their answers that informed further observations. A disadvantage of using this data collection technique highlighted by Walsh and Wiggens (2003) is that more vocal participants may affect the input of others however as I had planned the focus group to inform my knowledge of who was confident in sharing their knowledge of another language in my classroom, this was added to my field notes from the activity.

The focus group session took place at the beginning of the Spring Term. The aim of the focus group was to hear the children share their home languages with each other. I used different methods of questioning the children to provoke their discussion about languages spoken at home. I involved all pupils from my class in this group as I did not believe it would be best to separate the pupils in terms of their home language. This would not demonstrate an inclusive classroom as they may have felt uncomfortable having a key aspect of their home life discussed as something that could separate them from their peers.

As a group I enabled a discussion between children regarding what languages were spoken at home. I invited all the children to speak another language and would ask the children questions regarding their home literacy. I observed who was willing to share and what words they could translate. I used structured set of questions to guide the discussion. I filmed the discussion and transcribed the responses. From this I tracked the differences in children's responses at later times in the year.

During this initial interview I learnt that the children were engaged in their home language in a number of ways. They told me they go to Saturday schools or they are read another language in books, poems, songs or at religious events.

I observed the class in different situations throughout the year where I assessed their engagement with their home languages. These unstructured observations allowed me to identify the significance of the pupils actions after I had observed the pupil in this situation as explained by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) This method was particularly useful, as through the semi structured interviews, I found that some children where not willing to share their knowledge of languages they use outside school. Therefore, during an observation of the pupils in different contexts throughout the year, I was able to collect data. Also, as these observations were done within the context of lessons and workshops within the classroom lead by me, the pupils were in a natural environment where they felt comfortable as my observations were non-intrusive, a key aim for all my data collection techniques as pointed out my Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011). However, I found the observations proved difficult to identify strong trends and they were more useful for collecting data which could be compared over the year. It may have been difficult to identify strong trends from my observations as Cohen, Manion and Marrion (2011) explain the technique requires training to make informed judgements and the inclusion of important details.

Ethics

I had a discussion with the executive head teacher of my school to gain ethical approval for my research. I was conducting research on children which is a high risk group and would also be gathering information from their parents of their home practices of reading. For these reasons I was obliged to abide by higher ethical guidelines. Through my observations of advised classroom practice I did not cause and emotional harm on the children. Before asking questions of the children's reading habits in their home languages I asked for verbal consent that they wanted to respond to the questions.

All responses are anonymised and confidential as explain by the Data Protection Act (1998) by BERA (2011). In reference to the ethical guidelines put forward by BERA (2011) I took all the necessary steps to reduce the sense of intrusion. I took specific caution when asking pupils about their home lives regarding their practicing of engaging with another language.

5. | ACTION

Activities during Cultural Enrichment Week
I collected a number of ideas from my readings to inform practice that would create an atmosphere where the cultures of the pupils and their home language would be celebrated using different methods throughout the year. This included an action I took was informed by my reading of Chumak-Horbatsch (2012). In regards to creating a learning environment that catered for the varied linguistic needs of my classroom, I made a number of changes over the year and working in collaboration with a member of the senior leadership team, I suggested activities for Cultural Enrichment week. I suggested that there should be a shared food afternoon and asked if parents would write the name of the dish and share the ingredients they used. This became an exercise in sharing languages and I observed in my classroom, that due to the increased awareness of home languages that these conversations came from the children without my prompting.

Dual Language book displays
A further suggestion by Chumak-Horbatsch (2012) is to have "book displays". In my classroom I have a number of dual language books. These books are available for free choosing by the children and pupils of monolinguistic backgrounds. I have observed conversations between pupils discussing the language and the writing systems of the languages.The use of dual language books in my classroom led to pupils sharing their knowledge of another language and culture with each other which is recognised a main benefit to dual language resources by Semingson, Pole and Tommerdahl (2015) is that pupils are able to recognise themselves as an expert when they share their cultures with others. I also noted hoe the dual language books allowed pupils that had previously been hesitant to share their home language had the freedom and privacy during quiet reading to explore the books of their home language when they chose.

Before the project the dual language books had been used by the adult reader in my class who volunteers for one morning each week. I had taught her son in the previous academic year and during parent's evening she had asked me what she could do to help her son's reading as her first language was Turkish and she did not feel confident in her ability to help him decode English texts. Last year, before I had begun the action research project, I had provided the family with simpler texts which I knew he could easily phonetically decode and advised her to ask him simple questions about the sequence of events or to discuss the actions of characters as I thought that it was of greater value to have him engage in English language texts, however basic they were, to practice these comprehension skills. Through my research and by following the cycle of action research to see the outcome of my actions, I would change my advice for this parent. When she volunteered as an adult reader in my class, instead of giving her a low ability monolingual English child to practice their decoding skills, part of her time in class is spent reading with children in my class who speak Turkish. When talking with her after each session I asked if these children understood the text and how she would assess their comprehension and her observations of their comprehension of Turkish regarding how it may have changed over time. I wanted to see if she found their comprehension skills improve in Turkish just as I had noticed their improved comprehension of English texts. This action therefore had a number of successful outcomes in that it is one manner that the children acquired heightened comprehension skills by improving their skills in their home language. Also, it showed how working collaboratively with the communities linked to the school can improve understanding of how they can help their child's education. I had told the volunteer about the research I was taking part in and encouraged her to read in Turkish with her child and she and the current teacher have noted an improvement with the pupils understanding of texts.

Creating of a School Motto

A final outcome that I observed in my classroom as evidence that the children were embracing their home languages and that their various backgrounds were valued by each other was during a PSHE lesson. A task was set for the children to create a school motto. We decided on themes by ranking a list and finding common values that the children felt our school represented. In groups they then created mottos. As a plenary to this lesson, I spoke to the class about how Latin can be used in mottos and what this meant, introducing the idea that an institution with a Latin motto has a strong history as it is not a language spoken any more. Further from this, the children asked to use Google translate to translate their school mottos into their home languages. This ranged from Cantonese, Turkish, Arabic, French, Lithuanian, Russian, Guajarati, Polish, Kurdish, Hindi, Igbo, Yoruba and Nepali.

This exercise clearly demonstrated to me the value that my class now place of their heritage as they feel that this is how they should be represented by the school. This was in stark contrast to the initial exercise I carried out at the beginning of the year when some pupils did not even admit to speaking another language and now they were asking for their home language to be displayed on the whiteboard and heard by the rest of the class.

6. | OUTCOMES AND INFLUENCE ON PRACTICE

From my interview with the class I identified a theme regarding children's willingness to share their home literacies and their comprehension of English texts. This changed throughout the year. As pupils grew in confidence in sharing their home language so did their comprehension of written English. The trend in my class followed that EAL children who could not read in their home language were poor readers in English, while children who were learning their home language formally or who reported to me that they engaged with written texts demonstrated better comprehension skills in reading English.

During the initial interview I learnt that the children were engaged in their home language in a number of ways. They told me they go to Saturday schools or they are read another language in books, poems, songs or at religious events. Within my class there is a wide range of linguistic back grounds and I found that the children that shared common languages often shared a common skill in reading comprehension and decoding. This also correlated with parent's responses to their children's understanding of listening and reading in their home languages. According to the parents who could respond during the semi structured interviews, the children who engaged with their home language, I knew were also competent at reading English. However, parents who said their children did not have a good understanding of their home language, I found were the children who did not have a confident comprehension skill as their dual language and monolinguistic peers.

According to my semi structured interviews with the pupils I was able to map the trends as follows. The children have had their comprehension of text judged according to Key Stage 1 SATs criteria which correlated with my teacher assessment at the end of the academic year.

	At age related expectations and exceeding age related expectations in reading	Below age related expectations in reading
Children who said they read or listen to another language being read to them	11	1
Children who said they do not read or listen to another language being read to them	1	3

Table 1. Data concerning age related expectations in reading *and* reading and listening to another language being read to the children..

At the end of the academic year when I had tracked their reading comprehension levels and I found that a large majority of the EAL pupils had made good progress throughout the year with a number of them being assessed as working above the age related expectation for year 2 pupils in Key Stage 1.

As recognised by Bourne (2002), by children engaging with the home language through texts, they are improving their cognitive development through an enhanced metalinguistic awareness. This is mirrored in the trend in my class. By listening to or reading a variety of texts in different contexts, the children are improving their comprehension skills which transfers to their ability to find meaning in text and therefore engage with what they have read through discussions.

It is important to note however that there are further reasons to explain why the majority of EAL pupils in my class were working at age related or exceeding age related expectations. As well as celebrating the literacies of EAL pupils in my classroom, similarly to the findings of Flynn (2006) I deliver literacy lessons are based on my sound teaching of literacy for all pupils. Flynn (2006) recognises that effective literacy for multilingual and monolingual pupils involves encouraging the use of Standard English which I use to communicate effectively with pupils. Furthermore, I put learning in context through the use of a range of texts to engage pupils.

My observation in my classroom that language diversity being celebrated tends to raise the motivation and attainment of EAL pupils reflects the advice of Arnot et al (2014) that to develop an EAL pupil's academic process the school should make reference to home cultures and use the home languages of pupils.

There are a number of actions I have taken during the project that will influence my teaching practice. One of the key actions that I will use to improve EAL pupil's comprehension is encouraging the parents to use their home language to engage their child in reading and develop their comprehension skills. From my reading to research my actions and seeing the positive outcome it had on the pupils in my class, I now understood the value in parents improving comprehensions skills as these are able to transfer between languages. The value of social interaction between the school and the communities of the families is valued by Arnot et al (2014) who strongly recommend building communication between the school and EAL parents who can support their child. As stated, a role of the class teacher is to inform parents of their child's progress and if asked, to be able to suggest way for the family to support their child's learning.

I have found this project to have an affect on my practice in the manner that I will place importance of understanding how children engage with their home languages. By noticing a pattern in my class

I was able to differentiate the type of specific support I could provide for the pupils. For example, the children that are explicitly taught another language may need more differentiated support in the nuances of English while the children that cannot read their home languages must be shown the value in this and how it will positively impact their comprehension of reading English.

Further action I would like to take to measure the impact it had on EAL pupils comprehension is working with bilingual teaching assistants who could deliver focus guided reading sessions in the pupil's home language. While my volunteer reader was able to offer her opinion of the children's language skills in Turkish, having a focused lesson delivered by an educational practitioner would have an impact on the children's learning.

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