

## Identifying and working with the different levels of linguistic competence of the newcomer



make literacy meaningful

**Melinda Dooly and Claudia Vallejo**

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Teachers should be aware that newcomers arriving at a school from a different linguistic background will undergo a progressive acquisition of the school's vehicular language which stretches through several phases and many years (for more discussion and description of newcomer or newly-arrived students and strategies for their reception, see 'Creating an inclusive environment for language support'). It is important to understand the different levels of linguistic competence of newly arrived students and have some strategies for supporting their language development.

### **The first phase of language development**

The first phase (the first few months) consists of adaptation to the new environment. (While this phase inevitably consists of linguistic, socio-cultural and personal adaptation, the last two are not discussed here.) This article only focuses on the different phases of language development. During this time the student has great difficulties in communicating in the school language (or cannot communicate at all in some cases, depending on the similarities between their mother tongue and the school language). So the teacher plays a key role, acting as a physical reference for the newcomer and must provide sufficient affective support to encourage the student to engage in the vehicular language as soon as he or she is ready. Of course, how soon learners begin to produce frequently used words and expressions in the classroom will vary from individual to individual.

At this initial stage, non-verbal communication is crucial. Teachers should use a variety of communication strategies, such as gestures and eye contact or the use of pictures and drawings for key concepts (see 'Creating an inclusive environment for language support' for more suggestions). It is also important to repeat verbal instructions several times, with clear enunciation and using short, straightforward sentences. This does not mean speaking louder or much slower than usual as this seems to imply that the listener is hard of hearing or intellectually challenged. Repetition, reformulation and emphasis on key words that are clearly related to specific actions, places or routines are helpful. Also, modelling the instructions or role-playing the activity is always a good strategy.

The teacher should take special care to pronounce the newcomer's name correctly and to make sure that other students do the same. It is helpful to learn some key phrases (greetings, simple instructions) in the newcomer's language if possible. At the same time, find ways to teach these same phrases in the vehicular language of the school to the newcomer. This can be done through tandem teaching between the newly arrived student and classmates (each teaches the other) or as a whole class activity. However, the students should not feel forced to participate in activities until they feel comfortable. They should be allowed a period of passive observation if needed, as this gives them time to internalize the learning of the new language.

Be sure and provide enough visual and oral aides (e.g. recordings) to help support the learning of key expressions and vocabulary related to the everyday life in the classroom. Enlisting the other students in the class to produce the materials can save time, serve as a learning experience for everyone, introduce learner autonomy and is empowering for the students.

After the initial stage, the newcomer usually transitions into a level that can be equated to the CEFR's A1 level. Usually this begins in the first year and consists principally of the acquisition of vocabulary directly related to the class and school context and the more functional communication structures. At this level, the learner will begin to understand and use very simple everyday expressions and phrases and can accomplish some basic communication needs. At the beginning, oral interaction can only be achieved through scaffolded collaboration with other speakers of the language but will eventually become more fluid towards the end of the first year.

When asked questions, students' answers are often single words or short phrases. The learner can begin to understand signs or posters written with simple, common words and notes with straightforward information (if they are already literate in their language; if not, the development of literacy in the vehicular language will take longer). At this stage, displaying speech bubbles or labels with the names of materials and usual phrases through the classroom might be a way to keep these resources always 'at hand' and help link oral and written aids. The learner will begin to be able to demonstrate when they do not understand something by asking for repetition. He or she can also write personal information (name, age, etc.), copy or write short words and phrases with the help of models or other media (again, this depends on the level of literacy in their first language).

### **Some teacher strategies that support the language development at the basic user stage**

As the learner transitions into the A2 or basic user level (usually in the first year), the initial barriers to communication are progressively overcome as the newcomer acquires the basic communication routines (greetings, requests, simple answers) and begins to interact with his or her peers. Comprehension in everyday situations and the acquisition of the lexicon related to the surroundings speed up. Usually, comprehension comes first, followed by guided oral production, and ends up with

integration of the lexicon through unstructured (less guided) production by the learner.

As in the initial, transition stage, the teacher should always speak clearly and slowly (although not so slow as to make the newcomer feel intellectually questioned), using correct but simple structures and with emphasis on the key words. As often as possible, oral instructions and explanations should be exemplified (modelling of the expected activity) and through the use of gestures and body language. Make a special effort to repeat words and phrases to praise, congratulate and encourage. Studies show a direct correlation between receiving uplifting messages and motivation for learning. They also show a direct correlation between the positive attitude and interest of newcomers in learning the school vehicular language, and the interest and value teachers and peers show towards their own home languages (Vila, Siqués & Oller, 2009).

The class distribution can also have an impact on the newcomer's language development. Make sure that the student is seated next to a classmate who is able and willing to help as often as possible. The use of activities corners and frequent change of seating arrangements can expose the language learner to different accents, tones and use of the language as each classmate will have their own particular linguistic style.

Making the classroom activities enjoyable is good for everyone involved. The use of songs and chants can support the perception of phonetics and intonation and the learning of specific lexicon and language structures. Accompanying songs with physical movements, gestures and choreographies –taken from popular videos or designed by the students- can offer newcomers more opportunities for participation. Similarly, reading aloud and story-telling makes the learner aware of intonation, expressivity and rhythm of the vehicular language as well as motivating all the students to read and use the language creatively. As learners become more autonomous they can engage in pairs and trios with ICT programmes and vocabulary games.

From the second year onward, the student will be progressively more competent in the use of the school language within limited contexts. He or she will be increasingly able to follow the curricular content and meet learning goals that correspond to the educational level they are at. By the third year the students will have acquired significant lexical abundance and will have mastered the basic communication structures. However, it is important to recognize that this does not mean that they are able to follow the lessons at the same level as their peers. Studies show that learners need between 5 and 7 years to achieve the academic language required to have full access to curriculum content in their new language.

### **Increased level of language use**

Teachers should provide activities that enrich the newcomer's increasingly complex language use. Targeting specific academic language use for additional focus can help

overcome potential barriers for learning the curricular content. Well-planned interaction in the learning activities, continued modelling of expected language production and peer learning situations are key features at this stage of the newcomer's development. The student should be gradually introduced to progressively complex lexis and structures linked to the core content of the areas.

Students should be asked to carry out activities that integrate different modalities of communication (reading and writing) rather than exercises that work on only one language skill. For instance, newcomers might be asked to watch a short video with subtitles that portrays an incomplete story and then be requested to provide a final ending (orally or written, individually or in groups). As the activities gain complexity, do not discourage the newcomers from using the language they feel most comfortable with to formulate and conceptualize their answers or output. The production can also include several languages, and teachers can encourage students to make connections between the languages they know and the target language. From there, the teacher and students will work together to create output that brings in more and more of the vehicular language of the school.

During all the stages of language development, it is important to remember to always have the other languages present and visible in the classroom, not only the vehicular language of the school. Bringing in a variety of languages, cultures and history through connections with family members, multilingual teaching materials and social media and of course can help empower the newly arrived students by allowing them to teach their classmates about their heritage and language. By doing activities such as these, everyone has something to gain.

## References

Vila, I., Siqués, C. & Oller, J. (2009) Usos lingüístics de l'alumnat d'origen estranger a l'educació primària de Catalunya. *Zeitschrift für Katalanistik* 22, 95–124.