

LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF ENGLISH IN THE ART CLASS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the linguistic and cultural implications of teaching art through the medium of English to students learning English as an additional language (EAL) at an international school in Brunei. The students are learning about art in English, whilst simultaneously learning English, alongside native English speaking peers. A consideration of the success of this mainstreaming practice, in providing students access to the art curriculum, is examined.

The choice of art is possibly controversial since it could be assumed that it is a non-linguistic practice or at least that language is secondary to aesthetics. Indeed, the literature surrounding the use of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) for an art curriculum is sparse (in relation to other subjects, such as Business Studies, the Sciences, etc.), despite the increasing number of South-East Asian students who are opting for art based courses such as Fine Art or Graphics, both at Western and Asian colleges. Nevertheless, the practice of art reflects a system of codes that embodies cultural assumptions about what art is and these are partly determined, shaped and reflected through language.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this paper is on the implications of the mainstreaming practice of immersing EAL students in language across the curriculum, to consider the linguistic demands a curriculum subject, such as art, makes upon a student, in order to identify the types of language and knowledge that need to be made explicit and require scaffolding in order to include EAL students effectively.

An interactionist view of language, that deconstructs the natural or organic processes of language acquisition, viewing language and learning as an entirely social activity, provides a model that accommodates the variances of cultural context (Holzman, 1996). It also suggests that the specific linguistic and cultural requirements, or varying social language activities, of all learners, in relation to a specific subject, need to be taken into account. This can help provide an understanding of actual language used in the classroom and the specific teaching strategies required for helping students manoeuvre within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), (Vygotsky, 1978). It also represents the concerns of language, culture and learning as being inextricably connected. In order to provide EAL students with the appropriate scaffolding in the content classroom a thorough understanding of the ways in which language, content and culture(s) interact in terms of the precise linguistic and disciplinary requirements of the art curriculum is needed.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The paper arose out of a six-month action research project that focussed on a Year 8 Art class, made up of students aged 13 – 14 years old. English has been the international school's medium of instruction, in response to its western clientele and due to the fact that

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many of its Asian students hope to attend Western universities. The school is English National Curriculum orientated and prepares students for IGCSEs and A Level exams.

Most of the teachers are from Western countries. A number of students at the school speak English as an additional language (EAL) and they range from being complete beginners to advanced level speakers. In keeping with mainstreaming practices prevalent in Britain, Australia and America, EAL students learn English, alongside their native English speaking peers, whilst studying other curriculum subjects (Art, Maths, History, etc.) at the same time. When possible, EAL students may be supported by an in-class language specialist. Students will rarely, if ever, be withdrawn for language lessons since this has been viewed as ethically and methodologically unsound or as a form of academic apartheid. Mainstreaming practices can therefore be viewed as resulting from a particular ideological concern with being culturally inclusive.

There is a lack of specific, detailed criteria for types of language instruction and language teaching strategies in some current mainstreaming practices. Yet, this need not be considered as problematic if it is assumed that second language learning is to some degree a natural process. In many ways mainstreaming practices could be seen as adhering to Innatist or immersion theories of second language education.

However, much research has begun to point out some of the issues facing EAL students in immersion contexts. Collier (1987: 633) suggests that EAL students in America, after being immersed in the state school system for four years, were 'substantially below national norms in all subject areas except mathematics.' He says that by the time the EAL students had achieved the proficiency in English, to access content curricula, they had 'in the meantime lost 2- 3 years of CALP development' and 'this put them significantly behind in mastery of the complex material required for high school students.'

Due to their lack of access to the content curricula EAL students are in danger of falling behind their first language peers in terms of cognitive development. The possibility that they may end up in a linguistic no man's land arises. Paikeday (1985: 43) suggests that school provides a less supportive environment for language learning than the home, in which the first language is acquired, since they 'in some ways deflect and distort the process of language acquisition.' Snow et al. (1989: 214) suggest that the language of EAL students in the content class reaches a 'plateau' and that they 'make do with a relatively limited set of language skills beyond the primary grades despite the fact that the content itself is more demanding.' Snow et al. (1989: 214) also say: 'In immersion, it is assumed that students' language develops as a function of unsystematic and unknown changes in the communicative requirements of academic instruction.' However, if the content curriculum is not developed from a language-learning viewpoint their language skills will 'not continue to develop.'

Recently, in the United Kingdom, a more flexible approach to mainstreaming has been introduced and some degree of withdrawal, now often termed "induction" has again become acceptable since educators, in secondary schools, have realised that pupils cannot access the curriculum without the language (Roberts, 2005).

IDENTIFYING LANGUAGE USE IN THE ART CLASS

A crucial question about the type of language needed to access the content curriculum must be raised. However, the methods proposed in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) for identifying the language of subject curricula vary widely across academic disciplines.

Strategies for teaching and approaching the language items of a science subject can differ significantly to methods used to address the language concerns of maths or economics. The level of complexity involved in identifying the language concerns of an academic subject and proposing strategies for teaching content and language simultaneously is evident through the wide-ranging debates occurring in the literature of EAP. Whilst research in EAP can be drawn upon to inform practices of mainstreaming it should be done in a way that signifies the density of issues involved. When considering mainstreaming practices for EAL secondary school students we are confronted with, not only the issue of identifying the interrelated variables of language and content, (as in the EAP context), but also the task of differentiating the curricula for both native English speakers and EAL students. Despite the relatively homogenous student profile of EAP classrooms in comparison to mainstream secondary school classrooms, the level of debate concerning the appropriate methods by which to integrate language and content in EAP contexts is extensive. However, the same level of debate is not evident in the literature surrounding mainstreaming. This is surprising since the similar task of integrating language and content is at hand, yet, is confounded further in the secondary school context due to the mixed student profile.

For Blue (1993) the main factor determining academic success in the content class is proficiency in the language of instruction. It may seem inevitable that the more proficient a student is in the language of instruction the greater the access he/she will have to the content schema. Yet, Blue (1993: 7), suggests that it is the quality and not quantity of the students' language which is important: 'less language use does not necessarily imply a lower level of sophistication in language use.'

For Morrison et al. (1993) access to content curricula is not simply a matter of language proficiency but an issue of language skill in relation to the particular discipline in question. Students therefore need to be made aware of both the structuring of the language and models of knowledge within the discipline. However, this is not necessarily straightforward. Bramki & Williams (1984) suggest methods for tackling vocabulary within subject areas pose intense difficulties for EAL students. Morrison et al. (1993) suggest that students need to become familiar with not only the language of a discipline but the way that language is structured and constituted within cognitive models of the discipline.

A concern of this paper, in identifying the ways in which language interrelates with the curriculum and texts of art, is to identify the cognitive model of the discipline as well as the way language functions within that. Morrison et al. (1993) analysed textual models in terms of reading texts. But, since there is a strong practical element in art, the cognitive model will not be expressed exclusively in terms of reading texts. On the contrary, we can consider everything that goes on within the classroom as a text and the types of teacher talk and learning processes could therefore be analysed in order to identify the cognitive models within the discipline.

The process of identifying language use in the art class began with; firstly, identifying the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the learners since it is crucial to investigate the varying ways pedagogic practices impact upon particular groups of learners.

Learner Data: The Year 8 Art Class

In the Year 8 Art Class, in Brunei, 8 out of the 20 students were EAL. 10 of the students were either first language Chinese or Malay speaking but spoke English to a high level of proficiency and these were termed English Proficient (EP). Only 2 of the students were native English speakers or English Only speakers (EO).

These group statistics indicate that out of a class of 20 students only 2 came from the culture upon which the host educational curriculum is based. These figures therefore suggest that, in view of the large number of EAL students, English language support is an issue for almost per cent of the class and that the cultural interpretation of art, on behalf of 80 per cent of the class, may differ to the conception of art as determined by the U.K National Curriculum. This clarifies that issues of linguistic and cultural context are paramount, in a consideration of the delivery the Year 8 art syllabus, to this specific group of learners.

LANGUAGE PHOTOGRAPH

The next stage of the research process involved developing a 'Language Photograph' in keeping with Clegg's (1996) notion that a specialist skill of the language teacher is that he/she analyse a cross-section of content in the mainstream classroom to reveal the language and learning skills required. The variables of the Language Photograph were broadly set out as including the following criteria: Lesson Focus (Tasks and Activities), Types of Teacher Talk, and Types of Student Talk in order to consider the types of discourse occurring, subject specific vocabulary, cultural schemata and the disciplinary culture of the subject.

Over the six month period a number of art movements were studied and provided the basis for the practical work that went on in the classroom. These art movements included periods such Art Nouveau, Pop Art, German Expressionism, The Romantics. Students were shown examples of works from these movements, aesthetic concerns and techniques were discussed and then practical work which was inspired by the art movements.

The type of teacher talk employed across the lessons followed a distinct pattern and divided the lessons into theoretical and practical sections. Generally, the first half of the lesson involved the teacher presenting the theory of the theme to be explored and the second part involved the students in an application of that theory in the form of practical work.

EAL students generally had to have the comprehension skills available to listen to large chunks of information and to make sense of this by referring to the non-verbal and graphic cues presented either in the lesson itself or in previous lessons. During the practical stage of the lesson EAL students who did not have the required comprehension skills to understand the teacher's monologue could resort to observing the activities of their peers as well as requesting information about the tasks in hand from their peers.

In the observed lessons the students were not expected to engage in lengthy dialogues and the use of informal register was considered acceptable. One of the main speaking skills required of the students in these lessons was the structuring of question forms, requesting help and clarification. Students also engaged in informal language with their peers and both informal and formal discourse with their teacher, according to context.

EAL students in the Year 8 Art Class were expected to comprehend the use of general, everyday English (BICS) as well as the use of subject specific vocabulary, which may be structured in a context-reduced form (CALP). However, in terms of Cummin's (1986) distinction between BICS and CALP it was difficult to position the type of discourse occurring during the lessons as belonging neatly within either category. In some lessons language was highly contextualised, made use of many non-verbal and visual cues, such as reference to specific equipment (pencils, paper, inks, nibs, frame, etc) and demonstration of actual techniques (shading, soft / hard lines, maximising, etc). The contextualised nature of language use here could suggest that it was a mode of BICS yet it was not a mode of 'everyday language' that BICS tends to be identified as. The language was also highly subject specific and the students were not involved in a negotiation of meaning since the talk occurring was predominantly teacher-centred.

The interdependence of language and content should be considered as central to discussions of mainstreaming as it has been in the literature of EAP (Blue, 1993). Dudley-Evans (1993) argues that separating the language skills from the content element of a discipline could be dangerously misleading. In relation to the subject of art it does seem evident that language used in the lesson could not be separated from the content of the art class. Language was the thread linking the theoretical and practical components of the lessons and therefore a crucial variable or tool, like an easel or paints, which is central to accessing the art curriculum.

THE ART CURRICULUM: A PRODUCT OF INTERLINKING SOCIO-CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC FACTORS

In the literature focussing on EAP, there is the expectation that in order to succeed in the foreign academic culture students need to assimilate, to some degree, to the norms of that academic culture (Blue, 1993).

However, for Holliday (1994) the import of curricula, from British, American and Australian or BANA contexts, into foreign Tertiary, Secondary, Primary or TESEP contexts is often fraught with tensions since they are not necessarily congruous with the environment they are being imported into and thus are prone to being a form of methodological hegemony. Holliday (1994) therefore advocates that teachers in TESEP contexts also need to accommodate students' cultural backgrounds.

In any given teaching context, in order for successful communication to occur, a combination of both the above will have to occur. Students will need to adjust their expectations of disciplinary cultures in line with the cultural context of the discipline they are studying, and teachers need to have some understanding of their students' academic and cultural background in order to facilitate their learning. Both content and language teachers will also need to have a thorough understanding of how their own disciplines can be interlinked to facilitate the EAL students' learning.

Despite the problems associated with the study of culture we cannot avoid a consideration of it if we accept views suggesting that language and behaviour are satiated in the influence of culture (Helmer & Eddy, 1996; Byram & Fleming, 1998). In the context of this paper, the issue of how culture can figure as an item of study in the art class is therefore crucial.

In relation to the art classroom culture can be considered as threefold. Firstly, it is related to the disciplinary culture of the classroom and the type of behaviour that is expected within the context of the international school. Secondly, it is related to the way art is defined as a cultural artefact within the frame of the discipline. Thirdly, it relates to the socio-cultural and disciplinary cultural backgrounds of the students and how these influence the type of access they have to the curriculum.

The Language Photograph indicated that the disciplinary model of art being presented to the Year 8 students was a primarily Western concept of art and constructed through two main discursive components: theory and practice. Students were encouraged to perceive art as a discipline which rested upon a critical epistemological framework and be seen as a cultural activity that simultaneously emerged, reflected and commented (sometimes critically) upon its cultural context.

This model differs profoundly from traditional conceptions of art found locally. In Brunei, although it has often been claimed that there is very little which constitutes a tradition, there is a long history of indigenous arts. Relatively little has been written, in English, about Southeast Asian indigenous art in general and Malaysian and Bruneian art in particular. Reasons for this perhaps arise from the presence of indigenous art within an alternative artistic paradigm to Western art which does not privilege the individual artist or champion the uniqueness of a work of art (Sheppard, 1978).

The influence of Islam on Southeast Asian art has been as varied as the sources of Islam itself. Yet, generally, its effect upon Malay and Bruneian art was to eradicate some of the magical or animist influences upon the works (Maxwell, 1990). Sheppard (1978) suggests that the Bruneian / Malay indigenous art heritage has also been influenced by Islam to the extent that it avoids representations of living beings but that this ornate style was appropriate for these types of artefacts which were intended to be used as everyday objects.¹

In terms of modern art in Brunei the lack of a perceived artistic heritage has also undermined the spread or confidence in Bruneian / Malay contemporary or modern art (Piyadasa, 1983). Nevertheless, a growing movement of modern art is emerging. The works are predominantly a style of photorealism, but a strand of abstract and expressionist work, which draws on the region's indigenous heritage for inspiration, is developing.² The critical perspectives and concerns of this art exhibit a critical edge and have a controversial role in Malay and Bruneian society.

Piyadasa (1983: ix) suggests that some parties believe modern art to be 'intrinsically alien to the notions of traditional cultural values of society.' It has also been asserted that such a mode of expression is not only a '...residue of the colonial era,' but a form of cultural imperialism that the West continues to exert and is therefore considered detrimental to cultural identity (Piyadasa, 1983: ix)³

Thus, the status of art in Brunei can be seen as somewhat ambiguous in terms of what actually constitutes the area's artistic heritage and in relation to traditional Western paradigms of what constitutes as art. From within the country there are also anxieties

about appropriate aesthetic decorum and their relation to matters of religious and national identity.

The differing cultural models of art present in Brunei and at the international school therefore have various implications for the EAL students. Culturally varying models of knowledge are complex and not necessarily reconcilable, i.e. contrasting artistic concerns with figural representation and aniconism in Western and Islamic traditions of art.

However, Ochs (1993: 448) points out, attending an international school may provide students with an: '...orientation toward multiple cultural perspectives' which may enable students to discuss issues that may not normally be permitted within their own cultures.

The fact that art is studied through the medium of English at the international school also has significant implications. In the government schools, in Brunei, art is studied in Malay, which may set ideological constraints on styles of representation and the function of art as a cultural practice, but at the international school, studying art through the medium of English may detach students from such constraints. Since they are now studying the subject in English this may allow differing perceptions and / or discussions of art which could be informed by a Western or more liberal perspective.

Ozog (1996b) argues that English offers Bruneian students access to Western pop music and other Western influences that may not be deemed acceptable in traditional Bruneian culture and, therefore, it may also be able to serve the same function for art.

However, we should not assume that the concerns of BANA curricula, such as the Year 8 Art curriculum, are always appropriate for students in TESEP contexts. Furthermore, theorists such as Kramsch (1993) suggest that teachers who ignore the intercultural tensions in the transfer of curricula into a foreign context are administering an ethnocentric pedagogy and, for her, this is an aspect of the fallacy of democratic pluralism. Kramsch (1993: 228) asserts that what we should seek in cross-cultural education are:

...less bridges than a deep understanding of the boundaries. We can teach the boundary, we cannot teach the bridge. We can talk about and try to understand the differences between the values...We cannot teach directly how to resolve the conflict between the two.

Western educational concerns with 'inclusion' therefore are not always possible at a cultural level if we admit that certain cross-cultural values are irreconcilable. For example, the juxtaposition of the Western artistic tradition of depicting nudes with Islamic concerns of aniconism in art are not easily resolved and attempts to do so could be interpreted as highly problematic.

What is at stake in the Year 8 art class, however, is not an attempt to resolve such conflicts but to provide linguistic support for EAL students so that they may be successfully included in the art curriculum. The central question therefore becomes how to facilitate students' use of the language tool to provide them with the required curriculum access?

USES OF THE LANGUAGE PHOTOGRAPH

One of the central uses of the Language Photograph is the construction of scaffolding for integrating language and content concerns to guide EAL students. This could include mapping out the subject specific vocabulary, the modes of discourse and cultural and disciplinary schema specific to the subject in question. Yet, providing the necessary scaffolding for the EAL students, to access the subject schema, should not be viewed in terms of an isolated task such as merely informing students of the vocabulary for a specific lesson. Scaffolding for EAL students also needs to address higher order thinking strategies across different lessons and focus on building up a repertoire of subject knowledge. Furthermore, if it is accepted that in the art class at least, the distinction between BICS / CALP should be deconstructed in favour of the notion of a transformation of knowledge of BICS into CALP, then strategies that enable EAL students to realise this transformation in the mode of communication should be facilitated. In other words, EAL students need to be provided with strategies or scaffolding which helps them to relate the context-reduced instructions of some lessons to the context-embedded schema of prior lessons.

Due to the almost infinite number of vocations or situations to which English for Specific Purposes (ESP) could be applied, Dudley-Evans & John (1998) deem the possible range of teaching methods to be highly eclectic. They consider the term 'practitioner' rather than teacher more accurate, especially as the teacher / practitioner is not necessarily the 'primary knower' of the curriculum. This is a useful concept in relation to both the language-teacher in the content class and the content-teacher in relation to the language issues of the curriculum. It realistically allows both teachers to be positioned as explorers of the curriculum, and learning processes required. The research revealed the need for the language specialist to be informed and conversant with the concerns and objectives of the subject curriculum and the ways in which language can be made central to this prior to the actual lessons themselves. Therefore, the importance of macro-level collaboration and planning is clear.

The research also suggested that planning made at the macro-level, on behalf of the language specialist, needed to be implemented at the micro-level in a flexible manner. The language specialist should be willing to adjust her role and respond to individual students according to what occurs in the actual learning environment. The language specialist as a practitioner is well positioned to consider the subjective learning needs of EAL students and to respond to them as they arise.

Pedagogic policies, which are more in keeping with interactionist or Vygotskian views that advocate explicit instruction or guidance to shift students to the next level of the ZPD, would seem to offer more specific and tangible strategies for how to support students in the mainstream. In order to construct the required scaffolding to shift students to the level of the ZPD, a Language Photograph is useful to provide a blue-print of language use within a specific context.

At the same time this paper advocates that the language specialist in the content classroom be positioned in the dichotomous position of both learner and bearer of knowledge. This may not necessarily raise the language specialists' (perceived) lack of status from a traditional pedagogic perspective yet it does suggest ways in which the practice of language support in the mainstream classroom can be informed by theoretical rigour. As such, this offers suggestions for ways in which language specialists can go

beyond the failure of current teaching contexts to realise the progressive intentions of mainstreaming practices (Creese, 2000). Through addressing the complexity of issues at stake and developing strategies for assisting EAL learners with the cultural, linguistic and content demands of the curriculum in an appropriate rather than an intrusive and compensatory way.

In order to prepare South East Asian students to access Western art curricula a realisation of the culturally contrasting disciplinary models of art needs to be highlighted as well as the ways in which language is constituted within them. In doing so it is hoped that these students will be better equipped to identify the cultural differences or boundaries within a discipline and then to contribute to the curricula on their own terms. Obtaining a Language Photograph of a content class, such as the Year 8 Art Class, provides both a metaphor and an approach for evaluation and identification of language use within a given context in terms of what is actually occurring within that environment. This process should be considered as an ongoing rather than an individual event.

Finally, even in a highly practical subject such as art language is a crucial tool, (such as an easel or paints), that is central to the process of constructing the (artistic) product. In any subject language is the tool that students must work with to access and engage with the particulars of that discipline. In secondary mainstream classrooms it is the role of the language specialist to facilitate EAL students' use of this tool. Mead (1964: 165) says:

Language does not simply symbolize a situation or object which is already there in advance; it makes possible the existence or the appearance of that situation or object, for it is part of the mechanism whereby that situation or object is created.

END NOTES

¹ The indigenous arts of Brunei and Malaysia, which include: textiles, woodcarving, silver and ironwork, silk and mat weaving, shadow puppets, beadwork, kites, weapons, and bird cage traps, have importance as everyday and ceremonial objects (Sheppard, 1978, p.v; Maxwell, 1990).

² Artists such as Hj Mohd Arrifin Bin H.B. ; Hidup, Zakaria Bin Omar; Pg Khamarual Zaman Bin Pg Hj Tajuddin and Yusof Bin Hj Matzain paint in an abstract style that incorporates elements from the indigenous arts such as batik print, cloth, and local references and symbolism such as the traditional Malay kites.

³ The subject of much abstract and modern art has been shape and form and deconstructs realist representations. Therefore, this artistic mode could therefore be reconciled with an Islamic artistic concern with the non-representation of living beings.

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