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SUPPORTING EAL STUDENTS WITHIN OUR CLASSROOMS

This month at Early Careers Geography Network, we are looking at 'International Jobs and Travel'. As a migrant myself, I thought I would take this opportunity to share some research I have done into teaching students with English as an additional language or EAL students.

According to the Department for Education's (DfE) latest statistics on pupils in schools in England as collected in the January 2020 school census, 'a further 584,600 pupils in secondary schools are recorded as having English as an additional language' whilst 'the proportion of pupils with English as an additional language has increased steadily overall in recent years'. I know from experience that learning a new language takes time. It usually takes more than two years for EAL students to catch up as they must do so 'with a moving target' (Cummins 2000, p.36, Burgoyne et al. 2009, Demie 2012). As a result, I have tried to summarise below how we can help EAL students within our classrooms.

Walters (2013) suggests that we use group work or collaborative tasks to promote interaction within the classroom as interaction is key to supporting students learn a language. Interactive tasks and group based activities allow EAL students to join in and use the language they have learnt within an academic context (Gibbons 1991, Cummins 2000, Leung 2005, Walters 2013). This will help them improve their English. This is what Faltis and Coulter (2008) and Leung (2005) call 'active participation' of EAL students within the classroom, which in turn promotes 'social integration' of these students within the mainstream (Faltis and Coulter p.37). It is highly likely that EAL students will want to participate and engage with their classmates. After all, EAL students have 'access to another world of people, ideas, ways of thinking and literature' (Gibbons 1991, p.2), which can be extremely useful during group work. This type of work can therefore help EAL students realise how valuable they are within mainstream classrooms and help them settle in.

It is also vital that we learn how to promote and acknowledge the talents and accomplishments of EAL students. Whilst EAL students may struggle with their knowledge of English, these students can, contrary to their monolingual peers, usually speak at least one other language fluently. It is therefore important for us to acknowledge and promote the linguistic talents of EAL students (Gunderson 2007, Meek 1997, Walters 2013, OECD 2010). By encouraging rather than discouraging students to use their mother tongue within the classroom, we will allow students to grow in confidence by making them proud of who they are (OECD 2010, 2015).

Furthermore, proficiency in a first language will provide EAL students with a strong base to learn an additional language. This is what Cummins (1984) refers to as 'common underlying proficiency' (p.143). If EAL students can understand complex concepts in their first language, it will be easier for them to learn the same concept in an additional language. For example, if a student already knows how to read a clock, it will be much easier for him or her to learn to read a clock in English.

Additionally, we can also help support EAL students within mainstream classrooms by providing them with clear instructions and explicit explanations (Gibbons 1991, Cameron and Bygate 1997, Cummins 2000, Walters 2013). This will help students understand what is expected of them and develop their comprehension of the English language, which in turn will boost their confidence. However, clear instructions and explicit explanations alone are not enough. Providing EAL students with appropriate visual aids is another way of helping them build a context and relate what they are learning to things they already know and have already seen (Gibbons 1991, Rutter 1994, Meek 1997, Leung 2005, Walters 2013). Similarly, we need to maximise the use of modelling when teaching EAL students within mainstream classrooms (Hawkes 1966, Soni 2013, Walters 2013). This is especially true for beginner EAL students. In the event where the use of clear instructions, explicit explanations and visual aids does not help students understand what is happening within the lesson, modelling activities often helps students understand what is expected of them (Soni 2013). Equally, even if students have already understood the activity, modelling will help support initial instructions and prevent misunderstandings. Once the activity is underway, we also need to acknowledge the fact that EAL students will usually need more time to complete activities. Whilst most of them will have understood the activity, it will take them time to formulate their answers and process new information in their additional language (Gibbons 2002, Soni 2013, Walters 2013).

We may also support EAL students through scaffolding. The use of scaffolding is already common within mainstream classrooms and has been very effective. Applying this method to EAL students can turn out to be just as successful if done in the right way (Burgess and Gore 1990, Leung 1997, Gibbons 2002, Faltis and Coulter 2008). We can for instance build on EAL students' prior knowledge, provide students with bilingual dictionaries or provide them with glossaries of key words (Gibbons 1991, Rutter 1994, Soni 2013, Walters 2013). Supporting EAL students in this way will allow them to better understand what is expected of them and help them fulfil classroom activities. However, for this approach to be successful one must understand that scaffolding should make work accessible to EAL students without simplifying tasks (Gibbons 2002).

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Indeed, 'it would be counter-productive to give them separate, 'easier' work [...] low-level work and the derogatory opinions of other learners around them would serve to limit the students' own expectations of themselves' (Burgess and Gore 1990, p.77).

Ultimately, failing to support these students risks marginalising and isolating them within society, which carries serious long-term implications. In this book, Gunderson (2007) uses the French riots of 2005 to illustrate the consequences of an educational system that fails to provide the necessary support for an increasingly diverse population. Too often those who do not speak the language of their host country are automatically 'ranked at the bottom of the pile, their cultural backgrounds and linguistic abilities not only ignored but regarded as a hindrance to both their progress [...] and their achievement in schools' (Meek 1997, p.112). As the number of EAL students continues to grow, failing to support them risks exacerbating current inequalities (Leung 2005).

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