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What do primary teachers need to understand, and how? Developing an applied linguistics curriculum for pre-service primary school teacher

University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK; 29–30 May and 1–2 September 2008

The seminars brought together 55 delegates working in the fields of Applied Linguistics, Initial Teacher Education, Speech and Language Therapy, English Literature, Psychology, Educational Psychology and Teaching English as an Additional Language as well as staff working for children's charities, Local Authority Quality Improvement and National Policy Development units in both England and Scotland.

The seminars were designed to encourage debate about the applied linguistics understandings that are most helpful to primary school teachers in designing and teaching the language and literacy curriculum, in working with pupils with identified speech and language needs, and in working with other professionals such as educational psychologists and speech and language therapists. Participants were invited to consider what would be most helpful for primary-school teachers to understand about applied linguistics perspectives, and how this understanding could best be developed. These seminars are possibly the firstUKopportunity for such a wide range of people to discuss these issues. Discussion came not only from the different professional concerns and research perspectives but also from differences in how Scotland and England make, implement and monitor language and literacy education policy. The two seminars were designed to run as a conversation, and the papers in the second seminar developed themes and issues raised in the first, as well as introducing new themes of their own. The first seminar made the case for how applied linguistics perspectives can, and do, inform the curriculum and pedagogy in primary schools. Professor Debra Myhill (Exeter University) began by reporting on her research on Writers as Designers. She summarised some of the research on young writers' linguistic development – their lexical choices, syntactic features, and thematic variety – arguing that linguistic knowledge is necessary for good writers but not sufficient: good writers need also to have access to a thinking repertoire from which they design, craft and shape texts that meet their communicative goals. In doing this, the relationship between the writer, the text and context is central, and teachers need to draw on knowledge from all these perspectives.

Papers by Dr Maggie Vance (Sheffield University) and Dr Rosie Flewitt (Open University) offered two very different ways to analyse the issues facing children with identified communication difficulties. Vance explained the speech and language therapist's analytic approach, highlighting the insights that a diagnostic view of semantic, syntactic and phonological knowledge can offer. Flewitt presented an analysis from the perspective of linguistic ethnography, showing how the individual and institutional dynamics of the context affect how a child negotiates her way into literacy, how she is considered by the adults around her and how this affects their assessments. Separately, each paper demonstrated implications for assessment and pedagogy but together they painted a rich picture of the breadth and

depth of knowledge that should inform primary teaching.

Dr Gemma Moss (Institute of Education, University of London) reported her research on children's discourse around books, showing the importance of attending to how children and young people position themselves in relation to literacy and how this shapes both what they learn and how they learn it. In doing so, she made a powerful case for teacher education to go beyond discussion of the teaching content of literacy to consider the cultural and social identities of children and young people as readers, and how these interact with local and institutional contexts to determine reading engagement.

The paper by Dr Alison Sealey (University of Birmingham) outlined the potential of corpus-based approaches to inform the early-years literacy curriculum and to revolutionise the teaching of grammar in schools.

Professor Kate Nation (Oxford University) made the case for attending much more closely to children's comprehension, and the need for both researchers and teachers to notice and understand comprehension difficulties and the importance of the relationship between oral and written comprehension.

Professor Angela Creese (University of Birmingham) spoke about bilingual pedagogy and her research in community schools, challenging assumptions about language-switching and optimal instructional usage. Dr Carolyn Letts (Newcastle University) reported from an ESRC seminar series on communication impairment and children learning English as an additional language. She spoke of the assessment challenges when the child's home language may not be known, and debunked the myths that still surround dual language use, pointing out that children restricted to one language were invariably restricted to English – usually their weaker language. She also noted that there were fewer direct references to English as an Additional Language in the new QTS (Qualified Teacher Status) standards for England.
The second seminar began with a paper by Professors Terezinha Nunes & Peter Bryant (University of Oxford),who provided a data-rich account of the knowledge-base children need in learning to spell and read words, outlining the different situations in which morphological knowledge was useful and their research evidence that children's awareness of grammar and morphology is a predictor of their later ability to represent morphemes systematically. Their data provides a powerful critique of the 'simple' model of reading (the model of early literacy promoted in the National Literacy Strategy of England), which encourages teachers to consider comprehension and phonology as separate and, at least in the early literacy curriculum, independent processes.

Dr Viv Ellis (University of Oxford) & Jane Briggs (University of Brighton), in their paper 'Teacher education: What applied linguistics needs to understand about what, how and where beginning teachers learn', contextualised the debates about linguistic content-knowledge in a different way. By positioning teacher education as an academic discipline in its own right and providing an analysis of what we know about how teachers' understandings develop and change, they effectively re-framed the linguistic perspectives and firmly addressed the 'and how' part of the seminar title. Mary Hartsthorn (I CAN; www.ican.org.uk) continued the theme of how to develop teacher knowledge and outlined The Speech, Language and Communication Framework developed by The Communication Trust. The framework is an online audit tool that individuals and institutional managers can use to assess their skills and knowledge of language and communication, and identify staff training and development opportunities that will enable them to contribute to the 'Every Child Matters' agenda. Professor Henrietta Dombey (University of Brighton) provided an illustration of how one teacher education course builds student teachers' knowledge about language alongside an understanding of how to teach this important aspect in schools. She emphasised the

importance of students understanding how effects are achieved through written language as well as the patterns of progression in phonological awareness and the opaque relationship between phonemes and graphemes in English. Re-visiting Ellis & Briggs's theme about how student teachers learn, she argued that students should demonstrate the relevance of this knowledge to their role as primary teachers.

Professor Jane Medwell (University of Warwick) presented her research on what teacher trainees DO know, and how they use this knowledge when teaching writing. In her study, more experienced teachers with a secure knowledge-base were more likely to take account of features of the overall text and respond to them whereas less experienced teachers responded to lexical and syntactic features.

Sue Ellis & Dr Elspeth McCartney (University of Strathclyde) addressed a different kind of question, namely, how to support children in mainstream classes whose speech and language difficulties were most evidenced as literacy difficulties. Their research-based approach outlined a model of language support for teachers that was embedded in the institutional system of the primary school.

Three papers argued for a different kind of content in teacher education programmes. Professor Greg Books (The University of Sheffield) presented a passionate and closely-argued case for introducing student teachers to the International Phonetic Alphabet in his paper, 'Supporting accurate phonics teaching'. Dr Elspeth Jajdelska (University of Strathclyde) presented her research on the history of reading, suggesting that there was a revolution in the way texts were written in the eighteenth century in response to a surge in fluent, silent reading. She argued that understanding the history of this process can give teachers a useful narrative withwhich to understand continuing issues in text comprehension, including punctuation and sentence structure and made a plea for spaces in the crowded teacher education programmes for students to study such potentially useful historical analyses. Vivienne Smith (University of Strathclyde), in her paper 'The text of picture books', pointed out that picture book illustrations had received more critical attention than the literary affordances of the words. She suggested an analysis of the written text in terms of its pedagogic functions, literary quality and the ideological functions and assumptions of language that would provide a more secure knowledge-base for teachers.

The final seminar paper was given by Dominic Wyse (University of Cambridge), which summarised the incremental shifts of curricula control for schools and teacher education between the 1980s and the present in England. He examined the influence of globalisation and the increasing role of politicians in determining the model of understanding that has been adopted and called for greater scrutiny of the extent to which such models theorise understanding, are based on research evidence and reflect coherent theories of language in use. He argued that meta-linguistic knowledge is of limited value. For him, experience with the processes of reading and writing together with the ability to reflect on these in relation to children's learning, is the most valuable form of 'subject knowledge'.

The seminars generated much fruitful discussion. They did more than identify the potential contribution of applied linguistics to the curriculum and pedagogy of the primary school; they contextualised this in terms of teacher education and of what the research tells us about how such knowledge is best developed. Delegates came from very different disciplines and had different immediate concerns, but the debates showed a genuine desire to develop a breadth of understanding and to contextualise the issues in different ways. The discussions found common ground as well as differences, and have provided a foundation for future collaborative projects.

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