

Language Knowledge for Primary Teachers

Fourth Edition

Angela Wilson and **Julie Scanlon**

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By Angela Wilson and Julie
Scanlon

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Language Knowledge for Primary Teachers

Teaching children to develop as language users is one of the most important tasks of a primary school teacher. However, many trainee teachers begin their career with a low knowledge base.

Language Knowledge for Primary Teachers is the reader-friendly guide designed to address this. This book provides a clear explanation of the knowledge and understanding required by teachers to implement the objectives of the National Curriculum for English. It reveals how an explicit knowledge of language can enrich their own and their children's spoken English. It will give teachers confidence in developing children's enjoyment and comprehension of reading and writing so that children can use their language skills in the real world.

Updated to include references to the new curriculum, this book explores:

- the importance of subject knowledge in supporting children in language and literacy;
- language knowledge within the context of authentic and meaningful texts, from fiction to Facebook;
- the links between subject knowledge and real teaching situations;
- new areas on talk and dialogic learning;
- the increased emphasis on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and cross-curricular study.

This book will appeal to all trainee and newly qualified teachers needing both to meet the demands of subject knowledge for Qualified Teacher Status and acquire a firm understanding of the expectations of the National Curriculum for English.

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For Andrew and for Isobel
For Andrew and for Jeremy

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Introduction

Is this book for you?

In writing this book we had two audiences in mind. The first group is student teachers. The second includes all those primary teachers and teaching assistants who are trying to implement multi-strategy approaches to literacy, especially those who have felt challenged by the levels of language knowledge expected of them in recent government documents.

Government expectations

The government requires all entrants to teaching, at whatever phase, to have a secure knowledge and understanding of their subjects/curriculum areas (TDA 2006: 11). For language teaching at the Foundation Stage (three to five year olds) the requirement is to know and understand the aims, principles and relevant areas of learning set out under the heading of 'Communication, Language and Literacy' in the Early Learning Goals (DCSF 2008), which describe what most children should achieve by the end of their reception year. For Key Stage 1 (five to seven year olds) and Key Stage 2 (seven to 11 year olds) teachers must know and understand the National Curriculum for English (DfEE/QCA 1999).

Whichever government strategy is in place, and they seem to come and go with bewildering speed, nothing at all worthwhile will have been achieved if we cannot help children to enjoy using and encountering language in all its forms. And language not only brings enjoyment, it is massively empowering too. Teachers can best bring this joy and power to children if they themselves are confident and knowledgeable about language, a view supported by Earl *et al.* (2003).

We presume that you have picked up this book because you are training to be a primary teacher or are already teaching in the Early Years Foundation Stage or Key Stages 1 or 2. In our view, the question you need to keep in mind as you consider your language knowledge is 'Do I know enough to help me to enthuse and excite children to extend and develop their experience of language?' You may be tempted to answer 'No!', but if you decide to go on reading you're very likely to find that you know more than you think you do. Part of your negative response may come from a

feeling that you don't have the right terminology in which to express your knowledge. Terminology can be useful, but it is not the most important aspect of language study (see Activity 1(d), 'Putting into words what we know about language').

The fact that you are teaching in the early stages of schooling does not mean that a very basic level of language knowledge will suffice. (See Chapter 1 of this book for some discussion of how much you need to know.) However, the uses you will make of your language knowledge are different from those that, say, an academic linguist would be concerned with. There are people whose life's work is the study of phonology or syntax, and there are others who will spend many a happy hour writing to the newspapers about a perceived abuse of a grammatical rule. Your position is different from both of these. Above all, your task is to help children to discover the wonder and excitement and power in making a text or in sharing one.

The difficult issues arise when you try to decide specifically what to do to foster this excitement. It's a question not just of what you as a teacher come to know about language, but of how skilful you are in interacting with the children you teach. What kinds of 'knowing about language' will increase the children's language powers, which are already impressive even before they come to school? Are there some kinds of language teaching that might even get in the way of the children's development? You might like to spend a few minutes on Activity 1 to get you started on thinking about some of the important aspects of language teaching in the primary context. A commentary on the activity is on page 162.

Activity 1: Setting the primary teaching context

Try making a few notes under four broad headings:

(a) Home/school contrasts

What would you say are the similarities and contrasts between the kinds of language a child uses at home and the language demands of school? (Think about the purposes of talk, who does the talking, and what they know about each other.)

(b) Speech/writing contrasts

Think about some of the speaking – and writing – you have done in the last few days. What similarities and contrasts can you think of between the spoken and the written language you used on these occasions?

(c) Language as a process and language as a product

What kinds of language skills and knowledge are you as an adult drawing on, probably without even thinking about it, that enabled you to do that speaking and writing? Which aspects of the speaking or writing were the most difficult for you? Why was that?

(d) Putting into words what we know about language

How could you turn what you know implicitly about language into explicit knowledge so that you could share it with children? Similarly, what would you need to do to help them to share what they know implicitly, with you and with each other?

Why not take twenty minutes or so to consider these questions? See if you can jot down two or three points in response to each one. Don't worry if you can't manage as many points as that at this stage. You will find ideas to help you if you read the chapters of this book. You could try the activity again after you have read some of them, and we hope that then you will feel that you have developed your thinking.

My language is my home

In my mother tongue my
hatred is sanguineous,
my love soft.
My innermost soul
is in balance
with my language.
The closeness of it
caresses my hair.
It has grown
together with me,
has taken roots in me.
My language
can be painted over
but not detached
without tearing
the structure of my cells.
If you paint a foreign language
on my skin
my innermost soul
cannot breathe.
The glow of my feelings
will not get through
the blocked pores.
There will be
a burning fever
rising for a way
to express itself.

(Pirkko Leporanta-Morley, quoted in Skutnabb-Kangas and Cummins 1988)



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PART

1

The background to language knowledge

Why do primary teachers need language knowledge?

Those who teach children in the Early Years and in Key Stages 1 and 2 are meeting them at a most crucial stage in their language development. It is you, for example, who will help them to make important developments in their speaking and listening. So far, many children might only have participated in groups in which the adults understand the children so well that they know what they want to say almost before they have said anything at all. You can help them to use language to reach out to others and to increase the range of speech tasks they can accomplish. The *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* by Rose makes the following point:

The indications are that far more attention needs to be given, right from the start, to promoting speaking and listening skills to make sure that children build a good stock of words, learn to listen attentively and speak clearly and confidently.

(Rose 2006: 3)

Some fortunate children will come to you already enjoying songs, nursery rhymes and stories. Some will have little or no experience of these. For all of them, you can extend their enjoyment and help them to become independent readers. Crucially, this means helping them not only to learn how to read but also to know what reading has to offer them in all aspects of their lives. Some will already have the confidence to write, even if this means making marks on the paper to share what they want to say. Again, many will depend on you to start them off and to build up the range of purposes for writing that they can confidently tackle.

This is a daunting agenda and to be a creative, exciting and motivating teacher you need to feel confident about your own uses of language. We all acquire language knowledge as part of living our lives: we listen and we talk; we read and we write. Some of us do more of these things than others, and the kinds of speaking, listening, reading and writing we do will vary enormously. But what specific kinds of language knowledge do we need to be successful primary teachers?

Government requirements

One way of answering this question is to look at the documentation that has been published setting out what the government expects primary teachers to cover. There has been a lot of this over the last three decades. Some of it is still with us, some has been and gone and some may soon be on its way out. So not perhaps an ideal guide! However, a brief overview will introduce you to some of the topics in the documents that will remain important for you to consider, whatever the current legislation. References are given to where these topics receive further coverage throughout the book.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF 2008)

Extending the range

One very important concept has already been mentioned in the second paragraph of this chapter: purpose. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum encourages you to extend children's reading, writing and speaking for a range of purposes. If you have not thought about what this means before, just consider for a moment the kinds of reading, writing and talking you have done recently. Perhaps you have read a novel or searched for information about your holiday destination. You may have sympathised with a friend or explained to a plumber what has happened to your washing machine. As you move from task to task you quickly adjust your language according to what the situation requires. Sometimes this can be challenging. In speaking, and often in writing too, you take into account what you know about the other people involved: how long you have known them, how old they are, what their needs are etc. It would be a mistake to think that young children's spoken language is used by them only to meet their physical needs, though that is important. As well as telling us when they are hungry, thirsty, cold etc. they love to join in with what is happening around them, to share family jokes and stories, to remember a shared outing or plan a visit. The EYFS curriculum rightly encourages you to listen carefully to them. You may be very surprised at the 'meaning young children generate in their language through the creative ways in which they use words' (DCSF 2008: 42). But these children have a lot to learn. The range of purposes for speaking, let alone writing and reading, that the children encounter will inevitably be limited to the situations that their families or other caregivers introduce them to.

One big challenge for children in the Early Years of schooling is that they are now meeting people, adults and other children, who scarcely know them. So the EYFS curriculum makes clear that they need help with using language for building social relationships. The things they say and write must increasingly stand alone, without an adult there who can offer an interpretation. Increasing confidence in speaking and listening is a crucial starting point. This means taking part in one-to-one conversations and in small groups. As time goes on, it might even mean saying something to the whole class or even the school. Sometimes there will be adults in the group; sometimes the children must negotiate what they want to say without an adult. Children should have opportunities to initiate topics themselves and know that they will be followed up. They should be encouraged to ask questions and expect to be helped to find answers.