Why should language be placed at the centre of education?

In any learning context, the ways teachers and students use language with each other has a major impact on the quality of the learning taking place. Equally, students' ability to use language to read and write the multitude of texts from all curriculum areas determines their success in accessing, developing and demonstrating their curriculum knowledge.

At Lexis Education, we think that building students' repertoires of language resources is best achieved through an explicit pedagogy which foregrounds learning about language. Acknowledging the centrality and importance of language in education raises a number of key issues for teachers:

- What do students need to do with and through language?
- What do students and teachers need to know about language?
- How can teachers teach about language?

At the heart of these questions is a need to have some way of talking about language, a metalanguage, that ideally is shared between teacher and student.

And, further to this, in order to learn about language in any serious and systematic way, we need to learn how the language system itself is organised to express the meanings we are trying to make as readers, writers, listeners and speakers.

What do students need to do with and through language?

As students begin schooling, they will be drawing on their commonsense understandings and experiences of their close and immediate world to make meaning in a range of contexts. As they move through school, they will be expected increasingly to read, write, listen and speak about content outside of this immediate, lived experience: content that deals with more technical, specialised and abstract curriculum knowledge.

At the same time, they broaden the range of contexts from those where they take on a narrow range of social roles as they interact mostly with familiar people to contexts where they take on the kinds of expert roles through which they can demonstrate and express their increasing knowledge. With this comes an increasing pressure to express their ideas in more complex and subtle ways as they take on these roles. Students will need to become more conscious of how more objective, formal and impersonal language is used to persuade and influence others' actions.

This increasing complexity is also reflected in the shift from contexts where oral language is predominantly used to those where written language takes on an increasingly important role as students develop more technical and abstract knowledge. Here we see a movement from language accompanying action to language that reconstructs the action, allowing students the ability to generalise about phenomena, to reflect on human experience and to critique their own thinking and the thinking of others. In doing so, they will engage with increasing abstraction and will be much more conscious of how to organise texts coherently and cohesively.

How does knowledge about language help?

For students to become confident participants in this unfolding literacy landscape, they will need to build certain capacities in order to make effective and appropriate choices in any given context.

A key part of building these capacities is developing students' awareness of how language works to make meaning. By explicitly focusing on the workings of texts of all kinds, students can gradually build their own repertoire of meaning making resources as they come to understand the range of linguistic resources available and how they get taken up in any given context.

A feature of this explicit pedagogy around language is teachers and students having a shared metalanguage—a language for talking about language.

What model of language will assist us to do this?

The model of language that underpins all of our courses, the functional model of language, has proven to be an extremely useful framework for teaching and learning about language. It is concerned with how language varies according to the sociocultural contexts in which it is used. Here, we consider:

- how texts are culturally bound, have different purposes, and vary in structure
- the nature of the social activity taking place
- the roles and relationships holding between the interactants
- the nature of the text and the role language plays in it.

The model describes the choices available in the language system and how these are expressed at different levels of the language system: at the text level, the sentence/clause level and the sounds/letter level. At the text level, we consider the choices available in the language that allows us to connect meanings across the text so that they are cohesive and coherent to listeners and readers. At the sentence/clause level, we consider various groupings and structures that allow us to make the kinds of meanings appropriate to any given context.

How can teachers teach about language?

We believe that an explicit pedagogy around language is best undertaken within the context of a teaching and learning cycle that moves through four key stages: setting the context, modelling and deconstruction, joint or guided construction and independent construction. In the cycle, the teacher has a clear understanding about the kind of language demanded in various teaching and learning activities and how this can help to make decisions about what to scaffold and how to go about doing it.

In any given teaching and learning cycle, assessment criteria should be explicit and shared by teachers and students. By establishing criteria for success, teachers can plan more effectively and teach with greater direction and purpose. Students, also, will have a clear understanding of what is expected of them and what they need to do to improve.

Through an understanding of the ongoing development of students' writing and reading, teachers can plan effectively for language development at and across the various stages of schooling.

By focusing on the language used between teachers and students, teachers can be more conscious of how their language choices affect students and their learning. Students, too, can build up their awareness of the language choices they make with each other and with others and how these choices affect relationships within their particular social groupings.