AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO LANGUAGE PLANNING: COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

The goal of the project is to develop language planning guidelines and materials for schools and services. These materials will support practitioners to identify and describe deaf children's language repertoires and learning needs, taking into account individual language experience in contexts of home, school and the wider community.

A collaborative methodology was undertaken involving a University research team and a national group of school/service practitioners and managers. An ecological approach was taken to the collection of large scale language demographic and individual case study data. Regional focus groups were coordinated nationally to capture breadth and diversity of language experience but ensure consistency of approach.

The resulting guidance material provides a national approach to identifying describing and assessing deaf children's bilingual language development which maximises the potential of, and supports, deaf children's increasingly dynamic use of sign and spoken language. These outputs inform the provision of nuanced and appropriately balanced language programmes to incorporate first and second language teaching approaches in deaf education.

This work developed for practitioners by practitioners is a model for constructive transactions between research and practice which result in tangible outcomes to improve deaf education. An ecological perspective provides a useful way to conceptualise deaf children language experience and use and an analytical framework for language planning recognising the various contexts of children's language learning; the overlapping influences at home and school and the critical mediating role of others in shaping individual language experience.

INTRODUCTION

Knoors and Marschark suggested in 2012 that language policy and language planning for deaf children, and specifically the role of sign language and bilingual education, should be revisited. They argued that technological developments such as cochlear implants and early identification, affords increased opportunities for deaf children to develop spoken language. Subsequently, this change in the language

landscape in deaf education requires a critical review of the use of sign and spoken language in the classroom.

The specific issues for review raised by Knoors and Marschark (2012), centre on the need to provide differentiated approaches to language planning and policy which respond to deaf children's changing language profiles. In particular, they emphasised the importance of supporting the spoken language development of deaf children with cochlear implants, within bilingual contexts. They also stressed the need to ensure access to 'rich, fluent and consistent' language models in the early years, particularly in the case of deaf children of hearing parents, to facilitate true bilingual competence (2012, 294).

Their discussion of these issues calls for the flexible and matched use of sign and/or spoken language, according to individual need and language trajectory, that recognises the diverse and changing bilingual profiles of individual deaf children. Interestingly, they also revisit the potential of the skilled use of Sign Supported English (SSE) or SimCom as a means of making spoken language more visibly accessible, citing evidence that 'its' use in education can support comprehension, and production of spoken language' (2012, 300).

Marschark and Knoors (2012) explored these questions as part of a critique of bilingual education. This provided the initial stimulus for a group of bilingual schools and services in the UK to review their own practice. This review resulted in the establishment of the UK Language Planning project which translates these pertinent issues into action for policy and practice (Swanwick, Simpson and Salter 2014).

PROJECT GOALS
The goal of the UK Language Planning project is to design a language planning framework in the form of toolkit for teachers with guidance materials. This framework is intended to practically support the plural and shifting language practices of deaf children and articulate with global understandings of linguistic and cultural pluralism. This project is not concerned with promoting one particular language policy or approach. Instead, it goes beyond language policy boundaries to find ways of describing and supporting deaf children's language development and use, recognising the role of sign and spoken languages in children's daily lives. The perspective of this project is thus one that that recognises the multiplicities of individual language experience within a plurilingual society.

PROJECT PRINCPLES
The framework for this project is not predicated on any one particular language approach or ideology in deaf education. It is instead based on a number of core principles.

Ecological Approach
The approach taken to the development of this toolkit and guidance acknowledges the complex set of influences on children's language learning. This is conceptualised using an ecological model which provides a theoretical framework for envisaging the learning issues associated with deafness and for planning learning interventions. This model derives from Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) ecological systems framework. Bronfenbrenner's thesis was that to understand learning and

development, we have to be able to understand the interaction between the individual and their environment and the characteristics of the environment. This framework prompts consideration of the contexts of deaf children's language learning and the influences of the home and the classroom and the wider environment and culture. This model also brings into play the established constructs in the research and discourses, which have thus far informed teaching and assessment approaches in deaf education. Consideration of the full ecology of a child's life is thus a central principle of this project.

Participative Approach

A second principle of this work is the development of constructive transactions between research and practice to achieve tangible outcomes to improve practice (Swanwick and Marschark 2010). The participative nature of this project is reflected in the methodology and the consultation process which involved school and service managers, teachers, communication support workers, deaf and bilingual support staff, teaching assistants, speech and language therapists and educational audiologists. The collaborative methodology comprised of a University research team and a national group of school/service practitioners and managers involved in regional focus groups, which were coordinated nationally to capture breadth and diversity of language experience but ensure consistency of approach. The resulting toolkit has thus been developed for practitioners by practitioners. This partnership includes the range of hearing and deaf professionals that work collaboratively to manage and support educational provision for individuals.

Plurilingual approach

Underpinning this work is a recognition that deaf children's increasingly dynamic use of sign and spoken language necessitates a re-conceptualisation of what it means to be deaf and bilingual. Multilingualism for all children is increasing and we know that this presents very specific issues of identity and language for children and their families. However, we currently lack accurate information about the spoken languages other than English that deaf children and young people increasingly use at home (Cline and Mahon 2010). In the light of these gaps in our knowledge we need to develop tools and approaches which accurately describe individual spoken, sign and bimodal linguistic repertoires. The intention of this project is therefore to design a language planning framework that practically supports the plural and shifting language practices of deaf children and theoretically articulates with global understandings of linguistic and cultural pluralism (Council of Europe 2007).

THE LANGUAGE PLANNING TEACHER TOOLKIT

This toolkit provides a rationale and practical strategies for developing language planning in schools and services for deaf children. The strategies are presented as a suggested cycle through five phases, supported with exemplar case studies and materials. A process through the phases is outlined; recognising that language planning is iterative and that certain steps will be re-visited, depending on the starting point. For each phase, the toolkit provides practical guidance, materials and proformas.

Phase 1 Language Demographic

Deaf children are increasingly using more than one spoken or sign language at home and yet we lack information about the diversity of their language experience and use at an individual and a school/service level. To develop language planning at an individual level requires some understanding of the language landscape of the learning context which, within an ecological model, encompasses homes, communities, cultures and schools. This knowledge will inform the provision of learning support, assessment and education services to all deaf children and their families in an increasingly multilingual United Kingdom where on average 15% of school children use a language other than spoken English at home (this is 45% in London) and where the proportion and relative commonness of languages continues to change in response to growing super-diversity and migration patterns. Phase 1 of the toolkit provides a framework for collecting the language demographic of school or services and includes illustrative national and research examples.

Phase 2 Individual Language Profiles
An ecological approach to developing individual language profiles ensures that language and communication practices at home and at school are captured along with the influences of different contexts, people and communities. The use of the ecological model serves as a way of thinking about deaf children's language learning and experience in different contexts. Its use also helps us to consider the role of the Teachers of the Deaf (ToDs) as mediators within and across these different layers of influence. Phase 2 of the toolkit provides a proforma for developing initial language profiles of individuals with case study examples that highlight the mediating role of the ToD across different contexts.

Phase 3 Language Assessment Tools
Assessment is a dynamic process which contributes to the development of individual language profiles and plans and also provides strategies for the monitoring and assessment of progress. Assessment is thus positioned at the centre of the process emphasising its formative and summative functions. The ecological and integrative approach taken ensures that language planning takes full account of individual environments and contexts of language learning and is responsive to the breadth of individual language competencies. This includes attention to spoken and sign languages but also recognition of the relationship between these languages and individual bimodal and multilingual language skills and their use within different microsystems. Approaching assessment in this way necessarily involves partnership working between ToDs, parents and other key professionals in order to provide the range and detail of information required to develop to understand individual contexts of language use and specific skills. Phase 3 provides a critical and annotated overview of tools and protocols that can be used to assess and monitor different aspects of language development.

Phase 4 Partnership Working
The ecological framework provides a useful tool for analysing the factors which influence language planning and the individuals involved. This includes consideration of the most remote layers of influence (the macrosystem) through to a focus on the close relationships with the individual and the individual themselves (the microsystem). Following this analysis, the specific and complex role of the ToD as a lynchpin to the language planning process needs to be articulated. The ToD is uniquely placed and skilled to span and connect the different layers of influence and

mediates within and across these layers to ensure that language planning is embedded in the system. This requires ToDs to operate at all levels from leadership to implementation. At the same time, the different expert skills and knowledge that parents and other professionals bring to the language planning process necessitates a partnership approach. Phase 4 provides an analysis of different roles and responsibilities in language planning.

Phase 5 Individual Language Plan
The individual profiles provide rich information about individuals and show where the gaps in our knowledge and priorities for individual language development are. Used in conjunction with the diagnostic and assessment language tools, these provide a starting point for the language plan which brings together knowledge of the individual language goals, processes and the roles of the adults involved. The language plan maps onto the ecological framework that has been used throughout this process and thus provides a way to use the information gathered and offer nuanced and appropriately balanced language programmes for individuals, which incorporate first and second language teaching approaches and support deaf children's increasingly dynamic use of sign and spoken language. Phase 5 provides a proforma for developing an individual language plan with case study examples.

LANGUAGE PLANNING IMPLEMENTATION
The toolkit is currently being piloted at Frank Barnes School for the Deaf in London. Initially the pilot groups will be for those children entering the school in the Early Years Foundation Stage and those at the point of secondary transition. The language profiles and plans will be complied by the class ToD, SaLT and Leader of Bilingual Practice working in collaboration with the parents and will be reviewed and updated annually to reflect the children's progress and areas for language development. The intention is that the pilot groups will extend over time to include all children attending the school and language planning will be integrated into the school's assessment cycle. As part of this on-going pilot work, views of practitioners were collected on their involvement in the project.

Practitioner Feedback
What we have learned from the project?

> *Useful! Gave an opportunity for a multi-professional and large group of professionals from diverse contexts to share their approaches & tools with one another and directly impact upon practice and pedagogy (ToD).*

> *It has been a very interesting process being involved in the project. Very useful coming together and discussing how we all look at, assess and focus on children's language (SaLT).*

> *Working in deaf education, you can sometimes feel quite isolated. It has been a wonderful opportunity to learn from one another, (…) with a view to sharing with the wider community (ToD).*

What have we learned from collecting our case studies and language plans?

> *It has been useful to focus on how we go about language planning*

considering different aspects of communication and thinking about the different influences children are exposed to (SaLT).

It has highlighted the complexity of deaf children's language and the importance of careful, collaborative planning in helping them to reach (and exceed) their potential (ToD).

I have learned about the huge cultural and linguistic diversity of deaf children and the importance of embedding language planning into the curriculum, so deaf children can achieve their full potential both linguistically and educationally (ToD).

How would we like to use our learning in our work?

We all want to empower our students to be confident and competent communicators. We want to provide our pupils with great language models; focus on their positives and how they progress (ToD).

The process of more cohesive joint planning – putting the child at the centre, identifying strengths and building on them. Also as a guide to support other staff to develop their knowledge in this field (SaLT).

It will support us to look at the range of languages used by the children, including the role of BSL, SSE and English and how we can use their strengths to support learning (SaLT).

NEXT STEPS
The toolkit is being disseminated through regional workshops in the UK and is now available for download on the National Sensory Impairment Partnership website (www.natsip.org.uk). Use of the toolkit is being rolled out in schools and services in the UK in order to develop knowledge and understanding of the language landscape in deaf education through the collection of national demographic and case study information. The development of this work, and the new language landscape data that it will generate, is being coordinated by Leeds University as part of the Bimodal Bilingualism and Deafness project in the School of Education (www.education.leeds.ac.uk/people/academic/swanwick).

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