

Linguistic encounters: What year 7 students say about ‘difficult words’

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The large scale ESRC funded project entitled “[The linguistic challenges of the transition: identifying the language barriers encountered at a crucial time in the learning journey](#)” and led by [Professor Alice Deignan](#), aims to identify the differences between the academic language that students encounter at the end of primary (year 6) and at the start of secondary school (year 7). To meet this aim the research team adopts innovative, cutting edge techniques in the context of primary to secondary school transition, to create and analyse a language corpus. Whilst the project is informed by a wide range of data from varied sources, the focus of this blog, however, is the year 7 students’ voice: the views of those experiencing transition, in relation to the challenging words and phrases they encounter in maths, English, geography, history and the sciences.

The Transition team interviewed 30 students in three schools four times, twice in year 6 and year 7, in focus groups of five or six. To facilitate the stimulation and exchange of ideas and maintain participants’ concentration over a period of 40-45 minutes, we included group work involving hands-on activities such as card-sorting and poster-work, review of short texts for identification of difficult words and phrases and follow-up discussion in pairs and in plenary.

Year 7 students reported being challenged by specific items of vocabulary and phrases which they encounter on transfer to secondary school. Some of these are new to the students, vocabulary not encountered before at school or in their lives outside school; others are known to them but take on a different meaning in a different, subject-specific context; some students believe that they understand a given word but, in the different context, it transpires that this understanding is inaccurate. All of this poses problems for the students and may, in some cases,

impede progress in their learning in the early phase of their secondary school experience.

The focus groups helped provide interesting insights into students' thinking on their year 7 language encounters:

- Students categorise language items in a way which reflects their varied reactions to them and the subjects in which they meet them: 'posh words'; 'nerdy words'; 'technical words'; 'formal words'; 'scientific words'; 'complicated words'; 'words of the week'.
- The difficulties posed by language in a given subject can determine whether a student identifies the subject as difficult.
- Polysemous words, words which students have met before but have a different meaning in a particular context, pose problems. Such words include: 'mean'; 'mode'; 'median'; 'volume'; 'significant'; 'concentration'.
- Words which are difficult to spell and/or difficult to pronounce are challenging, for example, 'indisintegrating' (sic); 'prefer'; 'refer'; 'reference'; 'paleoanthropology'; 'long words that have strings of vowels together and strings of consonants not being intermingled too much. 'Simultaneously' has three vowels in a row near the end'.

Maths, science, geography and English have subject-specific items which are troublesome to students in terms of understanding, spelling, pronunciation and memorisation. Examples provided include: 'diffusion'; 'control variable'; 'dependent variable'; 'insulating' (confused with 'insulting'); 'conclusion'; 'conductors'; 'oxymoron'; 'assonance'; 'diaman-namic' (sic) I never heard it in primary school'; 'meander'; 'global warming'; 'volcano'; 'earthquake'.

In terms of strategies students implement to address language issues:

- Students have been taught in primary schools to develop some independence in solving language problems, for example, ‘three before me’. Some have taken this strategy with them into secondary schools.
- A small number of students, as a first step in identifying the meaning of an unknown word, use inference, exploiting the context and the words surrounding it.
- Students are sometimes diffident about asking their teacher to explain difficult words. They worry about what other pupils might think; they worry that the teacher might think that they had not been paying attention and therefore react rather negatively to such questions. As a result they prefer to ask their neighbour and if s/he cannot explain, they use their i-pads.

We look forward to adding and comparing the student-related findings to the analysis of interviews with teachers. At that stage we expect to be able to suggest some strategies to help address the difficulties students reported. Such recommendations might include greater communication and collaboration between secondary schools and their feeder primary schools. Reciprocal observation of lessons by year 6 and year 7 teachers would give teachers access to teaching content, teaching methods, the level of language used and strategies exploited by pupils to access unknown language. Year 6 and year 7 teachers could collaborate on schemes of work covering the transition years. This has the potential to give year 6 students early access to vocabulary and concepts to be encountered in year 7 and ensure a smooth transition in terms of teaching methods. Sample lessons taught by year 7 teachers to year 6 students would also serve this purpose.

Much has still to be learned from the corpus analysis which will build on these interview findings. Some of the above suggestions for addressing the linguistic challenge pose logistical problems in both primary and secondary schools where time is short and demands are great but none of these problems are insurmountable if the goal has benefits, as surely it has. If the proposals have the potential to improve

the student linguistic encounter and enhance learning, the pay-off is worthy of the investment.