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The linguistically aware teacher and the teacher-aware linguist

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Abstract

This review evaluates issues of teacher linguistic knowledge relating to their work with children with speech, language and communication difficulties (SLCD). Information is from Ellis and McCartney [(2011a). *Applied linguistics and primary school teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press], a state-of-the-art text deriving from a British Association of Applied Linguistics/Cambridge University Press expert seminar series that details: linguistic research underpinning primary school curricula and pedagogy; the form of linguistic knowledge useful for teachers supporting children with SLCD in partnership with speech and language therapists; and how and when teachers acquire and learn to apply such knowledge. Critical analysis of the options presented for teacher learning indicate that policy enjoinders now include linguistic application as an expected part of teachers' professional knowledge, for all children including those with SLCD, but there is a large unmet learning need. It is concluded that there is a role for clinical linguists to disseminate useable knowledge to teachers in an accessible format. Ways of achieving this are considered.

Keywords: teacher education, inter-professional working, primary-school teaching, speech language and communication difficulties

Introduction

Clinical phonetics and linguistics as a discipline is concerned with the study of speech and language and its application to speech and language disorders in children and adults. This review addresses primary-school teachers' knowledge of linguistics and how that may be enhanced to benefit all children, but especially those with speech language and communication difficulties (SLCD). It provides a conceptual overview of the issues based on research presented in an invited expert seminar series at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, funded by the British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL) and Cambridge University press (CUP). The seminars and resulting text collated research findings on the range of linguistic approaches contributing to teaching in primary schools and considered how teachers might access and use such information, including application to children with SLCD. This paper summarizes the major themes that emerged in the edited text that followed the series (Ellis & McCartney, 2011a) and critically analyses how teachers might acquire relevant linguistic knowledge*.

Children with speech SLCD form a clinical population from the point of view of speech and language therapists (SLTs) and other health professionals. By school age, however, support for their language learning also involves education and school services. Roles and modes of practice vary across countries and services. However, many children with SLCD are educated in mainstream school classrooms, in response to global educational policies aiming to promote social inclusion by having children wherever possible attend their local school (see Ainscow and Sandill (2010) for a good international review). Classroom-based language and communication learning can capitalize on the natural school environment, with extensive opportunities for social use of talk. This results in teachers, families, SLTs, and others sharing the implementation of speech-, language-, and communication-learning activities, including school-based activities. Classrooms are encouraged to become organized to offer a "communication friendly" environment (cf. Lindsay, Dockrell, Law, & Roulstone, 2011).

SLTs and teachers often work in separate agencies or across public sectors. For example, in the UK, teachers work in educational services and SLTs in health services. In these cases, they have no managerial responsibility for each other and have a nominally egalitarian relationship. In classroom-based approaches, SLTs often act as "consultants" to teachers. "Consultant" has several definitions (Law et al., 2002) but here broadly involves SLTs offering advice and guidance to teachers on appropriate language goals and how to attain them, with implementation undertaken by education staff (Forbes & McCartney, 2012). As well as maintaining a supportive communication environment, education staff organize the delivery of language-learning activities in school, via professional and/or support worker teams, and tailor curriculum language and literacy activities appropriately (McCartney, Ellis, & Boyle, 2009). This is only one possible model of school-based co-working, but one that predominates in many services. School organizations are not necessarily set up to promote collaborative working. Teachers and SLTs may or may not plan activities together and may or may not have well-established working relationships (McCartney, 2009). Despite the potential for good child outcomes, school-based consultancy approaches do not always achieve optimal outcomes (McCartney, Boyle, Ellis, Bannatyne, & Turnbull, 2011).

Classroom-based intervention raises important issues about co-professional working roles and shared understandings, and in particular the need for shared knowledge and a meta-language. As the learning needs of children with SLCD are often clarified by SLTs through linguistic analysis, the linguistic knowledge and understanding that is shared between SLTs and teachers should facilitate teaching and learning (Forbes, 2008). SLTs are expected to bring a good knowledge of clinical linguistics from their pre-service education. Teachers' pre-service education has a different focus. Their linguistic knowledge requires further consideration and is the subject of this review.

The Seminar Series and the Resulting Text

The BAAL/CUP expert seminar series addressed the issue of the form and amount of linguistic knowledge primary-school teachers need, and how it may be acquired. Presenters included teachers, academics, teacher-educators, SLTs, policy-makers, and psychologists. They considered the range of linguistic research relevant to primary schools, and what linguistics knowledge underpinned teaching, and how it added to teaching. Seminars also considered how and when primary teachers' linguistic knowledge might best be acquired, and how it might best be framed, and what knowledge might be most useful. Contributions were published as a text (Ellis & McCartney, 2011a) with added chapters giving an international perspective. Evidence within this paper is taken from that volume.

The context for authors was the complex and diverse modern school and classroom, where a large number of languages are spoken and where each teacher is likely to teach multi-lingual children

(Creese, 2011; Hammond, 2011; Tierney, 2011), and where primary classrooms routinely include children with SLCD, many of whom also use English as an additional language (Letts, 2011).

Chapters demonstrated the insights that linguistic understanding contributes to the development of teaching and learning approaches in primary schools. Myhill (2011) reported research on how an understanding of grammar as design choices for writers supports children's writing. Sealey (2011) discussed how the realities of language use are demonstrated by corpus linguistics, which employs large electronically stored databanks of authentic language samples to evidence language usage, and the potential for corpus linguistics to change the sort of conversations around grammar in schools. Smith (2011) reported on how the language of picture books interacts with the illustrations and can support, elaborate, or impede different levels of comprehension. Jajdelska (2011) discussed the development of punctuation, literary syntax, and the concept of a narrator from an historical perspective, and Moss (2011) reported her research on the social uses of children's talk about text. Nunes and Bryant (2011) reviewed the role of morphology in literacy teaching and contrasted it with the Simple Model of reading; Ricketts, Cocksey, and Nation (2011) summarized research on children's comprehension difficulties; and Lefstein and Snell (2011) research on the complexity of classroom dialog. This range demonstrated the innovative and extensive contribution made by linguistic research to the education of all young children, and so the importance and range of linguistic understandings required by teachers in delivering an effective talking and listening, reading, and writing curriculum.

The importance of applying linguistic understanding is also recognized in policies where teachers (and children) are expected to gain and use linguistic knowledge. For example, in England, the *Draft programmes of study* for the *National curriculum for English, key stages 1 and 2* (Department for Education (DfE), 2012a) were based partly on analyses of approaches used in international educational services where children perform highly on comparative assessments of literacy development (Department for Education (DfE), 2012b). The *Draft programmes of study* list explicit and extensive examples of linguistic terminology, definitions of grammar terms, and spelling patterns that are to be known and used by teachers and pupils. By Year 2 (aged 6–7 years) children in England should become able to "use and understand [a list of] grammatical terminology […] in discussing their writing" (§85). Teachers are therefore mandated to acquire linguistic knowledge (or at least to use linguistic terminology) to make language meaningful to children.

Teachers' Knowledge of Linguistics and Children with SLCD

Vance (2011) lists a range of linguistic knowledge particularly useful to teachers supporting children with SLCD, including the domains of phonology, vocabulary, morphology and sentence structure, and aspects of language use. This is a wide range of knowledge. However, if primary-school teachers understand and use linguistic knowledge as part of their on-going classroom teaching, children with SLCD will benefit along with others, and be supported by the amplification and extension of approaches already used in the classroom. Examples of whole-classroom approaches appear in Ellis and McCartney (2011a). Phonological knowledge appears on Vance's list and phoneme-grapheme correspondences underpin phonic approaches to teaching reading. Brooks (2011) suggested introducing the knowledge of the phonemes of a language and selected International Phonetic Alphabet symbols to teachers, in order to close what he considered to be a knowledge gap and to help teachers explain the linked phonetic and phonemic aspects of literacy to all children. This would also support teachers' co-work with SLTs, especially concerning children with speech difficulties. Apel, Wilson-Fowler, and Masterson (2011) gave a clear example a classroom-wide approach to spelling. Children who struggle with spelling receive a tailored, individualized approach, based on the analysis of that child's understanding of the linguistic underpinnings of spelling. This is however an enhanced version of linguistic analyses of spelling used with all children in the classroom. Further examples

are Smith's (2011) approach to matching the language of picture books to the linguistic as well as to the emotional needs of all children. Where teachers are competent in analysing language and using linguistic approaches across the whole literacy curriculum, their knowledge will also support children with SLCD. Such classroom-wide approaches may also tend to increase social inclusion.

Teachers' Acquisition of Linguistic Knowledge

However, Vance (2011) also reviews international research suggesting that many primary-school teachers at present feel that they have little linguistic knowledge to apply and are conscious of their lack of preparation for educating children with SLCD. Indeed, there has been limited attention to how linguistic understanding might be gained by teachers. For example, the English *Draft programmes of study* (§169) simply suggest that, in relation to learning linguistic terms, "For further details, teachers should consult the many books that are available". There is a need to consider further how linguistic knowledge is acquired by teachers, and, in light of Vance's analysis, how it may be enhanced.

 The answers that are arrived at in Ellis and McCartney (2011a) are not straightforward. One view, cited if not endorsed by Dombey and Briggs (2011), is that teachers in fact need relatively little formal and explicit linguistic knowledge to teach well. This view was based on a study by Medwell, Wray, Poulson, and Fox (1998) where staff known to be highly effective teachers of literacy performed relatively poorly on a linguistics "quiz" (involving classifying words, segmenting words, defining "verb", and identifying dialect features). They did however perform better than a comparison group of less effective literacy teachers. Teachers used relatively few linguistic expressions in responding to the quiz, rather they gave examples. However, more effective teachers demonstrated that they understood linguistic constructs within the practical teaching context, if not in the quiz.

 Whilst this suggests that teachers could be effective without extensive formal linguistic knowledge, Medwell et al. (1998) interpreted the findings as:

> [Regarding] the effective teachers, their knowledge in literacy took precisely the form in which they represented it for their children. They may, of course, once have known this material differently. But, through experience of teaching it, their knowledge seemed to have become totally embedded in and banded by their teaching practices. (para. 8.2)

> This may have supported their skills in "embedding attention to word and sentence level aspects of reading and writing within whole text activities which were both meaningful and explained clearly to pupils" (Medwell et al., 1998, para 8.3). Despite their lack of (or failure to recall) formal linguistic terminology, these effective teachers were applying linguistic understandings and using them to support children. This rather argues toward a working knowledge of linguistics, rather than a lack of knowledge.

Wyse (2011) suggests that in educational policy contexts where centralized planning of the school curriculum and of standards for teacher training pertain, pre-service education courses for teachers tend to include linguistic knowledge. However, such "top-down" approaches from central, usually state or district, planning bodies can appear over-controlling and be experienced as such by teachers. If this happens, they are likely to meet resistance. Horan and Hersi (2011) and Brooks (2011) also express concern about simply adding linguistics courses to pre-service education, lest they offer decontextualized knowledge that is not useable. Horan and Hersi (2011) stress the need for field-based tutoring experiences, reflection, and exploring the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of pupils.

Similar points about the need for relevance and application are made by Dombey and Briggs (2011) who outline a pre-service *Knowledge about language* strand within a qualifying teaching degree. This strand aims to supply linguistic knowledge that is both useful and is in a usable form. Student teachers study text structure, morphology and syntax, and segmental phonology. They apply this knowledge throughout their studies to their own experiences of literacy, to their pupils' writing, and to analyses of both fiction and non-fiction children's literature. Dombey and Briggs (2011) believe this builds student teachers' confidence by offering them a professional context in which to use linguistics constructs to talk about key features in text and children's writing. Such talk in the context of application affords them an opportunity to become better teachers of literacy.

Other authors recognized the needs of the large number of practising teachers who were not introduced in their pre-service degrees to useable linguistic approaches, and who now need this information. Hartshorne (2011) describes the development of a *Speech, Language and Communication Framework* (*SLCF*) by the Communication Trust. This allows individuals, including teachers, to analyze and assess their understanding of the development and use of speech, language, and communication and to identify their needs for further information and continued professional development. Although the SLCF was designed to equip professionals to consider the needs of all children, it offers opportunities also to consider the needs of particular children with SLCD. The resource provides links to sources of information and courses that may be interesting and useful, including information on applied linguistics, but it relies on the individual teacher to access such courses and information.

Ellis and McCartney (2011b) concentrate on children with specific language impairments, reporting a research-based approach where linguistic information on developing the oral language skills of vocabulary, later grammar and/or narrative (whichever are relevant to a particular child) is presented to teachers by SLTs. The SLTs also use their linguistic knowledge to select appropriate language-learning activities and materials that can be tailored for work with an individual child or with small groups of children, and used in the classroom by teachers or support staff. The model is premised on SLTs providing specific information and materials to teachers "just in time" to be used in intervention with an individual child. Examples of materials and information for SLTs to use with classroom teachers have been developed from this research (McCartney, 2006, 2007).

These writers therefore all stress that primary teachers should acquire relevant linguistic knowledge in forms that are immediately applicable to their on-going work. The knowledge needs to be useable within and beyond initial training or development courses, and it needs to become "owned" by teachers (and cf. Ellis & Briggs, 2011). Brooks (2011), however, notes that linguistic information has not always been presented to teachers in such an applied and contextualized way. He cites historical examples of over-abstract lectures on transformational-generative grammar and the development of complex, burdensome courses focussed on debates about the finer points of linguistic theory rather than its application. Indeed, throughout the BAAL/CUP seminars and the text it produced, there were suggestions that linguistics is perceived as a difficult, technical subject, one that students find challenging but not necessarily engaging or enlightening. The problems of teacher resistance that arise from "learn then apply" models were widely acknowledged, which led to calls for application as a key principal from the start. It was acknowledged that this model also had challenges, one of which was that it could make introducing new information difficult.

Analysis and Implications for Teachers' Learning and Co-working

An analysis of the arguments of the expert writers in Ellis and McCartney (2011a) therefore indicates that primary-school teachers may or may not have a useable understanding of linguistics, depending upon when and where they qualified, the content of their pre-service courses, and the collaborative opportunities in their course work and schools, as well as any post-experience training or personal

learning they have undertaken. Such variation in teachers' exposure to, and understanding of, linguistics, and the wide variation in the centrality of linguistics within classroom practice, means that SLTs cannot be sure in advance what an individual teacher might know, and how that knowledge is framed. Reciprocally, teachers may be confused or even alienated by SLTs "jargon". Misunderstanding and uncertainties may arise and affect children's educational provision. Further, the post-experience learning approaches reported in Ellis and McCartney (2011a) have some problems. Teachers using the SLCF to review and update their knowledge are taking admirable personal responsibility for professional growth, but their learning processes are likely to be curtailed to meet the immediate needs of children in their class. SLTs can recognize the difficulties for teachers asked to work with children with SLCD without preparation or development opportunities, and can use a "just in time" model (Ellis & McCartney, 2011b) to support child and teacher learning, but this places a large training responsibility on SLTs. It also allocates teachers to a quasi-"assistant" role, where they receive just enough knowledge to undertake communication development activities but are not expected to contribute to them. In essence, they are asked to adopt a role that fails to capitalize on their professional insights. "Requiring" them to undertake SLT-controlled language activities raises complicated issues of power relationships, some of which may apply particularly to the consultancy model (Forbes & McCartney, 2012). Teachers may also view linguistics as an essential part of an SLT's skill- and knowledge-base, but not a teacher's and this may lead them to resent what could appear to be the transfer of SLT workload to teachers (Forbes & McCartney, 2012).

This may be particularly likely if teachers are introduced to linguistic terms and approaches primarily in relation to children with SLCD. In a situation where teachers have not been inducted pre-service into the need for linguistic knowledge as part of their professional canon, they may well contest its relevance. Student placement experience in schools is very important in the professionalization process (Ellis & Briggs, 2011), so any lack of application of linguistic understanding or questions about its value within current school practice are likely to transmit to new generations of students. Requirements to use specific linguistic terms, as in DfE (2012a), to deliver a curriculum, without a clear pedagogical goal beyond simply teaching pupils to apply the terms, may not overcome this.

Where, however, a teacher's application of linguistic knowledge has become part of their professional repertoire, it can be used in a wide variety of teaching and learning contexts as children learn to talk and listen, read, and write. There are lots of pressures on teachers, and although applicable linguistic knowledge can help with some of the problems they face, many time pressures will remain, and competing demands for expertise in other areas. Nonetheless, linguistics can help them in undertaking diagnostic assessments, understanding the challenges of texts, standardising marking for national assessments, developing a common meta-language for teachers and pupils, and providing frameworks for teaching. Extending such applications to children with SLCN will not require a large step, and co-working practices should be facilitated. This is a position that many SLTs, teacher educators, teachers, and linguists would welcome and matches current policy requirements for linguistic knowledge as a proper part of a teacher's professional skills. Further, consideration of the rights of children with SLCD (and indeed the rights of all children), together with the demands of curriculum policies, suggests the need for linguistically informed teachers who can develop children's language skills. If child education and co-professional working is enhanced by linguistically knowledgeable teachers, and current curriculum policy in many countries also encourages this, the issue becomes a knowledge and training gap.

Conclusion: The Need for Teacher-aware Linguists

The knowledge and training gaps identified above have implications, and opportunities, for applied and clinical linguists. SLTs are one group of professionals, possibly the main group, that currently

mediate linguistic knowledge for teachers, but there is also a role for clinical linguists. SLTs in the UK and some other countries have traditionally concentrated on oral SLCD, although a growing awareness of the relationship between oral and written language is prompting consideration of literacy difficulties and increasing work with teachers as a matter of course. SLTs in other parts of the world have made such links over a longer time period, and SLTs with expertise in both oral and written language are very useful.

Clinical linguists of course have expertise and understandings of both oral and written language. Their role is unlikely to be a directly child-focussed one. Earlier hopes for a cadre of clinical linguists supporting the work of SLTs and teachers by providing data analyses and linguistic expertise have not materialised, as discussed by Crystal (2012). However, there is considerable scope for relevant scholarly contributions.

So far, however, the clinical linguistics "academy" has produced relatively few materials or policies aimed at educational linguistics or supporting the knowledge-base that teachers aim to develop. There is a need for texts, and on-line resources, that frame the sort of applied knowledge that will meet the needs of primary teachers, are applicable to children with SLCD in diverse contexts, and are cross-referred to children's writing and reading. The SCLF is a good example of such an approach, and the opportunities it offers teachers to self-evaluate their needs, and identify training courses and links to directly useful sources of information, will be helpful. Another recent example from England is the Communication Trust's (2012) *Communicating phonics* guide for teachers to help them in delivering and interpreting a new national phonics screening test when children have SLCD. The guide gives information on SLCD and provides implications for testing and teaching. Further information from clinical linguistics on factors which affect literacy, for example, the relationship between types of speech problem and anticipated difficulties with phonemic awareness, and hence reading (e.g. Harris, Botting, Myers, & Dodd, 2011), and oral grammar and reading skills (McCartney & Ellis, in preparation) could be useful to teachers.

An example of a different kind of service that would be very helpful is proposed by Damico et al. (2012). They outline how the Department of Communicative Disorders at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette, proposes to develop an existing clinical linguistics research center – the *Doris B. Hawthorne Centre of Communicative Disorders and Special Education* – to become a dissemination center, with educationalists listed as potential users. This would provide a mechanism for developing materials and educational programmes that are of general use to teachers, as well as for responding to specific issues and even individual questions. Such a facility could become a model of how teachers can be supported in developing and applying relevant clinical linguistic information, especially if it establishes an international dimension, or if such centers can be replicated in other countries.

However, there is a need for multiple routes toward a common outcome, and a diversity of provision is required including e-learning and traditional texts as well as face-to-face courses. Opportunities to influence linguistic aspects of curriculum development and the professional training of teachers exist also at present through relevant committees. UK examples are BAAL, and the Committee for Linguistics in Education (CLIE).

Expert teacher educators and others in Ellis and McCartney (2011a) discussed a relative lack of linguistics knowledge in general and of clinical linguistic knowledge in particular, amongst many primary teachers. They also identified the need for, and availability of, linguistic research that is relevant to the learning of all children, including those with SLCD. Curriculum policies in many countries confirm this. The authors also reported some in-service and post-experience opportunities for learning and the requirement for more tailored materials and information. The conclusion is that there is an opportunity for teachers to learn linguistics, and an opportunity for linguists to consult, devise, and widely disseminate appropriate materials and information. The knowledge gap can be closed, with it is hoped a resulting positive impact on teaching practices

for all children and on children's learning. Further research as to whether this hope is realized would be necessary.

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