COLLABORATIVE LEARNING project

Project Director: Stuart Scott, 17 Barford Street, Islington, LONDON N1 OQB
Telephone: +44 (0) 207 226 8885
e-mail:stuart.scott@collaborativelearning.org
website: www.collaborativelearning.org

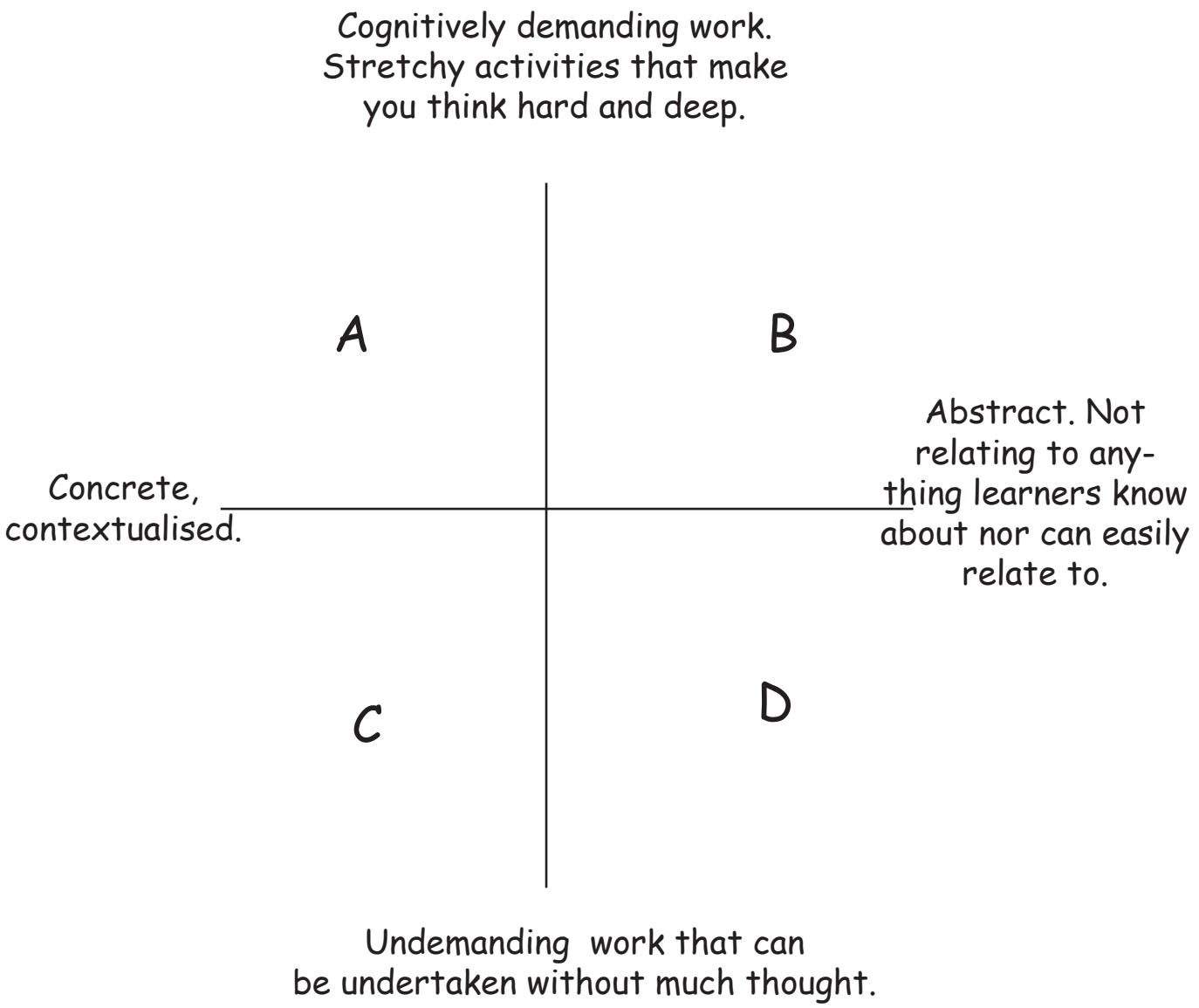
An introduction to Collaborative Learning: extending thinking and creating contexts for developing academic language in multilingual classrooms.

In an increasing number of our classrooms children are at different stages of social and academic language development in their first language, and in many classrooms they are also encountering their learning in an additional language. Since the aim of all teachers is for their pupils to achieve at the highest level, their classroom practice must address language development at the same time as it addresses curriculum. When examining language development it is useful to explore the concepts of BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and CALPS (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Skills). These are concepts developed and expanded upon by Jim Cummins, and colleagues in a variety of books and papers about the experiences of learning in an additional language.

To be able to "BIC" in a language is to be able to appear more fluent and confident than you really are. It means that you can use the language to travel, to ask for things in shops and restaurants and appear quite streetwise. Good "BICS" are a kind of shell that protect you in a strange environment from appearing too conspicuously different or vulnerable. Children in Britain who do not speak English at home may learn to "BIC" in English quite rapidly and develop social language that becomes quite fluent and well pronounced. They need their "BICs" to

survive in the playground, and to survive in class and in the street. Cummins estimates that it takes about two to three years to become a really fluent "BICker". However, this fluency is deceptive, because in order to achieve academically (rather than just survive socially) in school, you have to be able to use the language related to cognitively demanding thinking tasks. You have to be able for instance to justify your opinions, compare or contrast different ideas, formulate hypotheses or predict outcomes. A list is attached to this paper.
Teachers of very young children will be quick to tell you that all these thinking skills can begin to develop very early, although the English National Curriculum level descriptions imply that complex thinking 'appears' at secondary school. To develop the language to express this deep thinking, to learn to "CALP", can take seven to ten years or even longer. The language of thinking can only be successfully developed when closely related to real thinking demands thrown up by particular topics in particular curriculum areas. Learning an additional language, like learning your first language is not a quick fix. Children cannot be removed from the classroom for seven years to learn the language of thinking, and even if they were, this would take them away from the very environment where those thinking demands should be developed. Research now strongly supports the notion that many children do not have the opportunities to develop their language much beyond the BIC stage, and simply use their BICs get through lessons either cooperatively or disruptively, depending on their emotional make up or gender. This is because they are not able to develop their CALPs in a systematic way.

Jim Cummins produced a key visual which helps to clarify these ideas. This framework is rather like a map on which you can place any activity that takes place in the classrooom.



Much of the work demanded in the classroom is in Section B. It makes considerable thinking demands on children, but these demands are often presented in an abstract way which children, especially those learning an additional language, find difficult to access. If children are unable to do this work, teachers are often tempted to give them activities in Section D. This kind of work (eg: colouring in or copying) keeps them busy, but does not develop their thinking. Consequently those children who do manage to develop their CALPs, do so outside the classroom. They rely on the support of parents, peers or siblings as well as demonstrating a fearsome determination to learn. The majority underachieve.

If children are to develop their CALPs in the classroom they need to experience activities in Section A of the framework: activities that expand their thinking, but also contain elements of contextuality. What are these elements of context? Here are some general examples:

1. Making connections with children's experiences and activating what children already know ie: making children feel valued.
2. Providing the space and opportunity to actively use existing knowledge.
3. Providing opportunies for children to talk around a topic and rephrase it in their own language.
4. Provide a range of opportunities for children to use first language for their learning.
5. Providing visual frameworks to clarify/organise speaking, listening and thinking - using key visuals/graphic organisers.
6. Using objects and pictures.
7. Moving from the specific (example/case studies/personal accounts) to the general (generalisations, rules, principles)
8. Humanising the impersonal/abstract.

Developing and trying out classroom approaches that improve context takes time, but teachers have found that they are easier to develop and often more motivating and creative if they are developed when working together. If teachers have time to work together in twos or threes, especially when one is aware of the language issues, and the other is an expert on a particular curriculum topic, and if their school supports this cooperation, and is willing to arrange for the the teachers' enthusiasm to be shared in dissemination sessions, then the planning and implementation of new approaches does not seem so arduous.

This paper obviously simplifies many issues and is only designed to encourage you to read and find out more. Please let me know if you think I can improve it.

Stuart Scott

Last revised September 2008

A list of different kinds of thinking demands

Classifying

Comparing

Contrasting

Defining

Describing

Estimating

Evaluating

Explaining

Formulating hypotheses

Generalising

Inferring

Interpreting data

Judging

Justifying opinions

Labelling

Measuring

Noting a process

Ordering chronologically

Ordering spatially

Predicting

Problem solving

Rank ordering

Recommending

Testing hypotheses

Understanding and applying cause and effect

Understanding and applying rules and strategies