Language-sensitive teaching of so-called non-language subjects: a checklist[1]

Scaffolding academic discourse skills, strategies and genres (4/7)

The following checklist is intended for subject teachers who would like to reflect more closely on the language dimension of their own teaching and its implications for their students' development of subject literacy. The checklist can also be used as a tool for mutual classroom observation and discussion among subject teachers within a school. It is NOT meant as an instrument for external evaluation. The checklist consists of statements related to different aspects of classroom language use:

1. Transparency of language requirements in setting up attainment targets and tasks for subject-specific learning;
2. Use of language by the subject teacher;
3. Classroom interaction and opportunities for the students to speak;
4. Scaffolding academic discourse skills, strategies and genres;
5. Linguistic appropriateness of materials (texts, different media, teaching/learning materials);
6. Linguistic aspects of evaluating academic language and content achievement;
7. Incorporating Multilingual Aspects in so-called non-linguistic subjects.

Each of the statements, when considered to hold true or applicable for one's own teaching, can be ticked off. Those statements that do not apply (yet) may give rise to further reflection by the individual teacher or discussions with colleagues. Based on the advice of subject teachers, we have deliberately kept the checklist simple and avoided using scales. But if there is a demand for scales, these could be easily created, for example from 1 to 4, as a tool for drawing up profiles of the strengths and weaknesses of a teacher's language-sensitive content teaching. Such a procedure would also allow subject teachers to map the degree of progress made in specific areas of pedagogical action – provided the checklist is applied repeatedly with the purpose of devising a more differentiated agenda for further professional development.

Some of the statements may be more relevant than others. Some of them may not apply at all for a specific subject area or a specific pedagogical purpose. Still others could be added by subject teachers when they critically reflect on the language dimension of their own or their colleagues' teaching practice.

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[1] An extended version of this checklist has been published in German: Thürmann, Eike and Vollmer, Helmut Johannes (2012), "Schulsprache und Sprachsensibler Fachunterricht: Eine Checkliste mit Erläuterungen", in Röhner C. and Hövelbrinks B. (eds.), *Fachbezogene Sprachförderung in Deutsch als Zweitsprache*, Juventa, Weinheim, pp. 212-233.

4. SCAFFOLDING ACADEMIC DISCOURSE SKILLS, STRATEGIES AND GENRES

4.1 My teaching helps students to take responsibility for their own language learning. That is why I make them aware of strategies and methods of language learning: students discover when, how, in what context and through which methods their own language learning will be successful; they experiment with language and discourse strategies; they share these with others; they infer linguistic forms and structures from the model texts; they document learning results in their own wording; and they relate language forms and structures to other languages they know.

4.2 I encourage students to reflect on learning paths and to find out what works for their own learning, paying particular attention to the language domain, e.g. through writing language-learning diaries and working with (language) portfolios.

4.3 I distinguish between situational (point-of-need) and systemic (designed-in) need for language support. For the latter, I provide language scaffolds consisting of model discourse samples, metalinguistic reflection (e.g. genre knowledge), and supplies of relevant language means (academic vocabulary, technical terms, prefabricated expressions, etc.): *"situational scaffolding" refers to language phenomena that have no immediate structural relevance for the subject-specific content under consideration. The need for support in this case normally has to do with individual students' language biographies. For such cases, I offer individual help and guidance and also resources (e.g. dictionaries, access to relevant websites).*

"Systemic or goal-related scaffolding" means that subject-specific content goals cannot be reached without the availability of specific language means, reading or writing skills or the mastery of specific discourse functions and genres. In these cases, I either offer discourse models, set phrases, technical terms and appropriate academic vocabulary as well as routine expressions to choose from when working on a problem, or I make students aware of the characteristic linguistic features of particular genres and discourse routines. However, I avoid teaching grammar in a systematic way.

4.4 I am aware that subject-specific terminology poses a learning barrier for many students. Therefore, I handle complex subject-specific concepts and pertinent terminology with great care. *I concentrate on a minimum of key terms required by the curriculum for content work; these are dealt with, however, in an intense form, distinguishing them from words with a similar meaning in colloquial language use, relating them to other subject-specific terms in the shape of semantic webs, and using definitions in which terms appear in a contextualised form.*

4.5 In planning and providing goal-oriented scaffolds, I usually establish firm functional bonds between basic cognitive-linguistic functions and their characteristic linguistic and textual features, *e.g. negotiating – defining/naming – describing - reporting/narrating – explaining – arguing – evaluating – modelling/simulating.*

4.6 I use different techniques to support students in developing an awareness of the structure, cohesion and coherence of a text, so that they can produce texts on their own.