

Building connection in working with new arrival immigrant and refugee students

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Building connection through active participation in social settings is proposed here as a core feature of working with newly arrived immigrant and refugee children in schools – underpinning both curriculum content and pedagogical practice. This view is central to the Teaching English to New Arrivals (TENA) course, which has been developed in South Australia as professional learning for teachers working with ESL new arrival students. Developing this course has required an articulation of preferred teaching practices for working with this group of students, in an endeavour to provide a coherent and relevant pedagogical framework for teachers.

This paper is one outcome of that articulation process. By constructing the learning challenge for new arrivals as a factor of participation in social settings, it locates participation as a central theoretical and curriculum concept in teaching practice with new arrival students. The notion of 'contributive participation' is contrasted with that of 'apprenticeship', suggesting the importance of transitional performances in participation and of building on students' existing capabilities in dialogue. The paper concludes by articulating some principles and practices used in planning curriculum for both apprenticeship and contributive participation in transitional performance.

Developing a professional learning course for teachers provides a powerful opportunity for reassessing learning and teaching goals, examining pedagogic practices amongst accomplished teachers in the field, and investigating theoretical perspectives and current research. The English as a Second Language (ESL) Program within the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) has been doing exactly that over the last three years, bringing together a range of human and material resources for the purpose. This paper provides an introductory overview of the resultant articulation of preferred teaching practices for new arrival students and its focus on building connection. We start with a brief account of the context and move on to ways of understanding the learning challenge for new arrival students and thence to the implications of such ways of understanding in regard to building connection in curriculum practice.

The context

South Australia provides for immigrant and refugee students through its New Arrivals Program (NAP) centres (largely in the metropolitan area) and through individual regional schools receiving such students. The NAP centre teachers are supported through NAP leaders and also through the ESL Program in DECS. Regional schools receiving ESL new arrival students are also supported through the ESL Program. Such support for teachers is in terms of professional learning opportunities and resources for curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and reporting appropriate to ESL new arrival students.

The need for a clear articulation of preferred teaching practices arose from an unexpectedly large influx of immigrants and refugees into South Australia, which created an expansion from six to fifteen primary NAP centres over three years (2006-2008). Teachers without experience in teaching new arrival students had to be employed, and the ESL Program in DECS responded by deciding to develop targeted professional learning related to working with ESL new arrival students. This in turn required an explicit articulation of preferred teaching practices.

Developing such an articulation has been an ongoing process, grounded in the expertise of many accomplished teachers of new arrival students in DECS, and elaborated through study of relevant local, national and international research and curriculum frameworks.

Understanding the learning challenge for new arrival students

The first step in articulating the preferred teaching practices was to consider diverse ways of understanding the distinctive learning challenge experienced by new arrival students.

Historically, the South Australian ESL Program has primarily focused on linguistic challenges, using Halliday's (1978) functional view of language as the theoretical foundation. This model of language is the basis for the ESL Scope and Scales document (DECS, 2003), which is the assessment, programming and reporting tool for ESL students in South Australia. However, students' linguistic challenges need to be considered with an experiential overlay, particularly when there is considerable difference between familiar and new contexts. Halliday's functional model allows for this, through its attention to the contexts of 'culture' and 'situation', but there has so far been little articulation of the challenge of entering into unfamiliar contexts specifically in terms of new arrival experiences.

As indicated in Figure 1, entering or transitioning into unfamiliar contexts is a recurrent factor shaping the life experience of new arrival students.

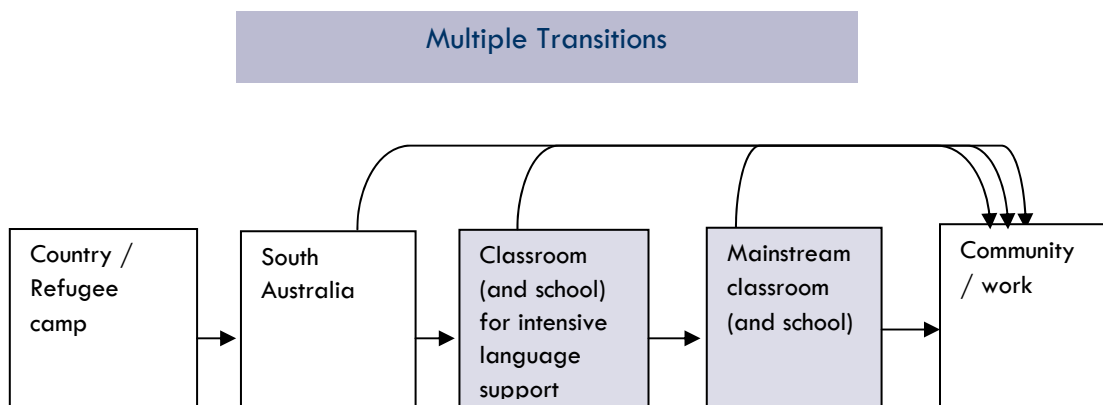


Figure 1: Multiple transitions typical of new arrival students (DECS, 2008)

One way of understanding such transitions is through the notion of participation in new ‘communities of practice’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in which the overarching learning challenge is socialisation into the practices of different communities. Figure 2 shows the complexity of this challenge for new arrival students – participation in a new society, the broad ‘community of practice’ with possibly unfamiliar and uncomfortable values, principles and expectations, as well as participation in a network of smaller potential communities of practice, each with different ways of doing things, including, but not restricted to, the use of English. In addition, the new arrival will be maintaining existing relationships, which may cross continents, at the same time as building new relationships. Identity is stretched and reshaped.

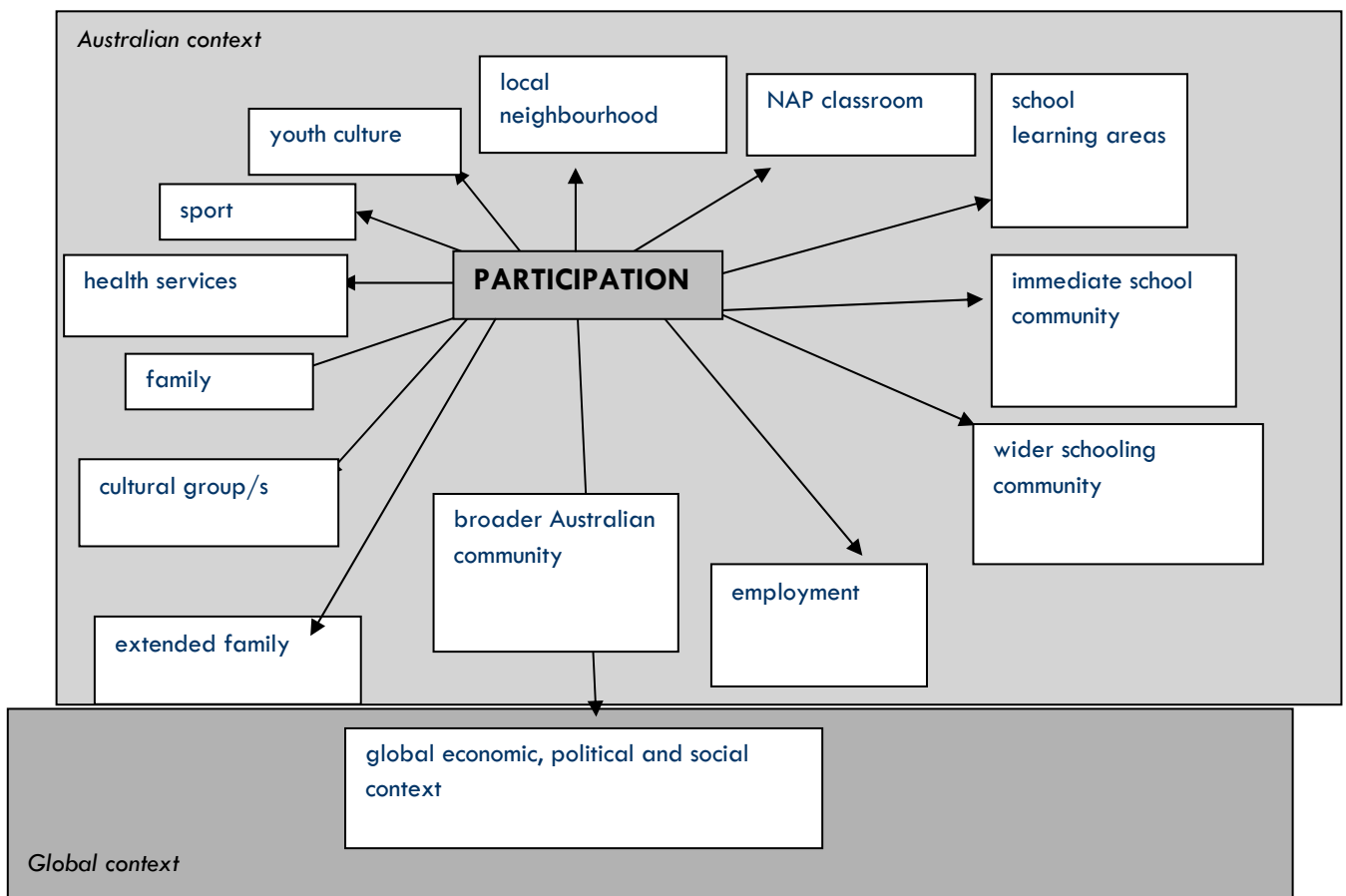


Figure 2: The learning challenge for new arrival students (DECS, 2008)

Taking participation as central to the learning challenge for new arrival students demands an understanding of participation that generates connections among context, learner, language, and pedagogy. Here we articulate such an understanding.

Theorising participation as a curriculum concept

For Wenger (1998, p. 55) participation “is both personal and social. It involves our whole person, including our bodies, minds, emotions and social relations.” We take this as a base position in articulating a teaching practice responsive to new arrival students, as it allows for consideration of emotional loss and loss of the competence experienced in previous communities, as well as adjustment to the ways of new communities and the learner’s initially peripheral place within them.

The apprenticeship role ascribed by Lave & Wenger (1991) for newcomers to a community of practice is also a relevant consideration in terms of learning how to participate and acquiring the language needed for participation. However, apprenticeship has limitations as a construct for teaching practice for new arrival students on two counts. First, it risks being seen as the sole form of participation viable for new arrival students in a particular English-speaking community of practice, devaluing the very active contributions they make to daily interactions within their school and classroom communities. Second, apprenticeship implies a desire for eventual belonging and full membership of the community, whereas participation need not carry any connotations of belongingness (Gee, 2004, p. 79). This is important, since some new arrival students may in fact not set out to belong but merely to function effectively within the semiotic space. The teaching practice for new arrival students thus needs to cater for different kinds of connection with communities of practice, not only an apprentice connection, but also connections that allow for more active contribution. We are calling this ‘contributive participation’ – participation whereby students actively engage in communal interactions as *users* of English rather than merely *learners* of English. Such contributive participation matches with Goodwin’s definition of participation as “actions demonstrating forms of involvement performed by parties within evolving structures of talk” (Goodwin, 2001, p. 172). This definition not only avoids reducing learner participation to mere apprenticeship by suggesting a range of forms of involvement, but also highlights the role of language. Contributive participation not only shapes language use, but is also shaped through the use of language in evolving structures of talk. At the same time, participants are embedded in layers of context and also actively building those layers in and through dialogue (Goodwin, 2001, p. 173). The focus on “the interactive work that hearers as well as speakers engage in” (Goodwin, 2001, p. 172) reflects Bakhtin’s (1990; 1981) dialogic view that language users actively orient themselves to other participants, consciously turning to them, both as speakers and hearers. This is likewise a core feature of contributive participation.

For new arrival students, such contributive participation involves transitional performances, building on their existing capabilities for dialogue and their degree of familiarity with contexts, cultural understandings, roles and English language.

Supporting students to build on existing capabilities is consistent with a Vygotskian socio-cultural constructivist view of learning, promoted in the South Australian school context, which emphasises learners constructing knowledge in social interaction and through scaffolding by the teacher and others. Such construction and scaffolding relies heavily on teachers and learners operating in the learner's zone of proximal development (ZPD), defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Learning occurs initially as peripheral participation and then as progressively more active participation, with the ZPD gradually increasing in complexity.

By focusing on students' ZPDs and on transitional performances of participation, teachers emphasise connections between talk and social behaviours, language forms and language functions, people and contexts. As Goodwin (2001, p. 173) points out, "[t]he concept of participation shifts the focus from the structure of speech activities to forms of social organisation made possible through talk". This means that the close links between culture, situation and language must be brought to the fore in teaching practices for new arrival students. Instead of prioritising language features alone, curriculum content must set those features alongside features such as cultural understandings, situated social practices, identity shifts and intercultural competencies.

Planning curriculum for transitional performance

This multilayered consideration of curriculum content can readily be understood through Michael Halliday's functional view of language (Figure 3), which makes clear connections between context and text, and between text and the components of text. Through these connections it highlights the notion of language choices suited to acts of participation and thus provides a strong foundation for planning curriculum for transitional performance and embodied participation.

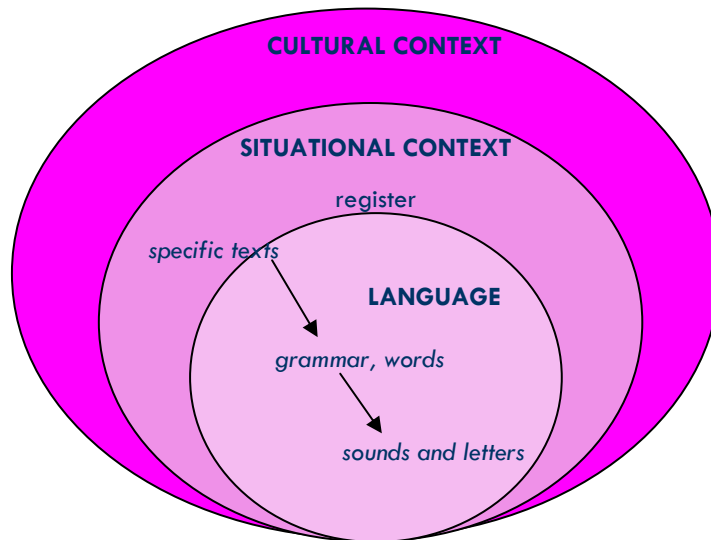


Figure 3: Halliday's functional model of language (1978)

In the TENA professional learning course, Halliday's functional model of language has been elaborated to emphasise contexts of transitional performance, taking account of contributive participation as well as apprentice participation. In the following example (Figure 4), the layered contexts make clear why the text or act of participation might appropriately be "Can I have a soccer ball please?" However, given that new arrival students will have differing levels of familiarity with the cultural contexts and social practices, it equally allows for other options, notably transitional options in terms of both language learning (e.g., control of the question form) and identity (e.g., with regard to comfort with the level of politeness of the text).

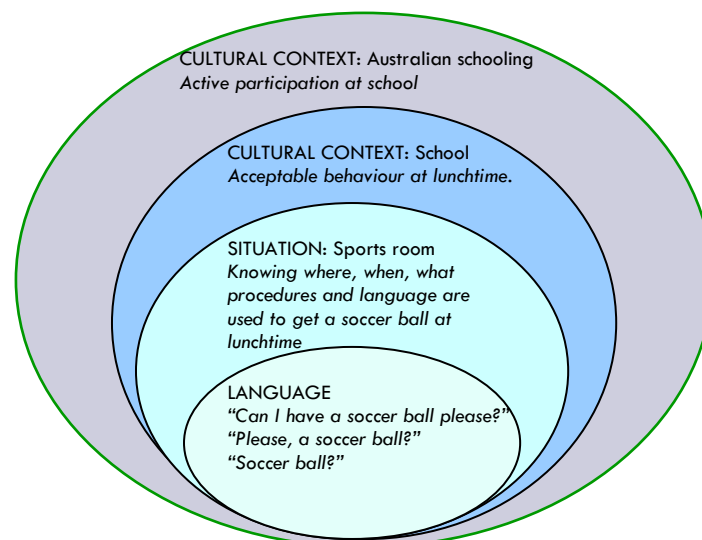


Figure 4: Elaboration of Halliday's model

The stronger the sense of connection to the context in which the language is appropriate, the more likely that the student will progressively adopt the language into their repertoire.

To build such connection, a focused form of backward planning (see Figure 5) has been developed and adopted in South Australia for working with new arrival students.

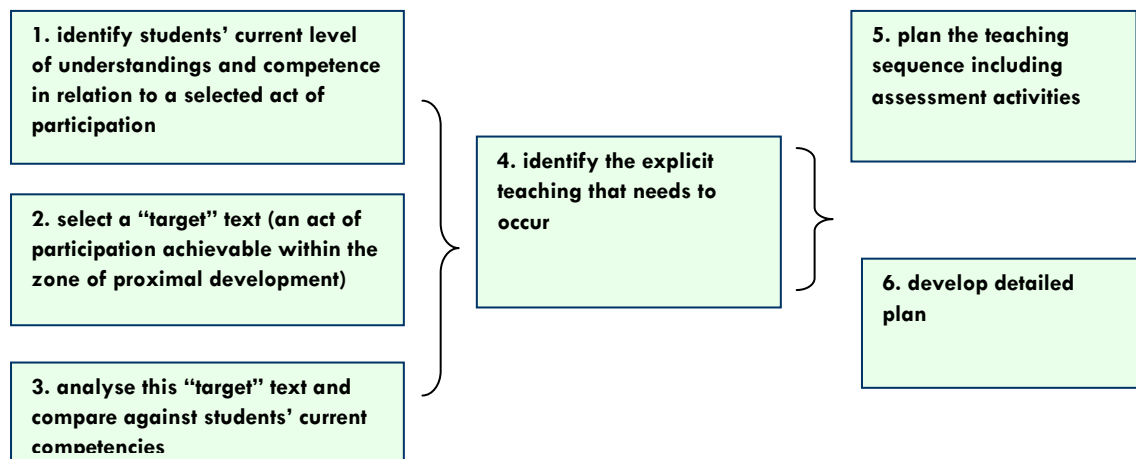


Figure 5: Approach to backward planning (DECS 2008)

Planning starts with determining the linguistic and cultural understandings that students currently have, as well as what is within their zone of proximal development in terms of a target act of participation (steps 1-3). It continues with the teacher actively responding to the students' learning challenge and designing a teaching sequence that will provide experiences in both apprenticeship and contributive participation (steps 4-6). These steps are elaborated as a strong focus within the TENA course.

Conclusion

In the process of developing the TENA professional learning course, the articulation of participation as a core theoretical and curriculum concept in teaching practices for new arrival students was drawn from a range of sources. Notable among these are a number of accomplished teachers of new arrival students in South Australia, as well as existing curriculum frameworks and their theoretical underpinnings of sociocultural constructivism and systemic functional grammar. Unpacking the learning challenge for new arrival students then resulted in a clear focus on supporting active student participation in a wide range of social contexts. This in turn facilitated the making of clear and principled connections among context, learner, language and pedagogy, some of which have been articulated here, and many more of which are articulated in the TENA course.

Key among these are the construction of the learning challenge for new arrival students as contributive participation in diverse communities and contexts, the notion of transitional performances developing over time, the importance of planning curriculum for transitional performance and building on students' existing capabilities, and finally the need for teaching practice that supports both apprenticeship and contributive participation in classroom activities and beyond.

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