What is the mode continuum?

How does knowledge about the relationship between spoken and written language support EAL/D learners?

Rationale

The Multicultural Education Policy commits schools to providing opportunities that enable all students to achieve equitable education and social outcomes, and participate successfully in our culturally diverse society. Almost 25% of students in NSW public schools are learning English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D). These students require support to develop their academic English language skills so they can access the curriculum, successfully participate in learning alongside their peers in mainstream classes and engage confidently in the broader Australian community. This document aims to develop teachers' knowledge of the mode continuum and how this concept supports teaching EAL/D learners to speak, read and write academic English. It also aims to assist teachers to plan effective English language learning support that aligns with system priorities in literacy and numeracy and meets the commitments of the Multicultural Education Policy.

Intended audience

EAL/D specialist teachers, classroom teachers, SLSOs, Assistant Principals Curriculum and Instruction, Lead specialists, School leaders

Timeframe for use

The document should be read in planning support for EAL/D learners.

Instructions for use

The document can be used to professionally develop teachers on key precepts in English language acquisition and EAL/D pedagogy. It can assist school leaders to plan professional learning, lead professional discussion and guide programming for EAL/D learners. Ideally, this teacher guide should be read in conjunction with What are BICS and CALP? (staff only) as the differences between Basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS), also known as 'playground English,' and Cognitive academic language proficiency

(CALP), or academic English, is important prior knowledge for understanding the concept of the mode continuum.

Concept overview

Sociocultural language theory deriving from Halliday (1985) explores the way in which context shapes language and language choices. Register theory describes how three key features of register – field, tenor and mode – shape language choices according to the situation of communication (Derewianka and Jones 2018). All three continua together comprise register. (See the Writing in secondary resource for more information on register) Here the focus is on mode, or the channel of communication.

Martin (1985) developed the idea of mode, arguing that language can be thought of as on a continuum. At one end of the continuum, there is spoken language, embedded in a context in which the speakers share a common situation and referent. At the other end, is academic language which discusses information removed from the context and relies on text features, vocabulary and language structures to convey meaning. To succeed at school, students need to master academic language. The concept of the mode continuum assists teachers to develop their EAL/D students' English language proficiency as it is a representation of the relationship between spoken-like and written-like language, and a conceptual framework to plan teaching and learning sequences to shift students' language use to most written-like. Teaching EAL/D learners to master academic writing, as Derewianka (2014) observes, is challenging. The mode continuum is a representation of language which can assist teachers in planning and implementing incremental teaching sequences focusing on language use.
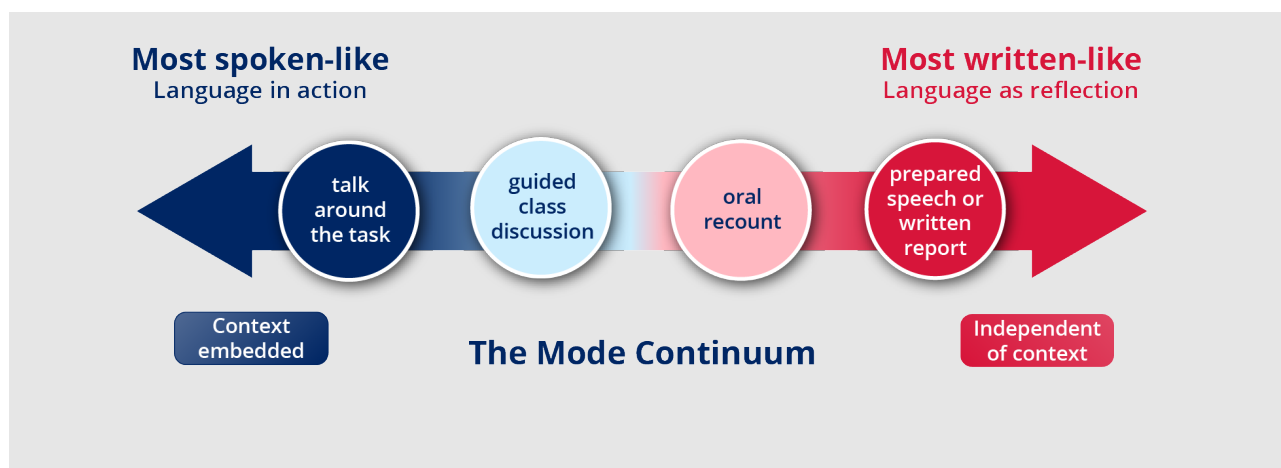
What is the mode continuum?

The mode continuum represents the relationship between spoken-like and written-like language and provides a framework to identify the changing linguistic and textual resources students need to shift their English language use along the continuum towards academic English. As writing academically is a key outcome of education, understanding the mode continuum and using it to plan writing tasks supports success at school.

Why is understanding the mode continuum important?

As students move into the higher stages of school, the language expectations shift. From largely oral activities in early years of school, in the latter years of school, students are expected to produce the increasingly dense, grammatically complex, and content-rich language in academic contexts (Derewianka and Jones 2018). Students need to be taught that language changes according to audience, context and purpose. More information about understanding the purpose of texts can be found in the Writing in secondary resource. This information is relevant regardless of teaching stage or KLA context.

The mode continuum is a representation that allows teachers to plan for and explicitly teach the language skills required when students produce increasingly academic texts. It reminds teachers that if they expect students to produce abstract academic texts, they need to start teaching the required language while teaching the KLA content and provide sequenced opportunities and support for students to master the required academic language and academic text structure and features.

Most spoken-like
Language in action

Most written-like
Language as reflection

talk around the task

guided class discussion

oral recount

prepared speech or written report

Context embedded

The Mode Continuum

Independent of context

As the far lefthand of the diagram illustrates, the language used by students when discussing how to complete a classroom activity, such as a cloze passage, is determined by the context. The students' language use would be interpersonal and without complex noun groups - 'I think this word goes there' – while pointing at the word – 'because I think it means this … and then the sentence makes sense.' On the other end of the spectrum of language use, such as delivering a speech, the language would be academic, structured according to the type of text, and reliant on complex noun groups and nominalisation to create its meaning. The topic of the speech is external to the situation of delivering the speech; the student needs to use a range of linguistic and textual skills to deliver a meaningful and coherent oral text.

The mode continuum and language learning

Language acquisition typically follows a developmental pathway. Most children, from the moment they are born, are surrounded by spoken language. Before attending school, children have participated in and listened to increasingly complex conversations about objects, feelings, behaviours, rules, responsibilities and so forth, continually augmenting their oral vocabulary, concepts and ideas, and their understanding of the way language works. Most EAL/D learners have acquired language in a similar way, albeit in a language or dialect other than Standard Australian English.

EAL/D learners enter NSW public schools at any age, into an age-appropriate stage, and at any phase of proficiency in Standard Australian English. At any stage of their schooling, EAL/D students are learning the language modes – speaking, listening, reading, viewing

and writing – simultaneously, and are learning English, while learning about English and learning curriculum concepts through English (Halliday 1975).

Understanding the mode continuum helps teachers to plan the language learning EAL/D learners require to master the academic English necessary for success at school. It reminds teachers that in addition to the content-learning journey, there is a language-learning journey — represented by the length of the continuum — between spoken-like language used to discuss tasks and the academic language required in academic contexts.

Researchers contend that spoken-like and written-like language have different roles in education (Derewianka 2018, Gibbons 2009 and Hammond 2017). The dynamic, interactive and contingent nature of spoken language makes it ideal for initial learning: introducing and explaining concepts, for trying out ideas, for exploring thinking and concepts. In contrast, writing encourages consolidation of ideas, clarification of thinking and concepts and opportunities for reflecting on one's own thinking and learning (NSW Department of Education 2018). Careful planning and sequencing of teaching and learning tasks enables students to engage with language at different points along the mode continuum, thereby learning the full spectrum of the different ways English is used in school, as well as the varying text structures, language features and registers appropriate to the language mode.

To master academic English, a well-planned teaching sequence would begin with context-embedded, spoken language activities which gradually and sequentially become more abstract and less reliant on spoken language, developing the linguistic and textual skills required to produce academic texts.

What does a teaching sequence which moves students along the mode continuum look like?

Ms X's Stage 3 class are learning about data displays in mathematics. A number of students are new arrivals, in the Emerging phase of the EAL/D Learning Progression, who have had limited schooling in their home language. The class is working towards collecting and collating data on the language backgrounds of the class and comparing this data with the ABS data for their suburb. Ms X knows that developing oral English language proficiency is an effective way to develop both content knowledge and overall English language proficiency.
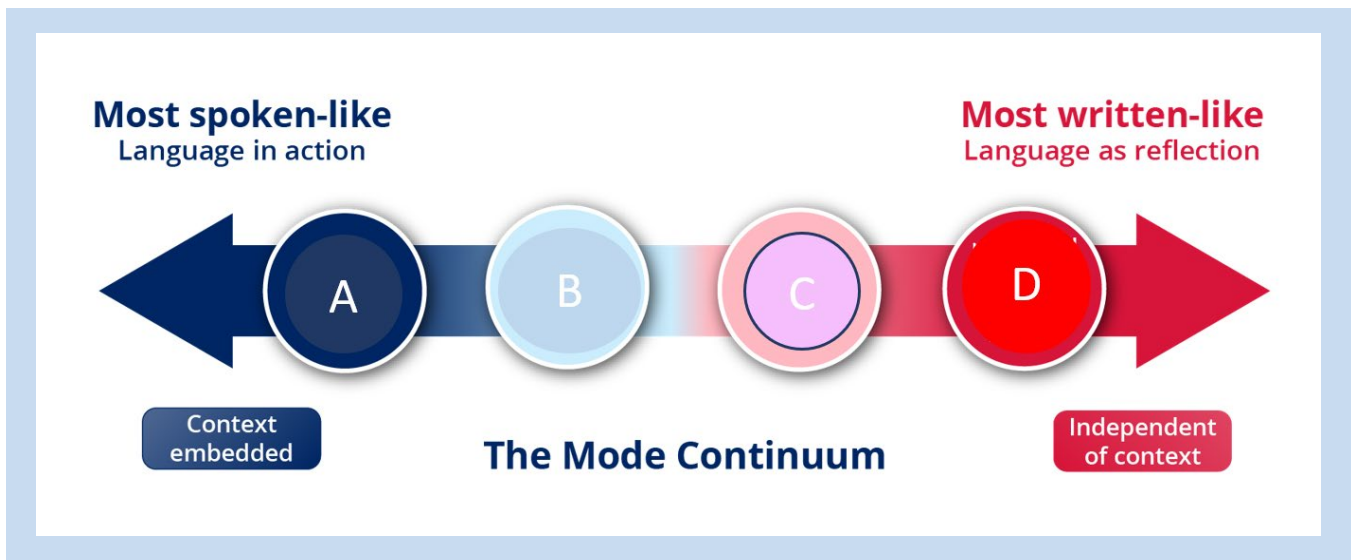
After explicitly teaching the language associated with graphs, Ms X uses a think-pair-share strategy in combination with numberless graphs to develop her students' knowledge of the features and language of graphs. These are both oral tasks and students are given the opportunity to use a variety of spoken English and/or spoken home language to engage in the tasks.

The next activity to consolidate the language and features of graph is a communicative crossword, in which students work in pairs and attempt to guess their partner's academic language term for a feature of a graph, from their partner's verbal definition. Ms X is using an oral activity but has moved the students slightly away from the context embedded talk, to talking about a graph their partner cannot see. This forces the language to become more precise. This activity is increasing the academic language demands and moving the students incrementally towards more written-like language.

As her students' understanding of the language and features of graphs has deepened, Ms X uses a cloze passage to expose her students to written language appropriate to describing graphs in mathematics. Students complete this activity in pairs so that they can use all their linguistic resources – including home language.

Ms X then introduces the language of comparison, and using numberless graphs and think-pair- share, asks students to discuss what is the same and different between the graph illustrating the language background of their class compared to the graph detailing the language background of their suburb. This is an example of mode shunting, in which the teacher plans an activity on the more spoken-like end of the mode continuum to introduce new content and language. The need to mode shunt – move in the other direction on the mode continuum – is supported by research which identifies oral language as the best medium for introducing new learning. Even though Ms X has moved students in the direction of the most written-like end of the mode continuum, the students are learning new vocabulary and new curriculum concepts, and oral language is the most effective linguistic mode for new learning (Derewianka 2018, Gibbons 2009 and Hammond 2017). Ms X designs activities which cluster on the most spoken-like end of the mode continuum. She consolidates the language of comparison through communicative activities, sentence matching and cloze passages, before using sentence stems to bring the two types of language – the language of graphs and the language of comparison together.

The final task involves students presenting to the class about the similarities and differences between the language backgrounds of the class and the ABS data on the suburb. After Ms X models the steps in writing a presentation through a text deconstruction of a WAGOLL (what a good one looks like) and then jointly constructing an oral presentation, the students work in small groups in a range of tasks to develop the necessary writing skills. They complete a sequencing activity on a jumbled example of a written formal presentation, before working in pairs to draft their text using sentence starters and a writing scaffold. After feedback on their draft formal presentation, students edit and refine their writing and practise oral presentation skills.

Most spoken-like
Language in action

Most written-like
Language as reflection

A   B   C   D

Context embedded

The Mode Continuum

Independent of context

A. Ms X's Stage 3 class uses oral language to discuss numberless graphs.
B. The next activity is a communicative crossword in which the students need to use slightly more academic language to complete the task.
C. Ms X then uses a cloze passage to consolidate the language learning and expose students to more written-like language.
A. Mode shunting step: Ms X uses more spoken-like language to introduce new concepts and new language through a Think Pair and Share.
B. Mode shunting step: The students consolidate new language and concepts through communicative activities, completing cloze passage and using sentence stems.
C. Moving more towards D: Modelling WAGOLL, joint construction, jumbled written oral presentation, sentence starters and writing scaffold.
D. The final task involves independent construction of an oral report by students.

Activities to develop most written-like language do not need to be unidirectional.

How has the language shifted in Ms X's teaching sequence?

Ms X's planned sequencing of language and curriculum concept tasks has incrementally moved her students' language along the mode continuum towards more written-like language. In the initial oral activities, students discussed what they observed in the numberless graphs using everyday or familiar words. After being explicitly taught the language of graphs, students then completed a communicative crossword in which they drew upon the taught definitions of the key features of graphs. All the activities using cloze passages modelled the use of academic language around graphs and statistics. This developing knowledge of academic English was further supported through the use of sentence stems. The sentence stems supported students to write in full sentences, create

noun groups and use nominalisation where necessary. For example, a sentence stem comparing the class's language background with the language background of residents in their suburb might begin: The one major difference between the language background of Class 3 Yellow and the suburb of Hibiscus is…. The sentence stems then become models of the type of language required for the oral report.

Illustration of practice

View the video on Abstraction in the Writing in Secondary Resource Hub for another explanation of the concept of the mode continuum and links to the explicit teaching of writing based on this concept.

Evidence base and reference list

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Alignment to system priorities and/or needs: Aligns with strategic priority to improve literacy and numeracy, aligns with What works best – EAL/D, aligns with Multicultural Education policy statements and Multicultural Plan 2019-2022 (PDF 1804 KB) targets.

Alignment to School Excellence Framework: Learning domain: Curriculum

Alignment to Australian Professional Standards for Teachers: 1.2, 1.5, 2.2, 3.2

Consulted with: Aboriginal Outcomes and Partnerships, Literacy and Numeracy, Teaching Quality and Impact

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Feedback and comments: Please email suggestions and feedback to eald.education@det.nsw.edu.au citing the name of the document

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