

Access and Comprehension - Teachers use of Simplified Language Materials

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This paper examines the current use of simplified language materials (SLMs) by primary and secondary teachers across England. Drawing on a survey of 33 schools the paper examines the degree to which teachers and support teachers currently use simplified language materials and the reasons they give for their usage. It discusses both the contradictions and similarities between teachers' perceptions of the value of SLMs and the existing research base. It focuses on current national guidance, the role of SLMs for people with learning difficulties and research that encourages the use of complex materials and bilingual support, contrasting this with teachers perception that SLMs increase both access and comprehension. The paper suggests that we should not expect teachers to abandon SLMs but should find ways to use this skill base to enhance the education of all.

Introduction

For the purposes of this paper I have defined simplified language materials (SLMs) as English language materials that use shorter words and sentences, with fewer clauses, and less negative and passive forms, in comparison to the texts used typically in a given setting. As a Language Support Teacher working in a Secondary School in Hackney London up until 2001, I produced many of these materials to serve as a basis for student activities. This was common practice among my colleagues who were also supporting bilingual students developing their English language, both within my school and within other schools in the borough. At the time we were aware that teaching through a home language was seen to be preferable, but SLMs often seemed the only way forward when we had no other language in common or multiple languages to deal with. It was our practical solution when working under pressure. Barnard and Burgess (2001) have noted too, in research in the north-west of England, that teaching staff demonstrated a tendency to simplify the language rather than the task.

This piece of research attempts to identify the degree to which this practice is commonplace in schools across England, and, if it is, to understand the reasons why teaching and support staff continue to use it. As Lewis and Norwich (2000) suggest, teachers use a continua of teaching strategies, drawing upon different strategies with different students in different

learning situations. This does not mean that all teachers currently have experience of all these strategies nor that all strategies will be useful to all students, but it does suggest that we should encourage those who work in classrooms to examine the skills that they are currently using and see in what ways they can build on these to include all their possible students.

It is common for teachers to feel that they will need to learn specific teaching strategies to educate different groups of students, when they actually have the skills required but merely lack the evidence of their own experience (Hart 1996, Thomas & Loxley 2001). If we can understand why and in what ways staff produce and use SLMs we are more likely to be able to build upon these skills to the advantage of all students within the inclusive classroom setting, and to minimise their usage in ways that are inappropriate.

SLMs and Current National Guidance

Very rarely in official guidance within England is there reference to simplification of language. It can be implied at times in documents such as The inclusion statement (DfEE/QCA 1999) of the National Curriculum for England and Wales, which refers specifically to students with English as an additional language (EAL), and recommends “using accessible texts and materials that suit students' ages and levels of learning”; or through such phrases as, “Guided reading texts are at students' instructional level and matched to their age and dignity” (p56) or “Tasks simplified or extended, e.g. short, concrete text used by one group; long, abstract text by another” (p55) which can be found in the Inclusive Teaching Observation Checklist - Department for Education and Skills (DfES 2002). But it is only within the National Numeracy Strategy (DfES 2001), that we find a clear recommendation to use simplified or standardised language, and this is in relation to students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD).

The thrust of the inclusion statement, as it is with other National Curriculum documents - such as The National Literacy Strategy (DfES, 2002) - however, is about gaining access to the curriculum, with English as the medium for learning. It is primarily about developing skills, moving from 'parts to the whole', with recommendations very much couched in general terms and open to individual interpretation (Barwell 2004). There is far more of an encouragement to adapt tasks so that pupils can access the information the tasks lead to rather than to simplify the language as the means of accessing the task.

SLMs and Second Language Acquisition

Students who have English as an Additional Language are immersed within mainstream English schools, theoretically acquiring language in much the same way in which they develop their primary languages. This builds on notions of the 'natural acquisition' of a second language (L2) (Krashen 1982), that can be seen to underpin models of L2 acquisition such as the Communicative Language model. From this perspective second language learning goes from the 'whole to parts', with sense being made of the message before there is learning about the form and structure of the language.

The value of SLMs within these models is peripheral at best. Olivares and Lemberger (2002), for example, state that bilingual students learning their L2 within a school setting should be encouraged to use their first language (L1) and that so too should their teachers, while Barnard and Burgess (2001) wish to encourage 'exposure to sophisticated non-simplified subject material' (327). The authenticity of language is seen to be essential if students are to develop a realistic impression of the form and structure of language that is used in different contexts (Olivares, 2002). Simplified language texts must inevitably reduce the authenticity of the language, either linguistically or in relation to content (Tommola 1980).

SLMs and Comprehension

A strong argument against the use of SLMs can be also be found in our understanding that complex learning activities such as comprehension require flexibility of thought. Simplifying such activities means they are likely to be only partially understood and not transferred to other contexts. For individuals to interpret the meaning of complex texts or situations they need to have appropriate experience and the ability to self-monitor the interaction. Out of this understanding have come a number of cognitive strategies that enable students to unravel complex texts, such as the use of Schema (Idol, 1987). Through the use of these strategies all students, and people with learning difficulties in particular, have been shown to gain greater access to complex texts within mainstream settings (Baker, Gersten & Scanlon 2002).

The degree to which SLMs can enhance comprehension is also open to question. There are suggestions that it may help people at the beginning stages of acquiring English (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992, Krashen, 1982), and that simplified English Dictionaries can assist those at an

intermediate L2 level (Albus, Bielinski, Thurlow & Liu, 2001), but there is also evidence to suggest that even though L2 students at an intermediate level of English acquisition felt that simplified texts were more comprehensible they did not demonstrate a greater comprehension (Lotherington-Woloszyn 1988). Set against this is evidence to suggest that using simplified English in tests has a positive impact on all student results (Abedi, Lord & Plummer 1997).

SLMs and Learning Difficulties

There is a strong body of opinion in support of the use of simplified language for a variety of individuals with Learning difficulties such as those with a label of autism or down syndrome. The Down Syndrome Educational Trust and the Down's Syndrome Association (Alton 2002), for example, recommend that teaching and support staff simplify their language as much as possible when working. It is suggested that this will assist in the learning of this group of people who typically have a comparatively reduced short-term memory, using more short sentences (Broadley & MacDonald, 1993; Buckley, 1993, Jarrold, Baddeley & Phillips 2000), with a simple structure (Chapman, Schwartz & Kay-Raining Bird, 1992, Jenkins 1993).

In summary, there is little in official guidance or within the research base to encourage teaching staff to develop and use SLMs except with some individuals with learning difficulties.

Discussion of Method

The survey was sent to 40 primary and 40 secondary state schools in England at the end of 2003 and the start of 2004. The schools had a spread across England, with a rural and urban mix. The survey was sent to Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCO) in the 40 primary schools and to SENCOs, Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant (EMAG) Co-ordinators and Heads of Department (HODs) for English and Geography in 40 secondary schools. They were asked to have a brief discussion and to fill in the questionnaire at their next staff/department meeting. Out of 80 schools contacted there were returned surveys from 33 different schools.

The form of survey means that it is not possible to give a breakdown of exactly who was attending the meeting, though it allows us to differentiate between subject areas, classroom teachers and support staff, but not which individuals held which views. The approach may

have also placed pressure on attendees to conform to the predominant feeling within the meeting. This could result in a slightly unbalanced response, but nonetheless would demonstrate the view around which people cluster to conform. This majority held view would in itself have a powerful impact on teaching style and reflect the way of working for many.

The inclusion of an open-ended thought-storm activity within the survey was also intended to work against this exclusionary pressure, creating an arena for all ideas to be presented if people so wished. There were 109 comments made in relation to the question: "What are the consequences of using simplified English materials?". These responses were then coded. Categories for coding were identified from an initial examination of these comments. The categories were then used to code the comments resulting from the survey. The author and a colleague independently carried out this coding, resulting in 66% agreement reducing the list to 15 categories of comments. This level of agreement included 17 responses that were not coded by one or other of the coders. Removal of the non-coded responses puts the level of agreement at 78%. The comments that have been used in the subsequent analysis, however, only include those which were coded identically by both coders. 72 comments were identically coded.

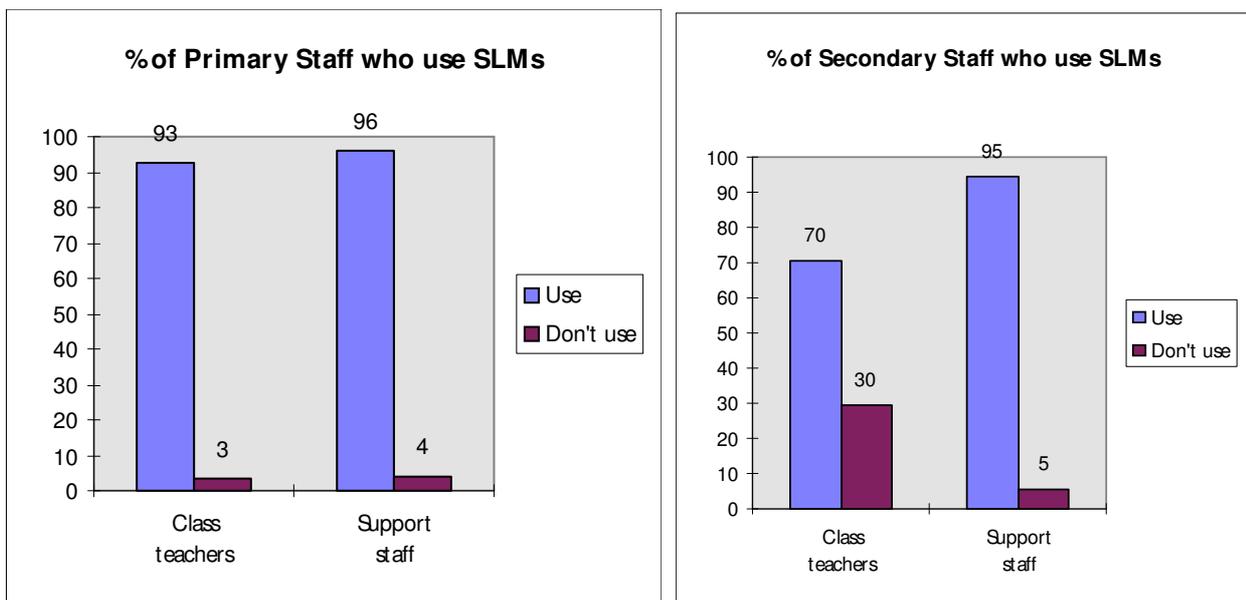
Discussion of Responses

Responses were received from 33 separate schools; 10 from primary schools, 20 from Secondary schools and 3 from schools that did not identify themselves. 264 people were involved in the meetings across the schools, 187 of them identified themselves as class teachers and 77 as classroom support staff. 120 of the respondents were from primary schools, 118 were from secondary schools and 26 were from schools that did not identify themselves. The average number of Classroom support staff for each meeting was 29% but this fell to only 2% in the Geography and English (or Humanities) meetings in the Secondary schools.

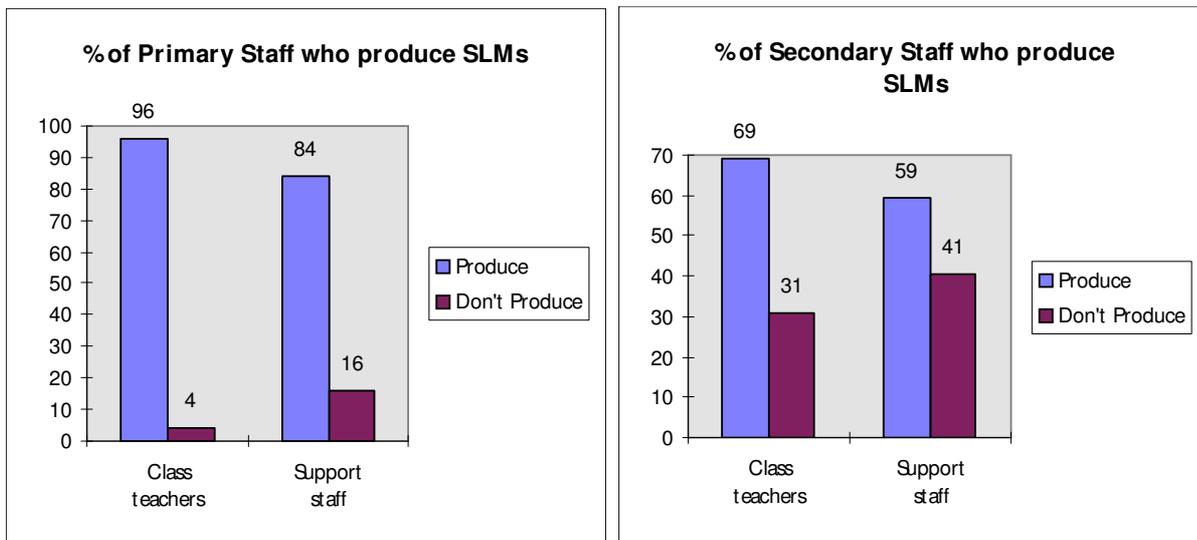
There was a very broad agreement about the definition of SLMs, in this case simplified English. 97% of staff felt able to agree with the definition of simplified English materials as: "Simplified English materials use shorter words and sentences, with fewer clauses, and less negative and passive forms, in comparison to the texts used typically in a given setting." Around 3% could not agree. This rose to 5% among Primary class teachers and Secondary Support staff, but the

numbers concerned were still very small. This agreement offers a useful starting point for any further work in this area, presenting both a common reference point and a clear, though slightly simplistic, set of directions.

The rest of the questions in the survey were all based around the definition of SLMs that 97% agreed with. Based on that definition 87% of staff said that they use SLMs. This dropped to 70% of Secondary class teachers, falling further to 53% of those at the Geography, English and Humanities meetings.

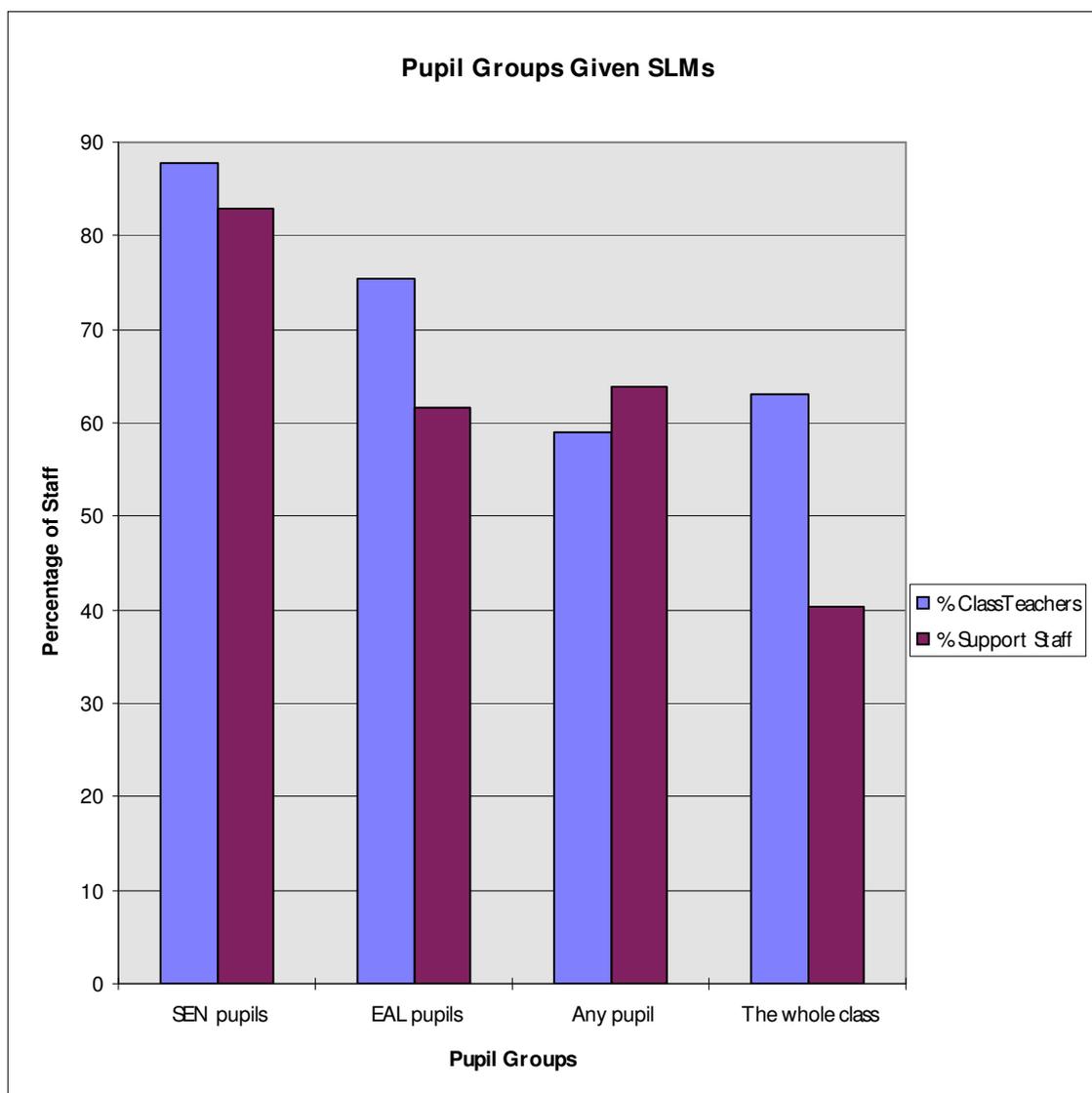


Similarly 81% of staff said that they produce SLMs. This dropped to 66% in relation to secondary schools, with 69% of class teachers and 59% of support teachers saying that they produced the materials, dropping to 53% in relation to those at the Geography, English and Humanities meetings. It is important to remember that this latter figure almost entirely represents subject teachers. Nonetheless, the very fact that so many staff are trying to produce materials can be set against findings that many teachers beyond the English department do not feel it is their duty to act as language teachers (Barnard & Burgess, 2001). Their reliance on simplification however may result from their feeling that they have little time to prepare work, are uncertain about how they should proceed and therefore call upon skills in which they feel they are already practised (Rix, 2004).



The slight differences between those who say they produce and use SLMs is unexplained, but it is possible that they are the result of teaching staff producing materials for support staff or using published texts such as those available in reading schemes or those designed for people with learning difficulties.

The most common group that staff said they support is the SEN students (85%), then the whole class (57%), then any student (56%) and finally the EAL students (53%). This figure for EAL students is slightly anomalous however because a number of schools did not have EAL students. In those schools with EAL students the percentages remained similar for SEN students (86%), any student (60%) and the whole class (58%) but 72% now indicated that they would use SLMs with EAL students. In Secondary schools with EAL students production of SLMs by support staff dropped to 41%. This seems to suggest there is less reliance upon simplified language as would be expected based on best practice advocated in the Communicative Language approach. Nonetheless this is still a high percentage. This could reflect the observation made in the introduction that production of SLMs is a fall back position when there is no language in common.



Similar priorities were seen within the Secondary and Primary sectors, but given that more SLMs were used in Primary settings the percentages were that much higher. For example, 97% of Primary staff said they would use materials with SEN students against 70% in the Secondary schools. 8 of the schools put caveats on their use of SLMs with any students or the whole class, noting that they used them “only when appropriate”, or “in specific sets”, or “lower down the school”. 1 school made it very clear that only Learning Support Assistants (LSA) differentiate materials, and another that simplified materials are only for use in situations where students with SEN are withdrawn from the mainstream class.

Discussion of Comments

There were 72 coded comments in response to the question, "What are the consequences of using simplified English materials?" As a consequence the coded responses represent the views of 28 of the 33 schools.

Over half of the coded schools made comments about comprehension issues, dealing with improved language comprehension and improved understanding of material, subject, or task. Individual comments included statements that students are not held back by the text from understanding the task, that they can grasp concepts, that they have a better understanding of concepts, at an earlier stage and that this understanding can be reinforced. All of these comments suggest that SLMs would have a positive impact on comprehension.

12 of the coded schools made comments about access issues, suggesting that SLMs offer greater access to the texts, materials, lessons, subjects, and learning. Individual comments included statements that students with literary difficulties have access to learning, that classroom differentiation is made easier, that the work is more appropriate for individual needs, and that it overcomes an inability to access GCSE texts. The main thrust was to do with providing access to the curriculum and again all the comments were entirely positive.

Over one third of all comments were about improving comprehension and access to the curriculum. There was no correlation between the presence of or absence of students with EAL and the responses of schools. No comments were made either to suggest that the improved comprehension or access were limited to specific groups. These comments combined came from 20 out of the 28 schools (71%). It would appear therefore that within a majority of schools there is a perception among at least some of the staff that SLMs will improve comprehension and curriculum access for a wide variety of students.

Comments highlighting positive impact of SLMs on Access	Comments highlighting positive impact of SLMs on Comprehension
Access to learning for those with literary difficulties	Better comprehension of language
Access to material	Reinforces understanding
Inability to access some texts (GCSE)	Kids can understand
Students able to access lesson/subject/curriculum	Easier understanding
Increases access to the subject	Better understanding
Allows those with low reading age or understanding to access the curriculum	Students not held back by text from understanding task
Greater access to curriculum	Grasp concepts
Allowing groups and individuals better access to the curriculum	Greater understanding
Giving children access to curriculum	Better understanding of concepts for less able pupils
Classroom differentiation made easier/work appropriate for individual needs	Better understanding
Enables greater access to curriculum	Easy understanding of text, language at an earlier stage
	Understand it – comprehend more easily
	Understanding
	Greater comprehension

Some staff must feel there is some concrete evidence for this increased access and comprehension, too, because 1 school said that subject knowledge increased, while 7 other schools made statements about issues of achievement, suggesting that SLMs enable students to improve results, their quality work and feel successful. This sense of self-worth and capability was underlined in a variety of ways. 3 schools highlighted confidence issues, both generally and in the ability to carry out tasks, as well as the ability of SLMs to raise self-esteem. 3 schools highlighted independence, suggesting the SLMs increase independence of working and understanding of purpose, and 3 schools talked about motivation, suggesting that SLMs

increased student motivation within the classroom, and made them feel 'safe'. Another school talked about greater participation in the setting, while 2 others talked about enjoyment issues, suggesting SLMs increased pleasure and effort. A couple more mentioned speed of progress issues, suggesting there is an increased rate of progress of both students and of the lessons themselves. In total 13 schools (46%) felt that in some way achievement, participation, motivation and confidence was improved.

This increased involvement of students would seem to have an impact on classroom organisation too. Over 30% of both Primary and Secondary schools identified the impact of SLMs on the ease of teaching and learning and on behaviour issues, including managing the classroom and the learning experience, coping with language differences and needs, and keeping students on task. There were a couple of individual comments too about the impact of SLMs on teacher knowledge and the teacher's improved understanding of the needs of students because of their need to examine their own understanding.

All the comments so far discussed were framed in a positive manner, but there were a few which raised concerns about the potential risks from SLMs in mainstream settings, some of which have been raised elsewhere (Rix, 2004). 2 of the secondary schools pointed out that if used inappropriately SLMs can highlight differences and encourage segregation, whilst 3 schools raised issues of relevance, pointing out that SLMs can bore some students and encourage a work sheet approach. In the same categories however, there were comments from 3 schools about the ability of SLMs to facilitate the inclusion of all students.

Coding of Comments describing the Consequences of using SLMs

Impact of SLMs	Primary comments	Secondary comments	Unidentified comments	Total number of comments	% of coded schools making this comment
Comprehension	4	9	2	15	53
Access	4	6	2	12	42
Achievement	1	6	0	7	25
Ease of Teaching & learning	2	5	0	7	25
Behaviour	0	5	1	6	21
Equality	1	5	0	6	21
Motivation	0	1	2	3	10
Independence	1	2	0	3	10
Relevance	1	1	1	3	10
Confidence	2	1	0	3	10
Enjoyment	0	2	0	2	7
Speed of progress	0	2	0	2	7
Impact on Teacher knowledge	0	1	0	1	3
Participation	0	1	0	1	3
Subject knowledge	0	1	0	1	3
TOTAL	16.00	48.00	8.00	72.00	
% OF TOTAL	22.22	66.67	11.11	100.00	

It seems important to report on some of the uncoded comments too. These include the views of 5 schools not otherwise mentioned. The majority of the uncoded comments echoed the positive comments as coded above, but there were a number of practical considerations and concerns expressed that should not be dismissed simply because the coders could not agree where they fitted in. Teachers in 3 schools talked about the need to create banks of resources, the difficulties of doing so and the time constraints they face. Teachers in 4 schools talked about the difficulties for students because they were experiencing restricted sentence structures and limited vocabulary, and that this lack of complex texts would impact upon language development. 1 school stated that differentiation was the most recent term for simplified language materials.

Conclusion

This survey suggests that staff believe that there is a value in SLMs in ways that research into comprehension and language acquisition does not support, or has not yet explored. It suggests that the majority of teachers and support staff in England are producing and using SLMs with a wide range of students. Staff in 92% of the coded schools, for example, commented that SLMs would have a positive impact on the involvement and learning of a

wide range of students. Staff clearly feel that SLMs help them to support individuals described as having special educational needs or English as an additional language, as well as assisting them in their organisation of the classroom and in their ability to work with students.

The high percentage of staff who are producing SLMs for people who are learning English as an additional language may be a cause for concern. The survey did not ask for specific details about the levels of language acquisition of the pupils at which these materials are targeted, and therefore it may be possible that staff are only using the materials in a very constrained and directed manner. However, there were no comments that suggested this to be the case, though it was noted by staff in 7 schools (both with and without EAL pupils) that if not handled carefully then it is possible that there can be a negative social and linguistic impact.

This research does not suggest that SLMs increase comprehension, or improve access and behaviour, of course, but importantly it does suggest that staff perceive this to be the case. These perceptions will in turn create expectations which will to some degree be self-fulfilling (Rogers, 1982). It is quite possible that teachers believe in the value of SLMs because they see positive results in their working lives; it is also possible however that their belief in SLMs could be a consequence of taking the time and trouble to create them, and therefore having a subsequent commitment to them. It is possible too that staff do not feel that they have another skill or resource available to them.

The use of SLMs is a teaching strategy that can build upon the strengths of teachers as simplifiers. They fit in with one of the fundamental practices of teachers, to simplify ideas so they are contiguous with the understanding of the learner. In addition they meet the identified needs of those with learning difficulties who with expansion of inclusive practice are a growing part of the school population. Of course, just because teachers are doing something does not make it the best way of working. We cannot just ignore research into complex tasks and language acquisition to fit in with current teacher practice. This research does however highlight the need to examine the effectiveness of the use of SLMs within mainstream classrooms, at both Primary and Secondary level, and to research into the application of SLMs in different ways, in different subjects and at different junctures within

lessons. It is quite possible that there are times when it is a very useful strategy to enhance the comprehension and access to learning of all.

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