



National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

Insights

What research has to tell us about ESOL

Review of NRDC studies on English for
Speakers of Other Languages 2006

David Mallows



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Introduction

This review of NRDC research into ESOL comes at a critical time for this key aspect of *Skills for Life*, the national strategy to develop the literacy, numeracy, language and ICT skills of everyone over 16 in England. The dynamism and large-scale funding for the *Skills for Life* programme has enabled rapid growth of ESOL provision, which has expanded well beyond expectations since 2001. Demand has risen even faster, partly as a result of migration from EU accession countries.

In this context, NIACE conducted an inquiry into ESOL this year. *More than a language*, the report of the inquiry, was published in October 2006. It makes many recommendations to government for developing ESOL, to which there has been a positive response. The Department for Education and Skills has also made some recent announcements on ESOL funding, introducing a more targeted approach. From September 2007, adult asylum-seekers awaiting the outcome of applications to stay in Britain will no longer automatically qualify; and a system of fee waivers will prioritise unemployed people and those on income-based benefits.

To put these changes in context, and understand the focus of NRDC research, it is worth remembering some history. ESOL was part of *Skills for Life* from its launch in 2001 and benefited from equivalent investment and the development of curricula, assessment and professional practice. ESOL has consequently been included in NRDC research from the start in two ways. First, we have recognised ESOL, like numeracy and literacy, as a distinct area of teaching and learning. It has been a strand of NRDC research on workforce basic skills, embedded learning, rural provision, adult learners' lives, and teacher education.

Secondly, we have undertaken research into ESOL alone. In choosing such projects, we bore in mind that there is a huge and growing body of theory and research about second language acquisition in general and about adult learners of English as a second, or foreign, language in particular. NRDC did not want to duplicate this. Consultation with practitioners suggested that the characteristics of ESOL that often pose difficult teaching and learning challenges are:

- The extraordinary diversity of the backgrounds, previous education and current circumstances of learners in the same class.
- Learners' strong motivation to learn English as a route to employment or further study.
- The fact that learners often have little access to interaction with English-speakers outside the classroom.

There have been two large studies: the effective practice research and sets of case studies. We have also aimed to provide access to the huge existing body of knowledge referred to above through commissioning two reviews, one on pedagogy, the other on applied linguistics. This new review was prepared for the NIACE inquiry. It brings together a wealth of knowledge generated by 18 research projects that have all involved practitioners. It contributes to our understanding of ESOL learners, what motivates them and what goes on in the ESOL classroom. It does not attempt to offer a total picture of ESOL, or engage with funding issues. There is always updating to be done, particularly on topics that have 'moved on' such as teacher training and use of citizenship materials. But we hope you will find this review relevant and useful, and welcome your views.

Contact us at www.nrdc.org.uk

What is ESOL provision?

“For many learners the classroom is their main reference group, sometimes the most motivating aspect of their lives – what helps them to get up in the morning.”

(Roberts et al, 2004: page14)

More than just language learning

The classroom provides much more than just language learning for many ESOL students. They also gain significant psychological, social, and emotional benefits. The ESOL class can act as their main reference point in an unfamiliar environment and provides a structure that is often lacking, particularly for refugees and asylum-seekers.

“We wake up in the morning and we don’t know where to go, sometimes we spend the whole day at home.” (Roberts et al, 2004:30)

“If you stay home you may watch the wall.” (CANDI, PLRI round 2 ¹)

For such learners being a member of an ESOL group is highly motivational, providing access to informal social support and the chance to establish and maintain friendships:

“When I come in the college in the morning, it make me happy ... because I meet some friends ... and we learn some English.” (Roberts et al, 2004:24)

“Our class is like a football playground. Yeah because when you stay at home you say, oh today I missed the best game.” (CANDI, PLRI round 2)

This also points to the social role that the ESOL classroom plays. Learners taking part in the NRDC’s ESOL Effective Practice Project (EPPP ²) explained that through their classes they have the opportunity to meet people from nationalities that they have never encountered before:

“...it’s particularly good to learn amongst so many different cultures and nationalities. When I first arrived here, this was very interesting for me – to see

¹ One of six small-scale practitioner-led research projects run as part of round two of the NRDC Practitioner-led Research Initiative. This particular project looked at retention on ESOL courses at City and Islington College, a large inner-city FE college in London. To be published winter 2006/7.

² The ESOL Effective Practice Project was one of a suite of five ‘Linked effective practice studies’ projects. It investigated the range of approaches to the teaching of ESOL to adult learners. To be published January 2007

so many different cultures and people from different parts of the world in one place.” Iranian woman, London (EEPP)

The friendships forged in the classroom are a significant emotional support for these learners, helping to combat the isolation that often results from their lack of English language skills and giving them confidence and a sense of identity that is frequently missing outside the college. The friendships also extend outside the classroom and allow them to practise using English, which they have little chance to do elsewhere in their lives.

“When you’re in college you speak English, when you’re outside you speak your own language.” (CANDI, PLRI round 2)

The EEPP also reports on the limited opportunities many ESOL learners have to practise English outside the classroom and lists some of the reasons for this:

Working in ethnic work units or in jobs in which they only have to speak their dominant language... working in a job where they don’t have to speak much at all in any language... being unemployed... having no contact at all with speakers of English, because of isolation or because of living in a community big enough to get all their needs met... because local people are unfriendly, unavailable or unapproachable; or just through shyness... (EEPP)

Such findings point to the need to consider and value the social nature of language learning as well as cognitive elements.

A safe, supportive environment

One reason why the ESOL classroom plays a significant social role in learners’ lives is that their teachers place such a strong emphasis on the creation of a safe, supportive environment. For those with a traumatic past, some teachers choose to filter out subjects and perspectives that are painful or undermining. In the ESOL case study *“This is not enough for one’s life”: perceptions of living and learning English in Blackburn by students seeking asylum and refugee status* (2004) we learn how one teacher approaches themes such as ‘family’ with extreme caution, knowing that this is a very painful subject for students who have lost contact with theirs, or who fear for their safety. For such learners the teacher’s awareness of and sensitivity to their particular experiences allows them temporarily to put aside other issues in their lives and just be a student. However, ESOL teachers do not ignore the realities or experiences of their learners; they focus on their needs and problems as a way of promoting solidarity and helping them to learn from each other (EEPP). The teacher mentioned above

has drawn on students’ willingness and initiatives to support each other both outside and inside the class. (She) actively encourages the students to look to their peers for learning support rather than setting herself up as the sole language expert in the class: ‘Right, you can help each other, you don’t have to work on your own, you can help each other with your meanings.’

The creation of a supportive learning environment is not solely reliant on sensitivity to learners' backgrounds. Teachers also anticipate cultural and linguistic difficulties that their learners are likely to face. This means that learners feel comfortable asking for clarification and using new language in a safe environment.

The research also shows that the ESOL classroom provides learners with a predictable and structured environment in contrast to the harsh and uncertain reality that confronts many of them in the 'outside world'. One learner saw her class "as a way of escaping the house and of escaping sadness". In such classes there is often a consistent approach to behaviour management, with clear rules agreed with the learners and the use of a course book to show visible progress and create a sense of achievement.

Responding holistically to learning and social needs

ESOL learners' lives are often extremely complex. They face an array of challenges such as restarting their lives in a new country, dealing with unfamiliar bureaucracies, raising families and looking for work – all in a language they have not mastered and in an unfamiliar and, at times, hostile environment.

"Here we've got a lot of things around us, I have a job, I study, I have some problem about my children, my home, something like that you know."
[CANDI, PLRI round 2]

For asylum-seekers, the problems are compounded by the uncertainty of waiting for a decision on their claims while dealing with the aftermath of the situations that forced them to leave their countries in the first place. Haxhi, an asylum-seeker from Kosovo who was interviewed as part of the EEPP, comments:

"I don't know what is going to happen. I have a family here and I want a better life for them but it does not depend on me. Today I am here in college and at midnight the police might knock on my door and tell me to leave this country and go back to Kosovo."

The resulting stress is likely to have a detrimental effect on learning (EEPP). Accordingly, another important element of the work of the ESOL teacher is to respond holistically to learners' social and learning needs. However, their efforts are hampered by the lack of a coordinated approach to providing support services for ESOL students. One of the main conclusions of the NRDC ESOL Case Studies (2004) was that there is a need for more proactive cross-agency support for refugees and asylum-seekers as most teachers were juggling a number of roles and lacked institutional support and specialist knowledge to do so. (Roberts et al, 2004:10)

Language socialisation

The NRDC research also underlines that, for ESOL learners, talk within the classroom has significance beyond the acquisition of fluency and linguistic accuracy. They are also engaged in a process of socialisation through language. They are learning to interact with others in this new language and becoming familiar with some of the rules that govern such interactions. This is made particularly clear in the NRDC Embedded Case Studies (2004) in which ESOL students on vocational courses learn to become members of another social group (e.g. potential childcare workers). The promise this membership offers is an important motivation for improving their language learning. Equally, in the ESOL classroom, learners require social and pragmatic knowledge of how the language is used in real communication. Only with this will they be able to succeed in their interactions with the teacher and their fellow learners as well as with those they must negotiate in unfamiliar institutional and bureaucratic settings.

Who are the learners?

“Overall, the ESOL classroom can be recognised by the diversity of the backgrounds and needs of its learners.”

Diversity

Breaking the Language Barriers (Department for Education and Employment, 2000) identified four broad categories of potential ESOL learner:

- settled communities
- refugees and asylum-seekers
- migrant workers
- partners and spouses of students.

NRDC has not carried out any large-scale surveys of ESOL learners and so it is not possible to comment on how accurate this classification is or to assess what the weighting of each group might be. However, it is safe to say that there has been an increase in demand from migrant workers travelling to work in England since the accession countries joined the European Union in May 2004 and that ESOL classrooms are still populated by representatives of the three other groups outlined above as well. Interviews and focus groups carried out with students and teachers also show that within these broad groups there is considerable diversity. The EEPP team said their sample of 40 ESOL classes:

... vary greatly both in terms of the length of time their students have been in the UK, and their immigration status and backgrounds. Most classes are mixed, not representative of a particular established local migrant community. In only around nine classes are the students predominantly from established or settled immigrant communities, and in only a small number of these, mostly outside London, are there classes where all the students share one similar linguistic and cultural background.

It is worth noting that most of the EEPP fieldwork was carried out before the EU accession

issue impacted on classrooms. The ESOL student profile is constantly shifting.

All learners come to classrooms with a range of aptitudes, personality traits, motivations, cognitive styles, learning disabilities, social identities, life experiences, interests, attitudes and values. But ESOL learners also bring their own acquired literacy practices in their mother tongue and in English, as well as varying degrees of existing linguistic knowledge, some of which has been formally acquired in other classrooms.

What is particularly apparent in ESOL classrooms is the wide range of backgrounds, life experiences and levels of education of the learners. While many ESOL learners have had no basic education in their home country and often have limited literacy in their mother tongue, others are professionals with successful careers. Most of the classes studied as part of the ESOL Case Studies project contained highly educated professional people with considerable cultural capital. As the EEPP authors note:

Just because learners have limited English does not mean that they have limited, parochial minds. (EEPP)

Some ESOL learners have come to the UK in search of a better economic future or to join already established family members. Others, fleeing war or persecution, are changed by past trauma and fearful of the future. This diversity would appear to be increasing:

The hyper-diversity amongst migrant populations caused by globalisation and migration (both voluntary and forced) means that ESOL learners vary hugely in terms of their immigration status, education, background and experiences of war and other strife. (EEPP)

Data from the EEPP suggests that it would be beneficial to make a further distinction between those ESOL learners who have recently arrived in the UK and long-term residents. First, the two groups identified within the EEPP have different profiles:

There are salient and statistically significant differences between these two groups. There are proportionally more men in the recently settled group than there are in the long-term residents group. There are proportionally fewer young students in the long-term group. A higher proportion of long-term resident learners reported that they could not read or write in their first language. The groups also differ significantly in terms of mean years of schooling reported, with an average of 9.15 years for the more recently arrived group and 7.13 years for the longer-term residents. The latter group are also significantly more likely to be attending non-intensive courses of 8 hours per week or less. (EEPP)

Secondly, their rate of learning is also distinct. The length of time students had spent in the UK by the start of the period in which the study was carried out was found to have a significant negative correlation with progress. More recent arrivals in the UK made greater progress than longer-term residents.

In recent years there has been a lot of emphasis on the need for differentiation in the ESOL classroom to take account of this diversity and to ensure that the needs of all learners are met. There are different approaches to, and ways of, differentiating. It can take the form of separate objectives for students within a group activity or extension activities. It is also worth noting that effective differentiation can be too subtle to appear on lesson plans and schemes of work. NRDC research, particularly the Adult Learners' Lives (2006) project, makes it clear that the possibilities for differentiation increase as teachers get to know their students better. This suggests that as well as tutorial slots (in which individual target-setting can be an effective way of differentiating by outcome) teachers should use formative assessment activities to gain a fuller understanding of learners' needs and abilities.

However, it may be that we are asking too much of ESOL teachers and that differentiation within a general ESOL classroom is not enough to adequately meet the needs of such a diverse group of learners.

The hyper-diversity of ESOL learners cannot be fully catered for by differentiation in the classroom alone. Pathways need to be developed which cater for specialisations. (EEPP)

Such specialisations would include provision for those who are not literate or have low levels of literacy. Both the ESOL Case Studies and the EEPP noted a number of examples of non-literate learners being placed in classes without literacy support, or without a teacher trained in literacy instruction. This has a very negative effect on their progress and is often the cause of drop-out and poor achievement because, despite the best efforts of the teacher, the style of delivery, the materials and the speed of the classes mean that the learners' needs are not met. The EEPP report gives voice to a learner with limited literacy who contrasts his experience in a general ESOL class with that of his current dedicated literacy class:

"To be frank, I wanted to stop coming to the classes ... because the teacher would be telling us something and trying to put something into our heads to make us learn as much as she could teach us, but why didn't we understand even though she tried hard? ... that was worrying me a lot. But when Linda takes us you feel like you can study in her class for a lifetime." (EEPP)

NRDC research, in particular the ESOL Case Studies, has also highlighted the need for more high-level provision and for more intensive, fast-track courses with high-quality careers advice to support the needs of professionals and others to help them to enter the job market more swiftly.

Motivations

Retention on ESOL classes tends to be lower than on other adult courses. Many of the reasons for this are related to the often chaotic nature of ESOL learners' lives; for example, ill-health, asylum-seeker displacement policies and uncertain employment patterns. This was highlighted in *Breaking the Language Barriers*.

... research into progression and drop-out in ESOL programmes indicated that about one in four students dropped out in any one year for a range of reasons, including change of accommodation, childcare and dissatisfaction with the lack of progress they were making on the course.

However, while it is clear that retention is, and will remain, an issue for ESOL providers, many learners show great persistence and do stay in classes despite the many obstacles they face in their often difficult and complicated lives. From NRDC research we can identify three major reasons why ESOL learners persist: self-improvement, the desire to integrate into UK society and to gain control over their own lives.

The need to learn English quickly and to a standard that will enable them to enter the workforce or to study is the primary goal of many learners. They want to create a better life for themselves and their families through further study and to gain higher qualifications or get a better job:

“I want to improve my English; I want to gain a certificate, a qualification, because I want a better future for me and my family.”

Another consistent finding is that ESOL learners see the improvement of their language skills as key to their integration into British society. They want to be able to communicate with other people and to function fully in society. This desire to integrate in the host culture is consistently expressed:

“Most important is that we live in this country...we have to push us because we are not moving back.”

The other major motivation is the need for more independence, choice and control over their lives. As one learner commented:

“I want to learn English and I have to speak fluently so I can say for myself. When I went to hospital or somewhere before (student has a chronic condition) I needed an interpreter but now I can manage by myself.”

Teaching and learning

“Rather than the ‘building blocks’ or ‘jigsaw puzzle’ approach to language learning in which one block or piece is placed after the other, language development is the result of gradually building up an elaborate network of connections.” (EPPP)

The complexity of language development

While the ESOL classroom provides more than just language learning, we have also seen that learners’ primary motivation is to learn English and that teachers see their primary responsibility as teaching the language. Little of the NRDC’s research has focused primarily on learners’ language development. However, throughout the reports on which this paper is based there is an acceptance of the complexity of language development and indeed of the teaching-learning process.

The myriad factors that result in language development mean that there is no simple causal link between what the teacher teaches and what the learner learns.

...learning is not always predictable as a product of input, but created through constant negotiations between individuals, social environments and broader social influences. A consequence of this complexity is that learning is rarely a simple sum of what has been taught in class. (Ivanic & Tseng, 2005:10)

This implies that we should take a broader view of the classroom and examine in more depth the social context in which the learning is situated.

The NRDC research does not presuppose that language development is a linear process nor that it is necessarily directly linked to input of specific items of language. The trajectory of a learner’s language development is influenced by many interacting factors; progress and backsliding in equal and unpredictable measures is the norm rather than the exception.

The complex nature of second language acquisition means that different learners will learn different things from the language they find in the classroom. Accordingly, a key role for the teacher is to create learning opportunities that expose students to the target language and encourage purposeful communication, whether or not that communication is closely linked to the curriculum. As noted in the NRDC ESOL Case Studies:

Much of the language use visible in the ... classrooms cannot be neatly tied to curricular objectives. It cannot be dismissed as incidental, since this assumes it is a sideline to the main project: the ordered acquisition of language. (Roberts et al, 2004:14)

Group work

In ESOL learning 'talk is work' and teachers need to be aware of the importance of a language-rich classroom in which learners can engage with the language in meaningful ways.

ESOL classrooms are extraordinarily heterogeneous and are largely made up of talk. As well as being the medium of learning, talk is what is being learnt. Talk is work. (Roberts et al, 2004:7)

The classroom provides many ESOL learners with their only opportunity to speak English. The EEPP found that they place a high value on speaking in class and tend to see small group and pair work as more beneficial than individualised learning. Group work would appear to provide rich learning opportunities. Here, interaction with others in a shared socio-cultural context is the key to learning and can be greatly enhanced by the skill and sensitivity of the teacher. ESOL teachers create not just a safe and supportive environment but one in which language interactions are encouraged and valued, leading to opportunities for both formal and informal learning. This talk may be generated through specific activities or emerge from conversations around routine classroom tasks. The latter produces language that has authentic communicative value, rather than language practice and should be valued as such.

Teachers' own use of language is particularly important here as they:

... sustain learner involvement by differentiating through their own spoken language choices and on-the-spot analysis and responsiveness to learner talk. Turning talk into learning. (EEPP)

The teacher should also be aware of the potential of their language use to act as a sample of the language to be learned rather than as a conveyor of information.

Furthermore, the EEPP and the ESOL Case Studies note that learners often have limited opportunities to speak English outside the classroom. This adds considerably to the importance of teachers encouraging extended output in the classroom. This can be achieved partly through formal structured teaching activities such as role-plays and

through classroom organisation in the form of pair and group work. However, while these provide more opportunities for learners to speak English in the classroom they would appear to be less effective than what the EEPP terms 'speaking from within' in which real communication takes place in the classroom.

These are the times when learners have a (sometimes urgent) need to communicate to deal with outrage, frustrations, sadness and to explain or ask for advice about unfamiliar or upsetting issues, or to argue their case in a personal matter or over more abstract and analytical points. They have to assemble whatever resources they have to convey intent and are pushed to extend their communicative ability in ways which more tightly controlled and less personally engaging elements of the lesson do less often. (EEPP)

This type of authentic and personalised language use can also act as a counter-balance to the more formal and restricted elements of the classroom. ESOL teachers need to identify discrete language elements on lesson plans and schemes of work as these provide an explicit structure to the course and make monitoring of achievement of SMART³ targets easier to manage. However, there is no comparable measure for authentic practice and the time available for it is inevitably limited by a focus on discrete language items. This can mean that learners and teachers place less value on authentic communicative activities than on work on more easily measurable practice of discrete language items.

A recent small-scale practitioner research project working with ESOL learners in the south-west of England studied the use of extra-curricular activities to supplement what happens in the classroom - exercise classes, social events, arts and craft classes and clubs, local visits and coach trips to destinations further afield. It concluded that these activities can help to build confidence and self-esteem, provide opportunities for real engagement with local institutions and services, and stimulate the growth of support networks within the community that encourage both engagement and progression. Furthermore, the opportunities they provide for authentic language use encourage the type of 'speaking from within' identified by the EEPP.

It is also clear that these extra-curricular activities have a direct impact on language learning itself: to state the obvious, it is clear that learning is not confined to the classroom...In fact these activities should be part of the curriculum; they are not 'adding value' to ESOL provision, they are ESOL provision. (Exeter, PLRI round 2⁴)

The learners involved were also clear that the extra-curricular activities had benefited their language learning:

"These trips are very, very useful - in class - talk is limited. Like children - when we're out there is more open opportunity for communication." (Exeter, PLRI round 2)

3 SMART = **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic and **T**ime-related

4 One of six small-scale projects run as part of round two of the NRDC Practitioner-Led Research Initiative, this particular project looked at the potential value of extra-curricular activities on a community ESOL project. To be published winter 2006/7.

Individual learning plans

The EEPP notes a tension between the group processes that teachers and learners value as the natural mechanism for language learning and the need to focus on individual learning goals that has been introduced as part of *Skills for Life*. The most visible and controversial element of this individualisation of learning in the ESOL classroom is the use of individual learning plans (ILPs). Prior to *Skills for Life*, ILPs were not widely used in ESOL. Only a third of respondents to the ESOL ILPs project⁵ had been using these plans with their learners before the introduction of the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum.

The EEPP found that the great majority of teachers were critical of the use of ILPs with ESOL learners. They were concerned that the focus on individual language learning goals and SMART targets were at the expense of the type of group processes and classroom interaction patterns discussed above. This was echoed in the ESOL ILPs project expert focus group. Its participants questioned the validity of SMART target-setting and whether there was any pedagogical basis to demonstrate that such targets either describe or support the language-learning process. Teachers felt that the use of SMART targets and the implication that language can be acquired through the ticking off of a series of discrete items betrays a misunderstanding of how language is used and learnt. A concern reported in the ESOL ILPs project was that this focus on small aims may lead to teachers losing sight of the bigger picture of learners' overall language development.

Furthermore, although ESOL learners often have very clear ideas of why they are learning English and what they hope to gain in the long term:

Their broad, long-term aims have to be translated into short-term goals and turned into specific, analytic language targets, a task which can be challenging for teachers and bewildering for students. (EEPP)

This is clearly compounded with learners at Entry Levels 1 and 2 who do not have sufficient command of the language to engage in meaningful negotiation with their teacher about what language goals to include on their ILPs. However, analysing language learning is not just difficult for learners at Entry Levels 1 and 2. Learners on a course for professionals with advanced English language skills interviewed as part of the ESOL Case Studies project were unable to monitor their language behaviour or be analytical about their communication needs outside the classroom. ILPs can therefore become little more than

...a mantra to 'improve my English' or 'learn more grammar'. There is clearly a need, particularly at more advanced levels, to focus on the language for reflecting about learning, if learners are to gain a greater sense of ownership of their learning. (Roberts et al, 2004:15)

Another clear consequence of the introduction of ILPs is an increase in workload. The report of the ESOL ILPs project graphically illustrates this by calculating the number of goals and targets a typical teacher may have to agree, monitor and assess.

The number of group goals ranges from 0 - 60 per year (max) and individual

⁵ This project described the range of practice in planning learning for ESOL learners at Entry Levels 1 and 2 in a sample of institutions nationally across accredited and non-accredited learning programmes.

goals range from 0 – 30 per year (and in one example 3 per week for 6 weeks). From the current data, the average ILP has 4.5 pages, 5.5 group goals and 4 individual goals. Given that many tutors are the course tutor for 2 - 4 groups at one time, this would result in a total of 20 – 70 ILPs. Assuming an average class size and ILP that would give the teacher a total of 110- 330 group goals and 80 – 240 individual goals to agree, monitor and assess. (ESOL ILPs)

It is clear from the ESOL Case Studies, the EEPP and the ESOL ILPs project that there is no clear consensus on what needs to be included on an ILP, how the information should be collected or in what ways it should inform the learning process. This appears to be in large part due to a lack of clarity at national level on the function of ESOL ILPs and a failure to set clear guidelines for their design and use. As one respondent to the ESOL ILPs project commented:

“...a lot of time and effort is wasted re-inventing the wheel. Why doesn't the inspectorate send us the form that they require us to do and we'll do it?” (ESOL ILPs)

Indeed, 82 per cent of respondents to the ESOL ILPs project were using plans that had been developed in-house rather than following a nationally agreed pro-forma.

Practitioners have reported that they want to know what good practice in ESOL ILPs looks like and they want more clarity on the function of ESOL ILPs. It is significant that feedback from inspectors can be inconsistent and, at times, contradictory. A literature review and audit of documentation from key national bodies also highlighted a wide range of guidance and lack of consistency on the key message of what the function of an ILP is and what an ESOL ILP needs to be. (ESOL ILPs)

The issues outlined above should not be taken to imply that ESOL teachers object in principle to their learners having and owning personal learning plans. Indeed, where these address learner rather than institutional needs, they are often viewed very positively. Neither should the impression be given that ESOL provision should be entirely group orientated; individual attention given to learners by teachers, both informally and particularly during tutorials, is consistently identified as important by ESOL teachers interviewed as part of NRDC projects.

In all aspects of the research, the value of tutorial time was reiterated by practitioners and learners alike. In addition to providing an important opportunity for some of the informal pastoral conversations which feature in many ESOL teacher-learner 1:1 exchanges, tutorials provide an important opportunity for goal-setting and feedback. (ESOL ILPs)

Learners also value the chance to discuss their progress individually with the teacher. A recent small-scale practitioner research project working with ESOL learners at a large further education college in London reported that learners valued highly their teacher's

ability to give individual attention within the classroom. This suggests that learners need to feel that the teacher understands their progression as an individual.

“A good teacher is worried about each person. We get it here through tutorials, individual work, what we have to do to improve.” (CANDI, PLRI round 2)

In the focus groups that were used to explore learners' views, tutorials were identified as a key mechanism for providing individual attention but ILPs were not mentioned at all. It would appear that individual attention is dealt with from the learner's perspective by talking with the teacher rather than being mediated through SMART targets in a document over which they feel little ownership.

Relevance

The mainly textbook-based materials used in ESOL classes often have little relevance to learners' lives.

Many learners were critical of readings taken from textbooks, which one student called 'a dead mouse' as compared with authentic material from the media. (Roberts et al, 2004:98)

The ESOL Case Studies report concludes that more authentic and contemporary texts led to more participation and discussion than textbook readings and also that the learners were:

...continually recontextualising the often bland and invented worlds of the course materials so that they can make them meaningful to their own lives. (Roberts et al, 2004:15)

ESOL learners also appear to be very aware of, and place great importance on, the extent to which their learning programme is relevant to their everyday needs and helps them to integrate into society at a deeper level.

When she teach us is help us outside college because she teach us for like election like London places and you can use the language outside. (CANDI, PLRI round 2)

The final report of the NRDC Adult Learners' Lives project confirms the importance of making learning relevant to people's lives.

We observed that engagement was most apparent when tasks were personally meaningful to students, in the sense that they could see the relevance of the task to their own lives, and when they were exercising choice and control over what they do. (Ivanic et al, 2006: 43)

However, the authors also point out that in much of the teaching they observed, making

learning activities relevant to learners' lives was done mostly in passing, rather than being a central part of the curriculum. This can be partly explained by the perceived need among tutors to identify discrete language elements on lesson plans and schemes of work to cover the curriculum in detail, leaving less time for work on more authentic or relevant texts. Again, from the NRDC Adult Learners' Lives project:

There was a strong grammar focus in the Entry Level 3 ESOL class in Blackburn. The tutor said that teachers feel that the ESOL assessment criteria demand a fairly hierarchical, step-by-step approach to covering the curriculum. (Ivanic et al, 2006:35)

There is also very little time and support for the development of specific materials and resources that would help these students to gain information and knowledge about the cultures of the society they are living in. However, this situation may change with the introduction of citizenship courses and associated materials, particularly if those materials are related to learners' lives and have a clear focus on the language they need.

Tutor recruitment and training

“ESOL teachers are working in a variety of challenging situations that make regular demands on both their skill as teachers and their understanding of their subject.”

Difficult teaching environments

ESOL provision takes place in many different contexts. NRDC researchers have studied classes in formal settings such as large FE colleges and local authority adult education centres as well as more informal and non-traditional settings including hospitals, prisons, women’s refuges, workplaces and shelters for the homeless. ESOL classrooms, particularly in community settings, are often less than ideal teaching environments. NRDC researchers have noted all of the following: open plan classes shared with other groups; children in the class because of the lack of crèche places; poor lighting; no whiteboard; overcrowding; lack of heating and nomadic groups occupying different spaces at each meeting. These are the environments in which ESOL teachers are required to work. Their training should prepare them for these often adverse learning conditions. However, recent NRDC research into the new Level 4 qualifications suggests that too little focus is placed on non-traditional settings. Many courses are primarily aimed at FE and this influences the choice of input, placement and tutors on these courses.

These areas indicate that teaching in non-FE settings is less than comprehensively attended to in the courses, and that preparing teachers to work in the community, workplace, hospital, refuge or prison needs to be a more integrated part of training for ESOL practitioners. (NRDC Programme 4.8⁶)

Furthermore, as we have seen, ESOL groups are characterised by great diversity among the learners – what the EPPP terms “the extraordinary heterogeneity of ESOL classes”. Learners with ‘spiky profiles’ are the norm, with large class sizes and often inconsistent attendance patterns leading to great disparities in learners’ language levels. There are also often great differences in educational background with holders of PhDs in the same group as those who have never previously been in formal education. Learners’ social background and current life situation are also extremely diverse. This means that teachers need to invest time and skill in creating and maintaining class cohesion in the face of such group and individual differences. This challenge is made more difficult by the fact that as well as teaching language, ESOL teachers carry out many other roles, as advice workers, counsellors, social organisers,

⁶ This project reviewed 11 new initial teacher education programmes, largely in universities, for adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL teachers. All the courses were in their first year of implementation (2002/03).

literacy brokers and interpreters. Teacher training for ESOL teachers should therefore not only prepare them to teach at different levels but give them the knowledge and confidence to teach effectively in a range of settings and prepare them to play more roles than the traditional teacher.

This is no small demand, requiring that courses adequately address ... knowledge of learners and knowledge of educational contexts. (NRDC Programme 4.8)

Understanding learners

The more teachers know about the personal circumstances, learning styles, language skills and needs of each learner, the more they are able to tailor their teaching to meet individual as well as group needs and the more effective they will be. This may mean that they adjust the content of an activity or their management of interactions in the class to maximise each learner's opportunities for learning. An example of this is given in one of the final reports of the NRDC Adult Learners' Lives project. During observation of an ESOL class in a college in the north of England it was noted that:

...the teacher, Duncan, adapted his style to suit students from diverse cultural backgrounds. His understanding of Abdul's prior education, of his experience as a learner and his existing knowledge of English (stronger literacy than oral skills) allowed him to set the right level of learning challenge and support to address Abdul's learning needs. His awareness of social dynamics, such as cultural and religious differences between Muslim students from the South Asian community and students seeking asylum from other countries, was important in helping him to foster a cooperative learning environment of mutual peer support. (Barton et al, 2006:33)

The key message to emerge from the Adult Learners' Lives project was the value of understanding learners and their lives outside the classroom. For teachers to be able to gain a real understanding of their learners they need to be given time in the classroom to do this and also the "tools", through training. This can not only lead to more effective teaching and higher levels of student retention and satisfaction; it can also give teachers a greater sense of achievement and confirm their purpose in entering the profession,

"I feel that my passion for teaching English has been rekindled, because I see the deeper value of what I do i.e. enabling people to take steps to make their experience of living in this country more whole, more complete." ESOL tutor on her own participation in extra-curricular activities (Exeter, PLRI round 2)

Professional vision

While training is of great importance in equipping ESOL teachers to work in such a complex field, NRDC research shows that there is no substitute for experience and what the EPPP terms 'professional vision'.

Professional vision is characteristic of the experienced, expert practitioner...based on funds of knowledge and judgement, derived from their professional and life histories. (EEPP)

Teachers with professional vision are aware of the wider context in which ESOL teaching and learning are embedded and draw on their experience to take informed action in response to any particular issue in the classroom or the surrounding environment.

They 'know' the students in their classes and can 'see' how materials can be selected and exploited because they are confident in classifying and highlighting a particular phenomenon or issue as it arises. (EEPP)

One important element of this professional vision for ESOL teachers is their ability to plan a learning programme and to select appropriate learning materials. To achieve this they need to be adept at both long-term planning and moment-by-moment decision-making. They have to be able to respond to the immediate needs of learners, often using the shared experiences of their class to generate materials. To describe these two types of planning the EEPP draws on terminology from models of speech production in second language learning, talking about 'strategic planning' and 'on-line planning'.

Although teachers are institutionally required and professionally motivated to plan individual lessons and schemes of work (strategic planning), the ability to respond to the new and unexpected in the classroom in coherent and immediately useful ways (on-line planning), or principled improvisation is equally important. (EEPP)

They also refer to such experienced ESOL specialists as 'bricolage' teachers in that they successfully select and adapt materials according to the specific and immediate needs of their group rather than following a prescribed or generic course. This was particularly apparent in their use of the DfES *Skills for Life* teaching materials, which were observed to be used by most teachers, though not extensively. Effective teachers were seen to be using a

...range of other materials including self-produced materials, course books, realia, the media and internet in creative ways, tuned to the particular group and their interests. (EEPP)

The concept of professional vision and the observation that effective ESOL teachers are *bricoleurs* should inform the design of initial teacher education and continuing professional development programmes designed to support newly-trained teachers. These programmes should draw on the experience of established teachers to give less experienced colleagues support in strategic planning and also to allow them to observe and understand the type of immediate responses to learner needs that characterise on-line planning and the skill of the *bricoleur*. There is clearly a need here for further research into the decision-making processes of the effective *bricoleur* teacher to identify by what criteria particular strategies and materials are chosen and to explore ways of formalising these processes to make them more accessible through CPD.

ESOL and *Skills for Life*

From the NRDC research, the positioning of ESOL with adult literacy and numeracy and its place within *Skills for Life* would appear to be complex and challenging. While it is more than just language provision, ESOL is essentially about language teaching and learning. However, it has long been grouped not with modern foreign language teaching but with adult literacy and numeracy, first under local education authority control and more recently as part of the *Skills for Life* strategy. This positioning has also strengthened the rather artificial split between ESOL and English as a Foreign Language. However, due to the changing nature of the ESOL population, this distinction between EFL and ESOL provision in this country is no longer as clear as it was. The needs of a significant proportion of ESOL learners and their educational backgrounds are not so different from those learners who have been traditionally offered EFL classes.

This changing profile blurs the distinction between EFL and ESOL.

(Roberts et al, 2004:11)

Another particular issue for ESOL provision is managing the conflicting needs of learners who are literate and have been educated in their own countries and those who have very limited literacy, often due to a lack of formal schooling in their own countries. There should be differentiated pathways for ESOL learners rather than purely general ESOL. The ESOL Case Studies note a demand for structured fast-track courses to meet the needs of learners with professional and/or academic backgrounds. Such differentiation of the offer would also necessarily include specialist literacy provision.

The social nature of learning in the ESOL classroom is richly demonstrated in this review and is of great importance. But readers will have noticed scant reference to matters to do with the design of the ESOL Curriculum and other linguistic issues. It may be time to shift the focus of ESOL research towards:

- Language learning, tailored to each learner's specific needs and focused on enabling them to make the transition from language learner to learner of other skills, either in a classroom or workplace
- The relationship of ESOL provision to the wider context of English Language Teaching, including global English and how we should relate our curriculum to the Common European Framework.

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CANDI *PLRI round 2*

One of six small-scale practitioner-led research projects run as part of round two of the NRDC Practitioner-led Research Initiative. This particular project looked at retention on ESOL courses at City and Islington College, a large inner-city FE college in London. To be published Winter 2006/7.

EPPP

The ESOL Effective Practice Project was one of a suite of five effective practice studies that also covered reading, writing, numeracy and ICT. It investigated the range of approaches to the teaching of ESOL to adult learners, understood as a “pedagogical repertoire”. It placed particular emphasis on the teaching of spoken language as a distinctive characteristic of ESOL pedagogy. It was hoped that this would establish, where possible, correlations between the approaches identified and student progress and make recommendations on effective practice and the direction of further classroom-based research. To do this, researchers drew on a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures. Forty classes were observed across sites which profile the demographic diversity of adult ESOL provision, urban and rural, metropolitan and regional. These classes yielded an initial cohort of 400 - 480 students. To be published January 2007.

Exeter *PLRI round 2*

One of six small-scale practitioner-led research projects run as part of round two of the NRDC practitioner-led research initiative, this particular project looked at the potential value of extra-curricular activities on a community ESOL project. The research focused on a group of 30 women who attend five hours a week of women-only ESOL classes at the mosque in Exeter. To be published Winter 2006/7.

ESOL ILPs

This project described the range of practice in planning learning for ESOL learners at Entry Levels 1 and 2 in a sample of institutions nationally across accredited and non-accredited learning programmes. It also explored how ILPs and the process of planning learning for this particular group of learners are perceived by those responsible for leading the learning process, learners, managers, national and local Learning and Skills Councils and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. To be published Winter 2006/7.

NRDC Programme 4.8

This project reviewed 11 new initial teacher education programmes, largely in universities, for adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL teachers. All the courses were in their first year of implementation (2002/03). To be published Winter 2006/7.

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