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English as an Additional Language and initial teacher education: views and experiences from Northern Ireland

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This paper addresses training for teaching English as an Additional Language (EAL) at initial teacher education (ITE) level in Northern Ireland. This small-scale qualitative study describes 15 primary and post-primary teachers’ perspectives on their preparation for teaching EAL in Northern Ireland. It explores reflections on EAL content in ITE programmes, the type of difficulties faced when teaching pupils whose first language is not English and the ways in which ITE might include the skills and knowledge needed to make effective provision for such pupils. The findings show that the current provision for EAL training varies and participants both need and want basic as well as more advanced practical EAL coping strategies, in addition to a thorough grounding in EAL-related theory.

Keywords: English as an Additional Language; initial teacher education; Northern Ireland

Introduction

Since the mid-1990s there have been rapid demographic changes in the population of Northern Ireland and these changes have obvious implications for education. As migrant workers have begun to settle and bring their families over, the demand for English as an Additional Language (EAL) in schools has increased, as has the need for teachers to develop skills to deal with children whose mother tongue is not English.

In Northern Ireland nearly all pupils, irrespective of their English language competence, are automatically mainstreamed and EAL is seen as a ‘generalist skill desired of all teachers’ (Creese 2004, 190) rather than a specific teaching and learning issue (Leung 2007). This means that the previous policy of withdrawing EAL pupils from class to be taught by peripatetic teachers is being phased out and the Inclusion and Diversity Service (established in 2007) is training teachers to take a ‘whole school’ approach to the issue. Currently in Northern Irish schools this plays out as a kind of partnership where teachers collaborate with EAL staff provided by the Inclusion and Diversity Service in order to implement strategies that support learning. For classroom teachers there is a definite sense of having to ‘learn on the job’. This small-scale qualitative study describes 15 primary and post-primary teachers’ perspectives on preparation for teaching EAL in Northern Ireland. It explores reflections on EAL content in initial teacher education (ITE) programmes, the type of difficulties faced when teaching pupils whose first language is not English and the ways in which ITE

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might include the skills and knowledge needed to make effective provision for such pupils.

**Background: national and international**

Observers have noted that there is a lack of systematic training for EAL at ITE level. Franson (1999, 68) describes a shortage of an ‘explicit programme of study for teaching EAL learners at the ITE level’ while Leung and Franson (2001) claim this is because EAL no longer holds any subject status in the National Curriculum and is, therefore, marginalised.

The expectation that teachers will be able to ‘learn on the job’ and work successfully with EAL pupils without specific EAL training, but by adapting their general teaching skills, has been seen as too ambitious. Costa et al. (2005, 108) state that ‘good instructional practices alone are not enough for students who are trying to learn in a second language’, while Hawkins (2004, 21) asserts that teachers need to rid themselves of the invalid assumption that if they teach well, this will result in language acquisition and academic achievement. Murakami (2008) suggests that this approach is grounded in the idea that pupils will just ‘pick it up’ as they go along. However, Cummins (1979) explains that while children give the impression of being fluent after two or three years, this is often not the case. He makes a distinction between basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS), that is, everyday informal English, and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), namely, more formal academic English, and says that it can take five to seven years for children’s CALP to develop.

Research shows that this language-learning process can be improved when teachers have the knowledge systematically to develop pupils’ awareness of language structure and functions (Ellis 1994). Robinson’s (2005) teachers had received no specialist training but had lots of experience of working with EAL pupils. Despite this experience, only some actively developed their pupils’ subject-specific vocabulary and interacted with them in a way which would encourage their oral skills, while the others seemed to find the reason for lack of improvement lay with the pupils rather than with how they were dealing with them. However, in Franson’s (1999) study the teachers had received initial training, were continuing with it in a professional development capacity and felt confident in how they managed EAL pupils. Murakami (2008, 269) emphasises that ‘learning on the job’ is inadequate as, even if teachers are attuned to the fact that it is their responsibility to serve both language development and academic needs,

…they are unlikely to base their practice on any ‘real understanding’ of how to concurrently enhance new language and subject matter learning. In other words they can only act upon what they feel is ‘right’ – even though it may fundamentally be wrong.

The importance of training for EAL is also recognised in other parts of the world. Cajkler and Hall (2009) describe trainees in Australia whose course includes components on the nature of English, acquiring English as a second or additional language and second-language pedagogy. However, anxieties about the quality and amount of pre-service EAL training also exist elsewhere. For example, with respect to teachers involved in language minority education in the USA, Fillmore, quoted in Cajkler and Hall (2009, 154), states that there are 2.75 million children with limited English
proficiency, but only 29% of their teachers are qualified to work with them, while Wallen and Kelly-Holmes (2006) say that Ireland has similar challenges as the number of primary EAL pupils has risen steadily over the past 10 years.

**Background: Northern Ireland**

The Northern Ireland Statistics Research Agency (NISRA) confirms (in an email communication, May 2009) that EAL has become a key educational issue in some areas in Northern Ireland. Within six years the number of pupils whose first language was not English rose by well over 500%; from a small base of 1244 pupils in 2002 (out of a total number in compulsory education of 332,549), to 6802 pupils in 2008 (out of a total number in compulsory education of 312,797). Recognition of the importance of training for the teaching of EAL has been noted in Northern Ireland policy documentation, and the Department of Education (DE) accepts that EAL is a significant activity which needs to be recognised: ‘our aim is to provide a consistent service across Northern Ireland to support schools and teachers who are working with children and young people for whom EAL’ (DE 2007, A7). In order to do this, the Department’s Inclusion and Diversity Service provides schools with interpreters, translators, a multilingual website, a diversity toolkit and EAL specialists, this last being a service for which schools do not have to pay. Through the Common Funding Formula, the Department also provides funding for each pupil who has language acquisition needs. Schools can then spend this money on supporting those children (DE 2009, iv).

In 2005, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carried out its first inspection of the provision of EAL in Northern Ireland. Its survey, which included 22 visits to primary and post-primary schools and 120 lesson observations across the five Education and Library Boards (local education authorities), identified many areas of good practice (for example, the combination of the four language skills within lessons, good use of circle time to promote opportunities for talking and listening, small group work, and engagement in meaningful reading and writing activities with modelling and guided writing [ETI 2005, 9]). However, the report also mentioned areas in which the approach to EAL needed to change, for example; by providing more challenge in withdrawal sessions, by assessing more accurately pupils’ comprehension and progress and by promoting pupils’ home language (ETI 2005,15). In a concluding note, the report recommends that the DE should put in place a strategy so that ‘an increased profile and awareness is to be given to the whole area of EAL within ITE and the early and continuous professional development programmes for teachers’ (ETI 2005, 17).

The DE’s EAL consultation report, which consulted with parents, children at all stages of EAL development, and non-governmental organisations, reinforces the ETI’s message; namely that ‘there should be initial teacher training as well as whole school training on dealing with EAL pupils from both a language and cultural perspective’ (DE 2006, 60). The DE’s (2005) review of EAL carried out observations and interviewed relevant staff from 10 schools. The report noted that many ‘of those interviewed for this review pointed out the need to plan for future EAL provision by including a module on EAL in initial teacher training’ (DE 2005, 36), and that ‘the establishment of a long term professional development strategy for those involved in EAL both at Board level and in schools, is viewed as essential for ongoing improvement in EAL support’ (DE 2005, 37).
EAL input in initial teacher education in Northern Ireland

In 2007/08, 715 students gained initial teacher training qualifications in Northern Ireland, 355 of them entered the profession following a three- to four-year undergraduate course and 360 from a one-year Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). Students have to meet 27 standards to gain Qualified Teacher Status (General Teaching Council Northern Ireland [GTCNI] 2007). However, despite recognition of its importance, EAL is not assigned an individual standard, but features as part of other standards. For example, as part of Standard 3 we are told: ‘Teachers will have developed, in Irish medium and other bilingual contexts, sufficient linguistic and pedagogical knowledge to teach the curriculum’ (GTCNI 2007, 19). However, it could be argued that this standard may not be applied to the average EAL classroom, which would not be classed as a bilingual context, or not until the pupils reach a standard of English which is equivalent to the use of their first language.

Standard 8 (GTCNI 2007, 24) makes reference to pupils’ cultural diversity requiring trainees to learn about the significant features of their cultures, languages and faiths, and their implications for the process of learning. While Competence 21 (GTCNI 2007, 37) incorporates strategies for teaching EAL to those with special educational needs: ‘Teachers will employ strategies that motivate and meet the needs of all pupils, including those with special and additional educational needs and for those not learning in their first language’.

This type of wording, which links EAL with special and additional needs, presents a deficit view of bilingualism, which was a view common before the 1960s and is worth exploring further. Hakuta (1986) states that researchers simply accepted that bilingualism was detrimental to the mind and was the cause of problems ranging from speech disorders to mental retardation, while more recently bilingualism is seen as an advantage, for example, it has been argued that it can help our brains remain young and active in old age (Bialystok 2004).

Cummins (1979) proposes two hypotheses. His Threshold Hypothesis suggests learners should reach a first level of linguistic competence to avoid any cognitive disadvantages associated with bilingualism, and a second level to enjoy the advantages of better cognitive ability. His Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis suggests that learners’ second-language competence is partly dependent on the competence achieved in the first language, as skills developed in the first are transferable to the second. In these hypotheses, Cummins considers Lambert’s distinction (quoted in De Angelis [2007, 115]) between additive and subtractive bilingualism, the latter implying that learning a second language has a cost to the first language. This may be the case for some children for whom English is an additional language but who use English at the expense of their first language, that is, less often, and so their first language may, therefore, become progressively weaker.

The study reported on in this paper investigated teachers’ views on their initial training for EAL, the type of difficulties faced when teaching EAL pupils, and how ITE might include the skills and knowledge needed to provide effectively for such pupils.

Methodology

The three-month study reports on the views of 15 teachers working with EAL pupils in five schools (three primary and two post-primary) across the five local education
authorities in Northern Ireland. A principal, an experienced teacher and a recently
qualified teacher were interviewed in each school, their varying experience and roles
providing multiple perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted since it
was felt that this would allow issues to be explored in greater depth and be more illu-
minating than, say, using a questionnaire (Cohen and Manion 1995). The question
items for each of the three different types of teacher were previewed by Teaching
English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) colleagues. Central themes related
to: the teachers’ pre-service training history; their experience of teaching EAL pupils;
and their views on how key EAL teaching and learning issues might be incorporated
into ITE. Inter-rater coding (Chaudron 2003, 86) of the data took place to increase the
reliability of the interpretations. A second rater was used to examine all the interview
data to see if they were classified and coded in a similar way to the first rater.

Participants

First, course directors of the five ITE courses in Northern Ireland were contacted by
e-mail and then telephoned to identify the EAL input (amount, type of content) in their
courses. Contact was made with the University of Ulster, which provides a primary
and secondary PGCE; Queen’s University Belfast and the Open University, both of
which run PGCE secondary programmes; St Mary’s University College, which has an
undergraduate degree (BEd in primary and secondary); and Stranmillis University
College, which provides both undergraduate and postgraduate training (BEd in
primary and secondary, BA early childhood studies and PGCE early years).

Second, three interviews lasting between 20 and 30 minutes were conducted with
each teacher in each school (15 interviews). The primary and post-primary principals
were asked the same 17 questions, with an additional question specifically directed at
the relevant key stage or subject. In the event, one principal was unavailable but
arranged for her deputy, the school’s EAL coordinator, to be interviewed instead
(referred to herein as a principal).

Schools

There exists an almost entirely segregated (on religious lines) education system in
Northern Ireland; controlled schools being made up of predominantly Protestant chil-
dren, and the intake of maintained schools almost exclusively Catholic. Integrated
schools educate Protestant and Catholic children together. The sample schools were
college-educational and were representative of the aforementioned management types and
the geographical spread of the five local education authorities. Schools A, D and E
were located in urban areas with one of the earliest influxes of migrant workers in
Northern Ireland, while schools B and C were in areas with a more recent intake of
EAL pupils. Schools were identified with the advice of an inclusion and diversity
officer (see Table 1).

An information sheet was sent to each principal. The teachers interviewed were
 nominated by each principal on the basis of currently working with, or having had
experience of supporting, the school’s EAL pupils. With the participants’ permission
the interviews were fully transcribed. The data were analysed thematically following
a qualitative approach (Vaughan, Schumm, and Sinagub 1996) with the author reading
and re-reading the transcripts in order to find key themes and sub-themes. Responses
Table 1. Participants and schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>School A SELB</th>
<th>School B SEELB</th>
<th>School C NEELB</th>
<th>School D BELB</th>
<th>School E WELB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maintained primary</td>
<td>Integrated post-primary</td>
<td>Controlled primary</td>
<td>Integrated primary</td>
<td>Maintained post-primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12 EAL pupils</td>
<td>16 EAL pupils</td>
<td>8 EAL pupils</td>
<td>20 EAL pupils</td>
<td>14 EAL pupils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal ET RQT</td>
<td>Principals</td>
<td>ET</td>
<td>RQT</td>
<td>Principal ET RQT</td>
<td>Principal ET RQT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching experience (years)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAL experience (years)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAL training at initial level?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No, but</td>
<td>language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: SELB, Southern Education and Library Board; SEELB, South-Eastern Education and Library Board; NEELB, North-Eastern Education and Library Board; BELB, Belfast Education and Library Board; WELB, Western Education and Library Board; EAL, English as an additional language; ET, experienced teacher; RQT, recently qualified teacher.
obtained are discussed under the following three headings with primary and post-primary schools’ responses considered together:

- views on ITE for EAL
- views on the difficulties faced by teachers when teaching EAL pupils
- views on how ITE may include the skills and knowledge needed for effective EAL provision.

Because the findings emerge from a small set of data they cannot easily be generalised.

Findings

Course directors

In 2008 four out of five of the ITE programmes in Northern Ireland included some kind of EAL input. Two of the three providers of PGCE programmes included a short introduction (two or three hours) to EAL, while one of the university colleges included a three-hour introduction to EAL on their PGCE early years programme. All three of these providers explained that the intensive nature of the PGCE programme did not allow for more time to be spent on EAL. The two providers of undergraduate teacher training programmes devoted more time to EAL input. Interestingly, one of the university colleges planned that EAL-related topics would provide half of the input sessions for one second-year module, while at the other a component of a literacy module was devoted to EAL. One university college also offered an optional certificate in EAL, which can be taken intensively over five days.

Teachers’ views on ITE for EAL

None of the primary school teachers interviewed had received any EAL training. One recently qualified teacher commented: ‘There was no mention of it at all at university. We weren’t even aware of what EAL meant’. The more experienced primary teachers said that they had learnt their skills through working with the Inclusion and Diversity advisors and their handbook ‘Toolkit for diversity in the primary school’ (Integrate Ireland Language and Training and Southern Education and Library Board 2007):

We were given a kind of basic survival guide which has been really useful. I use it to plan and go to it when I have a problem with one of the children… but no teacher training [in EAL], no training in college.

Although none had received EAL training at college, they all had received some tuition on language acquisition, especially those who had received early years training. One experienced teacher commented that she had benefited from working ‘quite closely with a lot of speech therapists as well, to try to work out language development stages’.

When asked whether training on how a second language is acquired would help now, the responses were enthusiastic. One recently qualified primary teacher replied: ‘I have no theory. I have no insight… without a shadow of a doubt I would avail of that immediately’. Another commented: ‘I went back to my notes, but couldn’t find anything to help me – not even references which I could have looked up. So, yes, I did feel lost’. Their view was reiterated by an experienced primary teacher: ‘Personally, I would like our beginning teachers to have an understanding of how language develops. I think they
have to understand that before it is possible to give a child support in learning vocabulary’. None of the post-primary teachers had received EAL training at initial level. An experienced teacher who was also the EAL co-ordinator was a language teacher by training so some of her existing skills were helpful. She particularly remarked on ‘the different ways we can introduce vocabulary’. Another experienced post-primary teacher believed that her background as a language teacher helped her with the EAL pupils and that to have even basic language skills as a recently qualified teacher would be an advantage. The recently qualified teacher in the same school had an awareness of how language is acquired: ‘I know there is a silent period and it maybe lasts about six months and sometimes these children do not talk… that’s not to say that they’re not capable’. She said it was difficult to know how and whether to help the pupil during this period, and when asked whether training on EAL at initial level would have helped answered:

They touch on special needs students, the high flyers and the weaker students… they should also deal with EAL students because how are we to know how to best teach them if we’re not told, if we’re not given advice or guidance on it?

The responses to the question as to whether EAL input would be of help to beginning teachers were an emphatic ‘yes’ from the teachers and the principals. One experienced teacher stated:

…the population of EAL pupils within schools is going to increase, and increase significantly, and therefore I would very firmly believe that teacher training colleges would need to take that information on board and build it into their programmes for young teachers.

As regards the issue of employment, all the principals believed, in light of the changing demographics, that having some EAL skill would enhance a newly qualified teacher’s employability. However, according to one, gaining the skills to teach EAL was frequently a case of ‘picking it up as we go along’.

**Views on the difficulties faced by teachers when teaching pupils for whom English is an additional language**

Communication difficulties were identified by all primary staff interviewed as being one of the main problems faced by the teachers, parents and pupils. Sometimes other children could act as interpreters, but that was not always possible. One recently qualified teacher said: ‘Primarily you want the child to be happy… It is also difficult for me to bond with them so my first concern is… trying to get them a friend or buddy they can rely on’. Each primary teacher identified communication with the parents of EAL pupils as a major issue, especially where no interpreter was available. A recently qualified and an experienced teacher commented, respectively:

…talking to the parents is a big, big difficulty for me when they first start because the parents have very little English as well, bringing them into the classroom and explaining the daily routines… so that’s also a big thing to overcome.

It’s hard to really get them to understand and very time consuming – it’d be good if there was a technique for getting basic messages across that would really help us out.

Similar challenges were experienced by post-primary teachers and, where possible a more senior pupil with good English could act as an interpreter.

Two of the five recently qualified teachers expressed how they lacked basic skills to cope with EAL pupils, for example, helping them understand the classroom routine
without having a common language and asked for some basic advice: ‘Even just to be aware of how to cope with a child would be good; any tips for ways in which I can explain everyday routines to help them settle in’. All respondents stated that they needed help trying to reach their pupils and identify their particular strengths and weaknesses. One experienced teacher explained that she had noticed her EAL pupils ‘copy or imitate’ and had encouraged this as a form of language learning. This behaviour became problematic though, as she found they continued to do this as a way of ‘saving face’ and their behaviour became counter productive because, although the EAL pupils were able to contribute, the teacher did not feel that they were learning.

All the primary teachers acknowledged that the problems faced by both the teachers and pupils were exacerbated when a child joined the class mid-year. Integrating the new arrival and helping the pupil to adapt to classroom and school routines was problematic. One recently qualified teacher found dealing with children who were at different stages of education in their home country the biggest difficulty:

I think the biggest shock is getting a child maybe that has never been to school before. Not only do they not have any English but they don’t have any experience of reading, writing or taking part in a class in their first language. This is really hard for them and us.

Ways of using cultural difference positively in the classroom also gave food for thought. The teachers understood that children from different cultural backgrounds can be a wonderful resource, but knowing how to share those differences with the other children was not always straightforward. One experienced teacher says she had to think carefully about how ‘to celebrate their uniqueness at the same time but not make a big issue of the fact that they are different’.

A particular difficulty for a post-primary school was assessing the English language competence of the children as no standardised assessment tool was available. One recently qualified teacher said:

There are two pupils in one of my groups with really different English language ability. I know one’s writing is better than the other’s, and one of them doesn’t seem to understand much of what I say, but I’d like to be able to place them on some kind of assessment chart and to plan how to take their English forward.

It is worth noting that since the interviews were carried out, the Inclusion and Diversity Service has produced a handbook for post-primary schools *The way in: Accessing language and the curriculum in the post primary context* (2010, forthcoming), which suggests using the European Languages Framework’s set of global benchmarks to assess pupils’ competence and provides a programme for English language development for teachers and pupils to follow.

The post-primary teachers also commented on the particular difficulties which arise because the pupils have to study so many different subjects. Interestingly, they explained that the problems varied depending on the subject in question. The students appeared to have fewer difficulties in foreign language classes or practical science classes than, for example, in a more heavily English language-based subject like history. One experienced teacher explained that:

In a subject like information technology pupils with EAL are easier to manage, but supporting them through English, history or any text-based subject can be really challenging. You really have to think about how to explain concepts more clearly and also where to begin with advice on improving their writing and oral skills. I feel I lack basic frameworks to help.
Views on how ITE may include the skills and knowledge needed for effective EAL provision

Three primary teachers felt that the practical placements during ITE could be used to give EAL input. One newly qualified teacher suggested that each trainee should be assured a placement in an urban setting to gain experience of multilingual classrooms:

You might be in schools where there aren’t any ethnic minorities, so you can’t get the experience. The tutor could plan the placements so everyone has a chance to see what it’s like to teach pupils who don’t speak English.

Although providing practical placements would be very useful, training institutions in Northern Ireland would find this difficult as many schools are in rural areas where the incidence of ethnic minority is low. Also it has to be said that the expectation that they should provide placements for any different classroom composition is unrealistic.

All respondents argued that training programmes should allow more than a half-day of input for EAL and were clear about what they did not want but were often vague about the type of input they did want, mentioning ‘strategies’ and ‘theory’ but not saying which. One experienced teacher stated that:

Courses shouldn’t just aim to raise students’ awareness of EAL by talking about diversity – what people need is practical specific strategies to help pupils access all there is in the curriculum as well as a focus on useful theory. You really need a good few days to cover all that.

Little mention was made of training to improve the teachers’ linguistic knowledge, for example developing awareness of the grammar or phonetics of the English language in order to help writing or speaking skills. Another mentioned that:

If some of the younger staff had a better grasp of English grammar this would go a long way to helping these children improve their writing. It’s difficult when you can’t really explain to them what is wrong with their sentences.

A recently qualified teacher felt she would benefit from knowing about the pupils’ first language and culture as she would know what to expect from certain nationalities which might help her teaching:

In one of my schools nearly all the EAL pupils were Polish. If I had known a bit about how the Polish language is put together and also something about their education system, history, cultural traits, I might have been able to help them lots more.

When asked whether EAL should be included as a compulsory or optional subject, respondents said that it should be compulsory. One experienced teacher commented that if it were only optional a trainee teacher ‘would be mad not to take it because… it’s the way it’s going’. Another said there was an equality issue involved for EAL pupils if the teacher did not have the background skills and knowledge to support and develop their English language skills.

Discussion

The views of the teachers in this study may be best examined in the context of recent recommendations in a paper from the National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum (NALDIC). This outlines five areas of EAL skills and knowledge for teachers: language development patterns; English as a linguistic system;
language as part of social and cultural practices; classroom as a language ecology and teaching as community development.

NALDIC’s third area of skills and knowledge includes EAL pedagogy and all teachers in this study wanted practical ‘strategies’ to help them. Learning a range of techniques such as how to adapt the planning and preparation of lessons (Brock et al. 2007), the importance of visual aids (Combs et al. 2005, 715) and the use of voice and classroom language (Flynn 2007, 179) would form a basic practical tool kit for many EAL teachers. More specific strategies, such as how to assess an EAL child’s language competence and understanding stages of language development, were also found to be lacking by both groups of teachers.

It was not only specific classroom practice that the teachers expressed a need for but, linking with NALDIC’s first area, a theoretical understanding of language development issues too. For example, participants were curious about the ‘silent period’, a stage of language development where learners are exposed to a new language and are silent for a long period of time. Krashen (1982, 2) argued that the silent period was evidence for his ‘Input Hypothesis’ that ‘humans acquire language in only one way – by understanding messages, or by receiving “comprehensible input”’ and that ‘speaking is a result of acquisition and not its cause’. He believed that during this time pupils are building up their competence in the language by listening and that once competence has been built up speech emerges. McLaughlin (1987, 37), however, criticises Krashen’s idea saying that children who are relatively silent would not be able to use ‘context, knowledge of the world and extra-linguistic information’ to be able to understand the language directed at them and that there are other plausible explanations for the silent period, for example anxiety or personality.

For teachers in this study, their pupils’ silence could be understood or misunderstood in various ways (for example, as the pupils not wanting to communicate, not being bothered to communicate, or being unable to communicate because of language or learning difficulties). Alternatively, pupils whose first language is not English with, additionally, dyslexia or emotional or behavioural difficulties could be mistaken as going through a ‘silent period’, and their learning difficulty not identified. The teacher’s ability to work out the cause of the silence impacts on their relationship with the pupil and therefore the pupil’s learning. If the teacher feels the pupil is not trying to communicate it is likely that they may not encourage the child to interact using gesture, smile, visual cues and eye contact. Lack of subtle non-verbal communication like this means building a positive rapport between pupil and teacher is difficult and can have a negative effect on the pupil’s emotional state, which in turn affects their ability to learn.

Concerning teachers’ theoretical knowledge, Schumann (1978) makes a link between acculturation (the process of the learner adapting socially and psychologically to the target culture) and second-language acquisition: the degree to which a learner acculturates to the target-language group will control the degree to which they acquire the second language. Clearly, this has relevance for language development in multi-ethnic settings where membership of the target language group is a concern.

In Schumann’s model, factors which determine social and psychological distance are listed. In situations with negative factors, the learner will not receive much input in the target language and will not use what they do receive, meaning that they will not progress beyond the early stages of second-language development. One teacher in
this study explained how hard it was for a child who started in the middle years of a primary school without having had any previous education. According to Schumann’s model, it may be that the child is experiencing a negative (greater distance) social and psychological situation. They may feel there is no social equality between themselves and the native speakers in the classroom, in that the native speakers are better because they know more; isolated because they are entering a second-language group which is large and already cohesive, with their culture not congruent with that of the other pupils and as a consequence they may lack motivation as there is so much ‘catching up’ to do.

Gardner (1985) and Giles and St Clair (1979) recognise the importance of context in the language learning situation. Giles and St Clair proposed an ‘accommodation theory’ which criticises Schumann’s theory for not considering the changing nature of identity and the fact that the way in which an EAL pupil defines themselves in comparison to the rest of the class may change constantly depending on shifting views of identity. Gardner says ‘students’ attitudes toward the specific language group are bound to influence how successful they will be in incorporating aspects of that language’ (Gardner 1972, 6). His work examines ethnicity, whereby an EAL pupil who has had authoritarian or nationalistic experiences of the English language in their home country may have negative attitudes towards learning the language when in an English speaking country.

Cultural awareness training is also important for teachers. For example, gaining knowledge of the stages of the process of acculturation (Gullahorn and Gullahorn 1963) may help the teacher support a pupil who had started in the middle years of a primary school without having had any previous education. This pupil may need to move through the initial honeymoon stage of the acculturation process when all is new and exciting to a stage when actual ‘culture shock’ sets in and they become withdrawn and depressed by the strangeness they experience.

Intercultural awareness should be emphasised too. Youngs and Youngs (2001, 98) state that ‘mainstream teachers often possess misinformation about the native cultures of ESL [English as a second language] pupils and expect less of pupils using non-standard English’, while Costa et al. (2005, 109) suggest that ITE must encourage students to have:

a) deeper respect for the culture of English language learners and their families, b) the ability to question their own assumptions, and c) the ability to discuss issues of identity, privilege and ethnocentrism.

Like the teacher in this study who wanted knowledge of her Polish pupils’ background, the newly qualified teachers in Hall and Cajkler’s (2008) similarly expressed a wish for more input on language backgrounds in their pre-service training.

The difficulty of obtaining advice on EAL was also an issue identified by the recently qualified teachers in the present study. Teachers often share the professional knowledge they have gained with those who are relatively new to the job, but the experienced teachers had little EAL experience to share. Both groups are then reliant on the Inclusion and Diversity Service for support and advice.

It is widely accepted that teachers’ confidence and motivation to teach well is strongly affected by their feelings of self-esteem and it may be that the teachers in this study were negatively affected in this respect because they lacked EAL skills and knowledge. Research shows that teachers must be recognised as professionals (Logan
and Sachs 1988) and given support in taking risks in the classroom (Fullan 1991). As Leung and Franson (2001, 86) state:

...stressed teachers do not have the energy to take risks, to try out new ideas, to accept the inevitable incompetence that accompanies experimentation instead they adopt self-protection strategies rather than open themselves up to change.

They add that a significant factor in the success of support for EAL pupils in Australia has been the development of specific EAL standards within agreed teacher qualifications with a recent trend to introduce two-year postgraduate degrees for ITE, leading to ‘greater consideration of language and literacy issues in the pre-service training of all teachers’ (Leung and Franson 2001). The aforementioned concerns are clearly evidence to support the inclusion of a robust EAL component in ITE programmes in Northern Ireland. The principals’ perceptions that EAL training can improve teacher employability give further support for its inclusion.

Since the ITE experiences of participants in this study, EAL input in Northern Ireland has gone from being non-existent to a stage where variable input is included by all but one of the five providers. Currently, this is mostly limited to two or three hours over the entire year and focuses on the development of skills and methodologies necessary to instruct EAL pupils, with occasional additional input on language learning theory. Landon’s (2005) description of the situation in the UK in general can equally be applied to the Northern Ireland context:

...many courses contain the obligatory single lecture, usually delivered by a teacher from the EAL service. This connects with nothing else in the programme; its marginality is evident to all, with the attendant messages that gives. Some courses also offered a final year elective on EAL, in the face of fierce competition from Information Technology, Special Educational Needs, Health Education etc. It is frequently cancelled because of poor uptake.

This description of EAL input is problematic because it underestimates the complexity of the interpersonal and intercultural dimension of working with EAL pupils. It is not just specific techniques and theory that are needed, but teachers who care and are sensitive to pupils’ cultural differences. Teachers who have knowledge of language teaching methods must also employ approaches that ‘invite’ rather than ‘distance’ the pupils (Grant and Gillette 2006, 230). Most new teachers are influenced by their own experiences of school; in Northern Ireland there exists a predominantly white, middle-class teaching force whose experience may not have included many challenges to their personal assumptions and beliefs (for example, situations where lack of proficiency in language challenged their ability to progress). ITE can enable student teachers’ preconceived beliefs about linguistically and culturally diverse pupils and practices to be interrogated. The teaching and learning of EAL pupils should not be a single injection of information, but an ongoing effort (perhaps using a problem-based approach [Landon 2005]) during the full spectrum of teacher education.

Conclusion and recommendations

For ITE in Northern Ireland to improve EAL teaching and learning, it is necessary to consider the structure, content and delivery of the EAL input. First, it is recommended that all ITE courses should include a compulsory EAL component which should be assessed (for example, through a case study assignment). This should centre on EAL pedagogy, focusing on strategies (visual aids, eye contact, gesture, facial expression...
and integration of host culture) that help build rapport and enhance two-way communication, which, in turn, make a positive contribution to the children’s English language acquisition. Theory which underpins language learning should also be addressed in such a module, for example, the Input Hypothesis (Krashen), acculturation (Schumann) and accommodation (Giles and Smith), Cummins’ (1979) work on BICS and CALP and Gardner’s (1972) work on attitudes and motivation.

Second, cultural inclusiveness/intercultural awareness training should be included. This could be woven throughout the curriculum rather than being specific to EAL training. Just as prior language knowledge and language learning experience are believed to facilitate the acquisition of additional languages (De Angelis 2007), so prior exposure to multilingual diversity may lead to a more positive attitude when working with pupils whose first language is not English. Pre-service teachers could be exposed to diversity through other curriculum areas; through foreign language experience, links with the community and the international departments in higher education settings, examination of multicultural education and assignments focussed on culturally diverse pupils. Commins and Miramontes (2006) suggest an EAL component should steer pre-service teachers away from being worried about teaching EAL pupils and instead educate them to celebrate, take advantage of and reflect upon the cultural diversity in today’s classrooms. Staff in all main strands of ITE should accommodate this.

Third, an optional module/certificate could be made available on each of these courses for those interested in developing EAL knowledge. Importantly, in light of demographic changes it should be recognised that gaining an extra qualification like this may enhance employability. Moreover, the Inclusion and Diversity Service could complement their in-service training by providing specific training appropriate for new teachers in their first and second years of teaching and by working closely with the providers of ITE who may wish to use their expertise.

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