



National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

ESOL

SUMMARY REPORT

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Introduction

■ The *Skills for Life* Strategy in England has led to unprecedented investment in adult literacy, language and numeracy (LLN), major reforms of teacher education and training, and the introduction of national standards, core curricula and assessment to inform teaching and learning. We have a unique opportunity to make a step change in improving levels of adult skills. But until recently too little was known about effective teaching and learning practices, and reports from Ofsted and the Adult Learning Inspectorate repeatedly drew attention to the quality of teaching, and the need for standards to improve.

It has been a strategic priority at the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) to investigate teaching and learning practices in all the subject areas and settings in *Skills for Life*: to report on the most promising and effective practices, and to provide teachers and trainers, along with policy-makers and researchers, with an unparalleled evidence base on which to build on the progress already made.

Our findings and recommendations are reported here, and in the four companion reports covering reading, writing,

numeracy and ICT. The five studies, which have been co-ordinated by NRDC Associate Director John Vorhaus, provide material for improving the quality of teaching and learning, and for informing developments in initial teacher education and continuing professional development (CPD). We are also preparing a range of practitioner guides and development materials, as a major new resource for teachers and teacher educators. They will explore and develop the examples of good and promising practice documented in these pages.

The dynamism and large-scale funding of the *Skills for Life* programme have enabled rapid growth of ESOL provision in England. Yet the demand for ESOL far outstrips supply in many regions. The country's demography is changing, partly as a result of migration from EU accession countries, and with it the profile of ESOL learners. What remains constant in ESOL classrooms is the wide range of backgrounds, life experiences and levels of education of the learners. This research sheds light on the challenges practitioners face and will help them improve teaching and learning.

Ursula Howard, Director, NRDC

The Effective Practice Studies

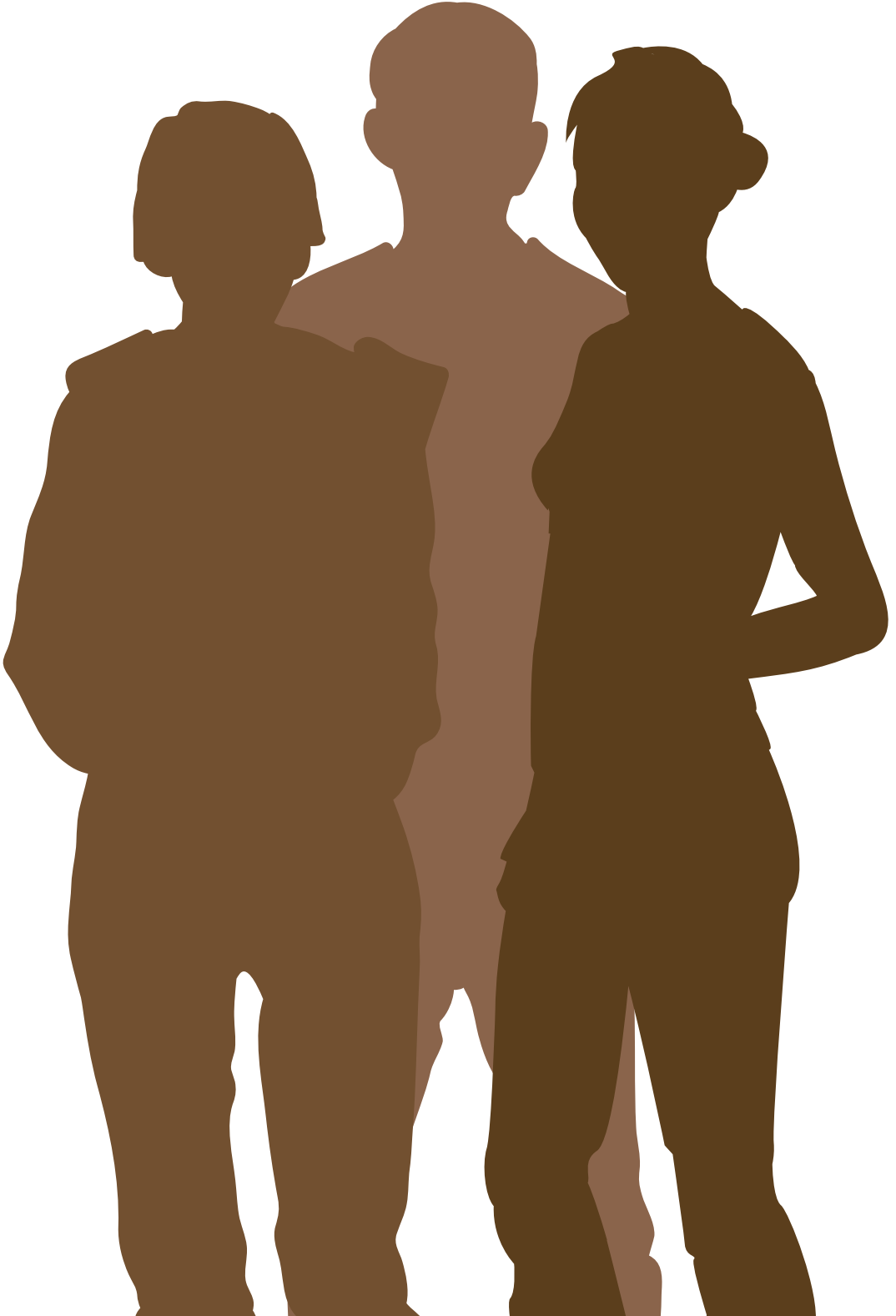
■ The five NRDC Effective Practice Studies explore teaching and learning in reading, writing, numeracy, ESOL and ICT, and they set out to answer two questions:

- how can teaching, learning and assessing literacy, numeracy, ESOL and ICT be improved?
- which factors contribute to successful learning?

Even before NRDC was set up it was apparent from reviews of the field that there was little reliable research-based evidence to answer these questions. Various NRDC reviews showed that progress in amassing such evidence, though welcome where it was occurring, was slow. Four preliminary studies on reading, writing, ESOL and ICT were undertaken between 2002 and 2004. However, we recognised the urgent need to build on these in order greatly to increase the research base for the practice of teaching these subjects.

The inspiration for the design of the five projects was a study in the United States of the teaching of literacy and English language to adult learners for whom English is an additional language (Condelli et al., 2003). This study was the first of its kind, and the lead author, Larry Condelli, has acted as an expert adviser on all five NRDC projects.

Our research began in July 2003 and was completed in March 2006. We set out to recruit and gather information on 500 learners in each study, assess their attainment at two points during the year in which they were participating in the study, interview both learners and teachers, observe the strategies their teachers used, and correlate those strategies with changes in the learners' attainment and attitudes. The ICT study differed from the others in that its first phase was developmental, its sample size was smaller, and it had a shorter timescale, completing in March 2005.



Main findings and recommendations

■ The ESOL Effective Practice Project aimed to examine what factors impact on learners' achievement and to establish links between pedagogical practices and learners' progress. The study draws on observational data of 40 classes that reflect the demographic diversity of adult ESOL provision, including urban and rural, metropolitan and regional sites. These classes provided an initial cohort of just over 500 students.

Learners and their progress

- Virtually all learners made progress at the levels researched (Entry 1, 2 and 3). This progress is clear both from test scores and learner interviews.
- Most learners appear hungry for more provision, and more opportunities to learn English outside the ESOL classroom and for employment. Colleges could encourage learners to join other classes, make informal links with other students and provide employment advice and inter-agency support within mainstream provision.
- Teachers need more help and training to support traumatised refugees and asylum-seekers. Bilingual counsellors could help in this respect.
- Relative newcomers have a different profile and rate of learning from long-term residents and this should be

taken into account in designing provision. The newer arrivals, including asylum-seekers, need adequate provision now so that they do not become the future long-term residents facing more barriers to learning. This would be an efficient use of resources.

- Long-term residents also need appropriate provision, including literacy where necessary. For these learners, ESOL classes are often their first chance to learn English because commitments and constraints have prevented them from doing so in the past.

ESOL provision

- Classes held in community centres, often predominantly attended by long-term residents, should be better supported, with improved facilities, more experienced teachers who can offer specialist literacy teaching, and a greater range of provision. Colleges could strengthen links between off-site and main-site provision with visits and exchanges. Better crèche facilities on main sites would also enable learners to switch from community centres.
- The superdiversity of ESOL learners (Vertovec, 2006) cannot be fully catered for by differentiation in the

classroom alone. Pathways need to be developed that cater for specialisations, including more fast-tracking for those with skills, high quality careers advice and more specialist literacy provision. These pathways are more specialised but should not be shorter. They must be flexible enough to ensure that the learning is not reductive, and to respond to changing ESOL populations. The pedagogic distinction between English as a Foreign Language and ESOL has increasingly less credibility.

Pedagogy and quality enhancement

- Talk is work in the ESOL classroom and these classes are largely made up of talk. The effective practitioner has to be flexible and needs to be able to turn talk into learning by on-the-spot analysis and responsiveness to learner talk. This requires a thorough understanding of second language learning and pedagogy.
- There were significant correlations between classroom strategies promoting balance and variety and gains on learners' test scores. This group of strategies can be seen as core teaching approaches because they balance fluency and accuracy with a variety of activities and materials that engage learners.
- The case study teachers show that effective ESOL practice involves high-level teacher strategies and qualities. They can plan on the spot and, like a *bricoleur*¹, can pull together whatever

is at hand to make the class work. These '*bricoleur* teachers' are eclectic in using and designing materials and activities to be highly learner responsive, and this eclecticism is underpinned by their clear professional vision.

- Teacher interview data suggest that some policy initiatives are not ESOL-friendly, and their implementation shows insufficient understanding of language learning processes and learner needs. In particular, a focus on individual learning can be at the expense of group processes and classroom talk and is extremely difficult to negotiate with low-level language learners.

Conclusion

There is no magic bullet for effective ESOL practice. The major resource that can make or mar the most promising methodology or initiative is the expertise and professionalism of ESOL teachers. This professionalism draws on both subject knowledge and subject-specific pedagogy and CPD that encourages an interpretive and reflective stance on teaching and learning. Initial teacher training and CPD need to reflect this by putting teaching and learning processes at the heart of teacher education policy development. More subject knowledge and subject-specific pedagogy need to be built into teacher training and more reflective practice built into CPD.

1 A '*bricoleur*' is a French handyman who uses whatever is at hand to do the job. The term is used widely in cultural studies to indicate a fusion of disparate ideas, materials or methods.

Background to the study

Contexts of ESOL

The socio-economic and political contexts of ESOL are complex, and impact on all aspects of effective teaching and learning. The superdiversity 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. For many, learning English is a matter of urgency. They recognise the need to communicate with local populations and are over-represented amongst the unemployed and low paid. However, the demand for ESOL far outstrips supply in many regions.

Scope and methodology

Although the first large study of its kind in England, this project still represents a relatively small group of learners and focuses on spoken language. It cannot, therefore, encompass the wide variety of ESOL learners and classes in England (and has not attempted to look at the rest of the UK). The focus on spoken language means that key issues such as ESOL literacy and the experience and progress of ESOL learners on non-ESOL-designated courses have only been incidentally addressed.

Most classes on the project were provided by further education colleges, at their main sites or in community centres of various kinds. They shared similarities in terms of the characteristics common to the FE sector as a whole, such as audit regimes and inspection standards. Where there were constraints of some kind in the centre, such as poor facilities, the classes were more likely to be mixed-level. Such constraints were more likely to occur in community centres. Difficulties in these centres included: a perception of community-based provision as separate and 'other'; poor student support; lack of opportunities for student progression; and inadequate management structures and support. While experienced tutors would be better equipped to work in such centres, given the teaching conditions and constraints, community-based tutors were often the most inexperienced.

Classes were, on average, larger than those for literacy and numeracy and were enormously varied in terms of student background. It is very unlikely therefore that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach would be the key to effective practice. The extraordinary heterogeneity of learners in the majority of classes reflects the range of ESOL

student backgrounds generally, and stems from a number of historical, political, social and economic factors. The implication for teachers is that they have to cater for large, heterogeneous classes.

We observed and audio-recorded 40 classes on three occasions across diverse sites. All the classes were at Entry Level on the national qualifications framework, with 17 E1 classes, 11 E2 classes, three E3 classes, and nine mixed-level classes. These classes comprised an initial cohort of 509 students, of whom 256 completed both pre- and post-assessments using an adapted version of the Cambridge Key English Test. Of these, 76 students, on average two from each class, were

interviewed using a bilingual methodology. Ethnographic interviews were also carried out with the 40 teachers. As well as statistical analysis, preliminary analysis was carried out on the 40 classes, combining quantitative and qualitative data and ten case studies were selected from these.

For a more detailed discussion of the methodology of the project and a description of the observation tools used, please refer to the research report on this study, also published in February 2007, or the full report, which is to be published on the NRDC website www.nrdc.org.uk. See also Roberts and Baynham, 2006.

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The learners

■ The learners in the study are notable for their diversity. As a group, they display most of the features of superdiversity. Some share a place of birth or first language, but there are huge differences in terms of social class, previous education, level of literacy, gender, age, political and regional affiliation and immigration status.

Countries of birth

The learners came from 58 countries of birth, especially Pakistan, Somalia, Turkey and Bangladesh. The high number of people from Pakistan reflects the population in the Yorkshire towns we researched. This picture would be different in other parts of England. In fact, it is notable that no single group dominated, because of changing immigration patterns, the policies of dispersal and ever-changing ESOL classrooms.

Languages

The learners reported 50 'first' languages but the full picture of language use is even more complex than this figure suggests. For example, the entry for Kurdish includes the varieties spoken in Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Multilingualism and multi-literacy is taken for granted by many of our informants. A student from Angola, for

example, initially reported on his learner information form that he spoke only Portuguese but his interview revealed that he also uses French, Lingala and Kicongo.

Educational background and literacy levels

The statistics indicate the amount of schooling that learners received before coming to the UK but they do not enable us to compare the quality or type of education. The average length of schooling was between eight and nine years but around 160 people reported less than eight, including more than 40 who went to school for less than four years. By contrast, 12 per cent have had a university education. Unsurprisingly, the picture in terms of literacy skills was also mixed; over 10 per cent said they could not read and write in their first language.

Gender

Around 63 per cent of the learners were women. The availability of childcare was a prime concern for parents – usually mothers – who were responsible for young children and wished to study ESOL. Many women said they had been unable to attend classes because they did not have access to adequate and appropriate

childcare during lesson time. Some informants talked about not being able to come to class when their children were young: *'Maybe if I had studied when I arrived, if the kids hadn't been so little I would speak good English. I always liked studying, yes. It was because of the kids.'* (Ecuadorian woman, London). This meant that their learning happened in a piecemeal way over a longer period of time.

Migration and settlement

A central issue for ESOL is asylum. Several learners were waiting for a decision on their claims while they dealt with the aftermath of war and other strife. This combined stress is likely to have a detrimental effect on learning (Murray, 2005; Pitt, 2005). Haxhi, an asylum-seeker from Kosovo, had been waiting for a decision on his asylum claim for five years. Meanwhile, despite being a qualified plumber, he had no right to work, could not choose where he lived and received a reduced level of state benefits. He had also suffered harassment from local people. All this was compounded by Haxhi's fear that he might be deported, an understandable anxiety as two members of his class had their asylum applications refused during the course of this study (see Bloch and Shuster, 2005):

'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.'

(Haxhi, Bradford)

Employment

One of the most pressing motives for people to invest in learning English is employment. In line with the average age of current new migrants to the UK (Kyambi, 2005), most of the learners (just under 80 per cent) were below the age of 40 and therefore of primary working age. They had a wide range of qualifications, skills, knowledge and prior experience and included skilled tradespeople and professionals, such as doctors, teachers and accountants, as well as those with lower levels of skills.

Unlike other *Skills for Life* learners, many ESOL learners are employed below their professional level and may remain in this position for years. Many of them appeared to know what they wanted to do in terms of work but had no clear idea what might be required of them in the modern UK workplace. Our interview data suggest that general ESOL classes, although effective in themselves, are at present unable to cater for all the complex needs of people wishing to compete for jobs and training in the UK.

Speaking English

The classroom is the only place in most learners' daily lives where they communicate in English; probably for this reason they place a high value on speaking in class. They tend to like



small group and pair work because they can learn from and with each other. As well as the cognitive benefits of learning in a group, ESOL classes fulfil a very important social function; learners form friendships that extend outside the classroom.

Many ESOL learners are marginalised because of their status as ethnic and linguistic minorities and/or because they are prohibited from employment and full citizenship. Their lack of access to the target language adds to their difficulties. The learners gave various reasons why their access to English speakers was so problematic, and why people might not acquire English, even after long periods of residency in the UK:

- Being employed in ethnic work units or in jobs in which they only have to speak their dominant language: *'I had worked in a take-away which is also owned by our people. There I could not speak English which I think was a great disadvantage to me.'* (Pakistani man, Leeds).
- Working in a job where they do not have to speak much at all in any language: *'In housekeeping, it's quite boring: you come to work, take your mops and go up to clean without seeing almost anyone.'* (Lithuanian hotel worker, London).
- Being unemployed: *'Without working, I feel useless, not worth anything. I am doing nothing but housework.'* (Turkish woman, London).
- 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: *'I do not use any English at all. I do not talk in English with my children because they do not like my English. Maybe I say "Good morning" to my neighbours. I do not use when I am shopping because I do my shopping from Turkish shops.'* (Turkish woman, London).

- Local people are unfriendly, unavailable or unapproachable: *'I don't avoid or do it on purpose; it is that I don't live around English speakers; there are no ways to mingle with people, you have to know them, most people in this country are normally conservative.'* (Somali woman, London).

Individualised learning, 'needs' and differentiation

Colleges have various ways of dealing with the issue of mixed levels and 'spiky profiles'². Teachers are often expected to show on their lesson plans that they are 'differentiating' between learners of different levels, and to cater for each student's needs through an individual learning plan (ILP). These plans are intended to help learners meet their language learning goals through a series of SMART³ targets. Coping with a high degree of diversity is part of the expertise of the skilled teacher and helps to make ESOL an enjoyable subject for many teachers.

However, the practice of relying on within-group differentiation, which places the onus on teachers, might be

² Spiky profile is the term used to describe the different levels in listening, speaking, reading and writing that one student may have.

³ SMART stands for specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-related (from www.standards.dfes.gov.uk)

allowing planners to avoid looking at more rigorous and effective ways of catering for learners' different needs. The most obvious and serious challenge of the mixed-level class is when people with low levels of literacy, or none, are placed in classes with people who are literate. Many non-literate learners are still put in classes without literacy support, or without a teacher trained in literacy instruction, and spend years making little or no progress.

Long-term residents

Several combinations of characteristics were tested, including gender, age, employment status, ability to read or write in the first language, and years of schooling to try to identify which of these made a difference to progress. The factor that was found to be most significant was the length of time learners had spent in the UK. Most learners in the study had been in the UK for between one and six years, the mean average being just under five years. However, the 103 long-term residents (more than five years) had made less progress, according to the test, than the more recent arrivals.

There are salient and statistically significant differences between these two groups. There were proportionally more men and young students in the recently settled group. A higher proportion of long-term-resident learners reported that they could not read or write in their first language. The groups also differed significantly in

terms of mean years of schooling reported, with an average of 9.15 years for the recently settled group and 7.13 years for longer-term residents. The latter group were also significantly more likely to be attending non-intensive courses of eight hours per week or less. These differences point to reasons why levels of progress vary between the groups.

The implications are that both recent arrivals and long-term residents need to have their ESOL learning supported, but in different ways. A large proportion of ESOL learners are recent arrivals making fast progress. Continued support in terms of accessible and appropriate ESOL provision is needed if they are to learn enough English to progress into other education and training and into employment, with the attendant social and economic benefits this might bring. Long-term residents with little schooling would benefit from literacy provision tailored to meet their needs. Improvements in the facilities and quality of provision at community venues where a high proportion of learners are long-term residents would also be helpful.



Progress

Most of the learners articulated their sense of progress and achievement by describing situations that they could now cope with which had been impossible for them before. This seemed to give a sense of confidence that motivated them to learn more.

Work: people were able to communicate with customers or talk to their managers:

'Before when [non-Chinese] customers come I would say "Just a minute" and run to my wife and tell her...but now I dare. I stand there and ask what he wants... blah blah.'

(Chinese man, Leeds)

Training: some had been able to find out what they needed to do to retrain in their professions:

'There is a course...they assess the business that you want to start and so on, what you have to do, what tax you have to pay, what type of business you want, they orient you more or less.'

(Colombian woman, London)

Dealing with health professionals, bureaucrats and banks, thus no longer needing the help of interpreters, which many found uncomfortable and intrusive, especially in health-care settings:

'If it something simple, I go alone. I go, I go alone and I say to the doctor where it hurts, and for how long, yes, I defend myself.'

(Ecuadorian woman, London)

Dealing with Home Office communicués and lawyers:

'Whenever I received letters, I just took them to the [community] association and they helped me do everything... I used to go there every day but now I don't go that often.'

(Chinese woman, Leeds)

Speaking to teachers at children's schools:

'Often I didn't go to meetings at school or I asked somebody else if they could speak for me. It is difficult when you come here and don't know how to speak. Now that I know a little it is good and I am happy.'

(Madeiran woman, London)

Making friends and participating in local communities:

'My neighbours are mainly English people. We go shopping together. I use my husband's car to drive them to wholesale shops to buy cheaper things.'

(Chinese woman, Leeds)

Communicating with their own children:

'Since I have learned English and I can talk broken English, they sit and talk with me and look happy.'

(Pakistani man, Bradford)

The teachers

Facts and figures

The 40 teachers had a diverse range of experience and duties. Fifty-six per cent of them were part-time, some being hourly-paid. On average, they had just over ten years' teaching experience, ranging from under a year to 30 years. The average number of years that teachers had been at their current institution was just over four, ranging from under a year to over 20. Over 70 per cent had completed the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum (AECC) training and 60 per cent had undertaken other LLN training. Some had spent a lot of time teaching English overseas while others had always worked in a British ESOL setting.

Significantly, over half of the teachers did not have permanent and/or full-time contracts. This situation needs to be addressed if the recommended further professional development is to be fully effective.

Changing contexts for ESOL teaching and learning

The interviews showed a constant tension between teachers' understandings of their learners, on the one hand, and their perceptions of the policy demands and audit culture of FE and ESOL on the other. The

teachers reported an enormous increase in paperwork – ILPs being particularly contentious. While they were seen as a good idea by some, because they ensure learners get one-to-one attention in tutorial time, opposition centred on the amount of extra work they involve and the fact that at lower levels they are very difficult to implement, especially with students at Entry Levels 1 and 2. It was also clear that many teachers felt that use of ILPs was not consistent with the predominance of group work in the ESOL classroom.

ESOL teachers' stance

We use the term 'stance' to refer to how teachers position themselves in relation to the policy context and institutional structures within which they work, as well as in relation to their students, their teaching, and the ESOL profession itself. The teachers in our study adopted a range of stances in relation to different aspects of the policy environment. They also took up varying stances in relation to learners, teaching and learning and their sense of control in their working lives.

Stance is affected by life experiences and formations, which varied widely amongst the teachers. Salima's life story shapes and informs the way she



approaches her work and responds to students, influencing and shaping her 'theory of practice'.

'See, I look at my own experience ... I started in primary school and worked my way through. Now, I never worked before I was married because, you know, women didn't so much. And although I had my education and everything, it was never taken seriously. With the Asian culture, women are protected by parents first. Fathers then husbands. In a lot of cultures, it happens. And you know he (her husband) was always promoting learning. Everything he did he involved me. Even if it was basic things such as taking out insurance for the house or whatever. And I'm glad he did because he died at a very early stage of our marriage. Well, not very early but we were only together about 15/16 years. And I had to pick up the pieces. Both my children were in private school. And I didn't want to disrupt their education so I carried on with my work. I had to cope with everything. Keep the children going. And I always say to them "Well fine, you don't want a job now but you don't know what situation you're going to be in in the future".'

Her whole pedagogical strategy is based on alignment with her students. She sees herself as a role-model and believes her learners can do what she has done.

Vanessa, a well-travelled teacher with

an EFL background working in Hull, uses an 'ethnographic' strategy of trying to get inside students' heads 'I ended up imagining how people would feel when they went along the street and couldn't read'. She worries about imposing her own perspective on students, but taking an ethnographic stance: '...opens up a whole new world for you'. Other teachers have a more instrumental stance towards the learner: 'I look at the class and I think "I can teach you what you need to know"' (Carl, a teacher in Leeds). Where Vanessa's approach is cautious and heuristic, Carl is more confident in his professional ability to know better than his students.

Another aspect of a teacher's stance relates to the level of self-disclosure and personal narrative that they bring into their teaching. Some, such as Carl, maintain a friendly distance from their learners, while Carol, a teacher in London, weaves in stories about herself, her childhood, her family and her personal life with those of her students, so there is very little division between them. Some teachers are open about their lives and beliefs, and encourage their students to be the same. Sarah talks about her political beliefs in class and is happy for her students to do so too. Michael makes a point each year of telling his class he is gay, partly because he expects them to be open with him, and partly because he believes that they may not often get the chance to meet gay people.

Training

Professional training and teaching experience are important influences. Many people with an EFL training have a strong linguistic and pedagogic background. Paul has an EFL background but also worked with homeless people and so relates to his learners' disadvantages and needs, which informs his ESOL teaching. Newer teachers highly value the chance to learn from colleagues: Hema, a new teacher in Yorkshire, talked of benefiting very much from informal observation, team teaching and borrowing ideas from colleagues.

A safe environment for learning

Each classroom creates its own environment, partly based on the teachers' stance, the range of students, the physical and other characteristics of the setting and its wider social environment. A common theme is creating a safe environment for learning, especially for those teaching large numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers. We recorded a lot of comments on the importance of the group 'gelling'. This is true for any group of learners, but perhaps more so with groups of people from very diverse backgrounds who may all have suffered some level of trauma or difficulty. We found a range of contrasting perspectives on how to engage with issues brought into the classroom by students. Some teachers see the life experiences of students as forming an essential part – perhaps *the* essential part – of the curriculum while

others prefer to leave student experiences and issues at the classroom door and focus on language as the organising principle of the ESOL classroom, striving to create a safe and productive space for learning.

Planning and sequencing

Approaches to planning and sequencing are strongly influenced by policy requirements. Other influences are stance and professional life history, as well as materials and theories of learning. Most teachers typically draw up a scheme of work, though here again practices differ. Sometimes they do this before they meet the students (thus as a document primarily for managers). Some are responsible for doing this themselves and some use an in-house model. Some equate lesson planning with what worksheets are available, others with the unit they are up to in the AECC *Skills for Life* materials. Some plan because they feel they ought to, but make it clear that they can teach just as easily without a plan. Others only write a plan at inspection time, while some over-plan because they lack experience or confidence.

Martin, an experienced teacher, talked of picking up topics and running with them. He is an 'improviser', pragmatic about starting lessons on time, and was happy to be '*...fielding people when they come in*'. He was open to learners and made use of their contributions. Jenny, a less experienced teacher, described herself as a planner,



although she realised that this was very time-consuming: *'I'm quite pedantic with the planning and I don't think it's always a good thing.'* The result was highly structured teaching, although she wondered if she would eventually become more relaxed about it.

Methodologies and materials

The teachers commonly used an eclectic *'bricolage'* approach to materials, adapting, picking-and-mixing and cutting and pasting and creating their own. Some used EFL textbooks to help them present grammar (seen as lacking in rigour in the AECC *Skills for Life* materials), while being concerned about their over-representation of people with middle-class lifestyles. The most experienced and effective teachers seemed to use what might be called a *'principled eclecticism'*.

Professional vision

A consistent theme in this section has been the professional expertise of ESOL teachers, ranging from the relatively inexperienced and novice, struggling to *'get their balance'* in the classroom, to highly qualified and experienced practitioners. Charles Goodwin (1994) talks usefully of *'professional vision'*, describing how through participation:

'...actors become competent members of the group, and also acquire the distinctive ways of seeing, the professional vision, the stance toward

a consequential environment that both defines membership in a group, such as a profession, and differentiates it from other groups.'
(Goodwin, 1994)

ESOL teachers with professional vision are reflective about their practices and work in a responsive way. They are self-critical, resistant to demands that undermine their professional practice, and confident in trying out potentially risky activities in the classroom. They *'know'* their students 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. Teachers with the clearest professional vision are able to code, categorise and critically highlight issues in a complex field. The development of professional vision seems to involve developing insights that go beyond *'the classroom scene'* into the college system and wider context in which ESOL teaching and learning are embedded. Learning the practices that constitute professional vision takes time. Accordingly, professional vision is characteristic of the experienced, expert practitioner.

Ten classroom case studies

■ This section, based on ten case studies of classes, illustrates dimensions of effective practice that shed light both on how expert teachers used particular strategies and what other stances, or qualities, contributed to their effectiveness.

Effective classroom strategies

The case study classes were chosen partly on the basis of quantitative analysis of the observation data collected from the 40 classes. During the classroom observations the researchers described what the teachers did using three protocols: general teaching strategies, strategies for learner involvement and specific teaching strategies. Our main quantitative criteria for judging effectiveness in ESOL teaching and learning were high scores on the first two of these scales.

There were modest but significant correlations between strategies

promoting balance and variety in the classrooms and gains on learners' test scores. This group of strategies can be seen as core teaching approaches because they balance fluency and accuracy with a variety of activities and materials that engage learners. The importance of balance and variety is further evidenced in the finding that learners performed best on the grammar and vocabulary sub-component of the test when they were taught neither too much nor too little of them. It is possible both to overdo and underdo the teaching of grammar and vocabulary. Of the four groups of teaching strategies and learner involvement strategies, those that promoted balance and variety and planning and explicitness were significantly more in evidence than those promoting a collaborative learning environment and connecting the classroom with learners' outside lives.

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As well as the quantitative analysis we also considered qualitative data from interpretive field notes and 'telling' extracts from teacher and learner interviews. These analyses were used in combination in the selection of the ten case studies, a close interpretive reading of which produced the overarching themes described below:

Balancing often conflicting demands

One frequently observed quality of effective practice was teachers' ability to juggle internal and external demands with their own professional decisions on teaching and learning. Pressures stemmed from learners' often vulnerable situations and the fragmentation produced by fluctuating attendance, late arrivals, interruptions, intrusions and urgent problems that had to be dealt with as part of the class. Learners often had to be elsewhere, so, although attendance was high overall, teachers created continuity with an often incomplete class, smoothly integrating latecomers and interruptions into the flow of the lesson. The teachers managed difficult learning environments, such as classes having no 'home' classroom, children in the class because the crèche was full, and 'open-plan' classrooms shared with another class. Also, the extraordinary heterogeneity of ESOL classes meant that the teachers were juggling with the task of class cohesion and group/individual differences.

Effective practice requires balancing these conflicting demands and

maintaining pedagogic and emotional coherence in the class. This requires qualities from teachers, not just good teaching strategies.

Classroom ecology

Each classroom, and indeed each session, creates its own environment and relationships – the classroom ecology. Sometimes, the lessons were characterised by flexibility and responsiveness in the moment-by-moment unfolding of the lesson. At other times, lessons went to plan with few digressions. Both types lead to high levels of learner engagement. Teachers integrated any learner-initiated topics into group learning and gave highly planned lessons an elasticity to respond to unexpected moments. Despite the focus on individual learning from *Skills for Life*, the overriding orientation was towards the group.

Learners' voices and classroom talk

Talk was both the topic and the resource in the ESOL classroom. 'Speaking English' was the goal, but the adults in the classroom were also social actors struggling to get things done and move on in terms of their social world and work opportunities. So, classroom talk was not only about practising and producing fluent and accurate forms of English, but also learning about the social and pragmatic knowledge that would enable them to use the language in real communication.

Learners' limited opportunities to

speaking English outside the classroom meant that it was important to encourage extended output. While role-plays and other structured contexts can provide these opportunities, they were often observed as less effective than supporting learners' 'speaking from within'. These were times when learners had a (sometimes urgent) need to communicate: to deal with outrage, frustrations or sadness; 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 had to assemble whatever resources they had to convey intent and were pushed to extend their communicative ability in ways that more tightly controlled and less personally engaging elements of the lesson were observed to do less often.

Planning, sequencing and continuity

Two types of planning widely used to model speech production in second language learning (van Lier, 1996; Yuan and Ellis, 2003), 'strategic planning' and 'online planning', can also be applied usefully to teachers. 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 (online planning) is equally important. To achieve this teachers have to be confident in their understanding of language and pedagogy.

Much of the strategic planning in effective ESOL practice mirrors current thinking on connectionist accounts of second-language learning (Ellis, 2002). 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. This is achieved through the 'constant restructuring' of language. So repetition and recycling over a considerable period is built into teachers' strategic planning. Cutting up learning into short, bite-size modules, as required on some courses, shows no understanding of these second language-learning processes.

Planning was also evident in careful sequencing and continuity across lessons, and in explicit links between lessons presented to learners both orally and in materials. Goals were revisited at the end of lessons. Given the inevitable fluctuation in attendance, these explicit recaps and links, forward and back, were essential to maintain a cohesive learning environment (as well as meeting institutional requirements). They also acted as motivators and appetisers, encouraging students to feel that they would be missing something if they did not attend. Within each lesson, each activity was strongly framed, with explicit goal-setting and staging of activities.



Materials, activities and contextualisation

Language, even the most form-focused drill, cannot be learnt without a context. Even where a lesson was not organised around a large topic such as 'health', language work was contextualised.

All teachers used some of the AECC *Skills for Life* materials, although few of the case-study teachers used them extensively. Most were *bricoleurs*, using and adapting various types of materials, including those they had produced themselves, course books, realia⁴, the media and the internet. All of these were used in creative ways, tuned to the particular group and their interests.

EFL textbooks and other published materials were often mined for more linguistic form practice through activities and games. Effective teachers used these strategically where the faster pace, range of topics, challenge and 'fun' element suited the particular group. This raises questions about how far ESOL pedagogy and materials should be seen as distinctive from those of EFL.

Another of the *bricoleur* teachers' skills was to use the shared experiences of individuals and learners as a group to generate materials. Many of the activities were learner-initiated or, where the topic was teacher-initiated, rapidly handed over to learners to develop and comment on from their own experiences.

Case-study teachers also used a lot of realia, such as media texts, particularly newspapers and material downloaded from the internet, brochures, and audio and video recordings from the radio and TV. In this way, current topics and debates could be aired and learners were also encouraged to use the English-speaking media to develop their skills outside the classroom.

'Professional vision'

The professional ESOL teacher can highlight and classify a particular element of learner talk and turn it into a learning point. Categorising and highlighting are central to the ESOL teacher's capacity to react to and work with the mass of learner talk generated in the classroom and turn it into learning. The case-study teachers, who worked with this learner-generated talk and who reflected on their practice, displayed professional vision, which set them apart from apprentices. Those who were untrained or under-trained in teaching ESOL had learnt to manage the teaching and learning but had not yet developed a professional vision.

This vision is not only necessary for any classroom practitioner but also for any evaluator/inspector of an ESOL classroom, since so much classroom work is concerned with the rapid response and classification of learner language into teachable and noticeable learning moments.

4 In education, 'realia' are objects from real life used in classroom instruction. Thus to teach the vocabulary of food a teacher may bring real foodstuffs into the classroom.

Conclusions and implications

The learners

1. The progress that the learners made (whether they were E1, E2 or E3) is clear both from test scores and learner interviews.
2. The learners reflect the increasing superdiversity of British cities: in terms of country of birth (58), languages (50); educational background (12 per cent with university qualifications, 10 per cent illiterate in their expert language), employment experience and skills, and immigration status. The cultural and linguistic landscape is constantly changing; the profiles in 2004, when fieldwork for the project began, are different from those of today, particularly due to the accession of new member states to the EU. Broad categorisations of learners do not easily account for this degree of diversity and change.
3. There were also common factors: relative youth (over 80 per cent are under the age of 40); constraints because of lack of childcare; and, for many, the stresses of being asylum-seekers, living with fear, uncertainty and recent trauma.
4. The average length of time in the UK was below five years, which suggests that newcomers and relative newcomers were keen to learn English on arrival. But about 20 per cent were long-term residents, who had been prevented from learning earlier for family and work reasons.
5. The interviews show that the learners had complex, often difficult lives, yet they were highly motivated, and most were frustrated by the lack of opportunities to use English outside the classroom. Accordingly, they were very positive about group learning – the opportunities to talk in English that these offered, and the social, communal nature of ESOL classrooms. This strong social function was a crucial element in helping relative newcomers to ‘belong’. Individualised learning in the form of ILPs was not mentioned as relevant to their development as English speakers.
6. Although many learners found ‘survival English’ a good starting point, most got along well without it or wished to move on from simple dialogues about obtaining services or going shopping. They had considerable experience,



knowledge, skills and social and cultural capital. They needed interactional competence for obtaining (better) employment, and technical and academic literacies for further training, as well as language for furthering personal development.

7. Learners' different goals and backgrounds suggest the need for more specialised teaching for some groups, rather than assuming that classroom differentiation can deal with 'spiky profiles'.
8. The less time the students in our study had been in the UK, the greater progress they made. There was a significant difference in profile between the recently arrived group (up to five years) in our learner sample and the long-term resident group (more than five years) who were older, had less schooling, lower literacy levels in their expert language and were more likely to be attending less intensive courses. Any of these factors could contribute towards slower progress.
9. The majority of the learners were relatively young and learned fast. This year's keen new arrivals, if not offered adequate provision, could be the future's long-term residents facing more barriers to learning and would benefit from some of the faster-paced approaches associated with EFL. This suggests that the pedagogic distinctions between EFL

and ESOL are now less relevant. Provision for long-term residents is also essential. ESOL classes are often the first chance to learn English for people who have been unable to do so in the past because of other commitments and constraints.

ESOL provision

10. Most learners are hungry for more opportunities to learn English in, and outside the ESOL classroom. Many are also hungry for employment. Colleges could encourage learners to join other classes, make informal links with other students and provide employment advice and inter-agency support within mainstream provision.
11. ESOL classes are distinctive from literacy, numeracy and ICT classes in several ways: the focus on talk as an end as well as a means; the focus on group processes; the diversity of the learners, who range from those with no formal education to highly qualified professionals; the experiences of the learners, many of whom are living with trauma and great uncertainty about their life in the UK. All these have implications for the learning structure, the inspection framework and management of ESOL provision.

12. Our learner interviews suggest that teachers need more help to support traumatised refugees and asylum-seekers, including training themselves and support from bilingual counsellors.
13. There are major differences between main-site FE provision and community centres. Good community provision does exist, and community-based classes can be an invaluable stepping stone. However, they need to be better supported, with improved facilities and more experienced teachers who can offer specialist teaching in literacy. Colleges could strengthen links between off-site and main-site provision with visits and exchanges. Better crèche facilities on main sites would enable learners to switch from community centres.
15. More than half of the 40 ESOL teachers interviewed were part-time and often hourly-paid, with the consequent insecurity this creates. Low status and insecurity can add to feelings of lack of control, which, combined with relative inexperience, can undermine professionalism.

What ESOL classes look like

16. ESOL classrooms are extraordinarily heterogeneous and are largely made up of talk. As well as being the main medium of learning, talk is what is being learnt. Talk is work. Effective practitioners, therefore, have to be flexible. They must 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 and (classroom) learning into talk (for outside) requires a thorough understanding of second language learning and pedagogy.
17. As well as the top-down requirements that can affect classroom environments, teachers' stance and, where it is articulated, 'professional vision', are the most important influences on teachers' effective practice. The teacher interviews shed light on significant differences in stance: some relatively engaged with learners, others more detached; some



language-orientated, others lifeworld-orientated. These different stances can be equally effective, provided they are supported by a clear professional vision.

18. The difference between novice and experienced ESOL teachers (in their stance and practice) is crucial in understanding effective teaching and learning. From class observations and teacher interviews, it is clear that less experienced teachers are over-reliant on the core curriculum and its associated materials, and tend to teach scripted classes which are not sufficiently attuned to classroom diversity. They are fluent in the language of *Skills for Life* policy, but cannot articulate a clear professional vision from which to make professional decisions.

ESOL pedagogy and quality

19. Effective practice can be seen when teachers are able to balance the conflicting demands, both external and internal, arising from policy and management requirements with learners' lives and goals. Managing the potentially fragile classroom ecology, where so many diverse people are gathered together, requires exceptional and flexible teacher qualities as well as sound teaching strategies.

20. Elements of effective ESOL practice observed include:

- Clear planning, both strategic and 'online' (ie responsive), and explicit framing and metalanguage.
- The *bricoleur* teacher, who creatively and inventively and in principled ways assembles materials and activities.
- Encouraging and supporting extended 'talk from within', combined with planned and on-the-spot, form-focused work.
- Collaborative group work where distributed knowledge is managed and exploited.
- Using the classroom as a place to learn from and for the outside world, including language socialisation as well as language acquisition.
- Constant re-visiting and re-working of linguistic items in different contexts.
- Safe and enjoyable learning.

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