



National Research and Development Centre  
for adult literacy and numeracy

# Research Summary

## English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in the workplace: review of research and related literature.

### Synopsis

This review describes UK and international research on ESOL in the workplace. It first outlines some of the distinctive characteristics of this research. It then examines current research theories and methodologies. Finally, it considers future directions in research and ways in which they need to reflect the changing and widening role of ESOL in the workplace.

### Key Points

- ❑ The scope of ESOL in the workplace has been contested since programmes began over 30 years ago. The early and narrowest formulation was of English language classes in a workplace setting. However, policy, research and practice have evolved to link ESOL development to much wider concerns in the workplace.
- ❑ ESOL is now set within the whole communicative environment of the workplace - 'the workplace is the curriculum'. This has a major impact on the curriculum at a time when the 'new work order' is creating changes: more flexibility, more multi-task working, flatter structures and more self-directed teams all require more competence in language and literacy.
- ❑ Most ESOL training has been in manufacturing industries but with significant programmes in the health services, catering and in some professional contexts. Both research and training have linked

language and cultural processes since the communicative environment of the workplace is usually multi-lingual and multi-cultural.

❑ Workplace research has also shown that language is a dimension of racial discrimination in typical 'gatekeeping' encounters such as formal recruitment and promotion procedures. So intercultural awareness training is routinely an element of ESOL programmes.

❑ A whole workplace approach to ESOL at work, most notably in Australia, has led to communication audits, the development of linguistically and culturally sensitive technical training modules, the integration of language and literacy demands with new skills competencies and facilitating industrial relations agreements.

❑ Evaluations of ESOL workplace programmes have shown the following benefits: improved communication (and other specific) skills, some level of economic protection, reduction in reliance on language brokers and some increase in employment opportunities for workers/learners. For employers the benefits are: cost savings, wider access for employees to training, more team work and more flexibility.

❑ Research, particularly ethnographic research has taken a more critical stance. The focus on ESOL and communication audits has undermined the value and authority of other languages in the workplace and can stigmatise workers who can do their jobs but fail language tests. This research also shows that more English does not usually lead to better jobs since

these usually require much higher levels of education. In addition, there is concern about the unnecessarily high level of language requirements set by employers, on the one hand, and, on the other, employees' and researchers' assessment of what language abilities are needed.

☒ In the UK, in particular, ESOL in the workplace is under-researched almost to the point of non-existence and this reflects the very low level of provision over the last fifteen years. There are, however, important lessons to be learnt from North America and Australia.

## Main elements of research

This review includes research from countries where English is the dominant language and where multi-lingual workforces are commonplace: the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Sources from the following categories have been consulted:

- Academic research literature
- Government and employer reports
- Communications audits and evaluation reports produced by employers, unions and educationists.

## References and further reading

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