



Literature review of ESOL for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities

Synopsis

This review was undertaken as part of NRDC's work in support of *Skills for Life*. It investigated the experiences of adult learners who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities and who also need English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) provision. A range of theoretical, practical and research materials were collected and reviewed and a practitioner seminar held. Only very limited research has previously been undertaken in this field.

Particular areas of concern were identified in the review: a lack of useful data on the target population; inadequate assessment procedures, problems with interagency working; unmet training needs of tutors working with ESOL students with learning difficulties and other disabilities; difficulties experienced by this group of students in accessing information on services and resources.

Key Points

- ❑ Knowledge of the target population is impeded by the shortfall in research data available in the UK. Quantitative data is required to assess the numbers of people who need provision, while qualitative data would describe the nature and value of the educational experience that they receive.
- ❑ Much of the UK based literature has focused on school-age children with reading difficulties, including dyslexia. The use of information that is child-focused is problematic when applied to the experience of adults. Further, targeted research is urgently needed.

- ❑ School-based literature has suggested that assessment of literacy and numeracy needs should be undertaken in the student's native language. However, there is a shortage of language interpreters and qualified ESOL staff.

- ❑ Inter-agency working for the individuals concerned is frequently reactive rather than proactive, causing lengthy delays in service provision. The problem is particularly acute for young disabled immigrants in the 16–18 age range. Practitioners suggested that research and development of co-ordinated services in ESOL for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities should take place.

- ❑ There are tensions between the *Skills for Life* strategy and the Access for All curriculum. ESOL students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities may fall between gaps in provision. ESOL tutors may lack confidence teaching impaired students. Access for All tutors may lack skills necessary for teaching ESOL students with impairments. Research in this area should be a priority.

- ❑ Research is also needed into the barriers that disabled ESOL students face in accessing information about services and resources. ESOL students already have the difficulty of accessing information due to language and literacy barriers and this problem may be compounded for people with physical or sensory impairments, those with learning difficulties; or those with mental health difficulties.

Background and rationale of research

One of the key recommendations of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) report 'Freedom to Learn' was that learners with learning difficulties or disabilities may need alternative means of accessing the core curriculum documents and demonstrating achievement. The DfES commissioned the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) to investigate the experiences of adult learners who have an impairment and English language requirements, and to write a review of the literature. This literature review provides a background for the development of research on English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and learners who are deaf/hard of hearing, blind or visually impaired, have mental health difficulties, are dyslexic, have physical impairments, or who have learning difficulties. In particular it aims to identify gaps in our current state of knowledge in this field. This issue has become more pertinent because there is an '...increasing pluralization of ethnic and cultural identities within European societies' (Lyons and Stathopoulos, 2001: 62), as global conflict and unrest has led to a highly transient global population, with Britain providing refuge and a chance for a better life to many.

Main elements of research

A range of theoretical, practical and research based materials were collected and reviewed. Education, social science and medical databases around the world were searched to identify existing research and sources of information on ESOL - and subsequently, English as an Additional Language (EAL) as well as English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) and students with learning difficulties and disabilities. The resulting information was analysed for evidence of good practice (actual and potential) and gaps in the existing literature base.

A practitioner consultation seminar was organised at a NRDC conference on 14 March 2003 and further discussion took place at a DfES consultative meeting held on 1 April 2003. The NRDC conference was a rich source of material presented by researchers while the consultative meeting included a mix of academics and practitioners and representatives from ESOL Pathfinders.

There are very few research studies globally, which span adult literacy and numeracy, ESOL and students/learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. In the majority of cases the literature intersected two of the three categories in various ways. Consequently, a 'best fit' approach was adopted, incorporating evidence related to the experience of school aged children as well as health literature on the experiences and needs of migrant adults. Some of the information used within the review is anecdotal. This was included, in the absence of clear research evidence, because it came from experienced professionals in the field.

Research team

Professor Derrick Armstrong and Ms Vickie Heathcote
University of Sheffield School of Education.

References and further reading

- Basic Skills Agency (2001). **Adult ESOL Core Curriculum**. London: Department for Education and Skills (DfES).
- Department for Education and Employment (2000), **Freedom to Learn: Basic Skills for Learners with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities**. Nottingham: Department for Education and Employment.
- Department for Education and Employment (2001) **Skills for Life: The national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills**. Nottingham: Department for Education and Employment
- Roberts, K. (2000). 'Lost in the System? Disabled Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Britain.' **Disability & Society** 15(6): 943-948.
- Sutcliffe, J. (1994) **Teaching basic skills to adults with learning difficulties**. The Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU)
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (1994). **The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education World Conference on Special Needs Education Access and Quality**. World Conference on Special Needs Education Access and Quality, Salamanca, Spain, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and the Ministry of Education and Science, Spain.
- Warner, T. D., Dede, D. E. and Garvan, C. W. (2002). 'One Size Still Does Not Fit All in Specific Learning Disability Assessment Across Ethnic Groups.' **Journal of Learning Disabilities** 35(6): 500.

Contact for further information:

Professor Derrick Armstrong
School of Education
University of Sheffield
388 Glossop Road
Sheffield
S10 2JA

Telephone: 0114 222 8107
email: d.j.armstrong@sheffield.ac.uk

 **The full report can be downloaded in PDF format from the NRDC's website at**

www.nrdc.org.uk

Paper copies are available from:
Publications
NRDC, Institute of Education,
20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL
Telephone: 020 7612 6476
email: publications@nrdc.org.uk