

7. Teaching Reading to Pupils Learning English as an Additional Language

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This study researched aspects of English reading instruction for pupils learning English as an additional language (EAL pupils) in Irish primary schools. Main findings of a survey of 107 teachers indicate that EAL pupils of all proficiencies participate to some extent with classmates in mainstream reading instruction. A lack of variety in organisation for reading instruction was found in both junior and senior classes. There may also be a lack of variety in the texts used with junior and senior EAL pupils. An imbalance was apparent in the skills prioritised by senior class teachers in particular, with infrequent comprehension development. However, a case study identified a number of constraints on teachers in EAL reading instruction, such as class size. The study found a limited level of teacher professional development in EAL reading instruction, and teacher knowledge about EAL pupils' first language proficiency. Implications for practice include the need to raise teacher awareness about variety in organisational format and text use in reading instruction in the mainstream class, as well as ensuring balance in reading skill development. Teacher expectations for EAL pupils' reading ability also need to be informed by policy, in order to ensure EAL pupils' reading success.

Introduction

People of various nationalities have been settling in Ireland in their thousands over the past decade, generating much debate around integration and governmental investment in welfare, employment and accommodation. Education, which signifies a major investment on the part of the state in terms of skills and integration, has been left out of the spotlight somewhat.

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This paper presents a small study of a key issue in ethnic minority education: the quality of reading instruction in English as an additional language. English reading ability is a crucial asset for ethnic minority pupils in Ireland, as they read to learn (Department of Education and Science, 1999) and attempt to keep up with their classmates, who are in a sense an academic ‘moving target’ (Cummins, 1994).

The study is divided into two themes, one cognitive and one affective, and this paper provides a snapshot of those themes. The *cognitive* focuses on reading instruction for pupils learning English as an additional language (EAL pupils) in the mainstream class. As a class teacher, I wished to learn how effectively English reading instruction is being implemented in linguistically diverse classrooms. Learning a new language in a native-speaking class may create issues around academic and cultural identity (Douglas Brown, 2000), and may affect self-image as a reader. The *affective* theme looks at teacher expectations, home-school communication and L1/L2 support for EAL pupils. International and Irish research on both themes is briefly considered in the first section. The final section discusses the findings of the study, with particular emphasis on teacher interviews.

Cognitive reading instruction: grouping and skill focus

Evidence from the US indicates that variety in instructional grouping is an important aspect of effective reading instruction for EAL pupils. Active approaches such as guided reading, shared reading and small-group reading experiences may be an effective means of engaging EAL pupils in a mainstream class (Altwerger and Ivener, 1994; Scala, 2001). Some Irish reading research has documented a focus on whole class teaching (Archer and O’Rourke, 1987) and a lack of emphasis on more active methods of instruction (Martin and Morgan, 1994). However, the extent to which varied groupings are employed in instruction with EAL pupils remains undocumented. The questionnaire and case study investigated this issue, and explored the extent to which EAL pupils were involved with the rest of the class in English reading instruction.

Measures of phonemic segmentation ability and grapheme-phoneme knowledge may be regarded as significant predictors of concurrent and later reading ability in native and non-native early English readers. Some evidence also suggests that phonological ability may, in fact, be independent from the language one reads in (Muter and Diethelm 2001; August, Calderón and Carlo, 2002). One may question, however, the extent to which L2 phonological strength can be put down to general metalinguistic ability. Some commentators speculate that high levels of decoding ability amongst minority pupils may be due to teachers focusing on decoding skills, at times to avoid comprehension difficulties (Au, 2002; Droop and Verhoeven, 2003). Comprehension monitoring ability and vocabulary knowledge are crucial to the development of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP, Cummins, 1994)². While EAL pupils may appear to develop conversational skills quite quickly, CALP may take at least five years to develop. Active comprehension skill modelling is regarded as an important means of progressing comprehension-monitoring ability while reading (Duke and Pearson, 2002).

Research into reading instruction in Ireland has revealed an over-emphasis on skills such as phonological awareness, perhaps at times at the expense of comprehension instruction. CALP-related teaching (e.g. comprehension strategies and multiple methods of vocabulary instruction) may have fallen short of current curricular expectations in Irish practice (Martin and Morgan, 1994; Shiel and Hogan, 1997). This study examined whether teachers manage to strike a balance in reading skill instruction for EAL pupils.

Affective support and success: teachers, home and L1/L2

Teacher professional development is necessary to develop the ‘tools with which to be more successful with students’ (August and Hakuta, 1998: 76), as well as giving teachers a more positive attitude towards EAL pupils (Stanosheck, Youngs and Youngs, 2001). The development of appropriate

² Cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) refers to the non-native speaker’s ability to meaningfully negotiate a range of experiences in the target language. This may include reading more challenging texts across the curriculum, e.g. history texts.

teacher expectations is crucial to pupil success and a healthy academic self-concept (Brophy and Good, 2000). It may have been difficult for teachers to develop appropriately high expectations for EAL pupils without an active policy of integration until relatively recently. Historically, the Irish government has done little to integrate foreign nationals into the education system, adopting a somewhat assimilation-based and *laissez faire* approach. Stapleton and Fanning (2002) suggest this has had detrimental consequences (e.g. in terms of early school leaving) for the first major refugee group that arrived in 1979. However, the recently released guidelines, *Intercultural Education in the Primary School* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2005) may help to develop appropriate integration and expectations for EAL pupils.

Research has repeatedly shown that continuing to learn to read in the L1 has benefits for L2 reading ability (Johnstone, 2002). There are no formal attempts documented to cater for pupils' first language within the primary system in Ireland. It is generally up to the respective language community to organise mother-tongue instruction, some of which is monitored and supported by Integrate Ireland Language and Training (2002). (The Irish Language Curriculum and Pilot Project on Modern Languages may provide some mother-tongue support for a minority of pupils within the primary school system.) Notwithstanding this situation, the study aimed to enquire into teachers' knowledge about their pupils' first language proficiency. Displaying an interest in pupils' L1 proficiency is not just about language: it shows appreciation for the pupil's identity both as a cultural being, and perhaps as an already accomplished reader.

It is recommended that minority language pupils spend up to five years receiving extra L2 support while participating in the mainstream class. Thomas and Collier's (2001) longitudinal study found non-native speakers' achievement should be at its maximum before integration, as this is the closest he/she may ever come to closing the gap with classmates. EAL pupils are currently provided with only two years support at most. This raises the question: if reading does not catch up with class levels after two years, how might pupils succeed in the long term? L1/L2 issues were explored with both class and language support teachers. The study

examined teacher expectations for their EAL pupils and levels of professional development in the area.

Given that children's home literacy experiences may affect their response to reading and later reading proficiency (Adams, 1990), it is important that the school is aware of the home literacy practices of children of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Some may be accustomed to very different methods of reading instruction and varying interpretations of 'literacy' as a concept (Reese and Gallimore, 2000; David, Gooouch and Jago, 2001). Communication between home and school was examined in the teacher questionnaire, while the case study explored teacher views on parental involvement in literacy.

Data: Survey and interviews

As this study gathered information on a broad range of issues in a relatively short period, survey research was deemed the most appropriate approach. The study used a mix method design, employing questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Respondents were 107 class teachers from all grades across eleven suburban schools who completed the questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 62%. The class profiles of those responding are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Numbers of teachers and corresponding pupils in the study

Class Level	No. of teachers	Average class size	Average EAL pupils in class	EALs as a % of all pupils			
				Low profic.	Med profic.	High profic.	Total
Junior (Inf.-2 nd)	60	27	4	4%	5%	7%	16%
Senior (3 rd -6 th)	47	27	3	2%	3%	5%	10%
Total/Average	107	27	4	3%	4%	6%	13%

The interviews formed the basis for a case study of my own primary school, which is situated in this suburban region. Group interviews were mainly used to hear different voices from the same class level within a

limited time frame, yielding data that might have 'lead beyond the answers of the single interviewee' (Flick, 1998: 115). Twelve class teachers, three language support teachers, one learning support teacher and the school principal were interviewed. Six of this group participated in follow-up pair interviews.

Questionnaire respondents and interviewees were assured that their identities would not be revealed. All informants were assured that tapes would not be used if they were unhappy with the content. Rather than distributing entire transcripts to all interviewees, each informant was delivered a letter stating how he/she was quoted or paraphrased. Simons (1989) suggests such an approach saves time, while simultaneously giving informants the opportunity to comment on their testimony.

The study may be regarded as being highly contextualised, based as it is around a specific suburban region. The broad nature of the study meant a number of themes were touched upon very briefly. The number of questionnaire respondents from each class level was quite small: sixty junior class and forty-seven senior class teachers. Fryer (2004) calls for reflexivity and awareness of conflicting motives in practitioner-based research. It was therefore important to monitor closely the constructions of reality presented for researcher bias. Finally, the study relies on self-report methods, indeed one of which involved a group setting.

Findings and discussion

The discussion of the results here will concentrate on the teaching context, by foregrounding teachers' comments on their practice. Some relevant survey statistics are presented in tandem with the qualitative discussion. These statistics are presented as potential topics for future, larger scale quantitative research.

Junior class reading instruction (Junior Infants–Second Class)

It appears that in the junior classes, reading instruction has been very much a case of 'getting on with it' when taking EAL pupils into account. Whole class and individual instruction were the dominant formats used by interviewees. Almost two-thirds (36 of 55) of those responding to an open

questionnaire item on ‘adaptations to reading instruction for EAL pupils’ reported strategies that could be classified as ‘small changes while teaching’. Such strategies included speaking more slowly, using more explicit explanations and greater use of pictures in reading instruction. In the whole class context, one teacher suggested

I would consciously repeat things to make sure that my children with no English sort of heard it, and that’s no harm for the others.

Questionnaire responses also indicated that grouping extended mainly to combinations of whole class and individual instruction. Significantly, teacher interviews shifted the study’s view of whole class instruction from ‘transmission of the same idea’ to ‘gradated levels of the same idea’. As one Senior Infant teacher suggested:

Because you do... one-on-one reading so much, the whole class isn’t that big a deal anyway. So you might be able to stand nearer to him and when I would say ‘put your finger under the word *birthday*, he might watch the other kids in the group before he’d be sure of it.

The majority (18 of 31) of questionnaire respondents involved low proficiency EAL pupils in whole class instruction. The majority of questionnaire respondents also used two grouping formats at most. While variety in grouping is recommended (Altwerger and Ivener, 1994; Scala, 2001), some interviewees felt management of a large class limited them to one or two formats.

Interviewees described focusing heavily on practicing rhymes and developing phonemic skills, which are predictors of later reading ability in additional language learners (Muter and Diethelm, 2001). However, comprehension was not directly referred to as a major part of any junior class teacher’s reading skills programme. One teacher referred to reading for meaning as:

...a major problem because [the pupil is] saying it perfectly but she’s not comprehending when I go to ask her the questions.

It may be likely that English is the junior class EAL pupil's first language of *literacy*. Alphabetic knowledge and word attack may therefore be entirely new challenges for him/her. Nonetheless, it may be of some concern that word-level features of reading instruction were over-emphasized in the case study and questionnaire responses. An over-emphasis on word-level features may pass on a limited view of reading to young EAL pupils (Jiménez, Garcia and Person, 1996; Saunders *et al.*, 1999).

Teachers of senior class pupils (Third–Sixth class)

The senior class teachers interviewed tended to focus on whole class, same-text reading instruction for all pupils. Teachers felt it important to include the low proficiency EAL pupil in reading lessons. Inclusion often involved pairing EAL pupils with a helpful child. One teacher suggested inclusion was not difficult as:

Some of the vocabulary [the EAL pupils] may have a problem with but, there's still some children in the class who would have weak English who would be at the same level as them.

While inclusion is to be commended, it appears unlikely that this approach alone would contribute to the reading success/self-concept of EAL pupils. Group negotiation of texts may be useful to EAL pupils (Van den Branden, 2000), but one may question what chance a predominantly whole-class environment gives any pupil to discuss a text in great depth. Eleven of the twenty-one questionnaire respondents teaching lower proficiency EAL pupils involved them with the whole class on a weekly basis. However, notably, sixteen of these teachers also used individual instruction with low proficiency pupils. As with the junior classes, a lack of variety in grouping was apparent. Approximately half of those teaching medium and high proficiency pupils used two groupings at most for reading instruction.

All teachers reported using a lot of discussion as the basis for comprehension teaching. This may be a useful method of improving EAL pupils' comprehension (Goldenberg, 1993). However, it is important to consider the quality of discussion. Teachers suggested lower proficiency pupils would usually answer only closed questions as opposed to

inferential, higher-order questions. Whole class questioning appeared as a more 'economical' method of teaching a large class. Comprehension modelling was not used as an instructional technique by interviewees. Only eleven of twenty-one questionnaire respondents used comprehension modelling on a weekly basis. The apparent lack of emphasis on comprehension modelling for senior class pupils is a cause for concern, given the importance of developed CALP for EAL pupils (Cummins, 1994).

Affective theme: teacher expectations, L1/L2 support, home-school issues

Over 86% of all teachers surveyed had not participated in any professional development in regard to teaching reading to EAL pupils. While teacher expectations for EAL pupils were high, the greater proportion of questionnaire respondents expected them to reach average class reading ability within two years. Given that CALP takes at least five years to develop, this expectation may lead to superficial results, e.g. a word-based view of reading. One language support teacher perhaps summarised the difficulty with providing two years of support:

I think when they're younger they are such sponges for the language that chances are two years is gonna...help them a lot. But once they get older, they're two years in language support and next thing they're in learning support.

One may suggest that such brief support sets some pupils up for failure. Nevertheless, language support was viewed as an important means of settling lower proficiency pupils into the school, and of offering them greater experiences of success.

At least 60% of respondents stated that they had limited knowledge of EAL pupils' oral, reading and writing L1 ability. Almost half of all questionnaire respondents regarded their communication with EAL pupils' homes as of a lesser quality than communication with Irish pupils' homes. Junior class interviewees expressed frustration when pupils' parents spoke little English:

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[Pupils] ...struggle... more because they can't take home the work and revise it. So it's gonna come back to you, and then you have to make sure that they understand their sounds.

But at times the existence of support in the home meant that language barriers could be overcome. One Junior Infants' teacher stated:

Some mothers, two who are non-national parents are highly motivated and they seem to see Ireland as, like, the new America...who would get everything they can, and they're really pushing their kids.

Despite the majority opinion that EAL pupils' parents prioritised education, however, it remains the case that their ability to exchange views on literacy with teachers is diminished by low English proficiency.

One teacher expressed the concern that some parents may not have the means to encourage reading for enjoyment in their own language, let alone English:

If they're not getting (L1 texts) they can't really encourage a love of books in their initial language.

While differences in ideas and experiences between the home and school may impact to varying degrees on EAL pupils, teachers also made reference to the fact that there may be as many pupils born and raised in Ireland whose home environment places little emphasis on literacy. The pressure to keep up with school expectations of literacy does not rest solely on the shoulders of foreign national pupils. While avoiding labeling EAL pupils to any greater extent, it would be of interest to see if support akin to 'educational disadvantage' schemes would be beneficial to additional language learners.

Conclusion and implications

The teachers participating in this study evidently involved their EAL pupils with the rest of the class in reading instruction. The apparent lack of variety in grouping formats resonates with large-scale Irish L1 research (Archer and O'Rourke, 1987). Pressure to 'economise' instruction due to

large class sizes permeated the interviews. Nonetheless, teachers may still test whether greater use of varied group formats would be of benefit to all. The apparent imbalance in reading skill instruction is of concern, particularly in the senior classes. EAL pupils are reading across the curriculum alongside native-speaking peers who are progressing at speed at this age. Strong decoding and pronunciation skills are only useful to EAL pupils if matched with a focus on reading for meaning (Jiménez *et al.*, 1996).

While it was clear that all interviewees had high expectations for their EAL pupils' academic success, teachers may need to gauge their expectations realistically for EAL pupils to maximise literacy success. Provision of teacher professional development in learning EAL would ideally emphasise the importance of valuing the first language and bridge the home-school literacy gap to some extent (Reese and Gallimore, 2000). Larger-scale studies are needed to investigate EAL pupil involvement in reading instruction on a national level. Comparisons of non-native and native English speakers' standardised scores need to be examined, leading to questions around pupil assessment. Studies using teacher observation and interviews with EAL pupils themselves would also be of great interest. There is huge scope for research in the area. Policy-makers may wish to examine national and international practice to provide greater direction for EAL pupils in the mainstream class.

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