An investigation exploring the extent ‘EAL Steps for Classroom Integration’ is effective in primary school language teaching

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Profile

I currently work as a primary school teacher with over 12 years of experience. I have an interest in EAL, particularly for international new arrivals, and would consider this to be my specialist area. With a Masters in Inclusive Education, I hope to be able to share my expertise with other teachers to further enhance inclusive practices in other schools.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to ascertain teacher perspectives on the use of ‘EAL steps for Classroom Integration’ as a tool to support teachers of international new arrivals with their daily planning; from teaching suggestions for themselves to preparing suitable activities and assessment. A need was felt for the research following the understanding that although there is ample information available for teaching English as an additional language in schools, research has shown teachers to feel underprepared from the absence of clear guidance. The author has carefully selected and presented information ‘in a nutshell’ and offered it to participants to guide their professional duty of ensuring integration of new arrivals in their classes.

Data was collected through two interviews and a focus group. The interviews, taking a before and after approach directly compared responses, with the focus group as an opportunity to corroborate findings. This short study saw an impressive turnaround in approaches used by participants who were able to engage learners and see progression through the changes that had been made to teaching strategies. It created confident and proficient, practicing EAL teachers with motivated learners, leading to the recommendation that ‘EAL steps for Classroom Integration’ should be widely available.

Keywords: EAL, International New Arrivals, integration, education, support, teaching
Immigration is currently a prominent and topical issue in the UK with families arriving from all over the world to work, study, accompany/join others or seek asylum. Figures for immigration show an increase from a total of 526,000 arriving in 2013 to 641,000 arriving in 2014 (ONS, 2015). In addition to this, up to 750 refugees are also settled into the UK each year through The Gateway Protection Program. 2011 Census data shows that 13% of the population were not born in the UK (ONS, 2012), a figure which has doubled in the last 20 years. At present “there is no reliable data on the number of people living in Great Britain whose first language is not English” (DCSF, N.D) but “there could be up to 200 languages spoken by long-term residents in the Greater Manchester area” with around 40% of children likely to be multilingual (The University of Manchester, 2013).

Compulsory school aged children arriving from overseas with little or no English are enrolled into mainstream schools as soon as possible. As children are always taught with their peers, this has created the difficulty for many schools to include new arrivals in lessons with a curriculum intended for children who can speak English. A system of addressing the language needs of the diverse nation is needed. ‘EAL Steps for Classroom Integration’ is a tool created by the researcher to support primary school teachers with effective classroom provision for their pupils who are international new arrivals (INA). INA is the term used to describe pupils who have joined the school at any age having arrived from a country outside the UK. ‘EAL Steps for Classroom Integration’ facilitates good classroom practice of teachers working with children who have English as an additional language (EAL). This paper reflects a research study conducted to ascertain participants’ perceptions of the usefulness of the tool in order to evaluate its effectiveness.

Approaches to teaching EAL in schools.

Although ‘International New Arrivals’ is a fairly new phrase to British education, the issues of teaching children who have arrived from other countries, in mainstream schools is not. Section 11 of the Local Government Act 1966 referred to the provisions that were necessary to be made to allow ethnic minorities to access education. The use of funds to remove bilingual children from the mainstream classroom to be taught in language teaching centres off site or makeshift language centres onsite soon became frowned upon and declared a form of institutional racism (CRE, 1986, p9) as children were withdrawn from their right to an ‘education according to their age, ability and aptitude’ as stated under the Education Act of 1944. Since the Swann Report (1985) was published, bilingual learners have been expected by government to be taught in the mainstream classroom throughout the day (Wardman, 2012). Much information has been developed since then to promote the awareness of significant and influential philosophies of researchers whose work is still advocated in EAL practice today.

Cummins’ contributions included BICS/CALP (Cummins, 1979), Common Underlying Proficiency (Cummins, 1980) and Task Difficulty (Cummins, 1984). His theories distinguish skills required to participate in daily conversation from skills required in abstract or academic discussions (Smyth, 2003). Once these were established, he showed how language acquisition is based on meaningful input that is understood by the learner. He further revealed that the development the child’s home language boosts English learning and personal development, recommending that teachers should promote and encourage the use of home language Cummins’ (1980). Cummins (1984) established a model (Quadrant) to demonstrate the usefulness of tasks set by the teacher in the development of language at different stages of proficiency. His idea of task difficulty presented in his Quadrant make it possible to refine teaching practices to create practical solutions to differentiate lessons and tasks for INA.

Some of Cummins’ thoughts have been supported by later researchers, for example Kenner (2010) and Martin (2003) have more recently shown the increase in motivation and grasp of English when allowing children to converse in the home language.

On the other hand, the work of Cummins has been heavily criticised too. Edelsky et. al.(1983) and Baker (2006) proposed that successful language acquisition needed to be assessed through a response to real life situations not merely the ‘meaningless literacy exercises’ that only produce children who can be successful at school (p35); a fair comment to make in an age where education strives to meet the nation’s workforce needs. Krashen’s theories (1982) do address this though. He explained language acquisition to be a subconscious process, claiming that language development was reliant on acquisition and not learning so taught language that had not been
subconsciously learned would not be useful for spontaneous speech in a real life situations. Instead, Krashen (1982) proposed five hypothesis to include: input, acquisition-learning, monitor, natural order and affective hypothesis. He established the conditions necessary for learners to progress in their knowledge of the second language (i+1) by relating emotions to learning; positive emotions contributing to motivation and negative emotions such as fear and embarrassment hindering the ability to acquire language. The notion of building on existing knowledge (i +1) is well established in education with Piaget’s Schemas (1952), which would support Krashen’s attempts to explain how second language is learnt, however Cummins’ theories should not be disregarded as they provide tangible methods of practical application in the classroom.

In addition, effective Teacher and peer interactions have also been promoted by Smith (2006) and Day (2002). Day studied classroom dynamics and the relationships of a new arrival summarising that the relationships created conscious and unconscious dynamics to promote English use. Smith studied how planned interactions between learners allowed the pupils to support each other’s learning; both resulting in recommendations for planned classroom interactions and collaborative learning to accelerate English language use.

A small sample of beneficial perspectives have been provided above, many more are available. But there still remains ample suggestion that a mainstream pedagogy is needed to generate a consistency of approach between schools and children’s experiences (Haworth, 2009; Mistry & Sood, 2012; Murtagh & Francis, 2012) and even with so much research suggesting otherwise; code switching (the use of the home language to support learning) is still sometimes not accepted in classrooms (Williams, 2011). This seems to demonstrate that even though there is research and recommendations available, they are not fully understood and utilised or even known of. If individuals were aware of the different pedagogies for teaching EAL, they should be able to decide for themselves which methods or techniques suit their situations and may not need to rely on such direction.

The National Curriculum and EAL

Curriculum 2014 contains two paragraphs within the inclusion statement regarding the planning, monitoring and support that pupils who have EAL may need in order to take part in all subjects (DfE, 2013, p8). Curriculum 2000 had the same points written in the inclusion section on p37 (DfE, 1999). It would have been beneficial to see the government responding to the current changes in society by including contemporary guidance for EAL or new arrivals.

The National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum (NALDIC) indicate several problems with the National Curriculum. NALDIC claims that it fails to recognise the diversity of the population, the different stages of language acquisition that children are at and the complex process that is required for these children to fully access the curriculum as has been recommended (2012). EMASUK has also pointed out that “from these statements clearly the government are expecting every ordinary teacher (i.e. not a linguist) to work with both English speaking and non-English speaking children in their classrooms at the same time” (2013). Two major EAL bodies have independently highlighted the same concern the researcher has; there has not been proper regard to the EAL statements that have been made in the National Curriculum- a legal document which teachers must follow.

For language development, the National Curriculum focuses on the English curriculum “which has been considered a good model for both first and additional language learning” (NALDIC, 2011). There is a specific requirement for schools to meet the complex needs of EAL. A clear expectation has been made for schools to know the needs of these pupils, monitor progression, plan for pupils to develop their English and allow for active involvement in all lessons (DFE, 2013). To ensure that these requirements are met, there would need to be training for teachers to understand the specific needs and how to address them, resources and support material available, and clear guidance on assessment in order to monitor children and use this as a means of ‘assessment for learning’ to guide teachers with planning suitable future leaning experiences.

Murakami (2008), Cajkler & Hall (2009), Mistry & Sood, (2011), and Murtagh & Francis (2012) are just a sample
of the many researchers that have found teachers to be unprepared for the requirements of teaching EAL learners due to insufficient input at initial teacher training level. It has also been identified that there is a need for a clearly specified pedagogical framework. The feeling of a lack of direction could be improved if teachers had a clear programme to work towards and if training for teachers and support staff was as readily available as it is for other subjects (Murakami, 2008).

“Students with EAL (need to be) given necessary time and resources to help them achieve….they need access to good quality assessment and teaching resources” (Murtagh & Francis, 2011, p210), but both are limited in their availability (ibid). There are minimal EAL resources available in comparison to what can be purchased for other subjects, and suppliers provide no guidance on how best to use these in schools for maximum impact on learning at the various stages of language acquisition. Resources need to be more readily available for schools to be able to “provide the support pupils need to take part in all subjects” (DFE, 2013, p8) as recommended in the National curriculum.

Monitoring and assessing pupils’ language use is a cause for concern with teachers having only a limited awareness of current national expectations (Cajkler & Hall, 2009). There is no nationally agreed assessment method but QCA (2000) has published guidance on assessment and levelling EAL. Demie and Strand (2006) point out many schools have not needed to assess language proficiency because there is a strong relationship between stage of English development and educational attainment. This contradicts the research of Cummins (1980) who explains that a child’s knowledge and the ability to express that knowledge in English are not parallel. I have found QCAs guidance to be ambiguous and inconsistent between teachers due the vagueness of the statements and the inconsideration for age when using them to assess. Demie and Strand’s research only highlights the need for a consistent and clear assessment process which teachers are competent in using so that they can analyse the information to personalise teaching for the pupils with EAL.

EAL Steps for Classroom Integration—the study.

The tool, initially assembled in 2012, was to provide the researcher’s school with a systematic approach to EAL planning, assessment, monitoring and teaching for its teachers who were faced with a number of INA in each class arriving throughout the year. The Department for Education (DfE) promote supporting INA as ‘a whole-school issue, involving all staff’ (2008, p61) and state the best support for new arrivals is ‘quality-first teaching in an inclusive curriculum’ (ibid). Although there was enough pedagogy, research and reports describing good practice for INA and EAL, the researcher felt that information was not presented in an easily accessible format to make maximum use of. ‘EAL Steps for Classroom Integration’ is based on the language assessment system of NASSEA (The Northern Association of Support Services for Equality and Achievement) (NASSEA, 2001) and combines it with many freely available recommendations that support each stage of development. It summarises, organises and presents them into a format that should be more manageable to understand and make use of for day to day teaching strategies, lesson and activity planning as well as for assessment. The information on the tool needs little explanation to teachers as it is a collection of ideas that are familiar in teaching but specifically beneficial for new arrivals. Using it should allow staff to meet the DfE requirements for INAs in their own class. Feedback received from teachers at the researcher’s school as well as the local authority’s integration service had been encouraging so it was decided that a formal study to investigate the extent that ‘EAL Steps for Classroom Integration’ is effective for primary school language teaching should be conducted.

The school selected for the study was recommended by a local authority support service as suitable for the study as they had recently accommodated several new arrivals via their service. This situation was new to the school; containing mostly white British children, professional development and support was being sought to embrace the new arrivals. Five teachers with varying experiences were nominated by the school to participate in the study, all participants had at least one new arrival in the class. Data collection consisted of two interview sessions and a focus group. Each interview generated responses to the same six open ended questions, with interview one acting as the opportunity to establish a baseline before the participants were introduced to ‘EAL Steps for Classroom Integration’ in order to make comparisons from. Shortly after the first interviews, and 1.5
hour training session was sufficient to introduce the tool, and explain with examples how to use it. The second interview was conducted after a period of 6 school weeks in which the teachers could put ‘EAL Steps for Classroom Integration’ into practice. A focus group with all five participants was used to discuss the themes that emerged from the interviews in order to examine inferences that had been made from analysing the interview data. This, along with samples of work from children’s books made it possible to corroborate the data.

Findings

The study demonstrated that teachers perceived the tool to be useful in many ways for themselves to support planning and teaching, which influenced the improved performance and participation of their children in lessons.

Findings show that using ‘EAL Steps for Classroom Integration’ creates a greater awareness of using teaching strategies that allow INAs to participate in lesson inputs, making teaching more accessible to them. This was demonstrated through two significant factors; a considerable reduction in the instances of children being excluded from lessons to be kept occupied with more seemingly purposeful activities such as phonics, and an increase in the use of strategies aimed at making lessons accessible for learners of EAL by adapting practices to include the use of visuals, hand gestures, facial expressions, clarifying vocabulary, speaking clearly, careful use of questioning, deploying various methods of encouraging interaction and expanding or recapping explanations which support to minimise the language barrier. The improved teacher performance allows new arrivals to be included in all lessons to ensure that school curricula and experiences are accessible to them.

Using the tool also expands teacher’s abilities to plan suitably differentiated tasks which develop language use in the context of the curriculum. A contrast in the quantity of abstract and cognitively undemanding activities such as copying and colouring-in being replaced by a varied range of cognitively undemanding but high context (sorting, ordering pictures, matching, labelling) and high context, cognitively demanding tasks (cloze, following written instructions, ordering sentences). With the increased use of visual prompts to support learning and the replication of activity types across subjects allowed children to be presented with a differentiated task for each lesson. The value of preparing such tasks had the added advantages of a decreased need for adult support with new arrivals as well as an increase in engagement with tasks from learners. A more balanced use of teacher and TA support could be deployed across the whole class to ensure that other groups were not disadvantaged. Also, as children were presented with tasks they could access independently, they were motivated to complete them; gaining a sense of achievement.

‘EAL Steps for Classroom Integration’ allows teachers to use assessment to monitor learning as well as use assessment to inform future planning for new arrivals. The combination of assessment descriptors and targets on the tool proved useful for the participants who otherwise had no method of assessing the children. All participants were able to determine the ‘step’ their new arrivals were working at and from this were able to select suitable targets to direct learning towards the next ‘step’. What began as a haphazard approach to establish suitable tasks soon developed into a structured method of working with new arrivals to push their learning further. Teachers can now plan for activities within lessons as well as during intervention sessions that are pitched to stretch the children just far enough to be manageable with support. Moreover, the systems in place are simple enough to be managed by more than one adult simultaneously; TAs that worked with the children shared the responsibility of assessing regularly to set further targets to work towards during focussed intervention sessions and all participants were comfortable that they could provide evidence for progression.

Teachers’ fears concerning teaching new arrivals are significantly reduced when using ‘EAL Steps for Classroom Integration’. This was evident when comparing the data at the beginning and the end of the study. Participants had worries around what to teach, which activities would be suitable, how to show progression and the potential increase in work-load for them. They were in a situation that was new to some of them, relying on ‘trial and error’ with frustrations from not having clear teaching strategies that guided their daily work. By using the information on the tool, participants’ fears of managing the needs of their new arrivals were no longer apparent as they had access to a range of teaching ideas and activities, an assessment method and targets for children.
to work towards which gave them the strategies to achieve that they previously did not have. Participants discussed their children positively and could explain how they had made a difference to their learning and confidence through the new practices in place. They were able to monitor progression and were secure in the knowledge that they could now demonstrate the progress that had been made. Having access to the tool with information presented as it was saved the teachers the time and effort of gathering ideas that may or may not have made a difference to the children. By supporting the teachers with their fears and anxieties, they were able to make the differences to their practice which made an impact on their children's learning.

As well as supporting the teacher, 'EAL Steps for Classroom Integration' has values for the children too. Other than those related to learning, which have been discussed above, the use of the tool allows the development of independence in the children and supports to reduce barriers to learning. The beginning of the study saw a heavy reliance of adult support for the new arrivals due to the nature of the tasks that the children were being presented with or the assumed inability to participate in lessons which resulted in withdrawal for an ad-hoc intervention. Unfortunately this denies opportunities for INAs to mix with the rest of the class, learn language in a natural setting, and learn the social skills of interaction and ‘unwritten’ classroom rules. New approaches allowed the children to be more independent around the class by working alone, with a partner or in a group more often; children supported each other so had further opportunities to build friendships and develop social skills as well as to practise their English naturally. Providing achievable activities that children recognised and knew how to accomplish created confident learners that could work without continuous adult support for all participants. Planning these opportunities also allowed for adults to be redirected to support other groups in the class as well so that all the children had a balanced approach to provision whilst the new arrivals had the freedom they needed to become members of the class.

The recommendations for teaching strategies and activities on the tool support to reduce the barriers to learning that INAs may have. In addition to language barriers, it is possible for new arrivals to have additional difficulties preventing them from learning, such as social and emotional troubles arising from past experiences or simply from relocation and adjustment. The practices promoted in ‘EAL Steps for Classroom Integration’, combined with the structure the teachers were able to provide from using it began to develop independence in the children with a noticeable increase in their motivation and self-confidence as well as accelerated learning. This was seen as a contributing factor to alleviate anxieties faced by new arrivals that inhibit potential learning. Not only were the strategies assisting INAs but it was also noticed that other children benefit from the new strategies that the teachers were adopting too. Clear and precise language use whilst expanding and recapping explanations supported more than just the new arrivals; indigenous children who needed such consolidation or clarity before beginning a task now also had access to it. Teachers noticed that it supported them to understand and complete activities accurately and with less support than previously needed. Strategies recommended for new arrivals are not always additional to or above what could be expected of good teaching, so by putting these methods to the forefront of the teachers attention simply reminds them to do it more often; good teaching benefits all children.

The school used for the study was at a very early stage of addressing the needs of their international new arrivals; for the five participants, a massive advancement in professional development in the area of classroom integration for INAs was seen over the duration of the project. For those schools which have already started addressing this, it would be naive to suggest that it could make such a difference as seen in this project yet ‘EAL Steps for classroom Integration’ would still be helpful to emphasise the flow that is needed between assessment, and classroom practice, as it places them side by side. It makes the general statements used for assessing language specific enough to be transferrable between adults without losing meaning or interpretation, which is a necessity if assessment data is to be adequately robust to carry through the school. An at-hand reminder of good teaching and saving time to think of suitable activities would also be added advantages for all teachers.

This research project has allowed the researcher to conclude that ‘EAL Steps for Classroom Integration’ is an extremely effective tool to upskill teachers to meet the needs of international new arrivals through planning, assessment, lesson delivery and choice of activity. Minimal training is required to use the tool as implementing
the suggestions on it do not require any additional knowledge or specific expertise from the teacher. Positive changes to practice can be made immediately with benefits to the child’s confidence, motivation and accelerated learning apparent in a short space of time. At initial teacher training and as a form of continuing professional development, ‘EAL Steps for Classroom Integration’ would be a valuable method of addressing inclusion for children who have EAL.
References


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