

‘Good practice’ for pupils with English as an additional language: patterns in student teachers’ thinking

Andrew Read
University of East London

Abstract

Student teachers construct ideas around how to support the learning of pupils with English as an additional language (EAL), basing these ideas on university- and school-based training, reading, dialogue and reflection. For the purposes of this piece of research, postgraduate student teachers training to teach pupils aged 3–11 were each asked to ‘picture’ one child with EAL encountered during blocks of school-based training, to categorise this child in terms of English fluency, to suggest the child’s specific needs and to identify effective strategies to support pupil progress. Student teachers’ responses are analysed to explore whether there are evident patterns in these student teachers’ identification of pupils with EAL, and the student teachers’ understanding of these pupils’ needs. Responses are aligned with current thinking about ‘good practice’. Points of congruence between student teacher responses and ‘good practice’ are identified. Where evidence of this congruence is lacking, implications for student teachers and for programme design are identified.

Keywords: English as an additional language (EAL); EAL pedagogy; effective teaching and learning; activating prior knowledge; advanced bilingual learners; promoting independence

Introduction

The percentage of the primary school population in the UK with English as an additional language (EAL) has risen year-on-year from 10% in 2002 to just under 18% in 2012 (NALDIC, 2012). In the Key Stage 2 (KS2) tests in 2011, on a national scale, 70% of pupils whose first language is not English achieved the expected levels in both English and mathematics. For pupils whose first language is English, the percentage was 75% (DfE, 2011). For inner London, the picture is somewhat different (NALDIC, 2012): 54% of the

primary school population are pupils whose first language is not English. In the 2011 KS2 tests, 76% of inner London pupils with EAL achieved the expected level or above, compared with 77% of pupils whose first language is English. This is broadly replicated in outer London boroughs (75% EAL pupils and 78% pupils whose first language is English achieving the expected level). There is a strong sense that primary pupils with EAL are doing as well as pupils with English as the first language. This pattern continues to the end of KS 4 where 61.0% of pupils whose first language is other than English achieved five or more GCSE grades A–C compared to 61.7% of pupils whose first language is English (NALDIC, 2012).

So, pupils with EAL are doing fine? The Government’s consultation document *School funding reform: next steps towards a fairer system* (2012) seems to take this view, proposing limiting funding of pupils with EAL to three years because this ‘should provide enough time’. The model provides schools with funding for pupils for the first three years of compulsory schooling, ie from the age of four to seven years, with the exception of cases where the pupil has newly arrived in the UK. One could argue that such a proposal contradicts most internationally established research on English language acquisition. For example, while pupils might attain conversational levels akin to those of English first language speakers within about two years, Collier (1987, 1989) and Cummins (1981) argue that EAL pupils require between four and nine years to attain ‘academic’ English. One could argue that it was precisely the funding that the Government is proposing to curtail that worked so effectively in enabling EAL pupils to achieve the expected levels at the end of Key Stages 2 and 4. But perhaps, in such a financially austere environment and at a time when research-informed government policy is something of a contradiction in terms, a closer look at student teachers’ perceptions of good practice when working with pupils with EAL is a way forward, because if we have some idea of student teachers’ thinking about good practice then we are in a more informed position to consider effective programme design and continuing professional development. In order to

'Good practice' for pupils with English as an additional language: patterns in student teachers' thinking

explore student teachers' perspectives, it would seem useful to first establish the features of effective EAL pedagogy.

Establishing a model of good practice

The National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum (NALDIC) identifies five 'key principles' (1999) at the heart of good practice for teachers working with pupils with EAL. Ofsted's guidance for inspecting provision for pupils with EAL (2001) implies that there are a number of key features of good practice. There is clear common ground in the models of practice articulated by the two organisations. Ofsted's most recent EAL briefing paper (2012) provides examples of good practice, some of which add practical emphasis to points made in its 2001 guidance, e.g. that recognition of the importance of the pupil's first language (2001) implies that some assessment of the pupil's 'proficiency in their first language' is required (2012).

In order to identify the common threads in NALDIC's principles and Ofsted's features of good practice, and produce a single model, a third perspective has been applied. The Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), drawing on school-focused projects, proposes ten evidence-informed principles for effective teaching and learning (2006), seven of which provide a baseline against which to set NALDIC (1999) and Ofsted (2012) principles/features (Table 1). This broadly suggests a model of 'good practice' and, it might be argued, supports the cliché that good primary practice implicitly meets the needs of all pupils (see table 1 on page 26).

For the purposes of this study it is also useful to have a model of the stages of competence in EAL learners' use of English. While there is no nationally agreed scale for this, Hester's *Stages of English* (1990) is widely used (NALDIC, 2011):

Stage 1: new to English

Stage 2: becoming familiar with English

Stage 3: becoming confident as a user of English

Stage 4: a very fluent user of English in most social and learning contexts

Hester adds further detail to each of these stages and I will use this to explore some of the student teachers' responses.

Gathering student teachers' perceptions

I wanted to find out what student teachers thought about good practice when it came to working with

pupils with EAL. At the point where this research took place, student teachers on a one-year Primary Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme had completed two blocks of teaching practice in primary schools: in the data, SEB refers to School Experience B, the second block of teaching practice. The majority of student teachers would have had experience of working in classes with EAL pupils and I felt at this point they would have developed a clear notion of 'good practice', drawing on university-based input, a set of self-study tasks undertaken in school and the experience of observing and working alongside school-based mentors with input from university tutors. The data gathered is based on the responses of 102 student teachers, of whom 72 were Primary student teachers and 30 were Early Years student teachers.

I asked student teachers to respond to three questions:

Thinking about one pupil in your SEB class with EAL, how would you describe his/her stage of English?

What target would you give this pupil?

What strategy would you use to support this pupil's progress in English?

Student teachers were encouraged to work alone when producing responses, with an assurance that all responses would be anonymous. The responses were then collated.

Stages of English (See table two)

A certain amount of reinterpretation on my part took place in order to identify patterns. For example, I have categorised the response 'very little English – at the beginning of learning spoken and written English' as *Beginner* (rather than *New to English*) and the response 'fluent speaker, good at reading but struggled to transfer to writing' as *Intermediate* (rather than *Fluent*). Table 2 summarises student teachers' responses, drawing on language used by student teachers to name stages and noting corresponding key characteristic behaviours. I was interested to explore whether 5–11 student teachers thought differently to Early Years (EY) student teachers, hence the final two rows. The percentages do not total 100% because it was not possible to discern clear categories in all student responses.

Table 1: Good practice

TLRP: effective teaching and learning (2006)	NALDIC: key principles (1999)	Ofsted: features of good practice (2001: 29)	Ofsted: examples of good practice (2012: 3–4)
<p>Recognises the importance of prior experience and learning (TLRP)</p> <p>'Informal learning, such as learning out of school, should be... valued and used in formal processes' (TLRP)</p>	<p>Activating prior knowledge in the pupil</p>	<p>a recognition that the use of the first language will enhance understanding and support the development of English</p>	<p>The school should... have taken steps to assess the learners' proficiency and literacy in their first language and established what prior subject knowledge and experience they have in other subjects.</p>
<p>'Learners should be...helped to build relationships and communication with others for learning purposes' (TLRP)</p>	<p>Actively encouraging comprehensible output</p>		<p>Pupils learn more quickly when socialising and interacting with their peers who speak English fluently and can provide good language and learning role models.</p>
<p>'Teachers should provide activities and structures... to help learners move forward in their learning so when these supports are removed the learning is secure' (TLRP)</p>	<p>The provision of a rich cultural background to make the input comprehensible</p> <p>Drawing the learner's attention to the relationship between form and function; key grammatical elements are pointed out and made explicit</p>	<p>enhanced opportunities for speaking and listening; effective models of spoken and written language; a welcoming environment in which bilingual pupils feel confident to contribute; the selection of visual aids is culturally relevant and of good quality</p>	<p>Specialist EAL support should be available for new arrivals... More advanced learners of English should have continuing support in line with their varying needs as they develop competencies over time.</p> <p>There should be a focus on both language and subject content in lesson planning.</p>
<p>'A chief goal of teaching and learning should be the promotion of learners' independence and autonomy' (TLRP)</p>	<p>Developing learner independence</p>	<p>teaching that assists EAL learners to internalise and apply new subject-specific language;</p>	
<p>Assessment 'should help to advance learning as well as determine whether learning has occurred' (TLRP)</p>		<p>teaching that recognises that more advanced learners of English need continuing support; clear targets in language and learning are identified and met; grouping strategies that recognise pupils' learning and language development needs</p>	<p>The school should monitor the attainment and progress of pupils who may be at the earliest stages of learning English.</p> <p>The progress and attainment of all EAL learners, including those who are advanced bilingual learners, should be closely monitored so they are doing as well as they can.</p>
<p>'Institutional... policies need to... be designed to create effective learning environments for all learners'</p>			<p>Any withdrawal of EAL learners from a mainstream class should be for a specific purpose, time-limited and linked to the work of the mainstream class</p>

‘Good practice’ for pupils with English as an additional language: patterns in student teachers’ thinking

Table 2: Stages of English

<i>Thinking about one pupil in your SEB class with EAL, how would you describe his/her stage of English?</i>						
Stage	New to English	Beginner	Competent listening skills	Intermediate	Fluent	Native fluency
Features	Very limited vocabulary; yes/no answers; communicating through peers	Interaction with others; copying/ repeating; very quiet; one-word answers	‘Good’ listener but less confident with speaking/ writing	Constructing short simple sentences; writing does not match competence in reading/speaking	Speaking and writing fluently	
Percentage of responses (5–11)	32%	18%	13%	9%	4%	Less than 1%
Percentage of responses (EY)	40%	20%		10%	17%	

Table 3: Student targets and strategies for EAL pupils

Stage	Target (Primary student)	Strategy (Primary student)	Target (EY student)	Strategy (EY student)
New to English	Extend social/classroom/ academic vocabulary (<i>eg to be able to say and write 10 key words</i>) [39%]	Use of pictorial resources/ visual prompts/sketches by the teacher/Makaton [39%]	Develop ‘everyday vocabulary’ (<i>eg say ‘good morning’ every day</i>) [25%]	Makaton/visual timetables/matching words and pictures [33%] Use of phonics [17%]
	Build confidence with simple sentences/ always respond to ‘everyday questions’ (<i>eg How are you?</i>) [17%]	Pair with peer with same first language [22%]	Use ‘everyday’ phrases/ sentences (<i>eg ‘Today is...sunny/ Wednesday’</i>) [33%]	<i>Encouragement</i> [33%]
Beginner	Use English with others every day [38%] Develop confidence in phonics [11%]	Use of visual aids/cues/ gestures/ prompts [54%] Work with peer/adult with same first language [23%]		Use of modelling (<i>eg through storytelling</i>) [67%]
	Intermediate [The percentages here are arguably irrelevant because of the small number of student teachers identifying a pupil at this stage.]	Use/begin to use connectives/formulate more complex sentences [83%] Widen vocabulary/ learn meaning of ‘tricky’ words [33%]	Peer/adult/parent support [67%] Work banks/target words [33%]	<i>Develop understanding of new/technical vocabulary</i> [67%]
Fluent	To be more comfortable using English	Increased opportunities to work with others	Develop reading comprehension	Use of guided reading/ questioning about the text

Targets and strategies for pupils (See table three)

The responses here were very varied. As with the *Stages of English*, a certain amount of interpretation on my part took place in order to categorise these. For the purposes of economy I will focus on the most common targets and strategies identified by student teachers for those pupils who are identified as *New to English, Beginners, Intermediate and Fluent*.

Observations

This particular group of student teachers, when asked to think of a pupil with EAL, tended to opt for pupils who were *New to English* or *Beginners*. During the course of discussions with other groups of student teachers on the same programme, I noted a tendency for student teachers to think in terms of 'EAL pupils' being those at the earlier stages of English acquisition. Student teachers refer to the 'EAL group', describing what happens in schools. Student teachers were aware of pupils with EAL who were more fluent, but these were not immediately perceived as being 'EAL'. Table 1 suggests that Early Years student teachers felt more confident about labelling EAL pupils as *Fluent*, although the number of Early Years student teachers was relatively small and the percentage therefore possibly misleading.

When identifying the behaviours of pupils with EAL, student responses suggest a continuum from *New to English*, through developing basic speaking and listening skills, transferring speaking and reading skills into writing, to *Fluent*. Responses describing EAL pupils' difficulties in articulating ideas in writing were relatively common, exemplified by the following responses, indicating student teacher thinking about EAL pupils at the *Intermediate stage*:

fluent speaker, good reading but struggled to transfer in writing;

able to speak clearly but unable to show this in written English;

good in conversation but not written.

Similarly, a continuum for targets emerges, from developing basic vocabulary, through everyday use, more complex constructions and greater depth of vocabulary choice, to targets around how *comfortable* English use is.

Student teachers' responses in terms of EAL pupil behaviours are very broadly in line with Hester's categories. For example, Hester implies that

confidence in speaking and listening precedes that in writing: at Stage 2, pupils are 'increasingly confident in taking part in activities... [and] beginning to write simple stories' (Hester, 1990). Hester notes that at Stage 3, pupils have 'growing command of... more complex sentence structure' (Hester, 1990) which student teachers echo in their description of pupils at the *Intermediate stage*. While Hester does not provide explicit targets or strategies, and indeed notes that pupil approaches and school attitudes will differ, she does emphasise 'social aspects of learning' and indicates (implicitly or explicitly) that pupils require opportunities to:

Stage 1: listen, echo, join in, label

Stage 2: communicate meaning, report on events and activities, describe

Stage 3: encounter increasing range of text types; explore complex ideas (in first language)

Stage 4: explore the 'subtle nuances of metaphor and... Anglo-centric cultural content', move between English and first language

In general, and largely perhaps because student teachers have pictured pupils at earlier stages of English acquisition when thinking of pupils with EAL, student teachers' responses in respect of targets and strategies share common ground with Hester's *Stage 1 and Stage 2* opportunities. Student teachers refer to labelling, acquiring basic vocabulary and communicating with others (eg '*Today is sunny*') at the *New to English* and *Beginner* stages (see Table 3).

Student teachers refer to the use of visual materials to support EAL learners at the first two stages. This is in line with notions of 'good practice': NALDIC, for example, argues that 'content learning can be greatly improved through the use of visual support' (NALDIC, 1999). However, student teachers make little mention of using visual materials at later stages of English acquisition. NALDIC recommends the use of 'key visuals' and graphic organisers (eg maps, diagrams and charts) to summarise and provide a structure for information (NALDIC, 1999). There are parallels here perhaps with Hester's notion of exploring complex ideas at *Stage 3* (Hester, 1990) and this extended use of graphic organisers could have implications for developing student practice.

Another key area that student teachers make little mention of is first language use, although this was seen as a useful strategy for 5–11 student teachers with pupils at the *New to English* and *Beginner* stages. First language use (both explicitly and implicitly within the idea of prior learning) is seen as central to 'good

practice' (see Table 1). Possibly, student teachers see the key purpose as the acquisition of English, so opportunities to speak in English are prioritised over enhancing understanding through the first language. The following targets exemplify the implication in a number of responses that it is the English rather than the content that is most significant: *To learn school routines in English; Begin to use English words to communicate with classmates.*

The significance of pupils developing independence – again seen as central to 'good practice' (Table 1) – does not come across strongly in student responses, although there is evidence of some student teachers thinking in terms of equipping pupils with strategies that have a longer-term impact. Targets such as *Say sentences out loud before writing them down and Repeat the question in the answer (eg 'Can you...?' 'I can...')* exemplify this – however, examples such as this were rare. More often, targets depended on either the input of teachers or focused on tools created by the teacher or general curriculum demands. Targets such as *Repeat words in English after the teacher, Learn numbers 1–10 and Practice learning high frequency words* exemplify this.

The needs of more advanced bilingual learners are essentially not addressed by student teachers. This is largely because of the student teachers' selection of pupils, with few identified as being fluent in English (see Table 2). The idea of a perceived 'EAL group' is again apparent here. However, through assessment, student teachers must ensure that all pupils do 'as well as they can' (Ofsted, 2012): this is central to 'good practice' (see Table 1). Where EAL pupils who are fluent in English have been identified by student teachers, targets and strategies sometimes suggest that this fluency is fragile: *Looking at comprehension during reading... lots of questioning about the text.* Perhaps there is uncertainty about how to challenge advanced bilingual learners. Hester (1990) provides useful starting points.

A key factor in relation to the infrequent identification of more advanced bilingual learners may be the significant presence of student teachers on the programme whose first language is not English. These student teachers, who have proceeded successfully through the educational system, will have a particular perspective when it comes to identifying and supporting advanced bilingual learners because this is who they are. The sense from discussions with student teachers that some schools associate 'EAL' only with those pupils at the earlier stages of English acquisition may serve to distance student teachers

from using the term with advanced bilingual learners and, indeed, in relation to themselves. This could provide an interesting area for further research.

A final observation, something of a side shoot from the main stem of 'good practice', concerns student teachers' reference to the use of phonics. It emerges as a default strategy in a number of responses and, while not a key strategy, its use as a target for pupils at the *New to English* and *Beginner* stages seems to bypass the need for these pupils to speak, listen and understand. This is not to question the value of skills in blending and segmenting, but simply to question their presence as targets and strategies for pupils at early stages of learning English. Targets such as *Use phonic knowledge when decoding, Learn letters and sounds to assist writing and reading and Work more on blending letters together* exemplify this type of response.

Concluding thoughts

There are some clear implications to draw from student responses. While the definition of English as an additional language in its broadest sense is presented to student teachers on this programme, student teachers' selection of pupils to focus their thinking on suggests a tendency to stereotype EAL pupils as those at the earliest stages of English acquisition. Consequently the needs of more advanced bilingual learners are potentially overlooked. A clear view of the progress and needs of all EAL pupils, using Hester's framework (1990) as a starting point, would bring greater clarity.

'The promotion of learners' independence and autonomy' (TLRP, 2006) is largely overlooked, as, broadly, is the significance of pupils' prior learning (including first language use), and the use of visual devices (such as graphic organisers) to support exploration of more complex ideas. These elements could be set within a lesson-planning framework to focus student teachers' thinking in relation to supporting the progress of all pupils – and implicitly the progress of pupils with EAL.

Finally, the 'side shoot' of phonics suggests that some student teachers may assume default positions when thinking about what is best for pupils. Sometimes defaults work. However, student teachers need continued encouragement to ask questions about the decisions they make, and opportunities to articulate their rationales, so that what might be an effective approach in certain circumstances does not become a knee-jerk response to a range of challenges faced in the classroom.

References

Collier, V. (1987) 'Age and rate of acquisition of second language for academic purposes' in *TESOL Quarterly*. 21, 617-641.

Collier, V. (1989) 'How long? A synthesis of research on academic achievement in a second language' in *TESOL Quarterly*. 23, 509- 531.

Cummins, J. (1981) 'Age on arrival and immigrant second language learning in Canada: A reassessment' in *Applied Linguistics*. 2, 132-149.

DfE (2012) *School funding reform: Next steps towards a fairer system*. Online: <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/s/school%20funding%20reform%20-%20next%20steps%20towards%20a%20fairer%20system.pdf> [accessed July 2012]

DfE (2011) National Curriculum Assessments at Key Stage 2 in England 2010/2011 (revised). Online: <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001047/index.shtml> [accessed July 2012]

Hester, H. (1990) 'The Stages of English' in *Patterns of Learning*. London: CLPE.

NALDIC (1999) *Working Paper 5: The Distinctiveness of English as an Additional Language: A cross curriculum discipline*. Watford: NALDIC.

NALDIC (2011) *Assessment practices in schools*. Online: <http://www.naldic.org.uk/Resources/NALDIC/Initial%20Teacher%20Education/Documents/Assessmentinschools.pdf> [accessed July 2012]

NALDIC (2012) Online: <http://www.naldic.org.uk/research-and-information/eal-statistics> [accessed July 2012]

Ofsted (2001) *Inspecting Subjects 3-11: English as an Additional Language*. London: OfSTED.

Ofsted (2004) *Managing the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant – Good practice in primary schools*. London: OfSTED.

Ofsted (2012) *English as an additional language: briefing for section 5 inspection*. London: OfSTED.

TLRP (2006) *Improving teaching and learning in schools*. London: TLRP. Online: http://www.tlrp.org/pub/documents/TLRP_Schools_Commentary_FINAL.pdf [accessed July 2012]

Contact: a.read@uel.ac.uk