English as an Additional Language: some lessons from an International School

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Abstract

The research was undertaken at the invitation of the school to investigate the efficacy of English as an Additional Language (EAL) teaching to students at a secondary-age international school, who do not have English as their first language and who are undertaking an EAL programme. A small-sample, single context case study approach was used. Although the research was undertaken in only one context, the findings might well be of value to others in similar settings. The research showed that it is important for mainstream teachers to engage in EAL activity and for EAL departments to engage in mainstream activity, that the interrelationship between the mainstream programme and the EAL programme is important, and that a focus on individual students by all teachers is important.

Context

This study was based in an English medium international school for secondary age students. We were invited by the school to undertake a study of the effectiveness of its EAL provision, and this paper summarises the findings of the study. The school catered for students from expatriate families and local students from largely affluent backgrounds. Over 40 nationalities were represented at the school and the majority of the student body had a mother tongue other than English. For many of these students English was a third or even fourth language; for example some local students spoke their mother tongue and the local language, and English became their third language. The school's philosophy and mission statement included a commitment to providing a high-quality education and a challenging curriculum. Teachers were required 'to establish a well-managed learning environment where active, individual learning and progress for all students are the norm'. All classroom teachers were expected to include differentiation and strategies designed to help English as an Additional Language (EAL) students in their lesson planning, but specific EAL teaching was only carried out by dedicated EAL teachers. The school was dedicated to increasing enrolment and placed no requirements for the English language ability of applicants.

The school had a traditional staff structure. There were no classroom assistants in mainstream subjects. There was an EAL department (with a staff of two full-time and one part-time teachers, and one full time assistant) which addressed the needs of students identified as needing help with their English students through "pull-out" classes and "push-in" to regular lessons. "Pull-out" classes take students from their normal lessons to undertake additional EAL work, while "push-in" sees EAL teachers in the mainstream lessons supporting EAL alongside the regular class teacher (McMahon, 2013). Interventions were generally not needs-based and were more dependent on the availability of resources. For example, "push-in" support was not timetabled according to student need but according to staff availability. Communication between the EAL department and the mainstream teachers was examined in this study: at the time of writing there were limited channels of communication: the impact of this on the learning development of the EAL students was reviewed.

This study reviewed the support that the school gave to individual students to help them access the mainstream curriculum. Although a high number of students had a mother tongue other than English, the number of students identified as requiring this additional help was relatively small. This allowed a focus on a small number of students and at an individual level. To facilitate a conclusion regarding the effectiveness of the system used, this study examined not only the help given to these students but also how they were initially identified and what happened when they no longer required such help. By analysing the data gathered in terms of the theories uncovered by the research it was hoped that the study would be able to answer the question of whether or not the school provided effective support to enable EAL students to access the mainstream curriculum.

Literature

In recent years there has been a significant increase in research on EAL and on English language learners in general. Studies on how best to integrate these students into international mainstream classrooms are more limited with the focus of the literature being on teaching methodology. Literature is wide-ranging and offers numerous interventions or methods that schools or teachers may employ when dealing with EAL students, however there are very few studies on the development or integration of EAL students within an international school context. Overwhelmingly, the literature refers to the role of the mainstream classroom teacher.

Rubinstein-Avila (2003) recognises the need for teachers to adapt for changing circumstances;
> *'all middle school teachers today, not only those teaching English as a second language classes, ought to consider obtaining ESL endorsements or sheltered English content training in order to be better prepared for the day-to-day realities in their classrooms.'*

Meyer (2000) also focuses on the role of the teacher, suggesting that:
> *'Teachers' strategies are able to create classroom conditions that enable English learners to cross over the instructional divide from confusion into meaningful output'.*

Gibbons (2003) dedicates a number of studies to the problem of integrating EAL students into mainstream classrooms:

> *'Merely exposing ESL learners to content classrooms, however, is not an adequate response…Teaching programmes in all curriculum areas must therefore aim to integrate 'language' and 'content', so that a second language is developed hand in hand with new curriculum knowledge. This is not a straightforward task….many teachers have never had the opportunity to ... prepare for this kind of teaching.'*

For Gibbons, the training of teachers in this area is important to the development of EAL students. However, it is important to consider all of the practical implications of this theory. In most cases in Gibbons' study, teachers had large workloads and few resources. Neither Gibbons nor Meyer give consideration to the capacity of mainstream teachers to fulfil this significant new role, nor the ability of schools to provide them with the necessary resources and training. It is equally important that the teachers use appropriate differentiation rather than just 'dumbing down' the lesson in general. The needs of first-language learners must also be taken into account.

Cummins (2000) focuses on whether EAL students should be held to the same assessment standards as first-language learners. Cummins argues that EAL students should be assessed separately, against a curriculum-based English language performance standard, rather than being included in the mainstream criterion based assessment adopted by the school. Cummins identifies many advantages of this system, including a more meaningful learning experience for the students but suggests that the standards must be aligned to the mainstream curriculum:

> *'Ideally, a standards-based assessment process should integrate in a coherent way an assessment of ELL students' progress in learning English within the total accountability scheme...In addition, performance assessment of achievement in particular content areas (e.g. through portfolios) should be implemented for ELL students rather than tests which tend to be much less sensitive to the progress that students might have made.'* (Cummins, 2000, p157)

Cummins goes on to acknowledge that the difficulty with his argument would be that it requires a familiarity with the process of language development among EAL students. This could also lead to problems stemming from classification of which students would require the different assessment.

When examining the effectiveness of the two main strategies undertaken by the case-study school, we did not make any direct comparisons of the "pull-out" and "push-in" methods. While we noted that general opinion favours the latter, especially where the former may result in the student missing out on other key lessons, no formal studies have been undertaken in this context. Furthermore the current literature focuses on the integration of EAL students into mainstream classes and does not examine the impact of "pull-out" lessons in such a context.

Burke (2009) argues that cultural considerations are important in supporting EAL students:

> *'The ways in which the school responds to the cultural distance which may exist between itself and ESL students, their parents and caregivers will in turn affect the ability of these students to: feel comfortable and*

confident in the school context, see the relevance of the curriculum to themselves and actively participate in the curriculum.'

It could be argued that this is of even greater importance in an English-medium international school context where there is no prevalent 'culture' other than those who can access English and those who are less able, and EAL students may struggle even more to integrate. However, for the same reason, it could also be argued that in this context, and inevitably restricted by lack of resources experienced by many schools, this might be even more difficult to achieve. Burke identifies students in the international school context as even more likely to have their learning affected by 'culture shock'. If schools fail to recognise the importance of cultural considerations (different attitudes to learning, different methods of learning and so on), Burke argues, these students are at risk of being left behind educationally.

The Study

In total, about 40 students received additional EAL support at the school. It was decided to use students from the middle age range of the school and the study focused on 12 year olds. Individual students were chosen based on how long they had been at the school, as we felt that this would yield more usable data. This process identified three students on which to focus. Students were of different nationalities; those affected by any other learning challenge were omitted in order to avoid multi-factorial bias.

The research began by collecting data from the student records which would provide the most tangible information on the students' development. These data included entrance examinations, report cards, major assessment results and any important teacher-parent communications. This information would also allow the development of the next part of the methodology.

The second stage of the research involved teacher interviews. Teachers from all subject areas were selected; although EAL support at the school is currently designed to help students only in English, humanities and sciences classes, it was hoped that comparing development of performance with regard to English language issues in these subjects with that in other subjects would give an indication of the success of the programme. Having collected student records it was important to get a clear picture of the development of the students' classroom performance and participation. This was especially so where the EAL students were given additional support in a separate ("pull-out") class designed to support their comprehension and confidence. Had the system been effective, it would have been expected that this increased confidence and comprehension would have been reflected and recognised in the students' classroom engagement.

Detailed interviews with the other EAL teachers were also conducted. Part of the EAL programme is a "push-in" system where EAL teachers work in mainstream classes with the teachers and EAL students, so it was important to be able to assess the impact and effectiveness of this intervention. In addition, as the teachers who implement the EAL programme and have responsibility for the learning of the EAL students, these teachers are best placed to provide a detailed opinion on its success.

It was decided not to observe the students in classes; carrying out observations for the short period of research would be ineffective compared with the information that the class teacher could offer. However doing this would place a greater reliance on the teachers to give an honest account of the accommodations they were making in classes where no EAL teacher was present.

Findings

Identifying EAL Students

The first aspect of data collection focused on the early stages of the EAL process for students and how EAL students were identified by the school. The results indicated that prior to the academic year of the study, the process was informal and "ad-hoc". As a result, the individual students in this case study had been identified in different ways:

> *Student A* was new to the school for the academic year and had been identified at the application stage as a result of his admission and English Language tests. Students admitted to the school earlier had not followed this process.

> *Student B* had been in the school for 4 years before one of his teachers brought him to the attention of the EAL department; he was then included in the EAL process.

> *Student C* had been in the school a few weeks before being sent to the EAL department by her foreign language teacher. EAL "pull-out" classes take the place of a foreign language class so students are either in EAL or in a foreign language (that is, students are "pulled out" of their language classes).

At the time of the study there were no further diagnostic tests carried out on students at the beginning of the EAL process and students were taught in "pull-out" classes according to age rather than English attainment level. EAL classes could be as large as 13 students and teachers were therefore expected to differentiate that many different levels in one lesson if necessary.

The EAL Curriculum

At the time of the study there was no EAL curriculum in the "pull-out" classes since the department was required to support the work of mainstream classes; the lesson content varied accordingly and largely mirrored topics or vocabulary covered in other classes. The EAL teachers often reviewed material that students were unable to access in previous classes. There were no formal agreed levels of what EAL students should be able to achieve in order to cope with the mainstream curriculum for their grade level.

Interviews with the EAL teachers indicated that even though EAL classes were designed to complement mainstream subjects, there was no formal communication between the two teachers. Often EAL teachers resorted to emailing the mainstream

teachers to find out what material was being covered. The school was undertaking a review of its paperwork and, following this, it is expected that curriculum documentation would be available to EAL teachers. However, at the time of the study they were only supporting the teaching in subjects where they had been able to communicate with the teacher.

Individual Student Progress

Information gathered on individual students was designed to show whether or not they were benefitting from the EAL process. Individual report cards were available for each student but it was only in the case of *Student B* that this source of information proved valuable. In this case it was possible to compare the progress of the student in the school before he was included in the EAL programme with that of his progress with EAL intervention. A slight improvement in his grades in general was noted but his progress was reflected most through the comments made by his teachers, many of whom noted the improvement in his comprehension, class participation and written English in general.

During the interviews, teachers were able to comment on the individual students but had limited capacity for comparison. One teacher noted a positive difference in the student's performance during lessons where an EAL teacher was available to give "push-in" support.

Assessment

In the mainstream classrooms, assessment followed a model where student progress was monitored through summative assessment devised by the external assessors. In some subjects teachers provided rubrics and modelling of assessment tasks and in others students were not familiar with the criteria themselves. EAL students were always required to complete the same assessment tasks and only one of the teachers questioned used modifications for these students. Scrutiny of graded assessment papers revealed comments such as "you were let down by your English". In all subjects, the three students scored lower than all of the first-language learners in the class. Their results in summative assessment tasks were used on their report cards.

Individual Student Records

The admissions department keeps student record files but this did not include a record of results nor was it readily available to teachers. The EAL department and others throughout the school have informal portfolios on some students but there were no personal details that might have helped a teacher in terms of the students' language development.

"Push-In" Support

Feedback from teachers during interviews on the success of the "push-in" programme was varied. EAL teachers attended classes when they were available, and were there to provide support to the EAL students in that class. There were no written guidelines for EAL teachers and the policy was not directly supported by any pedagogical theory. It quickly became evident that EAL teachers approached these classes in different ways. Some EAL teachers chose to sit beside the student and provide continual support throughout the lesson. Other teachers chose to sit at the back of the classroom and observe the students' learning, only intervening during periods of group or individual work. We were unable to find a consensus amongst mainstream or EAL teachers for a preferred method.

The Role of Mainstream Teachers

During interviews, most mainstream teachers were surprised to find themselves considered part of the EAL process. At best teachers were aware that some students had trouble understanding some of the content and at worst teachers were unable to name the EAL students in their classes. All of the teachers were aware of the school's commitment to the education of these students, and many felt that the school had a responsibility upon admitting these students to ensure that teachers were prepared for the challenges.

When questioned directly about the individual students for this case study, the teachers were able to identify the students but could give limited details on their individual circumstances. Only a limited number of teachers knew the nationality or language background of the students. In the case of *Student A*, several teachers raised concerns about his ability to understand the content but could not go into detail about his abilities.

The teaching staff is largely new to international schools. Many of the staff said that this was the first time they had taught in multi-lingual and multi-cultural classes. The school administration was committed to providing teachers with appropriate training and was intending to introduce the Australian Government Department of Education and Children's Services' course, *Teaching ESL Students in Mainstream Classrooms*, to help teachers cope with EAL students and provide them with strategies to do this. A number of longer serving staff had already completed this course. One of the limitations of choosing not to observe lessons for this study means it is not possible to say whether this course has made a difference, but it clearly was a positive step for the school.

An unexpected factor to come out of the interviews held with teachers was the problems resulting from a multi-cultural teaching staff. Many teachers commented that they had problems deciding whether to teach students British English or American English. In addition, teachers used their own colloquialisms in the classroom that would cause confusion for English language learners.

Discussion

As the literature places such emphasis on the role of the mainstream teacher in the learning of EAL students it is important to analyse the role of these teachers in the context of the school. The data gathered clearly show that despite the obvious assumption that this aspect of teaching might not be a new phenomenon for international school teachers, in this specific context there are some areas for concern. The high proportion of teachers new to international schools should raise concern about their awareness of this key issue. Although the school was clearly taking steps to equip their teachers to deal with this issue, the interviews revealed that many teachers still feel unprepared for the problem.

The data gathered in terms of assessment do not necessarily lend themselves to an agreement of Cummins' (2003) argument that EAL students should be separately assessed against specially-designed curriculum based performance standards, but do demonstrate a considerable problem with the current system. A wider study would be able to assess the exact impact of measuring EAL students against the mainstream standards, but this study suggests that students would benefit from a revision to the policy. Policy makers would also have to agree on the impact in terms of external assessment and certification if EAL students were held to different standards. Students at the school were entered for external assessments and certification and were therefore obliged to meet their requirements. Cummins makes the additional point that teachers must be able to agree on exactly which level of EAL student is assessed separately, and that it must not be arbitrarily determined. The poor performance of the three students in their assessments was more likely to be linked to their inability to access the curriculum content rather than the assessment itself as even in situations where teachers provided rubrics and models the students' scores were comparably low. In this context it seems that in the absence of more detailed study, and assuming that students must meet the programme requirements, the argument should be for careful modifications during assessments.

The school gives teachers limited capacity to know and understand the cultural context of its students. As a result, teachers have no knowledge of how best to develop the students' English language learning within the context of the curriculum. Burke (2009) argues that this is key to the development of these students and that schools should make this a priority. The literature and the data from our study clearly highlight the need for profiling and monitoring of individual EAL students at the school. This would involve a detailed understanding of students' cultural and language contexts and an enhancement of the role of the EAL department in the individualisation of these students.

The focus of the literature on the integration of students into mainstream classes and the role of mainstream teachers suggests that the school should consider a careful examination of their current "pull-out" system. Further study would be necessary, but there is little evidence to suggest that removing students from the mainstream context provides any benefit. Furthermore, it can have an adverse impact on their motivation as it identifies them as 'different'. The data from the EAL classes show the students making progress, but cannot be compared against students who do not have this intervention.

Studies also show that language development is strongly influenced by outside factors. Burke (2009) suggests that factors such as level of support at home, access to English language environments or first-language competency can impact English language development, and thus learning for an EAL student. There is some argument then for this school, and especially the EAL department, to develop strategies to support these areas. This would include increased cooperation with parents and care-givers and facilitation of access to English language environments.

Recommendations

In conclusion, the data collected do not allow us to measure the success of the school's programme for these students. In addition, this study and the literature do not wholly agree; the literature provides a general picture of the arguments in many different contexts, while this study provides information about one specific programme in a very specific context. We are unable to say whether these students are benefitting from the programme and are learning in a way that they would not have been had there been no programme. However, as a result of this study it is certainly possible to make some wider conclusions about the programme itself at the school and make some recommendations for the future that could be applicable in other, similar schools.

- Mainstream teachers need to be fully aware of their role in the provision of language support for EAL students. The school is committed to helping these students access the curriculum and as the specialists, the mainstream teachers are the most important part of the process. The EAL department should be playing a key role in supporting the mainstream teachers, equipping them for the challenge of differentiation in the classroom.

- Key guidelines and procedures need to be implemented by schools in the development of their EAL support programmes. Programmes would benefit from a clear curriculum, with agreed and curriculum based standards for EAL students at each grade level.

- Where students are identified and included into the programme in an ad-hoc way, the result can be that students who require support being identified later – perhaps too late. A clear entrance and exit policy for the EAL programme would ensure that all students with language needs would be identified immediately.

- To address the problem of a multi-cultural teaching staff with different regional versions of the English language, schools should provide staff with clear guidelines on not only written documents (report cards, curriculum documents and so on) but on spoken classroom language.

- EAL departments need to expand their role to include more cooperation and interaction with students outside the classroom. It helps when parents have a good understanding of the issues that their child is facing at home and how they can help. In addition, the participation of these students in English-

medium extra-curricular activities can be very helpful in developing their language skills.

- A clear focus on the individual student needs to be in place. EAL departments should have a clear understanding of the language learning needs and context of each individual student. Currently, the provision of EAL support in some schools is based around grade levels and whole classes. Diagnostic testing would provide teachers with a good idea of the exact needs of each student, and a personal profile would help teachers understand the child. This information could be used by the EAL department to help mainstream teachers enhance the learning of these students.

This study has not been able to achieve an analysis of the impact of the interventions for the three EAL students chosen, as such a conclusion would require a longer and more comparative study. However, it has demonstrated the importance of the individual in language learning in this context and provided the school with a map for the future development of the EAL programme.

Acknowledgement and afterword

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As an afterword, it should be noted that the school has subsequently implemented the recommendations of this paper and have found them to be very helpful – we hope to carry out a follow-up case study in due course.

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