

Advancing Pedagogy in Post-Compulsory Education and Training

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Title

Policy versus practice: Exploring factors which influence progress with ESOL students

Research Questions

1. What factors influence learners' ability to learn another language
2. What barriers do learners have which prevent learners from progressing from one level to the next
3. What can ESOL practitioners do to support learners with some of these barriers?

Abstract

Current FE funding methodology requires most learners to complete a formal summative assessment by the end of their programme of study - regardless of its length. This need to satisfy funding requirements through sitting a formal exam can cause significant issues for some learners who are unable to make the necessary progress to pass the exam which, in some cases, is a requirement to stay on a course.

While there is little that can be done to change the current exam requirements, this research seeks to investigate what factors influence learners' ability to learn another language as well as considering interventions which can support progress with learning so that learners are well-supported in achieving the summative assessment mentioned above.

Factors which influence on-course progression could include not having enough time to complete self-directed study, compartmentalisation of learning, insufficient engagement with English outside the classroom, attendance and punctuality issues, finding lessons too easy or too difficult and therefore losing interest and/or motivation in the classroom, potential learning difficulties impacting on learning and personal issues which impact on learner commitment.

Interviews with learners aim to capture a personal account of a learners' journey into the ESOL classroom. These interviews also aim to see if there are indicators or barriers which could impact on a learners' ability to make the progress necessary to achieve the learners' individual summative assessment goals. Most learners interviewed were either economic migrants or refugees.

Consideration needs to be given as to how learners can better make use of their time during the lesson, how learning, both inside and outside the classroom can become more meaningful to them and how their voice can be better represented within the learning environment to support and encourage progression.

Introduction

Each year, after the glow of the summer sunshine starts to fade and thoughts turn to fine-tuning enrolment planning and timetabling, there is always a sense of the potential in the air as learners make enquiries about enrolment and book in for their initial assessments. While these first few weeks at the beginning of the autumn term are very busy, placing ESOL learners onto programmes as a result of a 30–40-minute initial assessment is a process which is now enshrined in ESOL practice up and down the land. This practice is a direct result of the *Skills for Life Strategy* (2001), which sought to improve adult literacy, language and numeracy skills. The assessment tools, which were developed to complement the strategy, allows providers to make a judgement on learners' levels which saw them enrol on either pre-entry, entry 1, entry 2, entry 3, level 1 or level 2 courses - most of which required learners to complete a 'Skills for Life' ESOL qualification.

Once learners have enrolled, a diagnostic assessment is then completed to further fine-tune learner ability and then either compile 'individual learning plans' for learners based on their initial and diagnostic assessments or, if teachers (and managers) agree, learners are either transferred up a level, or down a level, based on this evidence and professional judgement, and so the on-course learner journey begins.

Teachers have worked hard during late summer term and early autumn term to develop schemes of work which clearly indicate what the 'intent' of the course will be (in-line with current Ofsted thinking) and learning objectives which link to the summative assessment start to be followed. Lesson plans are developed to clearly state aims and objectives on the lesson on standard, quality-assessed, templates.

Lastly, course profiles are developed, which help teachers to understand the learners' needs and personal situations better. Once individual learner targets have been set from all the above information, for some learners, progress both on-course and outside of the classroom is slow and learners then start to fall into the 'at risk of achievement' category.

The problem here is that our current funding and quality systems place significant emphasis on the overall performance levels (success rates) of training providers and this, in turn, places tremendous pressure on curriculum departments to squeeze learners through qualifications they are not ready for, making future progression at the next level particularly challenging.

Literature Review

As Barack Obama said, 'If you're walking down the right path and you're willing to keep walking, eventually you'll make progress'. It is the 'willing to keep walking' element of this quote which resonates in this piece of work.

According to Simpson (2007), the bureaucratisation of ESOL is largely responsible for current tensions between ESOL practitioners on the one hand and government agencies, particularly inspectorates, on the other. For example, an obligation to produce "measurable outcomes", is at odds with an understanding that processes of language learning are not necessarily linear.

It is exactly this tension which fails to recognise that some ESOL students progress to Entry Level 3 or Level 1 and fail to move ahead, often because their literacy skills lag behind their oral communication skills. Moreover, when considering provision for ESOL learners with basic literacy skills (which is where learners often get 'stuck' in levels), there is very little specific provision for learners who have basic literacy needs. Some organisations do put on classes specifically for learners wanting to study basic literacy; others try to integrate them into graded ESOL classes and, not surprisingly, find they make very slow progress in that environment (Sunderland and Moon, 2009).

In the research report *English for speakers of other languages: Access and progression* (2019), of 28 case studies considered, the main barriers to learning fell into the following broad categories:

- Poor/interrupted course/class attendance due to work and childcare commitments
- Significant mental health of asylum seeker and refugee learners
- Students needing to return home for extended breaks during the course
- Mixed ability classes (course viability) making progress on-course challenging
- Pace of a lesson being either too fast or too slow
- Difficulties in teachers being able to differentiate learning based on ability in a class, especially where the gap between the least and most able was large
- Limited tutor contact time owing to financial restraints (e.g. not enough direct contact time for learners)

Some, but not all, of these issues stated above were mentioned by the learners interviewed as part of this research. It is clear that learners show a range of motivations for learning English, such as improvement in job prospects, help with supporting children at school and a desire to connect with the wider community, but keeping motivation alive proves to be more of a challenge for some learners.

However, while there are practical and financial barriers to progress as discussed above, exploring the factor of a possible underlying learning difficulty or disability is very important in the context of language learning. In the article *Addressing Potential Impediments to Learning with ESOL Students*, Schwarz (2007), asks that before we assume an adult ESOL learner has a learning disability, we consider phonological processing skills, cultural differences and more.

Some adult ESOL learners may struggle because of weaknesses in the phonological processing skills that underlie literacy and support first or additional language acquisition (Ganschow et al., 1998). Phonological memory is needed for acquisition not only of single words but also strings of words such as grammatical constructions and idioms (Ellis, 1996; Williams & Lovatt, 2003). Essentially, sounds and words must be heard in order to process them. But since the adult brain perceives and processes unfamiliar speech sounds less accurately than children's brains do (Kuhl, 2004), the adult learner's phonological memory may not be able to record words and sounds accurately, limiting the development of oral skills.

Secondly, Schwartz discusses the unmet needs of adult language learners. Specifically, adult language learners need explicit instruction in accurately perceiving the sounds of the target language (Ganschow et al., 1995), especially those that are similar to sounds in their own language and therefore are harder to discriminate. Adult learners also need and want to understand something about how language works (Marshall & Snow, 2000) and it is this breaking down of linguistic structures, and being explicit in explaining them, which has seen a moderate level of progress with learners I consider having a potential learning difficulty.

Schwartz also discusses unacknowledged educational backgrounds and goes into detail about how misleading screening questions can be at the initial assessment stage given the layers of complexity associated with asking about someone's previous educational background. Educational histories may be exaggerated or misrepresented owing to the learners not wanting to seem uneducated or feel ashamed of their educational backgrounds. She makes a crucial point in stating that 'learners may have information gaps due to differences in education systems, interrupted learning, or lack of access to books. When assumptions are made about what learners know or can do, materials and tasks may be beyond them.'

She also considers cultural differences in terms of differences in the learning experience, for example learners from some cultures being more comfortable with behaviourist, teacher centred, approaches to teaching rather than more informal humanistic approaches more favoured by teachers here in the UK. Behaviors such as lateness, reluctance to join in multi-sensory activities or to ask or answer questions, ignoring writing structures, not doing homework, and how mental health issues are regarded by the cultures of your learners is one way to address this difficult issue (Butler, 1994). The penultimate issue she addresses is around inappropriate pedagogy which is crucial for learners who have clear motivation to

learn (for example, they attend each session and engage within the class) but disengage with the learning process in class and therefore do not make the necessary progress expected.

Noted in her research is the need for learners to appreciate and review content. Over-learning is essential for automaticity in skill-based learning. Using a wide variety of methods and material for review prevents boredom (Schwartz, 2007). This point clearly describes the tension between policy and practice as often, practitioners feel pressured to cover the curriculum as quickly as possible to meet assessment schedule deadlines set by senior managers and miss critical opportunities to review on-course content. She goes on to discuss the importance of learners setting their own goals, showing learners the progress they have made, having high expectations of learners and keeping learning relevant and challenging but not overwhelming and providing multiple ways of learning, all essential in terms of supporting learners with progress.

Lastly, she discusses health, physical functioning and mental health issues as potential impediments to learning. Mental health in particular, has been present in the ESOL classroom, long before it became a buzzword in mainstream media. So many ESOL learners have experienced significant trauma as a result of war, ongoing political conflict and personal tragedy, which means that the individual's own mental health can put them in a place where engagement with learning becomes challenging. Moreover, some learners may not themselves realise nor want to recognise that they may have issues with their health or physical functioning.

Research Methodology

The research methodology centres primarily around the qualitative method of one-to-one interviews. The focus of the research is to consider potential barriers to progression to support learners more effectively while on-course.

The group of learners I chose to work with were from a shared Entry Level 2 class based at a large FE college in west London. I started teaching this cohort in September 2020, face to face. The students I decided to work with were those which I thought displayed either spiky profiles where 4 out of the 5 learners interviewed had significant issues with writing in particular. 2 learners had been transferred down from the Entry 3 group. The interviews were carried out at the end of January, online, while we were in lockdown 3.

Site	Participants	Research Methods Used
West London College	5 out of 6 Entry 2 Learners (1 learner failed to attend the interview)	1:1 online recorded interviews

These 4 initial questions shaped the interview:

To what extent does not having enough time to do homework influence learners' ability to learn another language?"

To what extent do learners compartmentalise/limit their learning to taught hours of classroom experience?"

To what extent does teaching that is too demanding/undemanding negatively influence learners' motivation to learn?"

To what extent do learning difficulties influence learners' ability to learn another language?"

However, in practice, I had to simplify the language to make it more comprehensible for the learners and so asked them:

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? (Context)

Did you go to school in your own country, and did you have any problems with learning at school/college/university? (Potential learning difficulties)

Can you tell me why you have decided to study English? (Motivation)

Can you tell me what you find easy about studying English? (Feedback for improvement)

Can you tell me about what you find hard about studying English? (Further support needed)

Can you tell me what you enjoy about learning? (Resource to encourage further motivation for learning - if motivation is indeed the underlying issue)

Can you tell me what you don't enjoy about learning? (Underlying issues affecting progress e.g. classroom dynamics, teaching styles, difficulties in understanding what is being taught, pace of the lesson etc)

Is there anything that can be better and to help you more? (Feedback for continuous improvement and consider reflective practice)

How long do you usually study outside the classroom? (Degree of learner commitment)

How easy or difficult do you think the work in the class is? (Differentiation can be used more effectively in planning and preparation)

The Intervention

The feedback my 5 learners gave me was illuminating. Before the interviews were conducted, I held the idea that there was something 'wrong' with my method of teaching and that it was this that was primarily holding learners back from progressing. What transpired after the 5 interviews was that all 5 learners commented very positively on the learning experience (is that because I was their teacher?) and that for 4 out of the 5 learners interviewed, 'life' got in the way from learning outside the classroom. I had not anticipated just how big an impact the outside world actually has on these learners. I fully understand, from a cerebral perspective, that my learners have busy and complex lives, but when I heard some absolutely heart-wrenching accounts of their day to day lives, I am in awe of the fact that these learners actually turn up to class at all. 1 learner disclosed that she had lost her husband recently and was a single mum of 3 looking after an aged relative, 1 learner disclosed that he had lost his child because of the conflict in Syria, was 100% committed to making a better life for himself in the UK but also cared for his wife who suffered from a serious mental illness. It goes on. Just 1 out of the 5 learners expressed difficulties with their learning. A 50+ year old woman from Afghanistan who had had no formal education in her country.

Ethical Considerations

I had full consent from all 5 learners to record the interviews and questions were shared with the students before the interviews. I also explained to the learners what the interviews were for and explained that the primary motivation was to understand what barriers they may have to progression to help me better understand this from both a manager's and teachers' perspective. I also explained to the students that

nobody, other than myself, would have access to the recordings and any references would be completely anonymous.

I explained that they were able to withdraw from the process at any time and none of the learners did so. However, 1 learner did ask why I was asking personal questions and I explained to him that it was to get a better understanding of his situation outside the class which may impact on his learning in class and subsequent support I could offer him. Once I explained this to him, he chose to carry on with the process.

Interviews were conducted in confidential spaces and there was no access to my office by members of my family during the interviews and recordings nor to my office at work.

The data and its analysis in terms of themes and categories

Through this piece of research, the concepts from the literature review confirm the overarching idea that the way our current funding system is set out, some learners, often with extremely challenging life circumstances, possible learning difficulties and teaching and learning strategies which are not enabling learners to maximise their full potential. From the very small sample used in this study, the latter point, relating to learning strategies, did not really present itself as an issue, with 100% of learners stating that they enjoyed the teaching.

However, the fact that there are often intolerances at senior manager level where success rates are driven by a wider culture of 'benchmarking', publically available Ofsted inspections and league tables, learners are often invisible in the decision making processes in relation to curriculum planning, and policies such as withdrawing learners if they have not attended for 2 weeks, so as not to take retention hits, is in direct contradiction to what further education, and ESOL provision in particular, sets out to achieve.

This research project is not arguing the case that learners should be on courses 'ad infinitum' as, as a taxpayer and a manager with over 20 years experience in the sector, we need to be able to distribute the limited funding we have available to the sector fairly and proportionately and this inevitably means not progressing learners to the next level who have resat year after year or withdrawing learners with poor attendance without a good reason.

It's reassuring to know that with the introduction of the relatively new Education Inspection Framework (2019), there is a general trend to focus more on the quality of education rather than on data. Biesta (2009), argues that a lack of attention to the aims and ends of education has led to a reliance on a 'common sense' view of education. A focus on academic achievement in a small number of curriculum

domains or subjects is one example of the common-sense approach. It is that common sense approach which is refreshing and welcome after nearly a decade of over-focusing on data, data, data. Sean Flood, an Inspector and Headteacher in a Hackney Primary School writes in an Ofsted blog that 'My biggest observation was the sheer joy – both for inspectors and for school leaders – of the move away from detailed scrutiny and analysis of internal data. When presented with folders of data, I was able to say, 'thank you for that but I'd rather talk to/look at/hear...' This is especially true of early years data on entry and progress.' While this feedback is in the context of a primary school, the same principles apply to that of the further education sector.

The most interesting and unexpected issue in the data was around how little discussion with learners focused around pedagogy itself. Aside from the 1 learner with the potential learning difficulties, almost all learners struggled with their lack of progress in the context of their day to day lives. It seems blindingly obvious when the recordings are played back that these are real people with real lives and with real struggles and in my role as Head of Curriculum for a department of approximately 2000 learners, the individual often gets forgotten about and is 'just' a name on a long list of learners with attendance below 85%.

I set out on this journey thinking there was something I wasn't doing in order to help learners with barriers progress; both as a teacher and as a manager. As a teacher, by not providing enough engaging content to the learning, not explaining concepts more widely, not stimulating learning enough (clearly a deficit approach based on not a lot of evidence) and as a manager, being conflicted by the fact that I had to withdraw learners from courses because they had been at the same level for several years. However, it became evident that in a minority of cases, there is little either the teacher or the manager can do for the learner because the baggage the learner comes to the classroom with, neither the teacher, nor manager can support with.

Key Findings

My initial question focuses on what factors influence learners' ability to learn another language and what the possible barriers to progression could be. This research has found that:

The personal circumstance of a learner plays a vital role in a learner's ability to make progress with language learning.

Most learners interviewed for this research project were in their 40s and 50s, however, one learner was in her 20s. That learner was the strongest in the group and did not have any significant responsibilities other than herself. So, her ability to invest in studying was greater than that of the other learners. The other four learners all disclosed challenging personal circumstances which clearly impacted on their

ability to progress with their language learning and in particular the learner with the possible learning difficulty also disclosed a mental health issue which meant her concentration was impacted

Both diagnosed and undiagnosed learning difficulties and mental health conditions can be a significant barrier to progression and often, those learning difficulties and mental health conditions impact negatively on learner progress which in-turn can have a negative impact on learner motivation and commitment to studying for the long-haul.

Learner motivation can play a significant role in how effectively a learner progresses and it is important that the class teacher is aware of learner motivations so they can tap into them when motivation and class energy is low - especially in year-long courses.

As Gregson and Nixon (2015) point out, there is a clear and pressing need to design approaches to educational improvement capable of addressing the expensive shortcomings of outcomes-based models and educational and curriculum development. It is within this context that non-accredited, community learning courses could be better placed and served for learners who struggle with fitting the current assessment mould and structure.

Recommendations

What can practitioners do to support learners with some of these barriers?

Spend time getting to know the learners so there is a better understanding of their individual sets of circumstances. It is well-worth investing time and energy into getting to know the learners, once classes have settled, in order to get a fuller picture of the learners in your class. Some learners may not want to share details which may indeed help to support learners with either motivation, progression and personal development, however, the effort to do so, as was the case with the learners interviewed for this research, will be greatly appreciated and will help to form bonds in class which enable the learner and teacher to feel safe to share information which may be critical in the development of on-course learner progress.

In the case of pre-entry learners, where it is not possible to go into some detail about the learners' background, with the learner's agreement, it would be advisable to speak to an English-speaking friend or relative to get more information about the learner's sets of circumstances and previous educational background so there is a better understanding and empathy towards their slow progress. Moreover, the person may also be able to give some important information in terms of educational

background which may unlock the key to specific learning support which may help with progress.

Creating a meaningful class profile which considers factors such as gender, age, previous educational experiences, personal circumstances such as children and their ages, previous qualifications (if not captured at initial assessment) is key to understanding the needs of the individual and class better.

With the advent and use of tools such as Google Classroom to support learning both inside and outside the classroom, it is important that these tools are embedded within learning, teaching and assessment so that those learners who miss class for genuine reasons are given maximum opportunity to catch up with missed learning. All learners interviewed talked positively about using technology to support progress and as we emerge from the pandemic, the use of Zoom, Google Meet etc means that teaching can be recorded and shared with those learners who have missed class. It cannot and should not be used as a substitute for attending class (assuming it is face to face delivery) and consideration, by management, needs to be given to carrying on with online classes to make participation as wide as possible.

Appendix

Dissemination strategy

- Share the research (via email) to former ESOL teachers and managerial colleagues at the college so they are aware of the research and its potential impact on curriculum design and planning
- Share the research with current colleagues so they are aware of the research and impact of curriculum design and planning
- Present findings of research at the next available Continuous Professional Development (CPD) event for the wider curriculum team and facilitate group discussion
- Share research with professional colleagues I am not currently working with in online platforms such as Linked In

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