

ENGLAND: POLICY DEVELOPMENT IMPACTING ON ESOL BASIC LITERACY

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1 Introduction

This paper will argue that 'LESLLA learners' (ESOL learners with very low literacy skills in any language) are invisible in the English education system. It will describe current policy drivers in education and show how these lead to policies that exclude LESLLA learners. It will consider policy regarding provision, curriculum and quality assurance and whether this supports the needs of LESLLA learners. The paper will go on to reflect on issues of status and naming practices in ESOL and will relate these to theory concerning the nature of literacy. Finally, it will bring these two themes together in calling for a policy for ESOL basic literacy and for LESLLA to support work towards such policy.

2 Background

The policy background to post-compulsory education, known as the 'learning and skills' or 'lifelong learning' sector, in England is extremely complex. A group of researchers, reporting on a recent four year study on 'The impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the learning and skills sector' (Edwards, 2007), came to the following conclusions:

'two factors stand out in (the sector's) recent history: unprecedented and welcome levels of funding; and unrelenting, and generally less welcome, waves of change and turbulence.'

One of the researchers has described the sector thus:

'inchoate, over-centralised, democratically unaccountable, unequal, woefully under-researched and without robust data for decision-making' (Coffield, 2007).

If possible, the policy background to ESOL is even more complex than for learners in the rest of post-compulsory education. Policies that impact on ESOL learners, but not necessarily (or as directly) on other learners include immigration, and those concerning community cohesion and citizenship.

Altogether, five government departments input into ESOL policy. Until the cabinet reshuffle in early June 2009, The *Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS)* (now amalgamated into a new *Department for Business, Initiatives and Skills*) had most responsibility for funding and quality assuring ESOL. It was responsible for direct policy, such as the recent 'refreshed' policy: 'Skills for Life: changing lives' (DIUS, 2009a). This policy document announces yet more funds and new targets. It focuses much more than the original policy document (DfES, 2001) on employability skills and on reaching groups 'at risk of social inclusion' which it defines as including unemployed, adults with low skills in employment, offenders, some ethnic minorities and those living in the most disadvantaged areas of the country (pp. 7-8). However, the following departments also have input into policies that affect ESOL learners:

- the *Department for Children, Families and Schools (DCFS)* is responsible for school provision, and also inputs into family learning; see, for example, the website 'parentscentre' run by the department: <http://www.parentscentre.gov.uk/>.
- the *Home Office* polices immigration and regulates citizenship requirements, including an English language requirement; for information on how to become a British citizen, see the Home Office.
See <http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/britishcitizenship/>
- the *Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG)* is concerned with social cohesion and the prevention of terrorism, and ESOL is currently closely linked to this agenda (see below).
- the *Department of Work and Pensions (DWP)* has responsibility for the unemployed, and its regulations impact on learners who are out of work, for example they are not allowed to study more than 16 hours per week and still claim benefit.¹

To further complicate matters, education policy only applies to England; Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland make their own education policies. Immigration policies, however, apply to all of the United Kingdom.

Currently, three key policy agendas are driving ESOL policy in post-compulsory education. Firstly and most importantly is the 'World Class Skills' agenda. Reacting to Britain's position as an international competitor, the Treasury set up an inquiry chaired by Lord Leitch. His report (2006) and the subsequent government response (DfES, 2007) have had a huge influence on current educational policy and practice. Together they have ambitions for 95% of adults to reach level 2 (this is the level of English and maths school leavers are expected to achieve at 16, and is approximately equivalent to C1 in the Council of Europe's (2001) Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF) ²) in literacy and numeracy by 2020. Funding is prioritising provision that will enable learners to achieve Leitch targets (i.e. level 2), and, as a result, lower level provision is being cut. In addition, employers are to have a much bigger say in what is taught and funding is shifting towards employer-led requirements. This is leading to much more work-specific skills being targeted - for example how to understand instructions in operating equipment, or how to take bookings over the phone. This means that the needs of LESLLA learners, many of whom are not in employment and

¹ See http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/MoneyTaxAndBenefits/BenefitsTaxCreditsAndOtherSupport/Employedorlookingforwork/DG_10018757.

² See http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Portfolio/?L=E&M=/main_pages/levels.html.

are unlikely to reach level 2, are not considered priorities.

The second key policy area is the community cohesion agenda. This is very strongly linked to the prevention of terrorism and to ESOL in the government's mind set. Starting with riots in the north of England in 2001, closely followed by the attacks on New York on September 11th 2001, and later the London underground on July 7th 2007, the government has linked these events to an idea of communities, separated by language and culture, who, the government claims, don't feel British and don't speak English. The two agendas, community cohesion and speaking English, are inextricably linked in the government's mind as is shown by the following quote by John Denham (DIUS, 2009b), then Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills

‘the ability to speak a common language is a key factor in securing understanding and integration between communities. It is also a critical step on the path for those seeking citizenship. More than any other factor, learning and using English demonstrates to the wider community an individual’s commitment to adapting to life in the UK and enables them to make a productive contribution to the nation’s economy.’

The quote above comes from the Foreword to a new policy on ESOL launched by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills in May 2009 and linking ESOL firmly to community cohesion (see above). It proposes a complete change in the way that ESOL is organised, in which local areas will decide priority to what they consider to be ‘excluded’³ groups for their areas and direct funds towards them. Originally, it was suggested that some groups could be put forward as priorities by DIUS, and that learners with low levels of literacy could be one such a group, but this now appears to have been dropped in favour of local authorities making all such decisions. Each local authority is charged with getting together local agencies to identify priority areas for their locality. To compare two of the ‘test areas’ that having been trying out this approach: in one LESLLA learners, specifically Yemeni women with low literacy skills and childcare needs, have been given provision with childcare near to their home. In another, the local authority has prioritised young, male refugees, who have a need for advice and guidance on getting work. This means that LESLLA learners may be winners, but that equally they may be losers, and any lobby for better provision for LESLLA learners will have to make the case to hundreds of local authorities rather than to one central government department.

Finally, immigration is a key policy driver affecting LESLLA learners. New regulations introduced in 2008 make it almost impossible for unskilled workers to enter the United Kingdom, unless they are from the European Union. So it is possible that, in the future, LESLLA learners will be restricted to some spouses of existing British citizens and a few EU residents who still have very low levels of literacy. However, at the moment, LESLLA learners are still coming forward for help – though because of no research in this subject (see below) we do not know how many there are.

³ This term is not defined in the relevant policy document, the nearest to a definition comes in this quote is ‘the key characteristics of priority individuals should be that they: ...are isolated/excluded from, and not connecting with communities outside of their own’ (DIUS 2009b: 10).

3 Policies and provisions for ESOL basic literacy learners

ESOL learners with basic literacy needs are invisible in our system. If we consider either the policies or the practices for supporting them, we find very little.

3.1 Provision

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. Some of the vocationally oriented further education colleges send basic literacy learners away to be catered for in adult and community education where they typically receive fewer hours per week than they would in a college. In provision aimed at the unemployed it is quite common for ESOL learners to be put together with literacy learners, very few of whom are at such a low level. For example, it would be common for ESOL learners to have had very little schooling because of poverty, war or displacement. ESOL learners may need to learn very basic word recognition, sound/symbol relationship or how to write the Latin script, and will also be learning the English language at the same time. It is very uncommon for literacy learners to have any, let alone all, of these needs.

3.2 Funding

The current funding regime prioritises higher levels which lead to targets (targets exist for E3, L1 and L2, approximately equivalent to B1, B2 and C1 in the CEF⁴ and encourages reduction in provision that does not lead to accredited outcomes. However, though accreditation starts at E1 (approximately equivalent to A1 and, where learners are required to, for example, read a simple text, write a short greeting card, or fill in a simple form), it takes a long time to go from never having written before to the level required to write at E1. The funding regime does not allow for the amount of time needed. Most learners are expected to progress by a level per year, some are allowed 2 years, very few, if any, are allowed more. This funding rule applies no matter how many hours per week the learners can attend classes, and this can vary from 2 hours to 30 per week. Once the funding runs out, learners can be sent away from classes. Sometimes there is a small amount of community provision, often mixed level, that they are able to attend. In other cases, learners are left with nothing.

3.3 Teacher education

There is no requirement to train to teach basic literacy to ESOL learners. The current standards for ESOL teachers (LLUK, 2007) have nothing specific to teaching basic literacy to ESOL learners. New guidance, from LLUK, just released (2009) does have a few mentions of basic literacy, including ‘.ESOL teachers recognise that specialist knowledge of literacy learning and development is required in order to teach beginner readers and writers’ (p.47) but this does not appear in the national Assessment Criteria

⁴ As an example, the standards at E3 would expect, among other things, a learner to read and write continuous explanatory or descriptive texts consisting of paragraphs, skim and scan texts to understand gist and detail, recognise and reproduce generic features of common texts. L 1 and L2 are higher than E3.

for the qualifications, so many training courses do not assess it, and therefore do not cover it.

3.4 Curriculum

Support for basic literacy was highlighted as an issue by many of the respondents to the review of the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum (DfES, 2001): *'Need more addressed to complete beginner students for the literacy part. Some students remain a long time in first entry and skills to acquire at this stage are not taken into account in the curriculum'* (from on-line questionnaire). Teachers fed back to the review that the curriculum for this group of learners was not visible. The new, revised e-version of the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum (available on the Learning and Skills Improvement Service website <http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/sflcurriculum>) has attempted to address this issue; the reading and writing curricula for E1 is now divided into two parts, for learners who can read and write another language and one for learners who cannot. Teachers have said that they find this distinction helpful, as they can focus on how to support LESLLA learners and do not have to spend time working out what will suit them and what is more appropriate for learners who can already read the Latin script.

3.5 Research

In 2005, a group of researchers interested in second literacy acquisition got together to form a new organisation, LESLLA. The researchers questioned why, though there is plenty of research in second language acquisition, hardly any work is being done on second literacy acquisition. The organisation is an international one, and has just held its fourth annual symposium in Belgium. Out of approximately 100 participants from Europe and North America, only 7 attended from the UK. At the time of writing this article, there are no statistics of the number of LESLLA learners studying in English organizations, let alone any measure of unmet need. With little research on need or methodology, it is hard to make the case for special provision, teacher training or specific resources.

3.6 Quality assurance

The English inspectorate, Ofsted, recently carried out a survey on good practice in adult ESOL provision (2008). This looked at colleges which had received good grades for ESOL in recent inspections and identified good practice in the field. However, it makes no mention of work on ESOL basic literacy. We can speculate on whether this was because the inspectors did not look for good practice in basic literacy classes or because providers did not consider they had good practice in this area to show to inspectors. Either way, it shows that this area of work was not considered to exemplify good practice, and this is not good news for those learners who were involved in it.

4 Searching for reasons

As teachers of LESLLA learners over very many years, and, as teacher trainers, seeing the dedication of other teachers, we started to ask ourselves questions about why LESLLA learners find themselves in the situation described above. The answers appear to lie in

issues of status and power and in this part of the article, we want to further unpack the status of ESOL basic literacy in England. This might be regarded by some as a luxury, when there are the possibly more pressing matters of provision and pedagogy to grapple with. However, since there is an interrelationship between provision itself and its context, and the shape of provision is heavily influenced by its status, we feel that the issue of its status deserves our attention. In an attempt to illuminate the very low status of ESOL basic literacy, and gain some insight into the nature of this status, we offer some thoughts arising from a comparison between two extremely different types of learning programmes that include literacy, in England.

One is an example of a high status programme – the other is a low status one. And the ways they are described and conceptualised seem very different. For the high status learning programmes, we will consider Ancient Greek courses at Oxford and Cambridge Universities and we note that some of these are for learners who do not read and write in Ancient Greek. For low status learning programmes, we will consider ESOL courses in the post-schooling sector for learners who do not read and write in English or in another language. There is no suggestion that these learning programmes are actually similar, but the significant parallel that we want to focus on is that they all include literacy learning for learners who do not read and write in the language in question. However, while learning Ancient Greek is likely to be perceived as an achievement, by contrast, learning English is likely to be perceived as reducing a deficit. This stark contrast will be explored with reference to three issues: the names of the courses, how the courses are described, and linguistic competence in the learning cohort.

In terms of the names of the courses, the Ancient Greek courses are sometimes called ‘Classics’ and ‘Greats’. The ESOL courses, by contrast, are often called basic literacy courses. This name is used widely, it is used at LLU+. We do not see it as unproblematic, but like many people in the field, have focused on pedagogy more than the ‘name’. But the names seem to signal the gulf that is also evident in the way the courses are described. In prospectuses, the ESOL courses are often described in the way many courses in the sector are currently described, i.e. in terms of skills; by comparison, the ancient Greek courses are described in terms of knowledge.

In relation to linguistic competence, many ESOL learners are multilingual, using more than two languages on a day to day basis. Most ESOL teachers have met learners for whom English takes the number of languages they speak up to three, four, five etc. and whose everyday reality is a multilingual one; these multilingual realities are embedded in the multilingual realities lived by a significant proportion of people in Britain today. This has been documented and discussed by various authors including Saxena (1994) and Harris (2006). By contrast, a typical everyday language reality of many learners on the Ancient Greek learning programmes (though of course not all) is a monolingual one (albeit a very literate one), though they may use several varieties of English.

Though many ESOL learners have linguistic competence in several languages, and though their teachers may recognise these skills, their multilinguality is not generally considered important in England. In fact, it is frequently perceived as a lack of something (English), and learning to speak, read and write English is perceived as a way of becoming ‘ordinary’. Heide Spruck Wrigley, at the 2008 LESLLA conference, quoted a learner who told her that he used to be a skilled person in his country of origin, but ‘here’ (the USA) he is just someone who can’t speak English. In the current policy

context, in which notions such as ‘community cohesion’ are prominent, learning English is seen as a way of walking through the ‘way in’ door to an idealised integrated world; and not learning English (despite reasons for this, including lack of suitable classes) is becoming associated with disruptive behaviour in relation to this idealised world. Thus, while learning Ancient Greek is likely to be perceived as an achievement, by contrast learning English is perceived as reducing a deficit.

As already noted, there are of course many differences between both these two types of learning programmes and the learners themselves (as well as differences within them). However, these differences alone do not account for the differences in how the learners and the learning programmes are conceptualised. There is a wealth of theory which can be drawn on for explanations. Labov (for example, 2006) and Trudgill (for example, 1975), as early pioneers of sociolinguistics in US and UK carried out groundbreaking work around varieties of English, and showed how status and prestige in relation to language is socially constructed and related to the status of the speakers in the society. In the case of learners in English literacy classes, they are already marginalised in many ways in England and, as discussed above, the policy context is marginalising them further. Theorists such as Foucault (2002) and Gramsci (1971) analysed how views emerge, are constructed, circulated and contested in society, using concepts such as discourse and hegemony – and in this case, with the result that learning Ancient Greek becomes conceptualised as an achievement, and learning English in England conceptualised as a way of becoming ordinary.

Returning to the naming practices around English literacy courses and learners, there is an interrelationship between the name, status and message because the names do not signal an extension of existing multilingual achievement: ‘pre-entry’, ‘basic skills’, ‘basic literacy’, ‘beginner literacy’. In the wider society these learners are frequently described as ‘illiterate’. The word ‘can’t’ looms large in the title of a recent UK TV programme about a literacy class, ‘Can’t read, can’t write’, and this title manages to obscure the knowledge and experience of the learners in spectacular style. While it might be argued that the funding, provision and pedagogy for ESOL basic literacy are more urgent and pressing concerns than the names of courses, the issue of naming practices reflects the wider social context, in which they are embedded. In terms of identity, what do the learners think about naming practices?

In the situation where the status of the learners and their courses is low and their conceptualisation is a deficit one, it is critical to keep in mind what learners do know about literacy, and what they bring to their learning. Hall (1987) quoted in Spiegel & Sunderland (2006) reminds us that you do not need to be able to read and write to know about literacy.

‘...two little four year old girls, one Arabic and the other American doing ‘scribble’ writing. When asked what it said, the Arabic child replied ‘you can’t read it – it’s in Arabic’.

The vital importance of finding out about people’s practices, that is, what they know, and do and bring to learning, is a message signalled by literacy research conducted by Barton (2007), Street (1984), Brice-Heath (1983), to name just a few. They show how literacy is socially and culturally constructed and is about involvement - it is often not a solitary activity. Critically, this means that you do not have to do the actual decoding and the actual scribing to be involved in literacy practices. Literacy is

about meaning; decoding and scribing are part of the story, some of the time, but not the whole story. People in the UK who cannot decode an English language newspaper often know what its purpose is, and know about purposes of letters, emails etc., and are involved in interpreting their meanings when others read them aloud. People ask others to write what they dictate; they may not be scribing but they are determining the message they want to send. It means that there are learners in ESOL basic literacy classes who bring a wealth of knowledge about literacy practices to their classes, and they are there to learn more.

So while some learners of English and Ancient Greek share some aspects of the experience of learning to read and write in that language for the first time, any similarity ends here; the huge gulf in the ways in which these learners are conceptualised is a real lesson in the interrelationship between language and status in society.

5 Towards a policy for ESL Basic Literacy

Our case is that English educational policies disadvantage LESLLA learners. Naming practices and other issues both illuminate and exacerbate the low status of these learners. LESLLA is gathering evidence of policies and provision in different countries and publishing this on its website: www.leslla.com. We would like to propose a campaign that promotes positive policies that support LESLLA learners. In England we are campaigning for:

- basic literacy to be highlighted as a priority when talking about ‘excluded groups’,
- funding that supports specific provision for ESOL basic literacy, so that learners can receive the tuition they need to progress,
- research into appropriate pedagogy and resources,
- training for teachers of ESOL basic literacy,
- training for inspectors in assessing ESOL basic literacy provision.

We are also asking providers to tell us about their provision and the number of learners they are working with. See our website: www.lsbu.ac.uk/lluplus for updates.

But we would like to suggest that this campaign become an international one and is taken on by LESLLA. By sharing information from different countries, we can learn from each other and put together policy proposals that will result in benefit for all LESLLA learners.

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