

What strategies can teachers in secondary schools implement to effectively support English as Additional Language (EAL) learners in their lessons?

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Aim, focus and purpose of the research

This essay aims to explore what approaches and strategies English as Additional Language (EAL) learners and teaching practitioners find effective in supporting EAL learners' learning in lessons using questionnaires. This aim was encouraged by the fact that there is currently a lack of literature and guidance for teachers to accommodate the needs of EAL learners, particularly in schools where there are not enough EAL learners to warrant and finance specialised staff and resources. From experiences in schools, the extent of support for EAL learners typically was translating the class resources into their native language using online translators. Although this approach should not be discredited, it is essential that the complexity and diversity of EAL students require an equally diverse repertoire of strategies to ensure that they can access the curriculum. Understanding and implementing such strategies as a practitioner is crucial in an increasingly multilingual world. Practitioners must be prepared to support the influx of EAL learners entering schools. Additionally, this ability to differentiate to meet all learners' needs, including EAL learners, is part of the Welsh Government's mandatory professional standards for all teachers (Welsh Government, 2019).

A school was used as a case study to answer the question of what strategies teachers in secondary schools can implement to effectively support EAL learners in their lessons. To adhere to the British Education Research Association's (BERA) ethical guidelines regarding academic research in schools, all individuals and organisations will remain anonymous (BERA, 2018, p. 21). To provide some context, School X is a mixed-gendered, English-medium secondary school with over 900 pupils aged 11-16, 3.9% of whom are EAL learners, and nearly 34% are eligible for free school meals (FSM) (Welsh Government, 2023). The Welsh Government (2023) provides the national averages to put these into perspective: 21.2% FSM and 3.4% EAL.

Literature review

There is an ongoing influx of EAL learners in classrooms. This has been a consequence of general increases in immigration in the last decade and refugee crises caused by conflicts such

as the Russian-Ukrainian war (Wang and Lin, 2022, p. 1; Stavrakaki and Manoli, 2023, p. 1). With this increase in EAL learners, it has become increasingly crucial that schools can accommodate these learners. Riccardi, Giannantoni, and Le Rose further highlight the importance of schools' responsibility to accommodate and support these learners. They argue that schools are vital organisations in integrating EAL students into the host country's society (2019, p. 84). Makrooni (2020, p. 113) further supports this argument with their Finnish study, which found that schools' role in educating EAL and immigrant learners was crucial in helping learners improve their social mobility, quality of life and work opportunities through accessing comprehensive and higher education. Therefore, the literature clearly emphasises the necessity for teachers to be equipped to teach and support increasingly multilingual and multicultural classrooms.

Despite the evident need for strategies, current literature is still in its infancy and hindered by numerous factors. Although EAL and immigrant students are increasingly common in classrooms, the approaches to support these learners have varied significantly from specialised language schools to the immediate introduction in the mainstream alongside native students (Leung, 2010, p. 1). This means there has been little opportunity to compare different strategies and whether these can be successfully implemented in various cultural contexts. Additionally, the studies that have been conducted have all defined 'immigrant' and 'migrant' learners differently. These contrasting understandings mean that not the same sample of learners has been considered in each study, thus limiting the possible accuracy of comparing different studies. Furthermore, one of the inevitable difficulties of research into EAL learners is their diversity. Each EAL learner will have a different fluency in English, educational experience, cultural background and family dynamic (Faas, Sokolowska and Darmody, 2015, p. 454; Graf, 2011, pp. 25-6). This means there cannot be one universal strategy to support all EAL learners. Instead, it suggests that there needs to be a flexible repertoire to meet individual needs.

Some of the strategies that the literature has suggested include employing teaching assistants who have the same native language as the EAL learner alongside other language specialists to help support the learners' acquisition of the language (Monaghan, 2010, p. 19; Jørgensen, Dobson and Perry, 2021, p. 446). Oliver and Sengal's (2017) studies have found these strategies effective in helping learners access the curriculum and communicate their needs and interests to the schools (cited in Jørgensen, Dobson and Perry, 2021, p. 444). Despite the efficacy of this approach, it has been criticised by scholars. This is primarily because such resources are scarce for most schools, especially those with low EAL learner populations, and unsuitable in

times of economic recession and budget cuts (Bunar and Juvonen, 2022, p. 991; Faas, Sokolowska and Darmody, 2015, pp. 450, 453; Choy and Wärvik, 2019, p. 88). This consideration has led scholars to offer more suitable alternatives to teachers and schools.

One of the most common strategies has been to promote bilingual learning and 'translanguaging', which is often understood as allowing learners to use both their native language and English to support and enrich their overall learning and increase their cognitive ability (Liu, 2023, pp. 43-4; Conteh and Begum, 2006 cited in Graf, 2011, p. 24). Many have suggested that teachers can implement this by allowing learners to write their answers in their first language before writing in English, translating keywords and learners having access to dictionaries in lessons (Graf, 2011, p. 64; cited in Harper with Cook and James, 2010, p. 77; Vazquez, 2010, p. 37). Kaplan (2019) emphasises the importance of including the native language of EAL learners as part of their learning as they emphasise that English should not replace their original language but be an additional skill they possess. Moreover, they further argue that learners should have the opportunity to learn through their native language to bilingually communicate their understanding. Other proven strategies to build up a repertoire have included using visual aids and images so English proficiency is not needed to understand the task, encouraging socialising between EAL and native English learners, incorporating repetition of language and providing learners more time when questioned and performing tasks (University of San Diego, 2024; Graf, 2011, pp. 68-9; Kaplan, 2019; Leung, 2010, p. 9). Kaplan (2019) emphasises how many of these strategies benefit not only EAL learners but all learners, particularly students with Additional Learning Needs (ALN).

However, it is vital to note that consistently throughout the literature, experts and scholars have stressed the fact that these strategies must be tailored with significant consideration of the learners' native language, their fluency in English, educational background, culture, life outside of school as well as what support strategies the learner finds most beneficial (Graf, 2011, pp. 25-6; cited in Vanegas Rojas et al., 2018, p. 2338; Makrooni, 2020, p. 112). Therefore, it is clear that these strategies are recommended starting points for teachers before they can tailor their approaches to effectively meet the needs of the individual EAL learner.

Explanation of case study

Case studies hold a common yet complex position within the academic field. As many, like Gerring (2004, p. 342), note, this is due to case studies lacking a single agreed definition, understanding and method among researchers. For this reason, an established definition for this case study will be provided. This case study is understood as an empirical inquiry that explores a phenomenon in its real-life context by gathering qualitative and quantitative, meaning non-numerical and numerical, to garner a greater understanding.

One of the many reasons for using an exploratory case study approach here is that it sufficiently accommodates the purpose of the research. The case study approach captures the answers to 'what', 'why' and 'how' questions in contrast to experimental studies, which typically seek to prove a specific hypothesis (Crowe et al., 2011, p. 4). This approach allows the researcher to document their exploration of a phenomenon for others to benefit from without providing a definite answer. The literature has strongly suggested that there is no universal strategy for supporting EAL learners, meaning that the research approach cannot be compelled to provide a single answer but rather an array of recommendations. The case study approach allows this. It also permits the researcher to gain an extensive and in-depth understanding of a complex phenomenon compared to other approaches (Yazan, 2015, p. 148). This detailed approach is highly suitable for the 'how' question guiding this research as, due to the complexity surrounding EAL learners, the research approach requires a capacity that can accommodate these intricate factors and considerations. Moreover, its flexible use of multiple forms of data collection, particularly when following Yin's (2012) case study approach, allows for data triangulation that provides depth and helps validate the study's data and findings (cited in Yazan, 2015, p. 150). These characteristics of the case study approach make it clear that this is the most appropriate approach for the purpose of the outlined research question.

Despite this, the case study approach has limitations like any other method. Some researchers criticise it for its depth regarding the phenomenon, suggesting instead that it needs to be broader in its research to understand the less immediate factors surrounding it (Gerring, 2004, p. 347). Crowe and others have similarly recognised that the often specific nature of a case study can mean that conclusions cannot be generalised and applied to other contexts (Crowe et al., 2011, p. 7). This is a particular issue in the literature on EAL and immigrant learners. Most research has occurred in one school, region or country, so comparing these case studies is less accurate due to varying cultural and financial contexts. Additionally, case studies and their research methods typically generate qualitative data that the researcher is left to interpret by themselves, leading to discourse from scholars and participants about the study's conclusions who

may disagree with the researcher's interpretation (Crowe et al., 2011, p. 7). These limitations must be considered as part of the case study's findings and the research method to reduce the impact of these impediments.

Research methods

The research method chosen for this case study was digital questionnaires, which were primarily used to analyse qualitative data with some quantitative data from EAL learners and teaching practitioners. After exploring the literature, it was crucial that EAL learners could participate in this research, as many previous studies' limitations noted that there had been limited or non-existent consideration of EAL learners' perspectives (Faas, Sokolowska, and Darmody, 2015, p. 462).

The questionnaire was selected over alternative data collection, such as interviews, due to the nature of the research question and its participants. However, it was also selected due to its many advantages in research collection. As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2016, p. 158) summarise, questionnaires can often be more reliable than interviews due to the anonymity they permit. Participants usually feel they can be more honest with their answers and spend more time thinking about the questions as no one knows the answers are theirs, and no one can question why they provided such answers. Moreover, the questionnaires ensure that EAL learners can communicate their thoughts and experiences without English proficiency. The questionnaires are bilingual, meaning they are in English and whatever their first language is. This adheres to the recommendations made by Yaddanapudi and Yaddanapudi (2019, p. 335), who state that questionnaires should be suitable and clear so that the participant can answer accurately. Different bilingual forms were made according to the learners' languages, and the school provided this information in advance. This ensures that all EAL learners participating will clearly understand what is being asked of them and can express their answers in whichever language they are most comfortable in.

A digital format was also chosen for the case study's questionnaire. One of the advantages of digital questionnaires, in particular, is that they limit research costs and environmental damage by not using a paper format (Wright, 2005). Additionally, the online format also means that EAL participants will have access to online dictionaries and a spell checker, which will assist participants in creating intelligible and accurate answers. Also, as mentioned in the literature

review, EAL students can have diverse educational backgrounds, which may have hindered their previous learning. The online format means that all EAL learners can participate regardless of their ability to write, as it removes the difficulty of reading illegible handwriting and allows learners who struggle to write to speak their answers using a speech-to-text device instead. It could also be argued that it can allow learners who struggle with literacy as they can copy and paste the questions into an online text-to-speech service if needed.

However, as with any research method, there are possible weaknesses. These can include that the researcher cannot answer participants' questions if they have any while completing the questionnaire and how participants can rush questionnaires, whereas an interview allows the researcher to control the pace to which questions are asked and answered (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2016, p. 158). These issues can cause misunderstandings with the participants' understanding of what is being asked of them and also impact the reliability and authenticity of their answers, which can further limit the validity of the data and results of the case study. Moreover, one of the limitations of this specific research method is the issue of translating questions and answers. Although researchers have noted the convenience of various online translators, it has been noted that these translators are not equally accurate when translating all languages and that due to their lack of context, cultural nuance and vocabulary, they can often produce inaccuracies (Kessel et al., 2021; Yu, 2023). These inaccuracies in grammar and vocabulary could lead to participants misunderstanding the questions and producing answers that may not produce the data intended to garner from the question. The same issues could arise when translating EAL learners' answers into English for data analysis. However, to alleviate this translation issue, multiple translators and dictionaries were utilised to ensure the translations were as accurate as the case study's resources permit.

Furthermore, the types of questions used in a questionnaire have also been noted to have disadvantages. For example, closed-ended questions, where participants select from a set of predetermined answers, can be simple and quick to answer. On the other hand, closed-ended questions' predetermined answers can often limit the information shared and deny participants the opportunity to expand if their experience has more nuance than a tick-box answer can provide (Yaddanapudi and Yaddanapudi, 2019, p. 335; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2016, p. 158). Open-ended questions similarly have both benefits and disadvantages. While they allow the participants to expand on their experience and thoughts without limitation, they can take more time, which can be off-putting to some participants and more challenging to analyse (Yaddanapudi and Yaddanapudi, 2019, p. 335). Matrix questions, which are often in the form of

'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' continuums, also have the advantage of being quick and easy to complete but can risk the participant choosing the same answers all the way down the column without sincerely considering the question (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2016, p. 331).

Therefore, it is clear that to harness the benefits and counteract the disadvantages of certain question types, a range of question types should be used in the questionnaire. As Brace (2018, p. 45) notes, different types of questions will provide different types of data. This means that specific questions will have to follow a certain question type to ensure that the correct and most suitable type of data is gathered.

The questions in the questionnaires range according to each question. For example, matrix questions will be used to gauge EAL learners' English proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Multiple choice questions can be used to identify which strategies to support EAL learners from literature they have already seen or used in their classrooms. Open-ended questions could be used for participants to describe strategies or specific experiences they have had with certain strategies.

Data presentation and analysis methods

As previously mentioned, the questionnaire will generate qualitative and quantitative data. The approach used to analyse this data is 'thematic analysis'. Maguire and Delahunt (2017, p. 3352) describe this approach as recognising 'themes and patterns' across a set of qualitative data to effectively examine and comprehend it. One of the established advantages recognised by analysis experts is that, due to its lack of rigid protocols and often being identified as an 'umbrella term', thematic analysis is highly versatile in the way it can be utilised and implemented in various studies (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017, p. 3352; University of Auckland, no date). This is part of why it was selected for a subject as intricate as EAL learners in a school environment. However, despite this flexibility, it is crucial to recognise the structure that researchers should follow to create practical analysis.

Adhering to the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006), the data analysis followed a six-step process. The first stage is to become familiar with the data by reading the questionnaire results multiple times before creating initial 'codes' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 88). 'Codes' means marking parts of the data that might spark interest or suggest significance, such as EAL learners of particular languages finding specific strategies more or less effective compared to

other EAL learners of other languages. This aids in organising the data and its possible suggestions into different themes in the following three stages that further refine these into theme categories or sub-categories. Such themes could include English proficiency or subject-specific strategies. The final stage of this analysis consists of writing about the data, its identified themes, and possible suggestions based on such data. This will be accompanied by visual data presentation in graphs for the generated quantitative data, such as the number or percentage of EAL learners who said that a certain strategy or approach was the most effective in their learning.

Data analysis should take measures to ensure that they are trustworthy. Although this trait includes multiple components, such as credibility, for this case study, it is vital to have a sense of transferability, meaning its ability for its findings to be applied elsewhere (Ahmed, 2024, p. 2). Despite transferability being an ongoing issue in the field of EAL learners, providing a detailed but anonymous description of the learner's context and school can allow others to decide how well the strategies could function with their learners (Ahmed, 2024, p. 2).

Ethical considerations

Ensuring that all participants give informed consent and parental or carer consent of individuals younger than 18 years old is an essential aspect of any ethical research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2016, p. 52; University of Wales Trinity Saint Davids (UWTSD), 2022, p. 23). This is achieved by including a notice page before the beginning of the questionnaire. It outlines the research's aims and objectives and reminds the participant of their right not to answer all questions and withdraw at any time without their data being used. At the bottom of this page, there will be a 'next' button, which will act as the participant, parent, or guardian giving their consent. This page is available in Appendix A.

However, it is also essential that the EAL learners are also informed. Many, like Hughes and Helling, have noted that younger participants need to be equally informed of the purpose and nature of the research, as their age should not lessen their democratic rights (cited in Hurley and Underwood, 2002, p. 132; cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2016, p. 54). This is called assent, which is an agreement made by a person under 16 or 18 years old or who cannot legally give consent (Medical Research Council, no date). At the beginning of the EAL learners' questionnaire, once consent is given from an adult, there will be another outline of what the

questionnaire is for, alongside a reminder of their rights as participants so that the EAL learners are equally informed. This is available in Appendix B.

Furthermore, all participants will remain anonymous, and data will be protected due to sensitive information, such as language proficiency, personal experiences, and culture, which might be revealed in the questionnaires. There will be no name entry in the questionnaires, and they will be submitted digitally, so there is no face-to-face contact. The questionnaire results will be stored in an encrypted cloud system on a password-protected computer before being later deleted, so there is no external access to data.

Results and discussion

In the EAL learners' questionnaire (Appendix C), question 6 (Out of all the strategies teachers have used to help you understand your lessons, which do you think has been the most effective or helpful and why?) revealed that the most effective or helpful strategy was translating class materials into their native language, with 73.8% selecting this as the most effective (Appendix D). Among the explanations for this choice, learners expressed that the comparison between English and their native language helped identify keywords and sentences which they would have otherwise struggled with. This supports the argument made by Liu and Conteh and Begum about the benefits and effectiveness of incorporating English and learners' native language into their learning (2023, pp. 43-4; 2006 cited in Graf, 2011, p. 24). Also, 100% of the EAL learners whose native language does not have Latin scripts, such as Mandarin and Arabic, voted the translation of class materials as the most effective. This could suggest that learners from non-Latin script languages particularly benefit from having translated materials.

Yet, it should be considered that 27 out of the 31 participants with non-Latin script native languages identified themselves as lower on the fluency scale (1-3) in question 2. Moreover, out of the 74% who selected translation as the most effective, 63% also described themselves as just above the rank of 1 ('beginner with limited English'). Thus, it could be inferred that learners still developing their understanding of English and English fluency benefit most from the translation compared to more fluent learners.

Out of the 26% that did not choose translation as the most effective, the selection of the most effective strategies was more varied. Despite the diversity in their answers, 6 of the 11 of

these learners chose translation as least effective or helpful. Although participants confessed that they had found translation helpful in some tasks and stages of their English language acquisition, many described a similar experience of feeling stigmatised and 'different' because they had different materials from everyone else. Many of the learners who gave these answers also described an alternative approach where they asked teachers during individual tasks to read out the task instruction or reading sections for them.

However, the learners who gave these suggestions identified themselves as less confident in their reading fluency than in listening and speaking fluency, which was often ranked as 5 ('fluent'). The diversity of participants' preferences with strategies and abilities further exhibits, as Graf and Makrooni emphasise, the need for teachers to tailor their approaches according to the needs and preferences of individual learners (2011, pp. 25-6; 2020, p. 112). This was further evidenced by 45.2% of participants answering question 10 ('What do you think teachers could do to further help your English language development?') wanting teachers to ask what strategies the learner wants or finds most useful (Appendix E).

The teacher questionnaire (Appendix F) revealed little strategic difference between the AoLEs and that an array of strategies were used from the selection outlined. Out of the 59 who participated, 52 selected 'translating class materials in their first language' as the most effective strategy (Appendix G). For question 4 ('What are some common challenges you face when teaching EAL learners?'), most teachers expressed that a lack of accurate translation and language resources was their main challenge. This was further emphasised in question 10 ('Based on your experience, what additional strategies or resources do you believe would be beneficial in effectively supporting EAL learners?'), where 89% of teachers said they wanted more training and resources for teachers. Some recommended training courses, technology for learners to independently translate and 'word banks' so teachers could convey simple instructions in native languages.

The data suggest that more personal communication between teachers and learners is needed in schools to identify and implement the strategies that work best for individual learners and adjust these approaches according to learners' progress in English acquisition and the nature of class tasks. Additionally, more resources and training must be provided for teachers to prepare them for the complexities of teaching EAL learners and the strategies beyond translating resources so that teachers have a repertoire of strategies they can use to support the diverse needs of EAL learners.

Reflection, conclusion and recommendations

As with any data collection, elements will always partially hinder data reliability, as outlined in the previous 'research methods' and 'data presentation and analysis methods' sections. Although there were benefits to participants completing the questionnaire at home and in their own time, there may have been influences in their environment, e.g. a parent or carer, nearby media playing, routine limitations, etc., that could have impacted the nature, sincerity and detail of their answers. Additionally, as Kessel et al. (2021) and Yu (2023) note, the lack of authentic and wholly accurate translators may have introduced inaccuracies in interpreting the data once translated. Furthermore, as with most educational case studies, the data collection method would be generalisable, but the data would most likely vary due to different schools' varying cultural, social and economic contexts alongside the inherent diversity of EAL learners.

Despite this, it is clear that the data collection was as appropriate as resources and time would permit. However, in future research on the same question, the data collection method could be enhanced by a larger sample of learners, teachers and schools completing questionnaires in controlled environments. Also, the skills of native speakers who can translate answers and questions more accurately can reduce data interpretation inaccuracies. This would allow for both more reliable and valid results alongside more generalised data that more practitioners and schools can utilise for improvement. This would further develop several strands of the QTS strands, particularly 'differentiation', 'listening to learners' and 'wider reading and research findings' (Welsh Government, 2019)

In conclusion, the data has made it evident that there needs to be clear communication between teachers and their EAL learners to understand and implement what strategies they find most helpful and effective in their learning. Additionally, teachers need to be aware of the spectrum of possible strategies and be prepared to be flexible, as no two EAL learners will progress in English acquisition and school in the same way and with the same selection of strategies. Practitioners need to ensure that there are conversations had with learners before they implement specific strategies to avoid feelings of stigmatisation or using techniques that offer no support to the learner. Moreover, practitioners and schools should explore available training and resources for EAL learners. This means that when they face an influx of EAL learners, they are

prepared to ensure that all learners, regardless of native language, can achieve their utmost potential in school and life.

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