

LESLLA Symposium Proceedings



Recommended citation of this article

Simpson, J. (2007). Adult ESOL in England: Policy, Practice, and Research. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, 2(1), 197–212. <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7996858>

Citation for LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

This article is part of a collection of articles based on presentations from the 2006 Symposium held at Virginia Commonwealth University and the American Institutes for Research in Richmond, Virginia, USA. Please note that the year of publication is often different than the year the symposium was held. We recommend the following citation when referencing the edited collection.

Faux, N. (Ed.) (2007). Low-educated adult second language and literacy acquisition. Research, policy, and practice: Proceedings of the second annual forum. The Literacy Institute at Virginia Commonwealth University.
<https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/issue/view/447>

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ADULT ESOL IN ENGLAND: POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH

James Simpson, University of Leeds

1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present an overview of the current intersection of practice, policy and research in the field of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in England, with a focus on beginner ESOL literacy. To do this, three thematic perspectives on ESOL are put forward. The first perspective situates ESOL as a whole in its contemporary socio-political context, as a social policy in flux. I describe recent policy initiatives concerning ESOL, and the interplay of policy decisions and a changing ESOL population. The second perspective focuses on ESOL students and their diverse characteristics. I discuss recent research which explores the association between length of time spent in England and progress in ESOL, and the salient differences between two groups of students, long term residents and new arrivals. The third perspective suggests directions for future classroom-based research into ESOL and literacy, building on current interest among teachers for researching their own ESOL classrooms. Before turning to these themes, I provide a brief demographic snapshot of ESOL students in the second part of this introduction.

Much of this paper draws on findings from recent and current research projects, in particular a large scale study of ESOL students in England, the ESOL Effective Practice Project (EPPP) (Baynham, Roberts et al., 2007), funded by the European Social Fund and instigated by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC). The methodology for the EPPP was adapted from the “What Works” study for adult ESL literacy students, a study of the effective teaching of literacy and English language to adults in the US (Condelli et al., 2003).

1.1 *Who are ESOL Students?*

In short, ESOL students are migrants to the UK who fall into four broad categories: those from settled migrant communities; refugees, who subdivide into asylum seekers and settled refugees; migrant workers; and partners and spouses of people who are in the UK to study (DfES, 2000). These government-defined categories have remained stable for some years, yet are in the process of being reassessed (see Section 2 below). Moreover, such simple classification does not do justice to the most striking characteristic of the ESOL population, what Vertovec (2006) and

others refer to as *superdiversity*. Globalisation and patterns of mass forced and voluntary migration have resulted not only in large numbers of migrants coming to the UK, but also an enormous range of people. Consequently there is huge variety in ESOL classrooms across every dimension imaginable. The following figures are drawn from questionnaires on basic biographical information administered to 509 ESOL learners in 2004, part of the ESOL Effective Practice Project (EEPP). The learners in the survey came from 58 different countries of birth. The 10 most frequent are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: ESOL learners' countries of birth: Top 10 ($n=509$)

Country	Frequency	%
Pakistan	62	12.2
Somalia	54	10.6
Turkey	36	7.1
Bangladesh	29	5.7
India	22	4.3
Angola	21	4.1
Congo	21	4.1
Sri Lanka	20	3.9
Iran	17	3.3
Iraq	17	3.3

ESOL is a field in constant change, partly because of the ever-shifting nature of the ESOL student population. Thus, however recent the figures presented in Table 1 are, they are already out of date because of recent migration patterns. In 2004 a group of countries acceded to the European Union (EU), including Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. There were no restrictions placed on citizens of these accession countries travelling to or working in the UK. Although many of these Eastern European EU citizens plan to remain only temporarily in the UK, a large number maintain that they wish to settle (Spencer et al., 2007). As EU citizens they were entitled to free ESOL lessons under the *Skills for Life* policy, though their status is less clear now, as I explain later. The scale of increase in numbers of this group of students is shown by the fact that enrolments by Polish nationals into ESOL classes increased from 151 in 2000/1 to 13,137 in 2004/5 (Niace, 2006, p. 17).

Other background statistical data from the EEPP survey shows further interesting patterns concerning gender, age, literacy, education and employment (Table 2).

Table 2: ESOL learners' characteristics (n=509)

		%
Gender	Male	36.8
	Female	63.2
Age group	16-19	14.9
	20-29	34.3
	30-39	29.7
	40-49	14.1
	50-59	5.5
	over 60	1.5
Can read in L1		88.8
Can write in L1		82.3
University-level education		12.1
Currently in employment		20.5

So two thirds of ESOL students are women, half are under thirty, about one in seven cannot read or write in L1 while one in eight have a tertiary level education. And the vast majority are not currently working. Many migrants to English-dominant countries do not already have competence in English when they arrive. For these people, learning English is a matter of urgency. The importance of learning English has not been lost on the British government in recent years either. But while government intervention in ESOL has brought positive benefits, it has also resulted in some contention.

2 ESOL Policy

Historically, and despite certain attention from local and central government over the years, adult ESOL provision in the UK, in common with adult literacy and numeracy provision, was neglected in policy circles. Provision was characterised by *ad hoc* teaching and learning in community groups, homes and workplaces, with volunteer or part-time teachers. A major watershed in ESOL took place at the turn of the century with a decision by Britain's Labour government to bring the fragmented field of ESOL under centralised control, a process which, in brief, took the following path. Influenced by findings from the International Adult Literacy Survey, Sir Claus Moser's report to the government, *A Fresh Start* (DfEE 1999), recommended the launching of a national strategy to reduce the number of adults with low levels of basic skills. The response of the government was to put in place the *Skills for Life* strategy (2001) addressing this concern for adult basic skills in England and Wales. A similar parallel but separate system exists in Scotland. The language needs of bilingual students were not mentioned in the Moser report, and ESOL

was not originally included as a “Skill for Life.” This changed with the publication of a government working group report *Breaking the Language Barriers* (DfES 2000), which brought ESOL wholly into the adult basic skills agenda. This move included the creation of a statutory *Adult ESOL Core Curriculum* (DfES 2001), parallel to the adult literacy and numeracy curricula already in place. This separate ESOL core curriculum was developed partly as a result of lobbying by activist groups, in particular the practitioner organisation NATECLA, the National Association of Teachers of English and Community Languages to Adults (as documented by Hamilton and Hillier, 2006). The assimilation of ESOL into *Skills for Life* also brought with it a new teacher training framework and qualifications mapped against national standards. *Skills for Life* also entailed the establishment of the NRDC, the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy, which encompasses ESOL in its remit. The NRDC was created to provide a research base with which to inform the *Skills for Life* policy, which it continues to do today.

The *Skills for Life* policy has invested heavily into ESOL, though as we see below, there are signs that the government commitment to funding ESOL provision is weakening. Under *Skills for Life*, ESOL students are eligible for free tuition, and demand for ESOL outstrips supply in most areas. And students progress in ESOL classes. As the report of the ESOL Effective Practice Project puts it, “The progress the learners in our study make ... is clear both from test scores and learner interviews and therefore justifies the investment in their learning made by *Skills for Life*” (Baynham, Roberts et al, 2007, p. 6). But bringing ESOL under centralised control and regulation has involved contentious clashes in cultures. As John Callaghan writes, in the context of his study of ESOL teachers’ professional identities (2006, p. 30):

Whilst government initiatives have brought in welcome resources, they have ... laid a heavy bureaucratic burden on teachers, one which many see as being driven by auditing purposes and economic motives related to global competitiveness rather than the facilitation of language learning or the meeting of learners’ needs.

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. Moreover, the policy, management and inspectorate emphasis on “individualisation” (and lately “personalisation”) of learning, particularly through the agency

of the Individual Learning Plan (ILP), is at odds with the group processes of learning so characteristic of learning in ESOL classes.

A further trend in ESOL policy is the drive to increase private sector involvement. This tendency is common across Further Education in the UK, and is associated with a strengthening of links in policy between learning in the Further Education sector and employment. Private sector investment in Further Education, be it in infrastructure, in materials and methods, or in direct funding of courses, brings with it an obligation, implicit or explicit, to orient learning and teaching towards work and employment. Yet with regard to ESOL, this can lead to a confusion between the broader aim of English language education and the pedagogic focus. While it is obvious that many (though not all) ESOL students need to improve their English language skills for employment purposes, it is not at all clear that the way to do this is to focus in class on narrow employment-related concerns. This distinction is not always recognised by those charged with inspecting ESOL classes. For example, an article by an inspector from the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) published in the NRDC magazine *Reflect* (Julka, 2005), claims to identify the characteristics of a “Grade 1 lesson”; that is, one which would be judged “outstanding” by inspectors. The range of activities proposed in the article as comprising typical content in outstanding lessons is rather restricted. Mention is made of obtaining information about travelling, of filling out forms, of vocational texts and manuals. Books and magazines are for independent study only. There are strong echoes here of the competency-based and “survival English” materials and courses based on target needs analyses which gained currency in the 1970s. Such pedagogy has attracted much criticism over the years, not least on the grounds that it only prepares immigrants for menial work (e.g., Auerbach, 1986). It is an uncomfortable thought that well into the 21st century such a position regarding ESOL learners is being promoted by government inspectors. Moreover, there is little pedagogical justification for ESOL teaching and learning to be entirely needs-driven and vocationally relevant. For instance, recent theories of language learning stress the importance of the ludic or playful function of language in learning as well as in daily life (see in particular Cook, 2000).

Very recently, the British government, *via* the funding body the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), announced that from September 2007 ESOL classes would be free only for a targeted set of people, those who are “unemployed or receiving income-based benefits” (LSC, 2006, p. 5). The LSC policy announcement acknowledged that ESOL courses are a much-needed, and indeed over-subscribed, resource. Its proposal to “focus public investment on provision for those most at risk of disadvantage” (2006, p. 25) in fact excluded three groups who are precisely those most at risk. These were: asylum seekers awaiting a

decision on whether they have leave to remain in the UK (who are by law not allowed to work); unwaged members of families who are not claiming benefits; and low-paid migrant workers. Protests against the new government policy were vocal and widespread, with heavy lobbying from trade unions, teachers' groups, refugee groups, academics, and ESOL students themselves. As a result, there was some softening of the government's position. At the time of writing, asylum seekers who have been in the UK for six months or more will continue to be eligible for free ESOL lessons, as will some members of families not claiming work-related benefits. This latter group includes women from established migrant communities who were considered by many ESOL teachers most vulnerable to any cut in ESOL funding. Migrant workers, however, remain ineligible for free ESOL classes; the expectation, however unrealistic, is that employers will contribute towards the funding of courses for their migrant employees. It is predicted, therefore, that the composition of ESOL classes will change dramatically yet again, as students who are low-paid migrant workers find that they are no longer able to gain access to free ESOL provision.

Ironically, at the same time as cutting back on provision for ESOL, government ministers claim to recognise the importance of language in community building. In launching the Commission on Integration and Cohesion, the former Education minister Ruth Kelly described one of the aims of the Commission being to "encourage local authorities and community organization to play a greater role in ensuring new migrants better integrate into our communities and fill labour market shortages." She gave as an example of such an enterprise: "increasing the availability of English teaching" (Kelly, 2006). In a speech on "Meeting the Terrorist Challenge," the Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown stated, "I believe all who live in this country should learn English, understand our history and culture, take citizenship tests and citizenship ceremonies" (Brown, 2006). And writing in *The Guardian*, the Further Education minister Bill Rammell asserted that ESOL provision is an important part of the development of basic skills 'to improve social mobility and cohesion' (Rammell, 2006). It is interesting to note that these three politicians' speeches were made in the context of either social cohesion or national security. The suggestion that a lack of willingness to learn English is somehow responsible for breakdown in social cohesion or for terrorism is, of course, risible. In the first place, there is no such unwillingness on the part of adult migrants to learn English. On the contrary, it is perhaps a truism to say that most, if not all, people who migrate to the UK from countries which are not English-dominant wish to learn English and are highly motivated to do so: witness the waiting lists of most ESOL providers. And secondly, those perpetrators of terrorist offences such as the bombings in London in July 2005 were British-born individuals whose

English language competence was not in question. And yet it is surely the case that ESOL students are subject to negative representations in the media and public discourse, perhaps due to the tightening of the connection in law between immigration, national security and social cohesion.

2.1 *Current Research Informing ESOL Policy*

As I suggested above, there is a major focus on employment in the current thinking on ESOL in government and policy circles. In particular there is a concern about where people progress from ESOL and how they move from ESOL either into mainstream education (perhaps Higher Education) or into employment. ESOL in *Skills for Life* is divided into five levels, running from Entry Level 1 (beginner) through Entry Levels 2 and 3, Level 1 and Level 2 (nominally GCSE level). Many ESOL students progress to Entry Level 3 or Level 1 and fail to move ahead subsequently, often because their literacy skills lag behind their oral communication skills. Concern about routes beyond ESOL have led to a number of research and development initiatives, most recently the “Stick with it” research commissioned by the Quality Improvement Agency, a body set up by the British government to implement policy decisions and initiatives in the post-compulsory education sector. This research drive, which covers the whole *Skills for Life* policy area, is investigating ways of encouraging students to persist in their learning and studies, and progress from their classes into employment.

A second current concern relating to ESOL students in policy is the relationship between ESOL provision and literacy provision under the *Skills for Life* policy umbrella. The superdiversity of some urban centres means that a high proportion – sometimes the majority – of the population are bilingual. The consequence of this for *Skills for Life* provision is that classes, and not only ESOL classes, are often dominated by transnational students of various kinds: students who might have been born in the UK but who have spent much of their childhood in their parents’ home country; people who are second generation children of migrants who have another language as a home language; people who have come to the UK as teenagers and who are enrolling in literacy classes ten, twenty, thirty years later; and, in general, students whose expert languages are not English. Previous research has recognised – but not fully taken account of – the fact that *Skills for Life* classes across the spectrum are full of such bilingual students, many of whom have a language learning need. As the NRDC Effective Teaching and Learning Writing study states (Grief et al, 2007, p. 24):

Thirty per cent of the learners [on the study] did not have English as a first language and the 85 learners who recorded their first language had 44 different first languages between them. ... In practice we encountered many learners in literacy classes who might have benefited from specialist teaching in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

The experience of these students truly problematise the boundary between Literacy and ESOL, and are the concern of a recently completed exploratory study, again instigated by the NRDC (Simpson et al, forthcoming). One hoped-for outcome of this study is that there will be some readjustment of adult literacy pedagogy to take into account the needs of bilingual learners.

3 *Large-scale Research into ESOL Students and L2 Literacy Learning*

As stated in the introduction, ESOL students are a hugely diverse group. This section focuses on a particular sector of the ESOL population, one with relevance in the context of this collection. I concentrate on the identification and characteristics of adult learners of ESOL who, for one reason or another, missed out on schooling as children and are facing the challenge of learning literacy for the first time as adults and in a new language. To do this, I return to the ESOL Effective Practice Project (Baynham, Roberts et al., 2007).

Part of the EEP study involved collecting background data on learners, observing the strategies their teachers used in class, and investigating correlations between those strategies and changes in the learners' attainment, according to a pre- and post-observation assessment of oral communication (see Simpson, 2006). To investigate which learner-related variables had an impact on progress, a multiple regression was conducted to determine the best combination of learner variables for predicting progress according to the assessment. Several combinations of characteristics were tested, including gender, age, employment status, ability to read or write in an expert language, and years of schooling. None of these factors in and of themselves were found to make a difference to progress. The only factors found to be significant were attendance rates – a weak but positive correlation with progress – and the length of time learners had already spent in the UK at the point of the study – a significant and negative correlation. In short, more recent arrivals in the UK are seen to have made greater progress according to the pre-/post-observation assessment than longer-term residents.

It was clear that length of time already spent in the UK was an important predictor of rate of progress, so this variable was investigated further. Drawing on data from 468 students about their length of time in

the UK, the cohort was divided into two groups, those who had been in the UK for up to five years, termed the *new arrivals*; and a *long-term resident* group, in the UK for five years or more. The new arrivals made up 78% of the sample; the long term residents 22%.

Data from the two groups were compared across a number of variables, in order to determine how they differed demographically. And perhaps unsurprisingly there were salient and significant differences between the groups. For example, there were proportionally more men and more young students in the new arrivals group. The groups also differed significantly in terms of mean years of schooling reported, with an average of 9.15 years for the recently settled group and 7.13 years for the longer term residents. And, crucially, a higher proportion of the long-term residents reported that they could not read or write in their first language.

These differences point to reasons why levels of progress varied between the groups. People who have been in the UK for longer are more likely to be older and to have had less experience of formal education as children. Both these reasons might affect progress. Evidence from second language acquisition research suggests that age makes a difference; there is a cut-off point which divides younger from older language learners, and older learners have to find strategies which compensate for the loss of the language learning mechanisms of the young (Long, 1990). People come to ESOL later in life for a variety of reasons (Cooke, 2006). Many wish they could have started earlier but were prevented by patterns of work or childcare. Those learners who received little or no schooling as children have a further disadvantage in adult ESOL classes. In general, people who have experience of school recognise and are able to operate within the artificiality of the classroom situation (Luria, 1976). In contrast, adults with little school experience are less able to fully understand the pedagogical aspect of classroom interaction. A related and overarching factor is that people who have not acquired literacy as children in a first or expert language have particular difficulties learning literacy for the first time as adults in a new language.

A headline finding from the ESOL Effective Practice Project reads:

The newer arrivals need adequate provision now so that they do not become the future long-term residents facing more barriers to learning. Similarly, long-term residents need appropriate provision, including literacy where necessary. For them ESOL classes are often their first chance to learn English because commitments and constraints have prevented them from doing so in the past.

This finding, derived as it was from a large-scale correlational study, does not allow for the problematisation of the details of the issues which it illuminates. It also suggests a rather crude binary distinction between new arrivals *with* literacy and long-term residents *without*. It glosses over the fact that many new arrivals also have little or no foundational L1 literacy. Furthermore, it does not account for *why* these learners are reaching adulthood without acquiring literacy. And it presents a dichotomous notion of literacy which does not really fit the patterns of socially situated literacy practices, and individuals' participation in these. On the other hand, it can be viewed as a basis for a more situated and grounded examination of local contexts.

4 Classroom Research into ESOL Literacy

On a programmatic level, and with a speculative eye on putting forward directions and methodologies for research, I suggest that local contextualised research could be carried out by ESOL teachers investigating their own classrooms, with a view to change for the better. Practitioner-led action research in ESOL draws on a strong tradition of classroom-based action research (e.g. Kemmis and McTaggart, 1985; Richards, 2003) and exploratory research into language classrooms (Allwright, 1988). Tutors engaging in practitioner-led action research are able to position themselves as researchers; because this is *action* research, they are investigating local problems which might have locally appropriate solutions. Such a reorientation can be challenging for teachers. As a result of studying issues as they arise from their own classrooms, they may find themselves on unfamiliar ground. That is, rather than drawing primarily on previous training or on the literature on language teaching pedagogy, their starting point for developing an approach becomes their own classrooms. This reorientation allows them, therefore, to develop their own theories about teaching and learning from the study of their classrooms.

This is not to say that classroom-based research should be carried out in an unprincipled way. Rather, teacher-researchers bring to the research whatever insights previous research has gained that informs them about the teaching and learning needs of basic ESOL literacy learners, as well as their own experience of working with these groups of students. In this sense they engage in a type of principled pragmatism, as advocated by Kumaravadivelu (1994). The knowledge acquired through the close study of a classroom during a research project, combined with the skill developed over years of teaching, allows teachers to move away from an uncritical acceptance of externally developed approaches and methods. They therefore aim for a "postmethod condition," one which, argues

Kumaravadivelu (1994, p. 29), “empowers practitioners to construct classroom-oriented theories of practice.”

Theorising from the classroom using the heuristic device of an action research project, while not common in Adult ESOL in the UK, is also not completely unknown. Here I mention two current initiatives which adopt a practice-oriented context-specific attitude towards the development of theory. These are the Dewsbury College Skills for Life Action Research project (Clarkson et al, forthcoming), and the ESOL Practitioners Guide project (Cooke et al, forthcoming). Both of these projects were instigated under the auspices of the NRDC. The first, the Dewsbury College project, was part of the recent NRDC Practitioner-led Research Initiative (PLRI), a three-year scheme involving 17 small-scale projects of various types across the *Skills for Life* policy areas of Literacy, Numeracy, ESOL and ICT. The Dewsbury Project involved setting up a collaborative and mutually supportive action research network amongst ESOL tutors; in the first cycle of the project six tutors each devised and carried out their own mini-projects, coordinated in a collaborative mutually supportive network which met face-to-face and electronically via blogs. The key innovation in this project, which in autumn 2006 commenced its second cycle, is that in each case the learners in the class are heavily involved in deciding the nature and direction of the intervention to take place. The second project, the ESOL Practitioners Guide, stems from the ESOL Effective Practice Project (EEPP), described in part in this paper. While working on the EEPP, the researchers became aware not only of what was happening in ESOL classes, but also of what was not. One thing not seen a lot in ESOL classes was the encouragement of longer stretches of talk from students. The Practitioners Guide project involves five teacher-researchers, working under the coordination of two university-based researchers, to investigate ways both of encouraging longer stretches of talk in their lessons, and of working with that talk in ways which might promote learning. Ultimately, methods and findings will be presented together in an ESOL teachers’ guide. In each case, classroom-based researchers are drawing on the expertise of a university-based researcher who acts as a mentor.

4.1 *Teachers Researching their ESOL Literacy Classrooms*

Classroom-based practitioner-led research into ESOL literacy classrooms might focus on the following questions:

1. What do we understand by *Literacy*?
2. Who are our basic ESOL literacy students?

Once these questions have been investigated, classroom-based researchers can turn to the matter of appropriate pedagogy.

4.2 *What do we Understand by Literacy?*

When studying ESOL literacy at a local or classroom level, I maintain that it is important to turn away from *a priori* classifications of *literate* or *illiterate* in favour of an orientation towards literacy as socially situated practice. This allows one to sidestep the tendency to think in terms of typical outcomes for pre-defined groups. It also allows one to theorise literacy as embedded in everyday social practice, considering the classroom as one of many sites of language use. This follows the turn to the social and ethnographic taken in the New Literacy Studies (for example, Gee, 2000; Street, 1993). Teachers and classroom-based researchers can thus look beyond the mechanics of decontextualised literacy learning and view what happens in lessons in terms of classroom literacy practices. One way of investigating classroom literacy practices is suggested by Hellerman (2006), who provides a methodological framework for such a study. In his paper, Hellermann talks about how two adult ESL learners develop L2 literacy in their classroom at the National Labsite for Adult ESOL at Portland State University. Rather than focusing on their test scores, or in fact paying very much attention to the particular materials and techniques the teacher uses in the class, he concentrates on what he terms “the social processes which foster the development of classroom and interactional practices that characterize beginning literacy activities for adults in an L2” (2006, p. 377).

Hellermann’s position is aligned with the New Literacy Studies. In Hellermann’s words, “linguistic processing ... is embedded within and inseparable from social practices or routines in which individuals are engaged” (2006, p. 379). Within these literacy practices there are identifiable recurring literacy events. Through investigating these recurring classroom literacy events we can open a window on the process of the development of interactional competence through language socialisation, what we might term *literacy* socialisation. That is to say, investigating the interaction around the teaching of literacy, through examining literacy *events*, helps us to understand the processes by which students become socialised into literacy in their classrooms. Thus the identification and examination of recurring literacy events can become the focus of analysis of classroom observations and recordings.

4.3 *Who are Basic ESOL Literacy Students?*

In the introduction to this paper I discussed in broad terms the ESOL populations in the UK. But when carrying out small-scale research into a

class, it is important to understand who the students in the class are. Students with little or no literacy in L1, who are learning literacy for the first time in an L2, are likely to find themselves in beginner or basic ESOL classes. So what sorts of learners do we find in such classes? In their authoritative guide to teaching basic literacy to ESOL learners, Spiegel and Sunderland (2000) define a basic literacy student as: "Someone who is still learning to read a short simple text and struggles to write a simple sentence independently. ... Some learners may have little or no print literacy in their own languages, while others may be able to read and write extremely well in one or more languages" (Spiegel and Sunderland, 2006, p. 15). Beyond this definition there are a number of factors which complicate matters for teachers of basic literacy to bilingual learners. Some students come to ESOL classes with an ability to read and write another language which uses Roman script. Others might be familiar with an ideographic writing system, a syllabary, or a non-Roman alphabet. Others still may have little or no knowledge of any writing system at all. Thus all students of basic literacy will be coming to the class with different starting points, and classifying students according to literacy need becomes problematic for teachers. One helpful distinction made by L2 literacy acquisition researchers in the cognitive tradition is between those students with some foundational L1 literacy and those with none. Those with some L1 literacy are viewed as having skills to transfer onto L2 literacy (Tarone and Bigelow, 2005; Young-Scholten, 2004). And in ESOL literacy classrooms, teachers recognise that progress is slower among those with no skills to transfer. As Bell (1995, p. 687) says, "Most ESL literacy teachers would agree that learners who are literate in their native language make better progress than those without native language literacy." ESOL teachers will also recognise the fundamental point about language transfer: people are able to transfer knowledge that they have about literacy, regardless of script; for example, an understanding, as Spiegel and Sunderland say (2006, p. 15) "that there is a link between sound and symbol or that different genres have their own conventions."

Moreover, students in Basic ESOL literacy classes will differ in the extent to which they are able to express themselves orally in English. Some may have oral communication skills in English because they have been resident in an English-dominant country for some time, but will report having little or no schooling in L1; and others, perhaps new arrivals, will have neither English oral skills nor L1 literacy. It may well be the case that literacy provision needs to take account of this distinction. Practitioner-led action research of the type I advocate could allow teachers to implement an intervention based on such an observation in an attempt to make provision more focused and relevant to students' needs.

5 Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed policy and research in ESOL, with a focus on beginner literacy for ESOL students. Returning to the socio-political perspective with which I began, detailed work on the nature of the classroom literacy learning of adult migrants is pointless unless provision is made for such students to actually study. Government policy which encompassed ESOL within the *Skills for Life* agenda brought with it welcome resources. Notwithstanding this, much policy attention on ESOL and ESOL students in the intervening years has been less welcome. In particular, we see a paradoxical situation whereby migrants to the UK are castigated by politicians for not learning English for “integration” purposes; the very same politicians instigate policies which deny the potential learners access to freely available English lessons. ESOL classes are a lifeline for many students, and to remove provision of English language education from some of the most marginalised and needy groups in society is callous in the extreme.

The second perspective focused on policy-oriented research, and research commissioned to inform policy, which of its nature tends to be broad brush and large scale. Such research can provide useful and informative insights, as shown by the interesting correlations generated in the course of the ESOL Effective Practice Project research described in this paper. Without this type of research, it is unlikely that general and generalisable patterns such as the ones described in section 3 of this paper would be allowed to show themselves. Such research findings, if used carefully by policy makers, managers and other practitioners, can be of positive benefit to ESOL.

Yet for research that aims to directly inform practice, there is no substitute for grounded, situated classroom-based research. I maintain that only by investigating lived experience, for instance of classroom literacy practices, can one probe the subtleties of individual contexts with a view to improving practice. The third perspective of this paper included a call for such situated research efforts to be encouraged and supported.

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