

LESLLA Symposium Proceedings



Recommended citation of this article

Sunderland, H., & Moon, P. (2008). Teaching Based Literacy to ESOL Learners: Developments in Teacher Education in the UK. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, 3(1), 137–146.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8000841>

Citation for LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

This article is part of a collection of articles based on presentations from the 2007 Symposium held in Newcastle upon Tyne, England. 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.

Young-Scholten, M. (Ed.) (2008). Low-educated adult second language and literacy acquisition (LESLLA): Proceedings of the third annual forum. Roundtuit.

<https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/issue/view/447>

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TEACHING BASIC LITERACY TO ESOL LEARNERS: DEVELOPMENTS IN TEACHER EDUCATION IN ENGLAND

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1 Introduction

English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes for adults in England have been available in one form or another for over 150 years (Rosenberg, 2007). Over this time, the organisation, curriculum and costs to learners have changed very many times; at the time of writing, ESOL classes are free to learners on low incomes (Learning and Skills Council, 2006), and are considered alongside literacy and numeracy as 'Skills for Life' (Department for Education and Employment, DfEE, 2001). ESOL courses are intended for settlers in England, and ESOL learners come from a vast range of different backgrounds. Classes often have learners with very mixed educational histories and, in a typical class, a former teacher may sit next to a learner who has only had two years of school. In the last few years changes have been made to government requirements for qualified teachers of ESOL (Lifelong Learning UK¹ known as 'LLUK', 2007; this is the government-funded body that is charged with developing standards for teachers in post-compulsory education). However, these do not specify much detail about teaching basic literacy and do not prepare teachers to work with learners with low levels of literacy and very little education in any language. LLU+ at London South Bank University is a research and professional development centre specialising in ESOL, literacy, numeracy, dyslexia and family learning. It has a history of supporting ESOL teachers to teach basic literacy and this chapter will describe efforts to prepare teachers to work in this area. The chapter will describe custom-made courses, the training of teacher trainers and ways we provided the course throughout Great Britain and in Ireland. It will end by outlining research we are just beginning into teachers' approaches to teaching ESOL learners with low levels of literacy in any language.

2 Background

The government's policy paper, *Breaking the Language Barriers* (Department for Education and Employment,² 2000) identifies four broad categories of ESOL learners. These are

- settled communities, principally, although by no means exclusively, from the Asian sub-continent and Chinese from Hong Kong
- refugees
- migrant workers, mostly from elsewhere in Europe
- partners and spouses of learners from all parts of the world who are settled for a number of years and need to participate in the local community.

It suggests that "each of them brings a wealth of cultural experience and diversity to this country but this very diversity presents challenges to planning and offering appropriate learning provision." And it goes on to say that within these groups, learners

¹ Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) replaced the organisation, FENTO - see below. It is the government agency charged with determining standards for teachers of post-compulsory education.

² In the last 8 years, the government department dealing with post-compulsory education has changed names three times from Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) to Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to Department for Universities and Innovation (DIUS). In the UK, education is dealt with separately by the different nations, so the government department has a brief only for education in England.

would have very different needs depending on their language background, work and life experience, aspirations and educational background. It points out that the educational background of learners "could be anywhere on a continuum from no formal education at all to higher education and professional training." (Part 1, Section 2).

More Than a Language (Grover, 2006, p.22) suggests that these categories are still very much in evidence, with the proviso that "there has been a marked increase in the number of learners from the EU, specifically migrant workers for the A8 countries." This increase has meant that ESOL classes now contain more learners who are fluent readers and writers of the Roman alphabet and the contrast with those who are not is more marked.

Government funded ESOL classes in England are run in a range of settings, funded through the education budget or the training for employment budget. Classes also exist funded through the voluntary and charitable sector or run by volunteers in church or community groups. Learners may attend full time (30 hours per week) or part time (studying for as few as 2 hours per week). At the same time, private language schools also provide fee-charging English language tuition, mainly aimed at visitors rather than long term settlers to this country. (See also Simpson et al., this volume.)

Most learners are assessed on entry to ESOL provision, through a mixture of oral and written tests, and placed in graded ESOL classes. Since the advent of the *Adult ESOL Core Curriculum* (Department for Education and Skills, DfES, 2001, see below), the classes are generally graded according to curriculum level - these are roughly equivalent to the Council of Europe³ *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (CEF) levels. A very few organisations split the two lowest grades, Entry 1 and Entry 2, into two depending on the literacy level of the learners, but the majority put all learners in together. This means that a learner from, say, Europe or French-speaking Africa, with a mastery of the Roman alphabet and a high level of education, may be put into the same class with learners who either write a different script or who have had no or little education at all. The paper by Sunderland in this compilation describes how the little provision that does exist for learners with low levels of literacy is being threatened as a result of government targets for qualifications at a higher level (the school-leaver level). This mixture of learners in one class poses particular problems for teachers who are expected to address the individual needs of learners in groups with extremely diverse educational backgrounds. Not only are they expected to do this almost impossible job, they have very little teacher-training which prepares them to teach learners with low levels of literacy.

Before 2002 and the development of the *Subject Specifications for Teachers of ESOL* (see *Developments in ESOL teacher education in England*, below) there were no national requirements or standards for ESOL teachers which specified necessary subject knowledge or subject-specific pedagogy. The most commonly used qualifications for ESOL teachers were the 'Cambridge Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults' or the 'Trinity Certificate in Teaching ESOL' and neither of these highlighted basic literacy as a potential subject of study. So, in general, teachers were not learning about teaching basic literacy as part of their initial teacher education (that is, leading to their first teacher qualification). Many teachers came to ESOL from the private sector (and still do) where, though they may have had some learners with low levels of literacy in English (because they wrote a different script), were unlikely to have met learners who had received very little education in any language.

As a teacher education unit we found that we were continually being asked by teachers and educational establishments to put on continuing professional development sessions for teachers on teaching basic literacy. We were asked for a half day session that would cover the teaching skills needed. We demurred and tried one day and two day courses, but these were never long enough to cover awareness raising, some theory and a range of practical teaching techniques.

³ Council of Europe: an international organisation in Strasbourg which comprises 47 democratic countries of Europe. It was set up to promote democracy and protect human rights and the rule of law in Europe.

2.1 Development of the Teaching Basic Literacy course

As a result of our experiences, in 2000 we made a successful bid to the London Development Agency to put together a continuing professional development course for teachers who were working with learners with very basic levels of literacy. Our proposal was to develop and pilot the course, evaluate it, and publish it for other teacher trainers to adopt. Part of the funding allowed us to film an existing literacy class for use on the course. The original pilot course ran for 3 days and covered some awareness-raising, some processes (for example assessment and planning) and some theory. We had not put much about practical teaching into the course, assuming, erroneously as it turned out, that teachers would have a basic repertoire of techniques for teaching handwriting or composition and would need support for wider educational management, for example in assessing learners or writing schemes of work. This proved not to be the case. We evaluated the course by asking course participants and trainers to fill in individual questionnaires, and also by giving time to participants to discuss the course in the final session and feed back to the trainers. Evaluations were mainly very positive, but participants asked for a longer course with more detail on specific teaching techniques. We had been aware that many teachers were experienced in this kind of work and felt that they needed a chance to get together and discuss issues, rather than be involved in a more didactic course. Again, evaluations did not support this; participants asked for more input and less sharing. However, participants appreciated the modelling of different techniques and the interactive approach that the course took. We acted on the evaluations and published a course in 2000 which reflected them. The videos are still available (LLU+, 2000), as is the publication (Spiegel and Sunderland, 2000) which contains suggested lesson plans, materials and notes for teacher educators.

As a result of good participant feedback, we started being asked to run the course in other venues, initially in London and then further afield. The five days could be run in one very intensive week or spread over 5 or even 10 weeks. We submitted it for validation (accreditation) through London South Bank University, and it was approved at the equivalent level of the first year of a university degree. European Social Fund (ESF) 'Equal'⁴ funding through the ASSET⁵ project allowed us to run the course further afield and also to run a 'training the teacher trainer' course with graduates from some of the early courses who had continued to work in this area. At the time of writing we have run the course in different further education colleges all over England; centrally in LLU+ each year, and in Scotland, Dublin and Jersey. We would estimate that approximately 900 teachers are now graduates of the course. Feedback has been consistently positive - teachers have told us over and over that this is such an important part of their teaching and yet standard teacher training does not cover it in any real depth. We return to this last point in the section below on *Developments in ESOL teacher education in England*.

3 Content of current Teaching Basic Literacy course

The LLU+ course presents a particular view, one rooted in the notion of literacies as social practices (New Literacy Studies e.g. Barton, 2007; Hamilton, Barton, and Ivanic, 1994; Street, 1985). It emphasises a holistic, meaning- and text-led approach, which integrates text, sentence and word level work within contextualised activity, in contexts of relevance and interest to learners. The course is constantly being adapted, as all courses are, to meet the needs of particular groups and to reflect the changing educational context. However, much of the core content is now settled. At the time of writing the programme looks something like this:

⁴ 'Equal' is a European Social Fund funding stream - see <<http://www.equal.ecotec.co.uk/>> accessed September 2008

⁵ Asylum Seekers Skills Empowerment and Training

Table 1: Content of current Teaching Basic Literacy course

Session	Content
1	What good readers and writers know Learning to read in an additional language Definition of basic literacy in ESOL Individual learning styles/perceptual preferences
2	Breaking down the skills involved in reading and writing Text, sentence and word levels Learning skills in meaningful contexts Teaching approaches - composition
3.	Assessing ESOL basic literacy learners Designing a scheme of work Dyslexia and bilingual learners Teaching approaches - handwriting
4.	Setting learning outcomes for ESOL basic literacy Strategies for teaching mixed levels Staging and managing a lesson Teaching approaches - spelling and phonics
5.	Evaluating learning materials Materials making workshop

The course sets an assignment which involves assessing a learner, then designing, teaching and evaluating a short learning programme for that learner.

4 *Developments in ESOL teacher education in England*

In the eight years since we first developed the course, a number of developments have impacted on teachers' awareness of how to teach learners with basic levels of literacy. These have mainly taken place as a result of the government's *Skills for Life Strategy* (Department for Education and Employment, 2001). We describe some key developments below.

4.1 *2001 Adult ESOL Core Curriculum (Department for Education and Science, 2001)*

For the first time, reading and writing at a basic level for ESOL learners was described in a national document. The Adult ESOL Core Curriculum describes beginner reading and writing skills at text, sentence and word level. For example: "recognise that different types of text (e.g. very simple letter, signs and symbols, very simple form or appointment card) will look different from each other" or "hold and control a pen effectively". The curriculum document gives examples of application, e.g. "take down phone number and name spelt aloud by another person" and examples of teaching activities, such as language experience, where the teacher takes down dictation from a learner and the learner reads it back (Spiegel and Sunderland, 2006). The curriculum document spells out the skills that basic literacy learners need and gives ideas of how to teach them. Teachers in general welcomed the support given by the curriculum and feedback on it was very positive when it was reviewed in 2007 (Quality Improvement Agency/QIA unpublished report, 2008). However, a negative impact of the skills-based approach and the division into text, sentence and word, is that many less experienced teachers feel they 'ought' to start at word level and work their way up to text (despite

recommendations to the contrary in the document itself). This means that there is considerable de-contextualised word level work going on in ESOL literacy classrooms. So it seems that teacher education is still needed on how to interpret the curriculum document.

4.2 2002 *Subject Specifications for Teachers of ESOL (Further Education National Training Organisation, FENTO⁶)*

Up till September 2003 teachers followed a variety of routes to qualify to teach ESOL. From 2001, all teachers in further education (whatever their subject) had to follow a course that allowed them to meet the *Standards for Teaching and Supporting Learning* (Further Education Development Agency, 2001). In addition, in 2002, the government laid down the subject knowledge required by ESOL teachers as part of initial teacher education, and published it in the above document. From September 2003, teachers had to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the "wide range of learners' cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds" including that "learners will include people who are not literate in any language" and "are literate but in a different script". In addition, they were required to have an understanding of approaches to help learners who "are not literate in the first or another language, and the problems associated with acquiring first-time literacy in a language in which they may not be fluent." (pp 24 and 27). In order to be considered qualified to teach ESOL all new teachers had to have a qualification that lead to these standards. FENTO was responsible for checking and validating all courses, at universities and run by national awarding bodies such as Trinity or Cambridge. This meant that all teacher education courses, including the well-regarded Cambridge courses, now had teaching basic literacy on the syllabus and reflected in the assignments.

4.3 2005 *Skills for Life Quality Initiative (SfLQI) teacher education modules (Learning and Skills Council)*

As part of a national quality improvement project, funded by the government agency Learning and Skills Council, LLU+ developed a modular⁷ programme to enable teachers to gain a qualification in the subject specifications. We divided up the qualification into 11 different modules and included a module on teaching basic literacy. Like its longer sister course, this module was accredited by London South Bank University at the equivalent level of the first year of a degree and included a two day course. The two day course, designed to meet the specifications described above, included some of the elements of the 5 day course, including some of the practical activity and the information on dyslexia, but several of the educational management items, such as planning a scheme of work, had to be dropped. In addition, theories or models of literacy learning, including literacy as skills or as social practice, were also examined.

This teacher education module, with session plans and materials, was published on the SfLQI website (SfLQI, 2005) and the materials and activities were taken up by teacher educators all over the country and possibly beyond. LLU+ ran the module at London South Bank University as part of their Certificate for ESOL Subject Specialists (the subject qualification for ESOL teachers). We also ran it as a free-standing module for organisations that wanted a shorter model than the five day course, and for the Skills for Life Improvement Programme, a further government quality development programme, in 2006/7. Altogether, we ran approximately 20 courses all over England and in Wales and approximately 300 teachers attended.

⁶ FENTO was the government agency charged with determining standards for teachers of post-compulsory education before LLUK was formed.

⁷ We use the term 'modular' to refer to a course made up of several discrete elements and a 'module' as of these discrete elements. So, the *Basic Literacy module* can be run as a course by itself, with part qualification, or as part of a whole, leading to a full qualification.

However, further changes in the education of teachers were made in the summer of 2007 and became mandatory from 1st September 2007 (see below). This means that the module can no longer count towards an initial teacher qualification, though it can be (and is) still run as continuing professional development.

4.4 2007 *Application of the professional standards for teachers of English (Literacy and ESOL)* (Lifelong Learning UK, LLUK)

In 2006, the government made changes to the qualification structure for teachers in post-compulsory education. As part of these changes, Lifelong Learning UK (the successor to FENTO) produced the *Application of the professional standards for teachings of English* document, which replaces two 'Subject Specifications' documents – the documents for ESOL and Literacy. This *Application* document now sets the standards for all teachers of ESOL and courses have to demonstrate that they will enable student teachers to reach these standards. The document details the knowledge, understanding and professional practice to be demonstrated by teachers of English (Literacy and ESOL). It is a less transparent document than the 2002 *Subject Specifications* and not as easy to navigate. It does refer obliquely to basic literacy, with statements such as "Literacy and ESOL teachers know and understandthe second chance nature of adult literacy...." or "...the sub-skills of reading". However, of the many different items in this document (54 subject elements in 6 different domains, each with an average of four bullet points underneath them), only one of these actually relates directly to teaching basic literacy. Under the heading "Know a range of learning and teaching approaches associated with listening, reading, speaking and writing processes" (C21 En) it gives further guidance which includes "How to support the development of beginner readers and writers." (p. 28). It appears that it would be very easy for a course developer who does not have much knowledge of this group of learners to entirely miss their particular needs from a teacher training course.

4.5 *Publication of Teaching Basic Literacy to ESOL Learners* (Spiegel and Sunderland. 2006)

While we were developing and teaching the basic literacy course and the module, we became aware that there was very little published material that would act as back up for the course. We wanted something that would cover theory, case studies of typical learners, something related to the current concerns in the UK around assessment and planning and practical teaching techniques for this very distinctive group of learners. Finding nothing suitable, we decided to write the book ourselves and it was published in June 2006. As far as we know, it is still the only book that covers this subject in any depth and it is currently selling well in the UK and USA.

5 *On-going debates*

During the developments of the last eight years we have found debates on certain topics keep recurring. We will examine key issues below.

First of all, from the beginning we had difficulty with a title that did justice to the life experience and wisdom of our learners and did not appear to sell them short.

"Should we use the terms 'basic literacy', 'beginner literacy', 'pre-literacy' or something else? The more we talked, the more the terminology appeared heaped with connotations and implications. 'Basic literacy' carries the associations that have accompanied basic skills and basic education over nearly three decades - government slogans preaching the 'back to basics' message.....'Beginner literacy' might lead to confusion around the general language level of the learners, giving the impression it is....aimed at learners who are at a beginner stage of learning the language. 'Pre-literate' implies that none of the learners in our classes are literate in any language and does not convey the fact that they come forward to learn

English at different stages of learning to read and write...We struggled for some time with these issues and could come to no conclusions beyond sharing these concerns with you, our readers. We decided to continue to use the phrase 'basic literacy', though we do not embrace it." (Spiegel and Sunderland, 2006, pp 14 and 15.)

This debate continues to exercise many practitioners in the UK, including the teacher trainers of our 'basic literacy' course.

Another early debate was what kind of balance to strike between theory and practice. The initial course had some theory, particularly around learning to read, but in general was at a fairly practical level. The development of the subject specifications for ESOL teachers (see above) has made us look at theory again and gradually we are integrating more and more. Some teachers really like this; others only want it if it is truly integrated and not too obvious. In particular, we waver on how much to say about the social practices view of literacy and how it applies to teaching basic literacy in ESOL. To some teachers it seems so obvious as to almost not need saying, while others fail to see the point and how it applies to their learners. We do now overtly include this theoretical perspective in both the course and the module, and refer those who are interested to further reading.

The dyslexia session has always been very popular, but we continue to debate the worth of including it. We are concerned that teachers seem to want an instant solution: use this method and the dyslexic problems will go away, or refer a learner on for an assessment and someone else will teach him/her - neither of which is likely to happen. We have to stress that good practice for dyslexic learners is good practice for all, and that, at this level it is very difficult to conduct a dyslexia assessment, which rather begs the question, why bother with screening or awareness at all? However, we feel it is important that teachers should be aware of one possible reason for why a learner may be having particular difficulties with, say, sound/symbol relationship or with visual memory for spellings. We also think that it is important for learners to be aware that their difficulties may be due to dyslexia and that they may be able to access a diagnostic assessment in the future, if not immediately. So, at the moment, we have decided to keep in the slot on dyslexia awareness and support.

Over the last eight years we estimate we have worked with at least 900 teachers who are motivated to improve their teaching of basic literacy to ESOL learners. In the next section of this chapter we go on to describe the very initial stages of our research into their approaches.

6 Research

6.1 Purpose of the research

As a result of the many discussions we have had with teachers attending the *Teaching basic literacy to ESOL learners*' courses, we have developed an interest in how ESOL teachers' views of suitable pedagogy for teaching basic literacy are shaped, and this is an area we are starting to research.

There are, of course, a range of views about suitable pedagogy and the LLU+ course presents a particular view; as noted above, this is one rooted in the notion of literacies as social practices. The course emphasizes a holistic, meaning- and text-led approach which integrates text, sentence and word level work within contextualised activity, in contexts of relevance and interest to learners. Language experience is an example of a method that we examine on the course which embodies this approach: the text is composed *with* the learner, rather than *for* the learner, with the teacher acting as scribe. The text is then used for a wide range of text, sentence and word level activities, e.g. text reconstruction, according to the needs of the learner. Not all teachers share the view promoted by the course. Despite promoting a particular view, the course provides a forum for discussion, critique and reflection on this and other approaches that the

course participants know about, and believe in and use, for example, a more decontextualised word level-led approach.

We are interested in what has shaped teachers' views in the widest sense of life experiences, and we are researching this through semi-structured interviews with some of the teachers who have attended the course. We also plan to carry out some observations of classes as a spring board for discussion. We had considered interviewing teachers before and after the course, but decided against it as we felt it might put undue emphasis on the place of the course in forming teachers' views. We are not concentrating solely on the effect of the course on people's views (if any), but we will be interested to see what type of contribution it might have made.

6.2 Early findings

Our research is an attempt to probe how teachers describe and talk about the evolution of their approaches. We are using a qualitative approach and we are interested primarily in what teachers say about themselves rather than what we as teacher educators might think about their methods. We are seeking to find a way to explore the connections between different teachers' stories, and consider how we might use the results of this research in our teacher education. The data that we cite below come from the semi-structured interviews with teachers.

While it is early days in the research, there are some interesting issues that are starting to emerge. In particular, it is interesting to see how people's views about pedagogy interrelate with their identities as people and as teachers. A key question is emerging: why do teachers pull some approaches into their repertoire, adapt some and resist others?

We might summarise one teacher's story as a description of how she 'pulled in one approach, and adapted it and then later resisted it': she told us that she adapted the Montessori approach because she was not very sure at first how to work with a basic literacy learner. She had learnt about it from her mother, a Montessori teacher, and she had previously used it to teach her children to read. She concluded, however, that it was not suitable for adults, and she emphasized that she became concerned that that she was coming across to the learners as condescending. As she did not want to come across like that, she looked for other approaches from the ESOL teacher training course she was taking at the time. So, we might interpret her story as an example of a teacher pulling in an approach that she is familiar with from her own family experience, and adapting it, but then starting to resist it when she reflects and realises that it contradicts with something that is important to her, i.e. how she comes across to the learners. She then looks to another source for ideas, specifically, the teacher education course she is following.

There are a few interrelating patterns that are emerging from this and other teachers' stories:

- a. adapting approaches used with their own children, as exemplified above;
- b. reflecting, evaluating, problem solving, experimenting and looking for ideas *e.g. this same teacher (see example above), said she reflected on her use of the Montessori method, and concluded that it was appropriate for children but not for adults, and decided to look to another source for ideas – her current course; another teacher said that when she realised that both she and the learner were getting frustrated by the lack of progress, she started trying out new things to see what worked;*
- c. doing what feels right *e.g. one teacher said "I think I did that naturally but not properly" (referring to language experience);*

- d. taking account of what they consider to be important e.g. *one teacher reported that she was very motivated to use the language experience approach that she had learnt about on the LLU+ course because she liked the emphasis it puts on meaning, which, she said, is very important to her;*
- e. drawing on own experience of learning and what they felt worked for them e.g. *one teacher said that she used drama, which she had studied; another teacher identified a teacher from her own return to learning studies as a role model;*
- f. reflecting on how they feel they come across to the learners, with reference to what kind of teacher they want to be e.g. *one teacher said that when she reflected on her work with a particular class, she decided that she was talking down to the learners, and this conflicted with her view of how she wanted to come across, and resulted in her seeking to change this.*

These patterns may be significant in relation to how teachers' views of suitable pedagogy are shaped; our follow up research will allow us to probe further. We will be interviewing and observing a small sample of teachers, some new to teaching basic literacy, but also a sample of the experienced teachers who have attended our 'training the trainers' course. We hope to be able to share the findings with LESLLA members in the future.

7 Summary

This chapter has shown the extent to which developments in teacher education for ESOL basic literacy at a policy level have been intertwined with and have responded to the demand for ESOL basic literacy training from teachers and educational establishments. The paper describes the work of LLU+ in developing training and resources to meet this demand, demonstrating the iterative nature of course development, and outlines some of the discussions involved. This chapter also documents some research which has emerged from our extensive discussions with ESOL basic literacy teachers into how teachers' views of suitable pedagogy for teaching ESOL basic literacy are shaped. We feel that it is important to investigate and build on these views, particularly since we reject a transmission view of teacher education.

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