

Changes in the experiences of children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) in the English Education System

Bob Zglinski

During the second part of the last century there was a dramatic change in the intake of schools in the UK. Communities migrating to the UK in recent decades have brought many more languages to the country. There are hundreds of languages being spoken in the home environments of school children, the majority of these families are in the diverse communities of Britain's suburbs.

There have always been children arriving from other countries and after the Second World War schools in some areas had an influx of Polish speakers. This original community had been mostly integrated into the British community when in 2004 the opening up of the European community when economic migrants arrived in the UK. My parents were Polish; my father came over at the beginning of the war having escaped the invasion of his homeland. My mother was offered a work contract in 1947 at a wool mill in Bradford. They met there and set up home.

The post war Polish communities started off in a very insular manner and the families tended to keep contact within their own community. The focus of these communities was either the church or the Polish ex-services association, sometimes both. The communities opened schools so that the children had the opportunity for mother tongue lessons. In most homes Polish was spoken exclusively, especially if there was an older relative in the household.

Many Polish parents however, knowing that they were here to stay, would use English in the home. My own parents though, being older used only Polish. My father was quite scathing of the English speaking households, maintaining that the parents would teach their children incorrect English usage and at the same time deprive them of proficiency in their native tongue. He was vindicated in his opinion since children in the early 1950's were more inclined to play outside in the street and thus gain significant language opportunities from recreation within their local peer group.

When I started school in September 1954 at the age of five I had a reasonable command of basic English. My father took me on the first day, much to my clearly remembered disgust! The school was just over a mile from the house and subsequently I made my own way there and back each day, again something that most children of my generation did without a

second thought. My mother never visited any of the schools that I attended and was of the opinion that I was able to translate any information that the school wanted to communicate, I can recall that there were a number of Polish children as well as some Ukrainian and Italian. This was largely due to the school being a Catholic one, since many European immigrants of the time were Catholic these schools became first choice for the local families.

Since there were a number of languages being spoken by the children it was natural for them to use the common factor of English and so the school made no concessions to the individual needs of the pupils. A one size fits all policy was the norm of the time and it was regarded that it was our responsibility to ensure that we used English. We coped well with this, up to the point that many of our parents moaned at us when we showed a preference for communicating among ourselves in English.

By the time we reached Junior school or the new Key Stage 2, most of us were as fluent in English as our indigenous neighbours. The only give away as to our backgrounds was from our names, unlike later immigrant waves we blended in. Parents from the Polish community placed a huge emphasis on the acquisition of a good education and many of us did well within the eleven plus system going on to grammar schools. There we were further encouraged by our parents to go on to tertiary education. The secondary schools rarely made allowances for the indigenous language of the pupils and parents consultation evenings meant that we had to go along to translate for our parents, for myself a golden opportunity for constructive misdirection. The education system of the 1960 and 1970s largely ignored the home language of children and did not encourage them to converse in it. Fathers would often have better English than mothers as they needed to succeed in the workplace. Some women, maintaining the traditional role of staying at home, would gain limited English from running the household, preferring to socialise with other women from their immigrant community. Others would go to work alongside their British counterparts gaining language skills which would support their children. Children were expected to cope on their own in the classroom and their parents were not expected to be able to access support from the school, as the child gained improved language skills they would be expected to act as a go between with information often being translated by the child.

Teachers at the time were dealing with the increased class sizes of the post-war baby boom and were not given advice on dealing with the issues arising from working with EAL children and unfortunately often thought that these children needed no extra support and would just have to learn English in their own time. Nevertheless EAL children who were of Primary age when they entered the education system were often well supported by their

English speaking peers alongside whom they lived, those who entered the education system at Secondary age however often struggled to “catch up” with their peers.

Wolverhampton in the West Midlands is the place where I spent the majority of my teaching career. There are large areas of deprivation in the town with a range of socio-economic factors contributing to the challenges for educational, health and social agencies working in the area. I started teaching in Wolverhampton in the early 1970s working in an area serving a community of mostly Asian families who were drawn to the area to work in local industries. The number of children who needed support to access the English curriculum was a challenge for teachers and schools started to realise that a more specific approach to the issue was needed. However parents had very little involvement with their children’s education. The Local Authority realising the scale of the problem set up a “Language Centre” where arrivals were given intensive English language acquisition opportunities. There were also smaller satellite “mini-centres” set up in areas where immigrant numbers were rising. Local Authorities in certain areas started to set up specific language acquisition teams recruiting teachers to work with children who need support.

By the 1980s schools in certain areas had become more used to the issues associated with educating children whose first language was not English and some Local Authorities had begun to realise the positive impact of some support for families who came from other countries however support was not consistent and some was of poor quality. Also it was realised that children born to families who were well established in this country were coming into school with very little English as the children were often cared for by the older generation who were less likely to speak English. Schools found it difficult to accept that sometimes a conscious decision was taken by families to maintain the community language as the first language of the child in order to make certain that contacts were kept with older generations, and so that children were able to access their cultural heritage. For many of these children the experience of starting school could be quite traumatic and for those whose parents could not access support there were few staff in schools who would work as advocates for these children. The largely grammar school educated teaching workforce usually did not reflect the communities in which they worked.

Since the review of schooling in the late 1980s, and the subsequent introduction of a statutory curriculum in 1988 schools, have become increasingly accountable for the achievement of all children including those who are learning English as an additional language. In 1997 the introduction of the National Primary Strategies recognised formally for the first time the

need to support EAL children in the classroom. Previously only those Local Authorities with large ethnically diverse communities had been able to justify funding support which as we have already identified could be of varying quality.

The introduction of compulsory school inspections with the creation of Ofsted in 1992 identified support for ethnic minorities as one of the weaknesses of the mainstream education system. EAL children were often inappropriately grouped to work with those with special educational needs on the grounds that additional support would be focused on these groups, but this practice did not provide appropriate support for these children who needed good models of spoken English. During the first few years of this century practice has changed considerably and children are receiving more appropriate models of teaching and learning.

Throughout my career in education I have held a variety of roles and there has been a considerable change in the understanding of the importance of communication between families and school. I have spent most of the last decade working in a West Midlands secondary school in a support role after taking early retirement from teaching. During this time there have been a considerable number of children, entering secondary education from a range of other countries, with very limited English. When speaking to the parents from some of the communities including Polish, Slovak, Russian and Lithuanian the common theme of the challenges of communicating with school are that often nobody is available to deal with any problems and concerns the parents may have. Many schools have tried to recruit teachers or support staff to help them deal with this problem, but there is a shortage of suitably qualified personnel available.

Current recommended practice and advice is given in the New Arrivals Excellence Pack published in September 2007. <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/175027>

Obviously the programme has been written specifically for new arrivals, however some elements of the advice is also useful for other children who have English as an additional language.

The guidance given in the pack is very sound and many schools work hard to implement the suggestions. The recommendations given emphasise the importance of sharing information and developing good relationships with pupils and families. However the suggestion in the document that translation and interpretation for parents or carers may be provided by the LA, or another person from the community, is rather tenuous and does not provide a sufficiently robust entitlement for families. The important process

of translation is too often left to children with limited vocabulary in English or too well meaning adults who may be other parents. The confidentiality of family's information can be compromised and in some situations, children and their families are unable to communicate their needs. Economic migrants may have had time to prepare their children for the transition but the children of refugees and asylum seekers can arrive in unfamiliar setting with no knowledge of the language and perhaps having had experienced traumatic events. The lack of effective means to communicate with schools can add to their harrowing experiences.

In conclusion the current provision in schools is often very patchy and families' experiences vary widely. However well meaning people and the system try to be there is still a lack of understanding of the issues and the situation, for some children, is no better than when I was at school half a century ago! There needs to be a change of practice that would include the following recommendations.

- Better training for school staff including all support staff and administrators including receptionists who are often the very people who manage the families very first communications
- Additional funding for flexible central support for schools which can rapidly respond to the changing needs of schools
- A legal entitlement to professional translation for key communications which would include consultation evenings, appeals for admission and disciplinary matters
- Better use of technology including video conferencing which would maximise available resources

Biography

Bob Zglinski was born in Bradford, Yorkshire in 1949 of Polish parents and attended schools in Bradford, Nottingham and Wolverhampton before qualifying as a teacher in 1972. During his career he worked for many years in primary schools in Wolverhampton, Nottingham and Sandwell. Now retired and carrying out a support role in a secondary school in the West Midlands as well as teaching GCSE Polish and supporting Polish pupils in their integration into the English education system.

