

Does equal access mean treat the same? From theory to practice in the classroom of the EAL (English as an Additional Language) learner in Ireland- towards a transformative agenda

Abstract

While a substantial body of research exists on First and Second Language Acquisition (SLA), research on the language acquisition process that a language minority student goes through when they are acquiring a second language in an environment where both the host language and the language of instruction is the second language has been largely unexplored. Pedagogical practices that espouse language learning theories facilitate both the language development and integration of the language minority child into the classroom. This paper will look at various linguistic variables within the field of SLA which are of particular relevance to the language acquisition process of such students. By embedding these linguistic factors into pedagogical practices, educators can engage with a transformative framework which will not only aid their linguistic and cognitive development, but will also empower the students by developing their critical language skills and facilitate their ability to access the mainstream curriculum.

Keywords: second language acquisition; transformative framework; Inquiry-based pedagogy; EAL learner

Introduction

Lau vs. Nicholls (1974) was an important civil rights case brought by Lau and 1,789 Chinese students with limited English proficiency living in San Francisco. Lau and his peers claimed they were being denied access to equal educational opportunities, in terms of access to English language acquisition and the provision of adequate instructional procedures to enable them access the curriculum in a meaningful way. The US Supreme Court ruled in favour of these students, basing their ruling on the fact that all students bring different advantages or disadvantages to their educational career, based on their social, economic and cultural backgrounds, which are created separately from the school system. The ruling stated that equality of treatment did not mean to merely provide students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers and

curriculum. Hakuta (2011, 163) points out that providing students who are not proficient in the host language with the same treatment as students who are proficient in the host language does not constitute equal treatment, stating that schools have an affirmative obligation to address both the linguistic and curricular requirements of the student.

This landmark ruling by the US Supreme Court nearly forty years ago has never been more relevant in the context of the demographic changes that have and are still taking place in Ireland. Since the mid-1990s, Ireland has seen an unprecedented rise in immigration, and results of the 2011 census reveal that there are now 766,770 people living in Ireland who were born outside the country, representing 17 per cent of the total population. This is a 25% increase since the previous census in 2006. According to the 2011 census, the fastest growing groups were Romanians (up 110%), Indians (up 91%), Polish (up 83%), Lithuanians (up 40%) and Latvians (up 43%). This influx of people has contributed significantly to the linguistic diversity of Ireland. Polish is the first language of 119,526 people living in Ireland, making it the most widely spoken language in Ireland after English, putting it ahead of Irish, Ireland's official language. According to the 2011 census, 15,114 people resident in Ireland do not speak English at all, while 74,447 do not speak it well. There are 30,090 children aged between 0-4 years old born in Ireland that speak a language other than English or Irish at home. The corresponding figure for 5 to 12 year olds is 26,569, while 21,187 children aged between 13 and 18 speak a language other than English or Irish at home.

One consequence of the change in the linguistic landscape of Ireland is the increasing number of children entering both primary and post-primary levels of

education who have limited or no proficiency in English. There are speakers of at least 60 different languages registered in Irish Schools (DES 2005, 28). There are 48,000 migrant students at post-primary level, representing approximately 14% of the post-primary cohort (National Languages Strategy 2011). Ten per cent of the primary cohort, are migrant students representing 160 nationalities (OECD, 2009). This has serious implications for educational policy and practice in Ireland and presents a challenge as to how best to respond to the needs of this increasing linguistic diversity. A number of terms are used to delineate children attending school whose first language is neither English nor Irish. The term EAL (English as an Additional Language) is adopted here as it is the term used in Irish educational policy documents. Educational responses to this linguistic diversification have, ~~at best~~, focused on the provision of English language support. EAL students learn content subjects through the medium of English by being immersed in mainstream education with English support provided in the form of being withdrawn from mainstream class for a limited time ranging from a daily to a weekly basis.

The context of Educational Policy in Ireland

By ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in September 1992, the Irish State committed to promote, protect and fulfil over 40 substantive rights of the child, including access to education. Furthermore, in the last 15 years, the Irish government has introduced a number of legislative changes and policy documents designed to promote inclusion and facilitate diversity in schools. The Education Act (Government of Ireland 1998) “respects the diversity of values, beliefs, languages in Irish society” and states that the Irish education system will “promote the language and cultural needs of the students”, “promote best practice in

teaching methods with regard to the diverse needs of students” and “promote equality of access to and participation in schools”. The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (Government of Ireland 1999) aims “to promote diversity in education and training”, and the Equality Act (Government of Ireland 2004) prohibits discrimination in the access to education on any of nine specified grounds, including race.

Other initiatives taken by the government and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) to promote diversity and inclusion in the school system include the strategy document Towards 2016: Ten-Year Framework for Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2015 (Government of Ireland, 2006) and the Statement of Strategy for 2008-2010 (DES, 2008). The primary goal of the latter is to “support and improve the quality, relevance and inclusiveness of education for every learner” and one of its objectives is the provision of “targeted resources and supports for newcomer children” in terms of allocation of language support teachers and curricular supports. Transforming Ireland – A better quality of Life for all – the National Development Plan 2007-2013 (Government of Ireland, 2007) pledged €637 million for language support teachers to enable EAL learners “acquire a sufficient knowledge of the English language to enable them to benefit from the Irish education system at the same level as their peers”.

The government conducted two reviews of the English language provision; The Value for Money (VFM) Review of English as an Additional Language (DES 2011) examined and measured the effectiveness of expenditure on EAL provision, and the DES Inspectorate EAL Evaluation examined the quality of EAL teaching and learning (DES, 2012). The DES distributed Toolkits for Diversity to all primary schools in

Ireland, providing schools with assistance in creating an intercultural school environment. To supplement the school curriculum which predates the high migration influx, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) issued Intercultural Education in the Primary School (NCCA, 2006) and Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School (NCCA, 2006). These publications are intended to guide the teachers in making the school curriculum as accessible as possible, in a manner that reflects cultural diversity and creates an inclusive culture.

Furthermore, a number of key international and national reports review policy and practice in the Irish context. Two of the biggest reports were conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). Ireland was one of only six countries to take part in an OECD thematic review of migrant education (OECD, 2009). The Economic and Social Research Institute's report on adapting to diversity looks at the situation in 1,200 primary and post-primary schools in Ireland (ESRI, 2009).

The DES and the Office of the Minister for Integration (MOI) state in their Intercultural Education Strategy 2010-2015 that "research highlighted the fact that education sectors are already responding very positively to the increased diversity of learners" (DES and OMI, 2010). However, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance's (ECRI) Report on Ireland states that according to the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), Ireland is not very well prepared to help new immigrants enter the school system (ECRI, 2013). The overall tone of the report is critical of the government's response to the diversity in Irish schools, and they:

Strongly recommend that the authorities establish a *consistent* system of data collection to assess...pupils' performance...and establish *necessary* policies, ...encourages the Irish authorities to...*intensify* their efforts to ensure that no children suffer disadvantage in the school system due to inequalities in their linguistic skills in English...and recommends that the Irish authorities *step-up* the provision of training programmes to teachers and *regrets* another

programme “English as an Additional Language” has been *cut down* since 2008.

(ECRI, 2013, 23, my italics)

The government’s response to diversity has positioned the educational system’s role as primarily that of “English Input” (Kitching, 2010, 220), with state policy defining support to schools primarily in terms of the appointment, on a temporary and relatively restricted basis, of EAL teachers (Devine, 2005, 57). Such an approach ignores a number of other complex issues which facilitate the EAL learner’s language acquisition process.

In comprehensive studies conducted by the ESRI and the OECD, the lack of proficiency in the language of instruction was identified as the main barrier faced by students accessing the education system (ESRI, 2009; OECD, 2009). These studies also highlighted that Continued Professional Development (CPD) was a key need prioritised by teachers. According to the Inspectorate EAL Evaluation (2010), although they may lack specific expertise, most schools recognised their responsibilities with regard to teaching EAL students. The VFM Review (2010) showed that the current concentration of expenditure is not enhancing the capacity of the whole school to address EAL needs and emphasised that students need to maintain a connection with their heritage language. The need to maintain the heritage language has previously been highlighted by the NCCA (Little, 2003) and the OECD report (OECD, 2009). The OECD report emphasises the need to pay more attention to improving the literacy skills of students with diverse language backgrounds, pointing out that pupils that spoke a language other than English or Irish at home held an average score that was significantly below the overall average score of the TARA (Tasks for the Assessment of Reading Achievement) reading test (OECD, 2009). The 2009 ESRI report also stated that the requirement to take a broad range of subjects

requiring competency in English was difficult for students, as dealing with the specific academic terminology made the transition more difficult.

Nowlan (2008), citing Hansson, Morgan and Dunn (2002) and OECD (2004), says that an examination of international practice suggests that the provision of language support in Ireland compares unfavourably with provision in other countries. Research and reports also highlight weaknesses in meeting the needs of the EAL learner (Ward, 2004; Devine, 2005; Nowlan, 2008, Lyons, 2010). Nowlan (2008, 261) reports confusion between language support and special education needs (SEN), with assessment tools designed for use with primary-school-aged children with learning difficulties used to assess EAL learners' language levels, and cases where EAL learners were placed in remedial classes rather than receiving specific English support. Finally, in a three-year study of the micro-climate of EAL support in 70 Irish primary schools between the years 2007-2010, Lyons (2010) argues that EAL students have equality of presence in the classroom, but do not have equality of participation or achievement.

The evolving demographics have huge implications for Irish teachers, who are challenged to address the difficulties EAL children face. How well students succeed academically will greatly depend on the pedagogical practices they encounter in both the mainstream and language support classroom. It is these pedagogical practices, coupled with a teacher's understanding of the processes that language learners go through acquiring the second language (L2) that should be considered the gateway for the student to integrate into mainstream classes and achieve academic success. A UK study which surveyed 139 newly qualified teachers' perspectives on how well prepared they were in relation to providing language support to EAL students, the

need for greater linguistic and cultural awareness featured as the third most commonly identified professional development need (Cajkle and Hall 2009). In the survey, teachers revealed a limited understanding of language learning and expressed a need for further training in the area of EAL pedagogy and how a language is learned. This situation is mirrored in Ireland too, with an on-going failure to place pre-service language support in teacher-education colleges. Teachers identified inadequate provision of language support and lack of appropriate and funded language support training as the two greatest deficits of the present system (Lyons, 2010, 297). In this context, studies that contribute towards a greater knowledge of how best to manage the integration of language minority students into mainstream classrooms are crucial. This paper will focus on how EAL learners can be integrated into the Irish school system in a way that will facilitate their development and acquisition of the L2, using a pedagogical approach which is informed by the theories which explain the processes involved in language acquisition. The adoption of such an approach will also make the curriculum more accessible to the EAL learner.

Towards a more socially informed SLA theory

A substantial body of research has been generated in the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature on the processes the L2 learner goes through when acquiring a second language and the different environmental factors that impact on these processes. However, very little research has been carried out on the SLA process of EAL learners who are acquiring the L2 in an environment where the language of instruction and the host language is the L2. The process of acquiring a language through the school curriculum is very different from learning a foreign language as a subject in school, as outlined by Collier (1995). Norton (2000) argues

that the rate of language acquisition is a product of social relationships, determined by the social identities which immigrants are allowed to develop by the host society, suggesting that attention needs to be paid to the social conditions faced by immigrants. Swain, Kinnear and Steinman (2011, 88) call for a more holistic approach to language learning, stating that identity is not determined by any one person, but is socially constructed.

The motivation in looking at the social environment in which EAL students learn a second language lies behind the paradigm shift that occurred in language learning during the past twenty years. Theorists in the field of SLA began to move away from viewing the sentence structure as the unit of analysis with the language learner viewed as “a one dimensional acquisition device” (Pennycook 2001, 143). Prior to this paradigm shift, SLA theory ignored the complex social, political and historical reality of the language learner. SLA theorists began to draw on epistemologies from disciplines other than linguistics and psycholinguistics to inform SLA theory (Cummins, 1999). This sociocultural approach shifted the focus of attention away from the cognitive processes of the L2 learner and how they internalise rules, and began to move towards an interdisciplinary and socially informed study of the sociocultural context in which the language learner is situated. It explored issues such as how speaking a second language can influence the social identity of the language learner and how the social context will either expediate or hinder the learning process by denying or facilitating access to the linguistic resources of the community in which the learner finds themselves. Sociocultural theories of learning have been increasingly recognised in SLA research as a theoretical framework for understanding SLA processes and SLA pedagogies (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006). The following section

will address four key socio-cultural theories of language learning which are of particular relevance to the Irish context and should underpin pedagogical practices and policy planning in Ireland.

Theories of Second Language Acquisition

Examination of research studies, major reports and policy documents identifies a number of major areas of concern with regard to current practices and the provision of EAL in an Irish classroom. Issues of concern include the government's failure to acknowledge the distinction between basic conversational proficiency and academic proficiency by capping language support at two years. Other concerns include the provision of heritage language maintenance and the ability of the EAL learner to interact with peers and teachers arising out of motivational or self-esteem issues. This section will discuss these issues in the context of four different, somewhat interrelated SLA theories of particular relevance to EAL learners and demonstrate that the current approach to integrate EAL students into the Irish classroom is not in line with best international practice and is not serving the needs of the EAL student. These four theories are the affective filter hypothesis, the input and interaction hypothesis, the interdependence hypothesis and the BICS/CALP theory of language learning.

The affective filter hypothesis and the input and interaction hypothesis

In her study of EAL learners in Ireland, Ward (2004) identified a number of obstacles preventing EAL learners from attending school. These include difficulties within the school, motivational issues and problems relating to language and literacy ability.

Irish teachers and EAL students identify the inability to interact socially with peers and teachers as a barrier to a successful settling-in process (Smyth et al., 2009). Other Irish studies show that there is a higher incidence of bullying among EAL students (Molcho et al. 2008; Devine 2005), with more immigrant students reporting that they were bullied at least once in the last couple of months (30%) compared to their matched group (23%) (Molcho et al. 2008). These barriers will hinder the language acquisition process, by acting as affective filters.

An affective filter is a negative emotional feeling or attitude towards the language learning environment, such as self-doubt, anxiety or boredom, all acting as barriers to the language learning process, resulting in the learner filtering-out input which is comprehensible and making it unavailable for acquisition, and was put forward by Krashen (1985b). The theory states that affective filters can be reduced by strategies such as boosting the self-esteem and motivation of the language learner, creating a classroom environment with a low-level of anxiety and ensuring class content is of interest to the student. With this in mind, it is important that teachers encourage students, while at the same time, allow them to be silent in the early acquisition stage, until such a time that they feel ready to interact. The teacher needs to create a positive learning environment where the student is not afraid to make a mistake. In addition, the class environment needs to be welcoming and caring and the content needs to affirm and be congruent with the reality of the student's world and their future aspirations. According to the ESRI report, EAL students in Ireland were more likely to have a higher level of language proficiency, if the school environment is positive and supportive and when the school adopted a whole-school approach in helping the EAL student adapt to the school (Smyth et al., 2009).

One type of affective filter which is of particular relevance to the EAL learner is the inability to interact with peers. The input and interaction theory of language learning, which looks at the importance of interaction between L2 learners and other speakers of the L2, can play an important role in facilitating the students' ability to interact socially with both peers and teachers. It is often compared to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). Social interaction, coupled with participation in extra-curricular activities, is highlighted by teachers and students as a potential source of concern in the ESRI study on 1,200 Irish schools. The study revealed a strong association between problems with social interaction and language difficulties (Smyth et al. 2009, 85), with low English proficiency impacting on their ability to socialise and take part in extra-curricular activities. Inability to interact with peers and teachers may give rise to feelings of isolation and loneliness, which are, in themselves, affective filters which hinder the acquisition process. In a seminal paper by Hatch (1978), the importance of interaction and language learning is discussed, and she explores how the acquisition of particular language structures evolves out of the communicative use of the L2. Hatch's view that language learning evolves out of learning to conduct a conversation is the opposite of what was held to be the premise up until now. Since Hatch's paper, many SLA researchers have taken her lead and looked at interaction and the role it plays in language development (Aston 1986; Braidi 2002; Doughty and Veralá 1998; Farrar 1992; Foster and Ohta 2005; Gass 1988; Gass and Varonis 1985; Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991; Long 1983; Long and Robinson 1998; Lyster and Ranta 1997; Oliver 1995; Pica 1994; Pienemann 1989).

This theory of language learning is of particular relevance to the language development of the EAL child, many of whom are subject to power relations in the classroom, which can limit the opportunities the student may have to interact with

peers or teachers, and in the words of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, these students may not have “the power to impose reception” (Bourdieu 1977, 75). Menard-Warwick (2005) points out that individuals who interact across linguistic boundaries frequently occupy different positions of social power and due to their low level of linguistic competence, struggle with trying to simultaneously claim their right to speak while negotiating their identities. Day (2002) shows how the complexity of these power relations in the classroom play a role in how these students negotiate their identity, a concept which is inextricably linked with language development. Norton (1995) argues that inequitable power relations will determine the opportunities of the L2 learner to integrate with target language speakers, both in the formal classroom and the informal environment of the target language community. In addition, teachers need to be aware of the students’ ability to access the social networks of the target language group that exist outside of the formal classroom and facilitate access to these networks.

The Interdependence Hypothesis

The need to maintain the heritage language was highlighted in a report commissioned by the NCCA ten years ago (Little, 2003) and by the OECD thematic report on Ireland (OECD, 2009). However, provision of heritage language support has remained unsatisfactory and only available to a small number of students on an ad-hoc basis. The Irish situation is exacerbated by the absence of an integrated language curriculum, which results in language skills being compartmentalised and provides no encouragement for students to transfer skills across languages (O’Duibhir and Cummins, 2012). Furthermore, according to Lyons (2010, 198), when Irish post-primary teachers were asked about the importance of L1 maintenance, many felt that

the L1 and the L2 were competing against each other regarding available time for language learning and that a strong L1 maintenance would limit support for the L2.

Cummins (1979, 1994) put forward the developmental interdependence hypothesis to explain that a high level of proficiency in the first language (L1) will have a positive effect on the acquisition of the L2, and conversely, a level of proficiency in the L2 will help in the development of the L1, as skills, concepts and ideas learnt in one language can be transferred to the other language.

To the extent that instruction in L_x is effective in promoting proficiency in L_x, transfer of this proficiency to L_y will occur provided there is adequate exposure to L_y (either in school or environment) and adequate motivation to learn L_y. (Cummins 1981, 29)

The transfer of conceptual knowledge, specific linguistic elements, phonological awareness and the transfer of metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies are identified as the four major types of cross-linguistic transfer (O'Duibhir and Cummins, 2012). Such an approach develops the student's Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) and enables the transfer of literacy skills and learning strategies across languages once the L1 has reached a certain level (Cummins 2000). MacSwan and Rolstad (2005) enhance the notion of CUP in terms of knowledge transfer, and, rather than talking about knowledge being transferred between the L1 and the L2, favour the notion that both languages have access to the same knowledge stock. As explained by Chamberlain-Quinlisk and Senyshyn (2012, 17), if a learner already understands the concept of 'regression' or 'prejudice' in their L1, then they only need to acquire the label for these notions in the L2, which is not as challenging a task should they have to acquire both the understanding of the concept and the label for it in the L2. A solid foundation in the L1, achieved through reading and writing, oral proficiency and instruction in the L1, will ease the transition and serve as a bridge to the dominant

host language enabling the student to develop the L2 proficiency to the extent whereby they can receive instruction in both the L1 and the L2 and achieve literacy fluency in L1 and L2, leading to lifelong learning in both languages (Kosonen, Malone and Young 2007). Studies that show the positive effect of the Interdependence Hypothesis include Verhouven (2007), Perfetti (1985, 1994) and Thomas and Healy (2012). Many other studies have been conducted which show a similar positive relationship between L2 development and other non-language domains such as maths, geography and science (Bournet-Trites and Reeder 2001; de Courcy, Warren and Burston 2002; Marsh, Hau and Kong 2000).

Currently in Ireland the maintenance and development of the EAL learner's L1 is either ignored or suppressed as they are immersed in the L2 classroom. However, as has been discussed, there is compelling linguistic, educational and socio-cultural arguments which favour the maintenance of the L1. Native language maintenance should, therefore, in so far as possible, be incorporated into the students' educational process and supported, especially in the early transition stage, in order to avoid marginalisation. Failure to do so can consign the native language of the minority to a subordinate role, which in turn can create a situation where students may not want to speak their native language due to the low status it is assigned in society, creating an identity-threatening situation for this group. The issue of L1 maintenance is particularly challenging for Irish schools as EAL students are a linguistically diverse group, and there is very little clustering of linguistic groups in particular schools, and without critical mass, it is not feasible to employ an L1 instructor. However, provision should be made for the more prevalent languages, such as the East European languages.

The BICS/ CALP theory of language learning

In Ireland, EAL support is determined by the number of EAL learners in the school and is generally only provided for a period of two years. Schools that have less than 25% of the cohort in need of language support will have support limited to two years only. Schools with more than 25% of the cohort in need of language support will receive language support for up to three years.

However, this ignores two integral components of the conceptual framework for SLA proposed by Cummins in an attempt to explain the language acquisition process of language minority children. These are Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and the cognitively more demanding “academic” proficiency referred to as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). This framework distinguishes between “conversational” proficiency, referred to as BICS, which occurs when the meaning of an utterance is familiar to the student, such as a greeting, or can be deduced from the situational context, and CALP, which is described as academic proficiency in the L2 where the student can access academic content through the L2 (Cummins 2001). It is important that teachers be aware of the difference between these two levels, otherwise, they risk withdrawing the student from English support prematurely, and thus potentially creating problems which will hinder the student’s ability to access the academic content of mainstream classes

Teachers of language minority children need to be able to distinguish between language ability and academic achievement and must be aware that while majority language children need only acquire academic content in the classroom, minority language children must, in addition to the academic content, acquire the language of instruction. Children will need special support until such time as their L2 is at the

stage where they can follow the language of instruction, and the closer they are to reaching this stage, the more they can divert their energies to mastering the academic content of the class. Until such time as they reach this stage, the students' interlanguage should be considered as an immature, rather than incorrect, form of the L2. A minimum of five to seven years of instruction in the L2 is required to develop native-speaker levels of CALP (Cummins, 2011). It is essential that teachers are aware of the BICS/CALP distinction when assessing their students, failure to do so risks withdrawing them prematurely from EAL support. While BICS may be sufficient for students to survive in the classroom, it is CALP which will enable them to engage with the curriculum. When assessing students, it is vital that language ability not be equated with academic ability and a clear distinction needs to be made between language support and special education needs (SEN). The conflation of language support with SEN indicates that schools are not aware of the length of time it takes to acquire BICS / CALP and the various stages in the language acquisition process. For further discussion on SEN and language support see Troyna and Siraj-Blatchford (1993) and Tomlinson and Craft (1995).

Towards a transformative-grounded pedagogical approach

So far this paper has discussed the situation of the EAL learner in Ireland and the paradigm shift which occurred in SLA, which saw SLA theory being embedded in a greater cultural, economic, social and political context. In addition, based on a number of studies, reports and policy measures relating to the EAL learner in Ireland, this paper foregrounded four major language acquisition theories that have been put forward to explain how second languages are learned. It is against this backdrop that the final section of the paper will explore pedagogical strategies both in the language

support and mainstream class which seek to transform the lives of EAL students, many of whom traditionally have been excluded from roles of power, authority and prestige. Such pedagogical strategies provide the teacher with a transformative agenda which can play a major role in empowering the student, thus facilitating their ability to interact in the classroom, developing their perception of themselves and allowing them to negotiate their identity, all of which facilitate the language acquisition process, which in turn will strengthen their ability to attain academic achievement. A transformative agenda addresses the cultural, linguistic and social issues which affect the extent to which EAL students can integrate into the host society, both in the formal classroom and outside in the less formal environment outside of the school environs

The need to adopt a more transformative agenda in the Irish classroom stems from personal observations and recommendations from published reports and studies of language support and mainstream classes in schools, which confirm that the approach adopted in some classes is largely that of the transmission banking variety, based on texts that ask questions to which the answers are already known, or classes that ask questions to which the answers have been memorised. This is evident from O'Shea's study on the teaching of mathematics in Irish primary schools:

Susan, who was taught in classrooms employing very traditional methodologies, holds such practices in high esteem and continues to identify with and utilise such approaches in her classroom. These practices include having children learn basic mathematical facts through rote memorisation and paying particular attention to the teaching of operations. (O'Shea, 2012, p.22)

Emily lines up her students and asks them a series of questions very quickly and if these questions are not answered the student is asked to sit down, and so it continues until one member of the class is left standing. (O'Shea, 2012, p.23)

Further evidence of a transmission approach to teaching is found in mainstream classes that develop literacy and reading skills. A study by the DES Inspectorate

found that Irish language reading activities in most classrooms were based on textbooks which were essentially workbooks (DES, 2007, 57). A similar practice is found in language support classes too where a large number of classes are based on worksheet activities taken from the Up and Away course-book. Apart from reinforcing the passive role of the student, it is noted in the literature that such classroom activities do not facilitate language acquisition:

It can be claimed with confidence that, if the only input students receive is in the context of a limited number of weekly lessons based on some course book, they are unlikely to achieve high levels of L2 proficiency.

(Ellis, 2005, 218)

Such an approach treats students as docile listeners and robs them of their authentic voice. It is at odds with Piaget's constructivist theory of learning, which states that language acquisition will not take place merely by learners being taught. Learners learn by doing. Classroom approaches such as those outlined above have further implications for EAL students, as classes that are based on rote-memorisation, and workbooks are most likely to reflect the view of the dominant language and culture, which Cummins (1999) says will suppress both the view of the minority and the student identity, restricting opportunities for student empowerment. Classes, however, that are based on the actual experiences of the learner will enable all learners, no matter how impoverished and marginalised, to participate and interact in the class and develop a new sense of awareness and empowerment. In relation to teaching mathematics in Irish primary schools, O'Shea (2012, 23) asserts that teachers who choose appropriate mathematical problems of relevance and interest to students and their capabilities, and who adopt facilitative roles employing open ended higher level questioning techniques, lay solid foundations for effective constructivist explorations (O'Shea, 2012, 23). This is similar to Verhouven's study which confirms that students

who are actively involved in the language learning process will perform better (Verhouvern, 2007).

Classes that adopt an Inquiry-based approach to learning can help connect the students' actual lived experience out of the classroom with what is being taught in the classroom and facilitate active learning in authentic contexts. Inquiry-based learning is derived from the theoretical work of Dewey (1991/1938, 1997/1910), which maintains that making connections between what happens in the classroom and the real-life experiences of the outside the classroom is essential part of a successful education. It is transformative in its approach, with the emphasis on remaking the world along with ourselves. A pedagogical approach which is based on Inquiry-based learning is particularly appropriate for the Irish primary school context. Casey et al. (2009) illustrates how the Inquiry Cycle can be situated within the philosophy of the Irish Primary Curriculum. This is summarised in Table 1.

| The 5 Inquiry Cycle Categories | Corresponding Principle of Learning in the Irish Primary School Curriculum Introduction (PSCI) (1999) |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Ask | the impulse for learning is the child's sense of wonder at the complexity of the world...First-hand experience that actively engages the child with the immediate environment and those who live in it (PSCI, 1999, 14) |
| Investigate | It is an underlying principle of the curriculum that the child should be an active agent in his or her own learning (PSCI, 1999, 140) |
| Create | Drawing, painting, inventing and constructing bring together different elements of the child's experience from which new conceptual development can grow (PSCI, 1999, 52) |
| Communicate | Effective interpersonal and intrapersonal skills in communication are essential for personal, social and educational fulfilment (PSCI, 1999, 7) |
| Reflect | Having dealt with particular knowledge, ideas and skills at a simple level, the child should have the opportunity to return to them at regular intervals in order to deepen his or her understanding (PSCI, 1999, 14) |

Table 1: Situating the Inquiry Cycle within the philosophy of the Primary School Curriculum

If an inquiry-based methodological framework is supported by a sociocultural-informed theory of SLA, then it facilitates the EAL learner and their ability to engage with the curriculum, interact with their peers, while increasing their language proficiency which will help them integrate more into the mainstream classroom and achieve academic success. An inquiry-based pedagogical approach involves the student in problem-solving and gets them to derive meanings from their real life experiences. That language development is an important by-product of problem-posing is confirmed by Piagetian research. Piaget (1985) explains that “momentary disequilibrium” results from students trying to find a solution to the problem. This is then followed by “satisfaction at reequilibration” as the problem is solved. It is this state of disequilibrium that facilitates the process of language acquisition, and also brings about intellectual development and is a necessary process for the learner to go through before they can make that knowledge their own.

Basing the learning activities on the on the real-life experiences will reduce their level of boredom, which can act as an affective filter. It will also facilitate their participation in class and increase their motivation, an important variable which contributes to language learning. The communicative component of the inquiry-cycle provides the student with an opportunity to collaborate and interact with peers in discussion groups. Facilitating the EAL learner’s interaction will boost their self-esteem and motivation, reducing the number of affective filters which hinder the language acquisition process. By providing students with “the power to impose reception” (Bourdieu, 1977, 75), the EAL student can negotiate their identity, a concept inextricably linked with language acquisition. Inquiry-based approaches can develop the students’ literacy skills, and can foster content learning (Kennedy et al. 2012), facilitating the students’ acquisition of CALP, with the academic language of

the subject presented in multi-modal fashion. Collier (1995) adds weight to the argument that language acquisition, and indeed cognitive development, can benefit from such a pedagogical approach, stating that classes that are highly interactive, emphasise problem-solving and locate learning in thematic experiences are likely to provide the kind of social setting for natural language acquisition to occur simultaneously with academic and cognitive development.

Emerging out of the input and interaction hypothesis, research in SLA provides evidence that language classes that prioritise authentic language use by placing the focus on meaning are more effective than language classes that emphasise language skills by placing the focus on form. O'Duibhir and Cummins (2012) state that it could be argued that if students are immersed in the language of the L2 (as with the case of EAL students in Ireland), there will be a more natural focus on language use and meaning and that there may be a lack of focus on form. Cummins (1999) maintains that if children are immersed in the L2, teachers must focus explicitly on the form of the language, in addition to focusing on meaning. In discussing the implication of focus on form versus focus on meaning with regard to practice in Ireland, O' Duibhir and Cummins (2012, 47) suggest that where there are high concentrations of EAL students in a particular school, EAL students need to be provided with greater opportunities for spontaneous communication and there needs to be a greater focus on form. For schools with a smaller concentration of EAL students, students should get sufficient corrective feedback from peers, which counterbalances any lack of focus on form.

In addition to the focus on form versus the focus on meaning debate, the input and interaction explanation of language development stresses the important role that

interactional modifications and interactional restructuring play in aiding comprehension and language development. The interaction between the student and either the teacher or other classmates can be modified or restructured in a number of ways. Modification and restructuring can take the form of repetition, confirmation checks, clarification requests, paraphrasing, simplification or elaboration of the original message or the substitution or elimination of new words. In a report commissioned by the NCCA to synthesise evidence from Irish and International Research about effective language and teaching and learning strategies in order to inform discussion on the Primary School Curriculum, Harris and O'Duibhir (2011, 14) suggest corrective feedback, in the form of prompts to students, as being the most effective in improving second language development for primary school children in fourth to sixth class (age 10-12). They also note that prompts are more effective than recasts, which, in turn, are more effective than ignoring the error made by the student. These corrective strategies, in addition to making the interactions more comprehensible, facilitate language development by providing the learner with a target-like exemplar of the learner's erroneous utterance and can signal to the learner that a given utterance is not comprehensible in the L2, thereby encouraging them to make their utterance more target-like and nearer to that of a native speaker's (Long and Robinson 1998).

In a report commissioned by the NCCA on Literacy in Early Childhood and Primary Education (Kennedy et al. 2012), two different inquiry-based models of reading (Seeds of Science / Roots of Reading and Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction) are put forward as ways for teachers to ensure that children's literacy development is supported across the curriculum. These approaches essentially combine the teaching

of language objectives and content objectives within lessons across disciplines and supports the development of literacy of EAL learners through:

oral language development in the context of social interaction, where interpersonal skills develop; meaningful use of language in a variety of contexts; and engagement in comprehension strategies that build oral language discourse skills. (Kennedy et al. 2012, 25)

In a study on digital literacy in four Irish primary schools located in the vicinity of Dublin's digital hub, Casey et al. (2009) demonstrate how digital technology, such as animation, picture story and text captioning software and video and digital cameras, can enhance an Inquiry-based pedagogical approach and develops the students' digital literacy skills. It also facilitates the EAL learner, as schools that took part in Casey et al.'s study reported improved levels of engagement in learning and greater inclusion in classroom activities, and involved pupils of different abilities. Incorporating such practices into the Irish primary school has never been more timely, with recent publications by the NCCA, the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) and the Department of Education and Science providing resources on how new technologies can be incorporated into the classroom (Casey et al. 2012).

Irish primary teachers have been engaged in reform for the past ten years and the curriculum has undergone reform and evaluation. Problem solving does play a central role in current curricula (Government of Ireland 1999b, 1999c), and the discussion and acceptance of the point of view of peers are central to the development of problem solving strategies in the primary school curriculum. However, this does not mean that mainstream and language support teachers are embedding this concept into their pedagogical approach. A study of 10,334 students in Irish schools revealed that just over 60% of the sample reported being encouraged to express their views in

class (de Roiste et al., 2011). The extent to which this reform is impacting upon teaching practices in mathematics classrooms in the Irish primary school is evident in the following recommendations made in the 2009 National Assessments of Mathematics and English Writing (Eivers et al. 2010, x) which state that there is a “need for maths classes to incorporate a greater focus on collaborative problem-solving and discussion” and that:

“classroom practice should reflect advances in the teaching of problem solving. Pupils should spend more time solving substantial problems, analysing and discussing problems with other pupils and their teacher, and acquiring improved understanding of the concepts and skills involved. Teachers should ensure that pupils meet a range of problems across curriculum strands, including complex problems embedded in real-life contexts” (Eiver et al, 2010, x)

Conclusion

The every-increasing linguistic diversification in Ireland has challenged the education sector. Studies and reports have identified a number of issues which indicate that the current approach to integrate EAL students into the Irish education system is not meeting the needs of these students and shows that policy initiatives introduced by the government and pedagogical approaches adopted in the classroom are at odds with international best practice. This is compounded by the severe budgetary cuts which are impacting on all sectors of society, including education. These budgetary measures have a direct impact on students requiring EAL support. Despite pledging €637 million for language support and committing to the creation of an extra 550 language support teaching posts in 2009, this has not materialised and budgetary measures implemented since then have seen even more cutbacks in the area of EAL provision. There were 2,100 EAL teaching posts in 2009, this was reduced to 1,500 posts in 2010 with a further reduction to 1,150 posts by the end of 2011. Furthermore, the government has said that a further 250 posts will be reduced before the end of

2015. In addition, the Intercultural Education Strategy 2010-2015 states that “given the diversity of cultures now present in Ireland, it is not possible to commit to teaching all mother tongues in mainstream education provision (DES and OMI 2010, 47).

Operating within the EU-IMF framework for national recovery, teachers are operating under difficult conditions and are faced with even more cutbacks and reductions in available resources. Speaking at a forum on minority languages in 2009, the then Minister of State for Integration commented in relation to heritage language support that aspirations must be grounded in reality and “measures that can be achieved by a shift in thinking are more likely to be implemented than those which require extra financing” DES and OMI, 2010, 47).

This paper proposes what could be considered by the Minister as “a shift in thinking”, which would not require extra financing. This paper presents an Inquiry-based teaching methodology supported by a socio-cultural derived theoretical framework. This approach represents a move away from traditional teaching models, towards a dialogical approach, which facilitates both the EAL learners’ language acquisition process and their ability to integrate into mainstream classes and access the curriculum. It also serves to empower the EAL student. Such an approach addresses a number of the issues that have been raised by reports and studies on EAL learners in Irish schools. An Inquiry-based approach will improve the literacy skills of the EAL learner, and this can be further enhanced through the development of digital literacy skills with ICT support. The low level of language proficiency which has been identified as the main barrier faced by students accessing the school curriculum would

also be addressed, as learning based on the real-life experience of the child facilitates the language acquisition process.

The need for pre-service and in-service training in the area of EAL provision has been highlighted by teachers as a key priority. If no extra funding is available to finance this, then it is necessary to rebalance the expenditure mismatch between funding available for EAL teachers' salaries and the funding available for CPD. In 2009, €136 million was paid out in teachers' salaries, with less than 1% of that figure (€1 million) going towards CPD funding (DES 2011 and 2012).

Finally, the need for EAL students to maintain their heritage language was highlighted. For financial reasons, coupled with the lack of national clusters in particular schools, heritage language classes will not become a reality. However, schools can learn from good practice which has been adopted in some Irish schools, through the creation of dual-language books. One such school won the European Language Label award in 2010 for its project "Valuing Bilingualism in our school through the creation of dual language texts". These dual language books were written by the children in English and either Portuguese, Chechen, Russian or Polish. The 2012 European Language Label went to the "Polish weekend school", set up by a parent of a Polish EAL learner. At this weekend school, in addition to Polish, students learn history, geography and Spanish and play soccer.

Mainstream and language support teachers in Ireland cannot be expected to embrace every aspect of pedagogy and language theory discussed in this paper. It is the intention of this paper to introduce teachers to a pedagogical approach, rather than a

strict method, that meets the needs of language minority children, with the hope that, as educators, they will embrace at least some of its aspects in the classroom and by understanding the interaction between critical thinking, social interaction, learner identity, power and language acquisition, they can reflect on their classes and see if they are reproducing or transforming the social world of the language minority student, giving them the tools necessary to make the transition from an oppressed to an empowered member of society.

In light of the evolving demographics which are changing the linguistic makeup of Ireland, the question we need to ask is not whether children from linguistically diverse backgrounds can access the Irish system of education, but rather, whether they can access it in such a way that will enable them to achieve academically to the best of their ability. Ireland, as a country, cannot afford to ignore the educational needs of approximately 14% of the student population. This would not make sense from a social justice point of view, or from an economic point of view. This group will make up a vital part of our work force in the years to come, and will be an essential economic and linguistic resource for the Irish nation. The Irish school system must embrace language acquisition theory and pedagogical practices into the classroom in order to enhance the academic achievement of the language minority student, if it wants to avoid a court ruling similar to that of *Lau vs. Nichols* which occurred nearly forty years ago in the US.

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