

# The Right Course? Or The Right Teacher?

**James Danes** challenges preconceived views on ESOL and literacy teaching

One of the biggest discussions in the Skills for Life sector is that concerning ESOL and Literacy professional development (in particular subject specialist training). By writing this article I aim to challenge Skills for Life teachers to reconsider their own position and perhaps even open their minds to increasing their own potential and therefore their learners'. Only then can the workforce move forward and be more responsive to the evolving nature of language and literacy education.

This is a personal response to some of the findings of the recent NRDC report '*Right Course? An exploratory study of learner placement practices in ESOL and literacy*' (Simpson, Cooke and Baynham 2008) which resonates with some key findings of research with which Derby College has been involved confirming key issues of pedagogy and CPD. I'm writing this from the perspective of a Skills for Life teacher educator and literacy/communication specialist.

## Cross-fertilisation

*Finding 1* of the report seems to point to ESOL and literacy teachers needing to change their perceptions of their own practices and perhaps start to be less precious about their own skills sets, curricula and learners. With this level of loosening up we, as a sector, could go some way to working towards *Finding 5*, the potential value of cross-fertilisation.

Experience has shown how an injection of literacy and communication can benefit ESOL learners, particularly at the higher levels. But, in order to be effective, both time and resources need to be invested in a process of cross-fertilisation. We had a unique opportunity at Derby College to team-teach a group of L1 ESOL learners. ESOL and literacy/communication specialists brought together very distinct approaches from Key Skills, literacy and ESOL traditions for the purpose of designing and delivering employability enrichment in an existing ESOL class. The intention was that language frameworks would support the practical application of language and that this hybridisation of disciplines and approaches would have a positive effect on the learning experience, not to mention the teachers involved.

The ESOL department has a history of language teaching expertise, while the Key Skills teams are experts in contextualising materials and activities. Having cross-fertilised and applied key areas of expertise to the learners' real needs (determined through consultation with learners rather than making assumptions) a greater degree of confidence and quality of

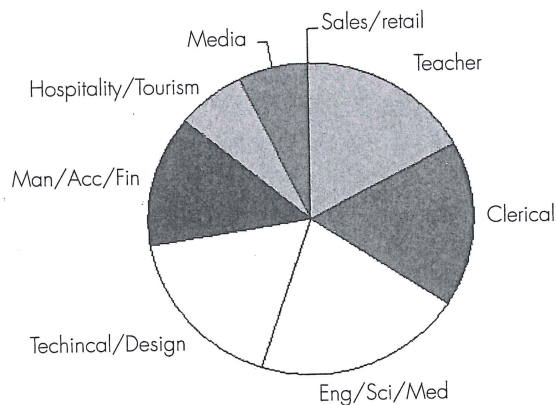
their communication and language use was realised. An ESOL teacher commented:

*"The students' feedback is excellent and quality of presentation of their work is very impressive. (A far higher standard of presentation than seen in the conventional ESOL delivery). It also seems that they have developed self confidence in the skills they have to offer."*

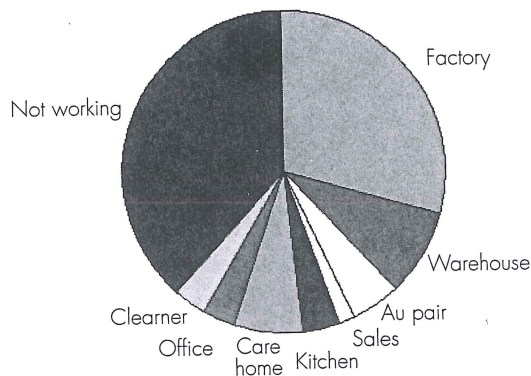
## Employability themes

Cross-fertilisation needs to occur in course design as well in the classroom. By scrutinising the qualification specifications of ESOL and Key Skills Communication we found common areas and overlaps. This meant we could simply embed employability themes such as researching careers, writing formal letters of application, creating CVs, delivering presentations and taking part in interviews into the scheme. The work centred around jobs and careers which the learners actually aspired to. In most cases they were qualified to do these jobs and had

What is your ideal job?



What is your current job?



experience in their own countries: Web designer, hospitality manager, engineer and doctor. This was a far cry from factory operative and order-picking type jobs they currently had.

A scheme of work was developed collaboratively which made extensive use of ICT and was team delivered throughout. The literacy/communication specialist focused on discourse and text level, i.e. social power and communication, while the ESOL specialist concentrated on sentence and word level aspects, i.e. accuracy. The sessions were diverse, practical and active, utilising DVD/video resources, peer observation/feedback, group discussions, library and ICT facilities, and more importantly the learners' experiences as part of a knowledge sharing community. A sociocultural methodology was applied throughout as the philosophy was very much about situated language development.

### Learner feedback

The learners commented on how they liked applying grammar to real-life, formal settings. This course had elements of both ESOL and Literacy provisions and was associated with mastery of English in a native-like way (*Finding 9*). The feedback from the learners at the end of the course was very encouraging these extracts were taken from personal narrative accounts of their learning journeys:

*"...lots of practice using language in practical situations"*

*"I have a different view to communication now, I'm learning and improving English by using it formally and understand that I need to really pay attention to detail"*

*"...very useful, not only in England but elsewhere"*

*"...improved vocabulary because we are speaking about real things"*

*"...more confidence because of real language use"*

*"I wish that in other ESOL classes the teachers taught skills that are more useful for students than only teaching grammar and vocabulary"*

*"I had to think about my feelings and my skills as well. I had to think about my personality and what I really can do. Even I had so many possibilities!"*

*"I found more information in the library and on the internet. I made a good plan and used some extra images to make my presentation more effective. I had to make new sentences on my own because the original text was too long for the presentation layout. As I had to learn new vocabulary about getting a good job, it was a great experience for me"*

*"Finally I feel I have to say attending to the combined ESOL and communication skills course, it runs very well. This has made better value of me as a student and an eventual employee."*

### Language awareness

*Findings 4 & 7* are concerned with a need for literacy teachers to have greater language awareness, to help reconcile issues

when faced with bilingual learners in their literacy classes. At Derby College we get a significant number of bilingual 16-18 year old students progressing into mainstream education after completing a one year full time language and vocational taster programme called Lexis. This presents problems for Key Skills Communication teachers who face difficulties when teaching them once they have progressed into the main curriculum. To what extent could this be mitigated if they had the awareness of approaches and the metalinguistic knowledge of ESOL teachers? A greater language awareness on the part of the teachers can make scaffolding easier since we possess common frames of reference and can talk the language of language which bilingual learners possess. Of course this extends beyond 16-18 and becomes more challenging with the older and more experienced adult bilingual learners.

Despite *Findings 4 & 7*, I was strangely unsurprised to read about the resistance to both explicit grammar teaching and subject-specific grammar knowledge development by literacy teachers (pp37-38) to accommodate the language needs of bilingual learners in literacy classrooms. Surely the majority of us literacy practitioners aren't so disinterested in the subject we teach that we can't see the value in fostering an interest of language in our learners from our potentially vast knowledge? Why restrict developing our knowledge just to accommodate the needs of bilingual learners? I have observed many lessons where had the teacher a better grasp of their own language, a more dynamic and interesting lesson may have taken place.

However I was surprised at the "trepidation surrounding the teaching of oral communication skills in literacy classrooms" (p38). If this is the consensus of the wider population of literacy teachers there is going to be a great deal of panic when Functional English hits the classrooms. It seems therefore that the three schools of English teaching in the Skills for Life sector (Literacy, ESOL & Communication) would each benefit from collaboration and cross-fertilisation. Perhaps we should not be in such a rush to churn out experts and specialists but instead provide a coherent framework of CPD opportunities as there is too much to learn in too little time.

There is evidence to suggest that new approaches to teaching language and literacy, which integrate practices from across the sector, can have a positive impact on the learners (and teachers!). But these depend on the extent to which practitioners take them on as part of their ongoing CPD and that teacher training packages accommodate this too. The success or failure relies predominantly on the commitment and enthusiasm of teachers to their own CPD. It is important that Skills for Life teachers have a level of professional vision to see the potential positive impact on learners and themselves in the long term and to actively seek out ways to develop their practice. If the CPD is right we won't be reading reports on learner placement but instead we'll be reading good practice guides that bridge the disciplines, creating not super teachers as such, but the right teacher.

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