



National Research and Development Centre  
for adult literacy and numeracy

## Research report



### The Right Course?

An exploratory study of learner placement  
practices in ESOL and literacy

James Simpson, Melanie Cooke and Mike Baynham  
March 2008

Published by the National Research and Development Centre  
for Adult Literacy and Numeracy

This document is also available in pdf format from [www.nrdc.org.uk](http://www.nrdc.org.uk)

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ISBN 978-1-905188-56-7

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NRDC is a consortium of partners led by the Institute of Education,  
University of London (see back cover for a list of members) [www.ioe.ac.uk](http://www.ioe.ac.uk)

Design: [www.chapmandesign.net](http://www.chapmandesign.net)

Cover photography: Philip Meech

Print: Elanders Hindson

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### An exploratory study of learner placement practices in ESOL and literacy

James Simpson, Melanie Cooke and Mike Baynam

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#### **Peer review**

This report was peer reviewed by: Liz Knight, City and Islington College; Irene Schwab, Institute of Education, University of London; Judy Gawn, NIACE; Sue Gardener, Consultant. Drafts were further commented on by Judith Hunman, Martin Norfield and Ursula Howard.

## Foreword

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When this research study was commissioned early in 2005, it was in response to observations about the changing characteristics of learners in literacy classes. In the context of debates about different funding arrangements for ESOL and literacy provision, it should be remembered that the findings of this research pre-date the changes in the autumn of 2007.

The study raises questions about the training of literacy teachers. Recent changes to teacher education qualifications<sup>1</sup> introduced from September 2007 have built in much greater recognition that all teachers of language and literacy need to have a good understanding of language variety and bi- and multilingualism. At the time of writing Lifelong Learning UK is further exploring the extent of overlap in the training of new literacy and ESOL teachers. Perhaps future generations of teachers need to be confident in teaching literacy *and* language rather than belonging to one or other of the separate traditions of literacy and ESOL, as in the past. This study makes an important contribution to the understanding of this new challenge.

**Helen Casey**  
**Executive Director, NRDC**  
11 February 2008

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.lifelonglearninguk.org> and <http://www.ifl.ac.uk> for details.

## Executive summary

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This study set out to answer the question:

How do ESOL or bilingual<sup>2</sup> learners get placed or place themselves in literacy and/or ESOL classes?

While colleges or centres in multilingual cities or neighbourhoods might have well-developed ESOL provision, their literacy classes also show huge linguistic diversity. At around Entry 3 and Level 1 in the National Qualifications Framework, bilingual learners might end up studying in either.

The study has found that the boundary between ESOL and literacy is not clear-cut, and that the range of learning needs encompassed by the two subject areas is more complex than a rigid distinction can allow for. The findings and implications expressed here stem from this overall conclusion.

### Practice in two colleges

The study explored the institutional and personal factors at play when a placement decision is made about whether a bilingual learner (at Entry 3 or Level 1) takes an ESOL or a literacy route. The study was carried out in two colleges of Further Education, one in London and the other in the North of England. In both colleges bilingual learners with similar needs were found in literacy and in ESOL classes.

Some staff described the difference between ESOL and literacy provision as one in which literacy was perceived as being for learners who are 'native' speakers of English, and ESOL for those whose dominant language is not English. For others, especially those working in multilingual communities, literacy provision was not considered as being exclusively for monolingual learners. From this perspective the level of oral fluency was often referred to as an important determinant of the placement of learners.

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<sup>2</sup> In this study we use the term bilingual for brevity but recognise that many learners are in fact multilingual.

## Changing patterns

At present the UK is experiencing an interesting and dynamic demographic and social phenomenon in which multilingual learners are central: many of its cities, with London at the forefront, are becoming increasingly characterised by their extreme diversity. In some urban centres a high proportion – sometimes the majority – of the population are bilingual at the least. The range of learners seeking to improve their language and literacy includes:

- learners who might have been born in the UK but who have spent much of their childhood in their parents' home country;
- people who are second generation children of migrants who have another language as a home language;
- people who have come to the UK as teenagers and who are enrolling in Skills for Life classes some years later; and in general
- learners whose expert languages are not English.

There is a growing understanding of the existence of a group of learners who fall into a grey area between ESOL and literacy, learners who, in the words of one ESOL manager, could 'quite easily be here or there'. Teachers recognise the overlap between bilingual learners in the two different kinds of provision, but institutionally there is a separation. Learners have to be defined as one or the other to fit, but for a large and growing number of learners in metropolitan and urban centres the distinction is not a valid one. The ideas of literacy pedagogy, and of literacy itself at institutional and policy level, have not kept up with the changes in the types of learners who are coming to literacy classes.

## Findings and implications

1. Many bilingual learners whose language level is around Entry 3/Level 1 on the National Qualifications Framework have literacy as well as more general language learning needs. This makes the distinction between ESOL and literacy a complex and contested area. A rigid division between ESOL and literacy *learners*; ESOL and literacy *pedagogy*; and the skills and training of ESOL and literacy *teachers* is potentially detrimental to the learning of a substantial and diverse group.
2. Bilingual learners have literacy and language learning needs which are specific to those with a dominant language other than English. This is an issue which cuts right across education, particularly in multilingual areas and in inner cities (Leung 2001). Where literacy classes contain bilingual learners, this has to be taken into account by teachers, planners and curriculum developers. The nature of literacy provision needs adjusting, rather than continuing to attempt to fit learners into provision which is not appropriate to their needs. This issue is too big for providers to deal with individually and so also needs to be addressed at the level of curriculum and policy.
3. Many bilingual learners fall into the Skills for Life priority areas. For example, they may be young adults, low paid workers, the unemployed or parents, and have literacy needs as well as broader language needs. As this study has shown, bilingual learners are equally likely to find themselves placed in literacy as ESOL classes, such is the ambiguity and complexity of their status and needs. Changes in funding arrangements for ESOL, as distinct from literacy, may yet impact on sensitive placement decisions for bilingual learners. Placement needs to be equitable, and a result of learning needs.

4. Literacy teachers are concerned that they are not fully able to cater for bilingual literacy learners' general language needs, in particular their oral communication and grammar needs. Literacy teacher training has not in the past wholly equipped teachers for meeting the language needs of bilingual learners in literacy classrooms. Literacy teachers with bilingual learners in their classes need to learn in initial teacher training and professional development about their learners' general language needs as well as their literacy needs, and how best to cater for these in their teaching.
5. The indistinct nature of the division between ESOL and literacy results in learners with similar language needs finding themselves in different provision, in different subject areas. This points to the value of cross-fertilisation of practice, including considering co-teaching of ESOL and literacy classes.
6. The effect accreditation and formal external assessment has on lessons – known as 'washback' – appears to be distorting practice in some literacy classes, and hence is hindering language and literacy development. This applies most obviously to the National Literacy Test. Literacy surely encompasses writing, and a national literacy test that ignores writing is potentially damaging to learners' writing development.
7. There are many 'monolingual' learners in literacy classes from Caribbean and African backgrounds in cities such as London, who speak non-standard varieties of English or English-based creole languages. Literacy teachers and managers need to be fully aware of the issues specific to these speakers in terms of their literacy and oracy. Training for literacy practitioners should include an element of general language awareness, as well as language education appropriate for second language literacy learners.
8. English is dynamic, changing, fluid, and we are witnessing the emergence of new varieties of English, for example the English of urban multicultural and multilingual London. This is beginning to be recognised by teachers and managers, as is the need to adjust ways of thinking about standard English in relation to emergent non-standard varieties of English, to standard Englishes which are not British English, to English-based creole languages, and to dialects. This phenomenon needs to be addressed at the level of planning, training and pedagogy, for ESOL as well as literacy teachers.
9. For some groups of learners, ESOL is viewed as marginal. As a result certain groups of learners will distance themselves from it by identifying with what they see as the mainstream. Bilingual learners will continue to be drawn to literacy provision, as long as it is associated with mastery of English in a native-like way, and as long as it is seen as the route which will propel people to Higher Education. Skills for Life literacy needs to be able to cope with the demands of teaching literacy – and other areas of language – to learners who are bilingual and who have language and language learning needs specific to second language learners.
10. Gatekeepers such as learner support, advice and guidance staff, play a crucial role in the placement of learners and need to be included in any provider training programmes. In addition, managers and teachers need support in changing organisational structures to better meet the needs of this growing cohort of bilingual learners.

# 1 Introduction

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## 1.1 Contexts of ESOL and literacy placement practices

This project started with a question: How do ESOL or bilingual learners get placed or place themselves in literacy and/or ESOL classes? While colleges or centres in multilingual cities or neighbourhoods might have well-developed ESOL provision, their literacy classes also show huge linguistic diversity. At around Entry 3 and Level 1 in the National Qualifications Framework, bilingual learners might end up studying in either. What are the institutional and personal practices at play when the decision is made about whether an ESOL or a literacy route is taken at Entry 3 or Level 1? To answer these questions we studied the literacy and ESOL placement practices in two colleges of Further Education, one in London and the other in the North of England.

As work on the project progressed, it became clear that the issues at the heart of the matter were not just to do with the technical and institutional processes in place to deal with placement and enrolment. There were also underlying issues concerning the nature of literacy and ESOL under the Skills for Life policy umbrella, the relationship between the two, and the suitability of literacy and/or ESOL provision for the many bilingual learners in these classes. Thus our questions of how learners are placed, or place themselves, evolved into ones about the boundaries and overlaps in the subject areas of literacy and ESOL: how they are conceptualised by managers, teachers and learners, who they are assumed to be for, and what the pedagogic focus should be.

### **Bilingual learners in literacy and ESOL provision**

The term 'bilingual learner' is used in the project to refer to learners who are expert users of languages other than, or in addition to, English. Most people in the world are bilingual or multilingual. Monolingualism is the exception and not the norm. Even so, categorisation of individuals into bilingual and monolingual implies a fixed view of language development which is at odds with reality. Bilingualism exists on a continuum, and an individual can have any degree of bilingualism; thus in this report we employ the stance articulated by Low and Beverton (2004:95): 'If ESL groups are partly characterized by a less than "perfect" command of English, and an imbalance between their languages then the only appropriate view of bilingualism is a so-called "inclusive" view whereby bilingualism is relative, not absolute, or balanced.' The language needs of bilingual learners are situated within the space formed by this imbalance, and would thus be familiar to ESOL learners and teachers.

At present the UK is experiencing an interesting and dynamic demographic and social phenomenon in which multilingual learners are central: many of its cities, with London at the



forefront, are becoming increasingly characterised by their superdiversity i.e. extreme language diversity (Kyambi 2005; Vertovec 2006). In some urban centres a high proportion – sometimes the majority – of the population are bilingual or multilingual. The consequence of this for Skills for Life provision is that classes, and not only ESOL classes, are often dominated by transnational learners of various kinds: learners who might have been born in the UK but who have spent much of their childhood in their parents' home country; people who are second generation children of migrants who have another language as a home language, people who have come to the UK as teenagers and who are enrolling in Skills for Life classes ten, twenty, thirty years later; and in general, learners whose expert languages are not English. Previous NRDC research has recognised the fact that Skills for Life across the spectrum is significantly populated by such multilingual learners, many of whom have a language learning need. As the *Effective Teaching and Learning: Writing* study states (Grief et al. 2007: 24):

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

These learners underline the complexity of the boundary between literacy and ESOL, and are the concern of this study.

### The policy context

Adult ESOL and literacy provision takes place in England under the policy umbrella of Skills for Life. Influenced by findings from the International Adult Literacy Survey, Sir Claus Moser's report to the government, *A Fresh Start* (DfEE 1999), recommended a national strategy to reduce the number of adults with low levels of basic skills. ESOL as a subject area was not initially included. This changed with the publication of a government working group report *Breaking the Language Barriers* (DfEE 2000). The response of the government to Moser's report was to put in place the Skills for Life policy strategy (DfES 2001) addressing this concern for adult basic skills in England and Wales. The following are viewed as 'priority groups' in the Skills for Life policy:

- unemployed people and benefit claimants;
- prisoners and those supervised in the community;
- public sector employees;
- low-skilled people in employment; and
- other groups at risk of exclusion.

(DfES 2001:3)

From the outset Skills for Life recognised the specific needs of bilingual learners within these priority groups:

There are between 450,000 and 1 million people in England who do not speak English as their first language. We will be taking specific action to address their language and literacy needs. Potential learners range from those who may lack basic literacy and numeracy in their first language to those who already have a high level of education. Some belong to settled communities, others are refugees or migrant workers. It is essential that the specific literacy and/or numeracy needs of these learners are not seen as secondary to the needs of English-speaking adults. (DfES 2001: 19)

This study comes at a time of major debate over the funding and future of ESOL. In October 2006 the funding body the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), announced that from September 2007 ESOL classes would be free for targeted sets of people, those who are 'unemployed or receiving income-based benefits'. (LSC 2006: 5). Concerns were expressed that this could exclude certain groups from ESOL provision though not from literacy provision; particularly asylum seekers awaiting a decision on whether they have leave to remain in the UK; unwaged members of families who are not claiming benefits; and low paid migrant workers. In response to concerns expressed, the funding policy was reviewed in early 2007, and certain concessions were made regarding eligibility. This review included the commissioning of a Race Equality Impact Assessment, which highlighted the implications of the new funding policy for ESOL, noting that it will put it at odds with funding policy for other Skills for Life areas:

Although the proposal to withdraw automatic fee remission brings ESOL into line with wider FE courses, there would then be an anomaly with other Skills for Life provision and most importantly with literacy provision.

(DfES 2007: 20-21)

One obvious implication for certain groups of bilingual learners is that they now have to pay for an ESOL class if they do not meet the eligibility criteria, but they do not if their needs are met by appropriate literacy provision. As this report demonstrates, certain groups of learners would, from a pedagogic perspective, be suited to either ESOL or literacy provision.

#### **The relationship between literacy and ESOL**

The fact that many learners in literacy classes are bilingual, and have what literacy practitioners consider to be an ESOL need, naturally raises the questions of the population groups which literacy is for, what its learning involves, and what its relationship with ESOL is. These are questions which we address, if not resolve, in this study.

Bilingual learners present current institutional and policy structures, for example the provision of literacy classes, with problems that they are not sufficiently attuned to. This is at least in part because the models of provision and of professional practice can be planned and predicated on the basis of a different body of learners than those who actually present themselves. The literacy acquisition processes of non-English dominant bilingual learners differ in complex ways from those of monolingual or English-dominant bilingual learners, who are themselves, of course, not a homogeneous group. These latter learners in the Entry 3 and Level 1 literacy classes of this project may well have acquired a measure of English literacy as children and have returned to literacy lessons as adults, in the words of one such learner, to 'brush up on' their English literacy skills. In these classes approaches to literacy and literacy learning might be used which were developed with reference to monolingual adult learners. How appropriate are such approaches when employed in the learning of literacy in a second or other language?

A second issue which concerns literacy provision is the focus of learning programmes. Within the Skills for Life strategy, literacy is in part defined as a set of skills which need to be acquired to a certain level for an individual to be able to function in society and at work (DfEE 1999; DfES 2001). The notion of 'skills' can be broadly or narrowly interpreted. However amongst the interviewees in this project (both learners and practitioners) literacy pedagogy was understood in quite a restricted way, as being about going back to the basics, particularly of punctuation and spelling, and about writing in a narrow range of genres, for example,

formal letters. Yet in many classes the literacy learners actually have wide-ranging literacy and language needs, not least oral communication needs. How well does teacher training equip literacy teachers to cater for the language needs of bilingual literacy learners?

Thirdly, the presence of large numbers of bilingual learners in literacy classes presents a challenge to literacy provision. In this report we identify tensions and a challenge about the relationship between ESOL and literacy. The Skills for Life levels run from Entry Level 1 (beginner) through Entry Levels 2 and 3, Level 1 and Level 2 (nominally GCSE level). The tensions we describe begin to show at around Entry Level 3; hence the focus in this study on Entry Level 3 and Level 1 classes. Why do some bilingual learners at this level choose to identify with literacy rather than ESOL provision? What role is played in these choices by the dominant ways of thinking about ESOL and literacy in institutions? Does the relationship between ESOL and literacy, and even the very distinction between ESOL and literacy, need to be reconceptualised?

#### **Time and space in the learners' journey: questions, issues and expectations**

Space and place are also concerns of this research. Physical space undoubtedly plays a role in the placement of learners on programmes. The first perspective on place and space is the issue of why and how bilingual learners study in a particular college in a particular place. This question is related to another: where do learners assume their course will lead them? What is the route that has brought them to a particular course, and where will it take them next? For many learners, their ultimate aim lies beyond an ESOL or literacy qualification. How do learners find themselves in an ESOL or a literacy class, and how do they move between courses in the two areas? These questions of placement and progress are underpinned by learners' self-identification and self-positioning as ESOL or literacy learners, which inevitably leads to the question of the relative status of ESOL and literacy. Status has much to do with how ESOL and literacy provision are viewed in relation to one another, and what ESOL and literacy are considered to be for, both by learners and in professional understandings and discourses. In particular, literacy is often understood by teachers and learners as the route to qualifications such as GCSE, or to an Access course and on to Higher Education. How then do learners view literacy in relation to ESOL? In which direction are they pulled?

## **1.2 Themes of this research**

With this background in mind, our guiding research questions are:

- How does the challenge of linguistic and cultural superdiversity affect established conceptions of ESOL and literacy?
- What are the learning needs of bilingual literacy learners? And to what extent does literacy teachers' training enable them to meet bilingual learners' needs?
- How is actual and metaphorical movement through time and space affected by notions of status, expectations, marginalisation and imagined futures?

These questions are addressed in turn in the thematic sections of this study, Sections 3, 4 and 5. For the remainder of this section the methods of this research are outlined, and in Section 2 the two focal colleges and their placement practices are described. The concluding section, Section 6, is concerned with implications for policy, training and practice, as well as directions for further research. There is an appendix comprising a summary of the six classes which formed the case studies upon which much of this report was based.

### 1.3 Research design and methods

The research examined placement in two centres where ESOL and literacy classes are provided: Rushton College, a large college in inner city London, and Cranshaw College, a small college in a town on the edge of a large city in the North of England. The names of the centres, and of all the people involved in the project, have been rendered anonymous. These centres were chosen because they reflect the metropolitan/regional dimension of difference. Each of the two centres has distinctive characteristics; some of which are common to other colleges and providers, and some of which are unique. Thus the matters attended to here should be regarded as able to be connected to, but not necessarily generalisable, across contexts. They are telling, rather than typical, cases. Moreover, this is exploratory research; there is scope for further detailed development work in all areas discussed here. The views of the teachers and learners interviewed for the project, and the approaches to learning and teaching that they represent, do not of course reflect the practice of all ESOL and literacy learners and teachers. Readers are invited to consider the issues raised in relation to other teaching and learning contexts such as vocational programmes, as well as to ESOL and literacy more broadly.

Through a combination of interviews, focus groups and observation, the research sought to ascertain both what is said and what is done about placing learners in ESOL or literacy classes in the two centres. Observation of enrolments, placement interviews and tests for new ESOL and literacy learners took place across different sites of each centre. Detailed field notes and recordings were taken at these sessions. Placement documentation and artefacts from each centre (e.g. copies of placement tests) were collected, as well as copies of prospectuses and promotional literature. 'Front desk' or first point of contact practices with new learners were also observed.

In the course of these observations, six literacy and ESOL classes, three at each centre, were identified as being at around Entry Level 3 and Level 1, the focus of our interest. The six classes were the basis of six case studies. These were informed by lesson observations and interviews with learners and teachers.

The six case study classes were as follows.

At Rushton:

- ESOL literacy Entry 3A
- ESOL and Childcare Entry 3
- Literacy Entry 3

At Cranshaw:

- ESOL Level 1
- ESOL Entry 2 +
- Literacy workshop

Summaries of the case studies can be found in the Appendix.

Researchers carried out a group interview with the learners in each of the six case study classes. The teacher and one learner from each class were interviewed individually.

Observations of the lessons in the case study classes took place during the first term of study. Syllabuses, teaching materials and samples of learners' work from their lessons were also collected.

Group interviews with teachers of ESOL and of literacy classes at the two participating centres took place, as did individual interviews with managers, learner support staff and the principals of the two colleges. These interviews were transcribed, and analysed through a content analysis employing a constant comparative method. This involved the main coding categories being agreed after an analysis of early interviews, then collapsed or expanded through analysis of the rest of the data set.

Observation data (field notes and recordings) and other artefacts such as emails, prospectuses, notices and data from lessons, informed the descriptive aspect of the research, providing a holistic picture of placement practices at each research site. Both the case study data and the broader interview data were developed to form the thematic content of this project.

Finally, a report entitled 'The geographies of student placement' (Robinson 2007) was specially commissioned for this project. This report was designed to inform our thinking about place, space and placement from the perspective of cultural geography. It contributes to Section 5 of this report, and will also play a role in shaping future research in this area.

## 2 Two colleges and their placement practices

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Fieldwork for this study took place in two centres, Cranshaw College in the North of England, and Rushton College in London. In this section we present a brief portrait of both colleges, of their ESOL and literacy provision, and of their enrolment and placement practices. This part is informed by ethnographic observations of enrolment and placement at the two centres which took place in September and October 2006. At points throughout the section, we illustrate issues arising in the placement process with short vignettes derived from these ethnographic observations.

The enrolment and placement processes were efficient and thorough at each observed college. Teachers and managers alike work exceptionally hard to ensure learners are placed correctly, in the face of administrative demands inherent in placement and testing, and under much pressure from learners to find them the best class. Here is not the place for an extended critique of the processes in place for enrolment at the individual colleges. Rather, the description in this section is intended to give a sense of some of the concerns of this study, as they appear 'on the ground'.

### 2.1 Cranshaw College

Cranshaw College is a small FE college in a town on the edge of a city in the North of England. It has a reputation locally as a 'good college'. The college's main site is in three buildings in Cranshaw, where all main site ESOL ('College' ESOL) and most literacy lessons take place. Of the case studies at Cranshaw, one of the ESOL classes and the literacy workshop happen at the main site. Other ESOL classes, including the third case study class, are held in seven community centres ('Community' ESOL). Literacy, numeracy and ESOL are all situated in the Skills for Life department.

ESOL provision at the main site comprises 12 day and evening classes, ranging in level from pre-entry to Level 2. For each class there is one three-hour lesson a week. In 2006-7 when fieldwork was carried out, most learners at the main site were migrant workers from Eastern Europe, often with a high level of education. In contrast, most ESOL learners in the community classes (2-6 hours per week) were women from more established or settled communities, many of whom were long-term residents in the UK, and who did not have high levels of education as children. One exception was a community class which was peopled by a very diverse group of learners who were, in the main, asylum seekers or refugees from many parts of the world.

The literacy department at Cranshaw is small. Classes are taught by the Literacy and Basic

Skills Coordinator and her colleagues. There are four literacy classes at the main site, and the college also runs literacy and numeracy classes at the college's community centres. There are about eight learners per class, except for the literacy workshop, which attracts up to 12 regular attenders. For each class there is one session of two hours per week. The individualised nature of the literacy teaching allows recruitment to carry on throughout the course, up until nearly the end of the year. A number of interviewees at the college express a view of literacy whereby the classes are seen as being for adults who have lived in the UK all their lives and for some reason need to improve their literacy skills. Bilingual learners only rarely enrol onto literacy classes.

### **Enrolment and placement at Cranshaw College**

#### *ESOL enrolment at Cranshaw*

2006 saw the trial of a new system of enrolment and placement in the ESOL department at Cranshaw College. Prospective learners enquiring about ESOL at the college were allotted a place upon enquiry on a 9-hour course devoted to the placement and enrolment process. This short course, running for three weeks in October 2006, was followed by a 90-hour programme, from November through to June 2007. The 9-hour course focused on assessment, induction and in some cases study skills, and aimed to give a flavour of the course so learners could assess whether it would meet their needs. It also enabled the tutor to check for correct placement, and move learners if necessary, before the start of the long course. Beyond these reasons, there was a two-fold rationale for organising placement and enrolment in this way. Firstly, funding for the previous arrangement, a three-hour diagnostic assessment course, was withdrawn, so a longer, 9-hour course was set up, combining both assessment and induction. And secondly, the end of the 9-hour course coincided with Ramadan, when attendance usually drops.

New learners at the initial assessment session, the first 'lesson' on the 9-hour course, did the ESOL Speaking and Listening initial assessment (Read Write Plus), the ESOL Pathfinders reading and writing assessment and the BSA literacy placement test. They also underwent a group discussion and an individual interview with the tutor. Returning learners carried out diagnostic assessments at the same time.

The teachers' attitudes towards this 9-hour programme were ambivalent. While some mentioned the benefit of having a period of time to orient the learners, the additional work on top of an already heavy bureaucratic load was commented upon unfavourably. Teachers also noted that in the community centres of the college, learners tend to choose a centre, rather than a course, to attend. At each centre, there are usually only two levels of class, so the fine-tuned placement and initial assessment is to an extent irrelevant.

#### **Vignette 1: Zayeed**

Zayeed is from Pakistan, has lived in the UK for three years, and first attended Cranshaw College two years ago. He works at a hospital as a care assistant, and also works part time as a steward at a local football ground. He passed ESOL E3 last year, and I observe him taking the E3 ESOL diagnostic test and the Level 1 listening diagnostic test. On the form which is the basis of his interview with the tutor, he has graded himself as '2' (i.e. 'OK') at reading, writing and speaking. Zayeed would like an evening class to fit in with his work patterns.

While still in Pakistan, Zayeed did a similar job to his current one, but there he was a more

senior and specialised theatre assistant. He spoke a lot of English in Pakistan, the books he studied from were in English, and at least some of his lectures were in English. His aim is to work in an operating theatre but he has not found the right job yet. He considers himself to be well-qualified and thinks he will get a job when one comes up. He does not mention English as being a barrier. He finds reading in English the easiest of skills, and is best at that. He listens to the radio, and sometimes watches *Coronation Street*. The tutor interviewing and assessing Zayeed says she realises his speaking skills are good but is concerned about his writing.

#### *Literacy enrolment at Cranshaw*

In the literacy department, the literacy coordinator, Lynne, interviews every potential literacy learner herself, a 15 to 30-minute appointment in each case, at a weekly session where she will see up to five or six people. Decisions regarding placement are made during this interview. Because literacy provision is so small, there is no great complexity over placement at the interview stage. New learners undergo a computer-based diagnostic assessment during their first literacy lesson. Sometimes learners on other programmes might be referred to the literacy classes, and Lynne herself might actively inform learners on other courses that the literacy classes exist. For instance, she meets the GCSE English learners at the beginning of the year to explain to them that they can consider literacy as an option in preference to GCSE English. She describes how people sometimes enrol onto a GCSE class, carry out the initial assessment, find out how much work is involved in GCSE English, and never return. Lynne is also the GCSE English coordinator, and sees literacy to an extent as a preparation for GCSE. The GCSE English drop-out rate is high, and might not be, thinks Lynne, if more people did a literacy course before embarking on a GCSE course, or as an alternative to GCSE.

#### **Vignette 2: Sonia**

Sonia attends an interview with the literacy coordinator, Lynne. She is a monolingual learner born and brought up in the local area, about 30 years old, and wants to sign up for either an English GCSE or a Level 2 literacy course. Lynne suggests she comes in to do an initial assessment, as neither she nor Lynne are sure which class would be most appropriate for her.

S: The GCSE just sounds quite large work wise ... I think I'd do best with the Level 2 and it's over and done with.

L: But the door's open for doing the GCSE next time.

Sonia has absolutely no difficulty at all in completing the enrolment form. Eventually she attends the first lesson of the term's literacy workshop, and there she stays.

## **2.2 Rushton College**

Rushton College is a large college in inner-city London. There are three main sites, and the college also has an extensive provision of classes in community venues and workplaces around the borough. Adult ESOL and Basic Skills are based at Orchard Place, where two of the case study classes took place, and one other site. Orchard Place also has a large provision (12 courses) of ESOL for 16–19s. The mainstream, non-ESOL provision takes place at the largest site, where there are also vocational pathway courses for ESOL learners.



In 2005–6 ESOL made up 25 per cent of college enrolments and 16 per cent of guided learning hours. There are courses at each level from Entry 1 to Level 2. Each Core Curriculum level is divided into 'A' and 'B', and up to Entry level 3 each course also has a parallel class for people with literacy needs. So, for example, Entry 2 comprises E2A and E2B as well as E2A Literacy and E2B Literacy. The provision is wide, with courses during the day and in the evening. There are also courses focusing on work and on study. A recent addition to ESOL provision is an Entry Level 3 course for people who wish to take the Citizenship test.

Literacy at the Orchard Place site of Rushton comes under the programme area Skills for Life, which also encompasses English and Maths up to GCSE. It is closely connected to the Access courses, and runs several 'pre-Access' type courses (at Levels 1 and 2) for those not ready for Access. Many learners on Level 1 and Level 2 (and sometimes E3) literacy courses originally came to the college hoping to do GCSE or Access. The majority of learners in this department are bilingual, many being of Bangladeshi or Somali origin or heritage.

#### **Enrolment and placement at Rushton College**

The first three days of enrolment are for returning learners or for learners who have been assessed previously and are on the waiting list (called closed enrolment). Therefore there is no testing during this phase and the task of enrollers is to place learners in a class at a time which suits them. Some people spend long periods of time on the waiting list, despite Rushton's best efforts to accommodate all of their applicants in the year they apply.

On the open enrolment days, the first prospective learners arrive at 5.30 am. The queue is already long by 8.30 am, and fills the pavement outside the building. The task of allocating the tickets and controlling the crowd has been given to senior managers, who go up and down the queue asking if anyone has come to enrol on 16–19 courses or on Access courses. These people are fast-tracked through the queue because the 16–19 learners are always found a place and the Access courses have significant vacancies. The rest of the queue are a mixture of ESOL and Basic Skills learners. The managers seem to make very quick judgements about whether learners are ESOL or literacy, based on a very brief interaction. They have to do a certain amount of troubleshooting on queue duty too. People are angry and frustrated when they are told they have to come back later in the day. There are frequent appeals for translators: 'Anyone here speak Hindi?' 'Anyone speak this woman's language?' and a lot of on-the-spot interpreting.

Enrolment is a major operation at Rushton; everyone is involved and all areas of the college are used for a different part of the enrolment process. A large part of the process is bureaucratic, as learners need to have their immigration status verified and their fee status worked out. The enrolling teachers have to negotiate times of courses with learners. The main issues are for people who work and women with children.

#### *ESOL enrolment at Rushton*

The first difference between enrolment for ESOL and enrolment for literacy is the greater number of ESOL applicants who have to be tested and enrolled. First the learners fill out their application forms and have their status assessed. This avoids any learners being unnecessarily tested if they are not eligible for classes. They then do a reading and a writing test. The score from the reading test places the learners in a particular level. This is then confirmed, or disconfirmed by the piece of writing, this judgement being made by the enrolling teachers. The learners are then interviewed. At this point the enrolling teachers are also listening for their learners' oral level to help them decide which is the most appropriate

group. A lot of the enrolment time is taken up not so much by negotiating levels but trying to find suitable timetables for learners who are working or who have childcare issues.

### **Vignette 3: Shajma**

A Bangladeshi woman, Shajma, is enrolling on an ESOL course. She has been in the UK for 27 years. Her husband is mixed heritage Bengali/English and speaks English as his first language. Her children were all born in the UK and speak English at home. She is very fluent and speaks with few errors. Her test shows her to be Entry 3A literacy (on the ESOL literacy strand which runs parallel to straight ESOL). She says she needs help with her writing for her job. She works as a nursery assistant in a private nursery, and is often asked to write reports, which she feels unable to do and asks others to do for her. Next year she wants to do a childcare qualification. She speaks Bengali, Hindi and Urdu and is literate in Bengali. At one point the enrolling tutor considers sending her to enrol on a literacy course, but instead takes advice from another tutor, who says she should enrol onto an ESOL for Study course as her writing is 'not that bad.' Finally she finds a timetable which suits her work hours and is enrolled onto ESOL E3.

#### *Literacy enrolment at Rushton*

Testing and placement for literacy learners takes place in the learning centre. The literacy team leader first asks them what they are here for: 'Are you here for literacy? English? Reading and writing?'. At this stage she is trying to identify people who she believes should be in the ESOL department. She asks what people are looking for, and stresses continually that these courses 'concentrate on reading and writing [and not on] speaking and listening, because that is ESOL'. The learners in this queue say 'I want English pre-GCSE', 'I want literacy pre-GCSE', 'I want English and Maths'. All of them are bilingual, and dominant in languages other than English. They are tested through writing a paragraph ('why I want to study') and an interview followed by a writing test at a level ranging from E2 to L2. At the same time as learners are being tested for their literacy levels, groups of learners are brought through the centre to test their suitability for GCSE English and Access. Those who are not deemed ready for these two courses are usually sent to do literacy and numeracy in the Skills for Life department. The enrolment therefore consists of a lot of negotiating, and sometimes arguing, with learners about their level.

### **Vignette 4: Shamina**

Shamina is enrolling in the literacy department. She is from Bangladesh and has been in London for five years. She says that in Bangladesh she went to university and worked as a teacher. When she arrived she spoke no English at all. She was brought here to get married and suffered a lot of depression when she arrived. She speaks English very fluently and expresses herself very well, but makes many grammatical errors. She is currently working in a nursery as a volunteer and wishes to do childcare qualifications. She has recently completed an ESOL E3 childcare course and now says she wants to improve her English and Maths so she can do a better childcare qualification. She arrives at enrolment saying she wants to do 'pre GCSE'.

She does the first part of the assessment and is then interviewed by one of the literacy tutors. She is unsure about Shamina's writing and confers with the literacy manager, who says that Shamina has 'problems with fossilisation' pointing specifically to the structure in her writing assessment where she has written 'I am disagree'. She tells the tutor that if Shamina has already done an Entry 3 ESOL class then she will be at one level lower in literacy, so should be enrolled on an Entry 3 literacy course.

## 2.3 Summary

The decisions made at enrolment, rather than the technical process of enrolment and placement at each individual college, are the concern of this study. In particular, the interest is in the decisions relating to learners whose status is somewhat ambiguous. These are learners who are bilingual and who may have well-developed English language skills (particularly fluency), but who still have a language need, be it an oral or a literacy need, or both. Such learners, as we have seen from the vignettes, may find themselves in a literacy or an ESOL class. To be sure, a learner's language need is not the only factor determining whether they follow a particular route through their learning: many other factors impinge, as shown later.

A number of questions arise from the observations of the placement practices at the two colleges.

- Why is a learner who has studied in English in their home country, and who has lived and worked in England for a number of years, placed in an ESOL or an ESOL literacy class rather than a literacy class?
- Why is a learner who is fluent in English and who is exposed to English at home placed in an ESOL class rather than a literacy class, while another learner from a similar background, but less fluent and exposed to less English, finds herself placed on a literacy course?
- How appropriate would a literacy class oriented towards monolingual English-speaking learners be for a bilingual learner who is a recent arrival in the UK?
- Does the ambiguous status of some learners in the vignettes serve to draw attention to the complexity behind the more or less settled distinctions between ESOL and literacy?
- These questions, and others like them, shaped the subsequent direction of this study after the initial observation phase.

### 3 Established positions and the challenge of superdiversity

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'Them adverts were really good, especially with gremlins. It does make you think actually, don't it? when somebody says to you, 'Oh, will you just write this out?' and you get sweaty and everything, and you think, 'I don't even know how to spell it and I don't'. It's like he's with me but when you're in a situation where he in't, I get palpitations, I really do. I really do. I start getting sweats an' ... when you get that gremlin you think, 'Cor, he's comin'. [Laughs] He's on his way.'

(Literacy learner at Cranshaw College)

T: Now we're getting bilingual and multilingual learners.

T: Because we're getting this blurring, [with learners] who can communicate and sort of make themselves understood, but then it's the written English...the grammar.

T: So they are actually literacy and ESOL learners together, aren't they? You know maybe the old distinction doesn't exist any more.

(ESOL and literacy teachers in discussion at Rushton College)

Section 3 is concerned with existing conceptions of ESOL and literacy, and how the presence of large numbers of bilingual learners with literacy and broader language needs poses a challenge to these established positions. Bilingualism, and bilingual and multilingual literacy practices, present ESOL and literacy with a fundamental problem. That is, how far should the two domains be understood separately, given that in daily life, as Martin-Jones and Jones (2001) say, language use and literacy practices among migrants to a country will inevitably be multilingual? The first quote at the top of this page is designed to draw attention to the general way in which literacy is understood as quite separate from ESOL by many teachers, learners and managers at both Cranshaw and Rushton colleges, and the second shows how teachers recognise a diverse group which challenges the established position. The first two sections of Section 3 deal with these themes. The third section looks at ways in which teachers and managers talk about the distinction between ESOL and literacy.

#### 3.1 Established positions

In the two colleges, Rushton and Cranshaw, there is a prevailing initial position regarding ESOL and literacy in which the two areas of Skills for Life provision are seen as fundamentally

different and distinct from one another. As an ESOL coordinator at Rushton says, in terms of college structures, ESOL and literacy are 'completely separate really'.

Interviewees from the Principal through to managers, teachers and student services staff at Cranshaw find the difference between ESOL and literacy provision to be an unproblematic distinction which rests on whether prospective learners fall one side or the other of a native speaker/second language speaker divide. Literacy provision is regarded as being for native speakers of English, despite the problematic nature of the concept of the 'native speaker' (Rampton 1990), while ESOL is for people whose dominant language is not English. The example of learners' first encounters with Student Services exemplifies this stance. Learners at Cranshaw often make their first contact with the college through Student Services. The staff therefore have to make an initial judgement about whether to refer prospective learners to the literacy or the ESOL sections. These brief exchanges are largely subjective assessments which reflect the assumptions of individual decision-makers. They are also therefore an important context for exploring how people in institutions develop ideas about bilingual learners and for considering how such ideas may be linked to notions of 'other' places (Said 1978).

Student Services staff appeal to a general notion of 'foreignness' to make a judgement about a learner's placement: the basis upon which the decision is made is whether the person who has contacted the college is from abroad, or has a non-English accent. If they are seen as obviously a 'foreign student', the decision is made that they will be referred to ESOL (referred to by the name of the college ESOL coordinator, Elena) because literacy classes (coordinated by Lynne) are not for them:

- A: Because even if somebody says they want written English, if a foreign student, they're better off with ESOL. [...] And then they get English language as well as the written, which is handy.
- B: I can usually work it out from, obviously, how the person is speaking. If they are actually speaking bad, broken English you know that they just don't stand a chance with Lynne, it's obviously Elena's group that we need to send them to, and then, obviously, if we're wrong then Elena would refer them to Lynne.

While these judgements do not dictate where learners are finally placed, they are important for considering the basis on which decisions are being made.

Members of staff throughout Cranshaw have a view of literacy provision which is firmly positioned in a traditional Basic Skills model; thus ESOL and literacy provision are clearly differentiated. In the student prospectus for the college, distributed as a tabloid freesheet in the local area, Skills for Life literacy and numeracy are advertised thus: 'We have courses to help you get to grips with some of the basics such as reading and writing English and Maths.' This section of the prospectus is illustrated with a 'Gremlin' from the advertising campaign to encourage adults to attend literacy and numeracy classes. Student Services staff refer to literacy as 'Lynne's side', Lynne being the literacy coordinator at the college, and make reference to the 'Gremlins' and to 'her bit in the paper' (i.e. the prospectus):

- A: And I always tend to see Lynne's side as being, ... like her bit in the paper, it's the gremlins, isn't it?

B: It's the gremlins. It's improving the English that you've already got, isn't it?

A: It's people who for ... one reason or another... haven't learnt to read and write properly in school. Older people. I see it as the gremlin plan, you know, the advert things.

Likewise, literacy provision is seen as being for monolingual English speakers by teachers. Here an ESOL tutor at Cranshaw, describes his understanding of literacy and literacy provision:

'For people whose first language was English ... Yes, perhaps people who haven't necessarily been successful in mainstream school. And as adults wanted to try and upgrade themselves and give a bit more attention to developing their first language skills. That's how I understood literacy classes.'

In contrast, the initial position at Rushton is more complex, reflecting the obvious reality of diversity in the area. At the time of the 2001 census, 58 per cent of the population of the borough where the college lies belonged to an ethnic group other than 'White British'. A third of the population were Bangladeshi, and 7 per cent came from African/Caribbean backgrounds. With bilingualism being so much the norm in the catchment area of the college, the possibility of sorting ESOL and literacy learners out along lines which are at least initially as easily defined as native speaker/non-native speaker of English becomes difficult. For example it is not an established institutional position to consider literacy classes as being solely or even mainly for monolingual learners.

The challenge to established positions regarding ESOL and literacy are illustrated by this portrait of Ismail, a learner at Rushton College.

#### **Ismail's story**

Ismail is from Somalia and has been in the UK for 12 years, since his early teens. His spoken English is fluent, and he speaks with a Somali-London accent, marked by the glottalisation typical of London youth vernacular (Harris 2006). He mixes in a multicultural, multilingual group of young people, using English as a lingua franca.

Ismail had an interrupted education in Somalia due to the civil war. The only school which stayed open was the madrasah, where he acquired an amount of liturgical literacy (Rosowsky 2001) through the recitation of Qu'ranic Arabic. His initial experience in England was difficult because he spoke hardly any English and wrote none. However, within a year his English was fluent and he left school with 4 GCSEs, although the teachers had not been optimistic about his chances:

I: Some of the teachers ... were predicting me like I'm not going to leave with no grades. My head of year. For the first of all they were saying this guy is going to leave with no grades. And he was shocked. Four GCSEs. [Laughs]

M: Right. So the teachers were wrong?

I: Yeah they was, yeah. Big time.

After Ismail left school he had many problems with his family and with homelessness. He had casual jobs but nothing stable and was unable to find a fixed place to live until recently.

Being housed means he can now concentrate on getting the skills he needs to do something different in his life. The catalyst for him deciding to go back to study came when he signed up to do voluntary work for the mental health charity Mind. He is currently working on a project which is researching the experiences and needs of the Somali community in the mental health system. As part of this project the team has to write a report, which has been one of the pushes he needed to bring him back into education:

'my writing was worse, and my spelling was worse as well. So I thought to myself, yeah, if you keep like this you are going to get worse, so you might as well study now.'

When Ismail contacted Rushton College for the first time he asked for English classes, and said he wanted to work on his spelling and writing. He was directed initially to the ESOL department who had a lot of difficulty placing him:

M: And they were saying that you were too high for their levels?

I: Yeah, that's what they were saying, the teacher. He was ... saying, yeah, 'I have, like, four or five different classes, and he was...all these classes, you can be in them now but I think you are too high for them. So you're not going to be in lower classes. ... When I find you a suitable place I will let you know.' And after a couple of months they did.

Ismail now has several ideas of what he wants to do. He would like to do higher study but says he will concentrate first on doing GCSE English and Maths, and then 'see how things go from there'. He would also like to continue working in the field of social and community work, especially with the people from the Somali community: 'my community needs people to work with them... and at the end of the day you're helping your people and other people as well.'

What might be considered appropriate provision for learners like Ismail? Ismail was eventually enrolled in an Entry 3 ESOL literacy class in the ESOL department. Could he have equally been placed in the literacy department, given that he has several characteristics of a literacy learner, for example a difficult experience of the UK school system and a big gap between speaking skills and literacy? Or is he better placed in an ESOL class where the focus of provision encompasses oral skills? Would the largely functional literacy syllabus suit Ismail? Or will the broader work done in the ESOL class which has a citizenship syllabus strand suit him better? And beyond how Ismail might be placed correctly or not within current ESOL or literacy provision, perhaps the difficulty lies with the structures of ESOL and literacy as they are currently conceived. What is clear is that Ismail, and many other learners like him, raise questions about the boundary between ESOL and literacy to the extent that the appropriacy and stability of the two notions themselves are in question.

### 3.2 Bilingual learners: A challenge to fixed conceptions of ESOL and literacy

The traditional distinction between ESOL for second or other language speakers on the one hand and literacy for UK-born English speakers on the other is challenged by the emergence of a very diverse group of learners who fit neither ESOL nor literacy provision comfortably, bilingual learners with literacy needs but also general language needs. These more general language needs are evidenced by difficulties learners experience in spoken as well as written

English; their language production would probably be recognised by English language teachers as that of learners of English as a second or other language.

There is a growing appreciation within institutions of the existence of this group of learners who fall into a grey area between ESOL and literacy, learners who could, in the words of an ESOL manager at Rushton: 'quite easily be here or there'. In this section we examine ways in which teachers and managers describe these learners who are on the boundary. These are the people who ultimately have to decide where these learners would be best placed. Most often, managers and teachers present the learners and their needs as problematic, that is, they are described as having to fit either ESOL or literacy. Some managers and teachers, however, raise the possibility of adjusting institutional structures to accommodate the diverse group of learners with language and literacy needs.

Managers and teachers alike acknowledge that these learners are problematic because of their language needs. For example, a manager at Rushton describes how such learners are recognised, but not catered for within the literacy department. Instead they are referred to the ESOL department: 'I think there are people who would say, "Ooh, that's that kind of person, you know, push them over there" maybe, or "they're an ESOL learner, I don't know what to do with them'. The question is whether that learner should be placed in a literacy or an ESOL class. In other words, the learner is obliged to conform to the existing structures. Before considering the question of structural adjustment, we can turn to how teachers and managers talk about the learners who are on the ESOL/literacy boundary. How do they describe the difference between a bilingual literacy learner and an ESOL learner at a similar level?

When teachers and managers consider the varying characteristics of (bilingual) literacy and ESOL learners, the ways of describing the differences are fine-grained, and tend to appeal both to linguistic knowledge and other types of knowledge. At Rushton oral fluency is an important distinction: 'So, I think people in the team would say that they [prospective literacy learners] have to be reasonably fluent.' At Cranshaw oral fluency also emerges as a prime distinction. An ESOL coordinator describes how she decides whether a bilingual learner should join a literacy class:

'if their sentence structures are sound, ... if their vocab choices are there and if they sound like they're comfortable in their language, then I would I would generally think that they were, you know, a literacy student.'

When linguistic proficiency alone does not enable a clear distinction to be made, cultural and citizenship skills and knowledge come into play. ESOL learners are generally considered to lack certain kinds of non-linguistic knowledge that literacy learners possess. The literacy coordinator at Rushton summarises the differences between literacy and ESOL learners which do not relate to narrowly defined linguistic competence:

'they're not just fluent, but they have an understanding of, you know, how things work, ... and they, sort of, can make themselves understood, they can get around in the community. Whereas, an ESOL learner, if you think of the spectrum, may not have those ... sorts of skills that lead to citizenship, those ... sort of access skills and how to make a hospital appointment, how to go to the doctor, how to do all that kind of thing. So a literacy student will have all those kind of skills and be fluent, and then that would be your starting point. I guess if I were to ask the team that, I think that's what they would say.'



The non-linguistic factors which are mentioned by managers in Cranshaw are whether someone was born in the country, whether they have spent large amounts of time in their parents' country of birth, whether their upbringing has been characterised by spending periods of time in the UK and other countries, their educational and schooling background, their knowledge of British culture. A picture emerges of a complex set of decisions that are based on experience and personal judgement that go beyond the question of oral accuracy and fluency.

An ESOL coordinator and tutor at Cranshaw describes different learners in the 16–19 programme at the college, the most obvious class at the college where learners' status as either literacy or ESOL learners is not clear. On this programme, these learners spend some time in a dedicated ESOL class, and the rest of their programme in other classes such as ICT, Interview skills, Business, and Health and Safety. In terms of ESOL level, they range from Pre-Entry to 'low Entry 3'. The teacher describes the group as being 'bordered between' ESOL and literacy, and makes distinctions along cultural and social, as well as linguistic lines, between groups of learners. These distinctions are based on her observations of learners demonstrating and asserting their prior knowledge.

T: On the 16 to 19 programme, we were bordering literacy and ESOL at points when we were teaching them. And it was very difficult in the class actually teaching them because some had complete ESOL need but some bordered between the two. So there was always this ganging up, 'Oh we know that. You don't know that' with the prior knowledge and so on. So it can be quite difficult.

Researcher: When you say they had an ESOL need, you're talking in terms of oral skills?

T: Yeah, oral and cultural, social skills as well. They've never lived in the country so they weren't aware of things, whereas the other person, although they may have been born here, they're native to this country, they've moved back and forth countries, so there's a difference there as well.

These learners who 'border between' ESOL and literacy present a challenge to teachers. A tutor at Cranshaw explains how one particular group of literacy learners did not conform to her well-established idea of the type of learner she would expect to find in a literacy class. The learners she talks about are all from Pakistani backgrounds.

'And the first year that I came here, I was asked to do literacy. So I did literacy. And one of the classes that I had in the community was called a literacy class, but it was full of Asian women. So, I found that really hard to take on board that this was a literacy class. Why wasn't it entitled ESOL? Because there was a mixture of women there. They weren't all British-born. ... most of them were from Pakistan with maybe one or two who were British-born, and had had some kind of education here, but it hadn't been continuous because they'd been taken out of school or they'd spent quite long spells in Pakistan.'

It transpired that these learners were on a literacy course because their ultimate goal was to join a course to train as a classroom assistant, which had a Level 2 literacy qualification as a prerequisite requirement. The tutor's confusion about these learners' status may have had at its root a prevalent view of literacy which does not encompass bilingual learners.

The differences between an ESOL learner and a bilingual literacy learner are often so finely nuanced that a decision where a learner belongs lies at a level of subtlety beyond fluency and cultural knowledge. A bilingual student advice and guidance officer at Rushton describes his knowledge of the difference between ESOL and literacy learners as intuitive. He is a key gatekeeper at the college, the first point of contact, advice, and placement. As such, he helps determine institutional positions on ESOL and literacy in relation to one another. The make-up of the classes is partly defined by advice and guidance staff as they do the initial referral of learners to particular areas of provision. In making his decisions, the advice and guidance officer appeals to experience and to intuition. And while his notion of the distinction between the two curriculum areas is at least partly a 'native speaker' versus 'foreigner' distinction, he also appeals to an idea of relative level of effectiveness in oral communication. When asked how he decides whether a bilingual learner needs ESOL or literacy provision, he replies:

'Well essentially it is whether or not they can communicate effectively or not given the language skills. For example we have got some people whose communication skills are not that great but they are native speakers, you know. But I couldn't tell you how but I know, I know if they need ... literacy, or as I said if there are any doubts, then we refer them to ESOL.'

At the level of institutional structure, certain things are done to cater for the groups of learners who fit neither ESOL nor literacy as they are currently conceived. In one case, the issue is resolved by allowing the learner to attend both a literacy and an ESOL class, as this ESOL manager at Rushton says:

'I mean we've resolved it in an interesting way, haven't we, with a couple of learners recently, in that they are accessing their ESOL course and they're accessing the literacy programme. So ... they have got one foot in each department. I'll be interested to see how that's actually working out. Because that's new, isn't it, for us to do that.'

This is clearly not an ideal or sustainable solution. Yet it gives a sense of how colleges are now in a position where they have to respond to the growing diversity of their Skills for Life learner populations.

ESOL and literacy teachers at Cranshaw accept that advanced level ESOL learners might find literacy provision appropriate. This leads to an articulation of the fundamental differences between two different populations of literacy learner: bilingual learners, perhaps with a schooled or literate background; and monolingual UK-born learners with adult literacy needs:

T: Because I said I thought literacy classes were perhaps for people who hadn't necessarily succeeded at school, and as adults they wanted to upgrade their developing language.

H: That is true. You're talking about native speakers. I was just talking about ESOL. ESOL students. They would class them as literacy students if they had a speaking language.

T: Which is quite high.

H: Quite high, yeah.

T: Quite advanced.

- H: They would transfer them into literacy. But I agree with you. Literacy is more for students who haven't done as well at school, but now need to.
- T: Like two perceptions because if your language has become so advanced with working at Level 1/Level 2 ESOL that you can converse using idiomatic phraseology, and you are almost as first language, then perhaps the literacy level at GCSE ... If your first and only language is English, then if you're an adult you've probably struggled at school. And I'm probably thinking of Basic Skills education for that kind of person. Whereas somebody who is being educated with English as their second language, and is at Level 1 or 2, I think it's a very different kind of student. Totally different.

The teachers have an understanding that the needs of the two groups of learners are not the same and might have to be met in very different ways.

At Cranshaw, although there is not a strong history of bilingual learners on literacy courses, bilingual learners with a literacy need do exist, and do occasionally find their way onto such courses. The literacy coordinator has bilingual learners who she describes as 'a couple of ESOL students' in her community-based literacy and numeracy class:

'... so they do both literacy and numeracy. [...] And it's quite interesting, teaching numeracy skills, particularly at Level 1, when the students, I feel, haven't quite got the language skills to go along with that. I mean luckily I've two students who can speak to each other in their first language. ... There's a little bit of banter between them and it's interesting because if they translate it into ... the language that they know and ... understand the numeracy in those terms, then they find it easier.'

These learners seem to have developed strategies based around the use of their expert language in class to cope with the language demands (not the numeracy demands) of the numeracy course that they are on.

At Rushton there is long experience of catering for bilingual learners within literacy provision. As noted above, fluency in English is the main criterion for allowing bilingual learners into literacy classes. Literacy teachers expect to be able to hold a conversation with their learners, even at very low levels: 'you'd still expect the E1s to be able to hold a conversation with you with ease.' By this criterion, this makes learners eligible for literacy classes if their expert variety of English is some variety of British English, along with bi-dialectal or Creole speakers of English, and fluent speakers of English who were not brought up in English-speaking households, whether or not they are migrants to the UK. As the literacy manager says:

'And we do get a lot of Bengalis, a lot of our students are bilingual. So, English is maybe not their first language, it may be their second or third language, and that's why we say in the literacy department that we want people to have a reasonable amount of fluency.'

It is notable that nothing is said about oral accuracy here, which perhaps helps to explain why the accuracy of English among bilingual learners in literacy classes presents an unresolved problem for literacy teachers at Rushton.

On the other hand the literacy needs of bilingual learners in the ESOL department at Rushton have been explicitly addressed. Here, in common with many other London colleges, an 'ESOL literacy' strand exists alongside the ESOL provision within the ESOL department. Thus

learners with similar needs might enrol on either a literacy or an ESOL literacy course at Rushton. That is, a parallel system operates at the college, with ESOL literacy (in the ESOL department) on the one hand, and literacy (in the literacy and numeracy department) on the other. And to return to the question of the differences between literacy and ESOL learners, bilingual learners with similar needs can be found in each area of provision. As an ESOL tutor at Rushton says: 'Because we could be doing completely parallel courses. ... And I suspect it's probably more similar than you think.' Whether there should be very different provision in different departments for learners with very similar needs is open to question. It is certainly a situation faced by many colleges today.

The grey area between ESOL and literacy is illustrated here by Sadia, who has studied in both an ESOL and a literacy department at different colleges.

### **Sadia's story**

Sadia is 29, and has lived with her husband and two young children in a small town just north of Cranshaw College for six years. She was born in the UK but was taken to Iraq 'my original country' by her parents at 18 days old. She lived and did her university studies in Libya, and came to the UK after graduation. She speaks Arabic with her children at home, and they sometimes respond in English. She is planning to send them to an Arabic Saturday school.

Sadia is a qualified civil engineer, but has no work experience. She says she really needs to get a job; she studied hard to get qualified but has been unable to look for work because of bringing up her young children. She and her husband see their lack of fluency in English as a real barrier to gaining employment. She is also considering returning to university to do a higher degree. Her main English language needs, as she sees them, are speaking and listening. She says how she struggles when talking to the doctor or to her children's teachers, yet she is articulate and clear in her speech.

Her first experience of study in the UK was not a good one; last year she attended a large college in another town nearby. She asked for an English class there and was enrolled onto a Level 1 literacy class:

'Actually, I went to that college. I ask them for English class and they ... did test for me and they decided I'm in Level 1 literacy class. So I did ... I don't know why they put me in literacy not E-S-O-L, yeah.'

The literacy class was wrong, in her opinion, for many reasons: there was a focus on individual learning, when Sadia wanted to learn as part of a group; there was no emphasis on speaking or listening, when this is what she wanted; and crucially she did not identify with the other learners in the class:

'And they ... were good in speaking and listening, they...most of them born in England and, you know, live only life ... their life ...[whole life in England...]

These learners had quite different needs from her; they were there because they 'wanted to complete their study, GCSE and A Level', said Sadia, while she wanted to learn to speak in a class of fellow non-native learners. She stayed the year, passed the Level 1 literacy exam, and enrolled at Cranshaw College the following year. When she contacted Cranshaw College, she asked specifically for an ESOL course, and is now studying in a Level 1 ESOL class.

For Sadia, literacy provision was not appropriate for a number of complex reasons, and she eventually identified herself as an ESOL learner. But her decision was based more on her unhappy experience in a literacy class than any easily determined institutional idea of where she should be placed.

### 3.3 Addressing the distinction between ESOL and literacy

In interviews for this study, literacy and ESOL teachers and managers considered the distinction between ESOL and literacy. They were asked what the difficulties surrounding the differences between the subject areas are, and what can be done to address them for learners for whom the sharpness of the distinction between ESOL and literacy is not obvious.

Teachers recognise that there is an overlap at Rushton, and to rather less an extent at Cranshaw, between bilingual learners in literacy and in ESOL classes in terms of their oral and written competence in English. Yet institutionally there is very little overlap. Moreover, because ESOL and literacy are two different programme areas, the learners are always positioned in opposition: they are either literacy learners or ESOL learners. For a large and growing number of learners in metropolitan and urban centres, this distinction is not a valid one. During a group interview with ESOL and literacy teachers at Rushton these comments were made which highlight how some learners could be studying in either area of provision, while at the same time there is little institutional crossover:

'Also, we seem to be talking about, you know, there has to be a choice between them being in the ESOL department or the literacy department, and I've always thought it's a bit funny that there's so much overlap between those two departments – there's differences as well, obviously – but loads of overlap, but in fact in real day-to-day time terms, there's no overlap. As far as I as a teacher on the ground sees, we don't link up very much at all. And so for a student, we are talking about will they be in one or will they be in the other.'

Literacy classes, as teachers recognise, contain bilingual learners who are not English-dominant language users: 'I mean in your literacy classes you have people from all over the place.' And as is stressed elsewhere, teachers recognise that the same learner could find him- or herself in the literacy or the ESOL department.

'I'm pretty convinced that at some of the E3 levels we have students that could easily be in either class. ... I mean, we can't experiment with them. ... But if we did actually just put them in another class ... it's so tempting. Because it would just be our perceptions that would alter. They wouldn't actually alter. They'd be the same students in a different place.'

So what, according to teachers, can be done to address the issue? Various possibilities were explored during interviews. The clearest point was the need for cooperation between ESOL and literacy: 'I think maybe we do need this cooperation between programme areas.' Beyond this, a number of other suggestions arose.

One tutor recounts an anecdote about a learner who attends both a literacy and an ESOL class, followed by a comment from another tutor about the practical difficulties of adopting

this approach. For the learner who is attending both a literacy and an ESOL class, the experiences of each class are different but equally enjoyable.

T1: If they need to improve their oracy and it also might be appropriate for them to be doing focused work on their reading and writing, and that was appropriate for them to be in literacy, why would it be such a mad thing [Laughs] for them to be accessing both departments? And there is a student who is doing that. When I was chatting to him, he doesn't see it at all... Because I was wanting to ask him, you know, what are the differences and all that stuff, and it was completely inappropriate for him because ... it's not difference. It's, this is my class here and this is my other class and I enjoy them both, and they're...you know, there's a bit of different experience.

T2: I disagree. I should think that would be a timetabling nightmare.

One senior manager mentioned a model of language provision for bilingual learners which had been in place at her college some years previously, a system of providing language teaching across the curriculum, whereby language support was integrated into main-stream vocational provision:

'And we worked on integrated language support, embedded in the vocational or academic curriculum for full time, young students from other continents, most of whom had recently arrived as opposed to having been born here. But over a period of time, obviously, it was for the people who were being born and bred here, but of Pakistani origin. So our focus for many years was in relation to that, the needs of young adults, studying full time in the FE curriculum.'

This Language Across the Curriculum model in the guise of embedded ESOL provision would be recognisable to many ESOL teachers and managers today.

The most radical idea mentioned was to dispense with the distinction between ESOL and literacy after Entry 3 altogether, and replace it with 'literacy for all' lessons. One group of teachers discussed the hypothetical possibility of a literacy and an ESOL teacher team-teaching a unified group of learners who had formerly been studying in the ESOL and literacy programme areas:

'I think, that ... there would be a group, right, and it's called E3, and me and T share this group. They're our group. And I teach the speaking and the grammar aspect – because he doesn't like grammar – and he would focus on the reading and writing. And that doesn't mean he doesn't do any speaking and listening in it, because that's part of it, you know, they're going to have a chat before they write something, but his focus is going to be the literacy, and I will still do a bit of literacy but my focus will be their speaking and listening.'

There are, of course, difficulties with placing monolingual English-dominant literacy learners in classes together with bilingual learners. In addition to differing learning needs (discussed in Section 4) there may be cultural barriers and prejudices to overcome. Teachers here discuss such difficulties, which are current concerns in literacy classes with mixed groups of monolingual and bilingual learners.

T: I had literacy classes ... and they were for native speakers with ... second language speakers, and they didn't like it.

M: And why did they not?

T: They... felt demeaned, I suppose. ... I mean I don't think that their attitude was a good one, but that's how they felt, perhaps. I think perhaps that's how they felt.

J: If you see it from your point of view, and you're learning a language, and if you already spoke the language but wanted to learn to read and write, ... you might not resent the other people, but you might think, 'This isn't quite what I need because I don't want to do this part of the lesson.'

From a pedagogic perspective, learners would not ideally be made to fit into either an ESOL or a literacy class if neither were quite the right place for them. But some factors appear to work against such a learner-centred approach. These include: internal organisational structures; professional boundaries and separate histories between ESOL and literacy; gaps in teachers' own knowledge of English as a subject; the learners' own beliefs about what topic they should be studying; and national policy regarding ESOL and literacy. The current learning infrastructure works both for and against diversity and cross-fertilisation between ESOL and literacy provision in that it includes both a core curriculum for literacy which includes speaking and listening, and a specifically designed ESOL core curriculum. There is an opportunity to see how, separately and together, the two curricula can support bilingual learners with literacy needs and where further development of the learning infrastructure is needed.

### 3.4 Summary

Learners like Sadia and Ismail, whose stories were told here in Section 3, clearly present a challenge for Skills for Life providers. Both learners are studying in ESOL classes, but both could equally have found themselves in a literacy class. Sadia spent a year in a literacy class and Ismail had experience of secondary education in England. The questions that arise from this section are:

- How do a large group of bilingual learners with a literacy need fit into current structures of ESOL or literacy provision?
- Can ESOL and literacy as they are currently understood actually cater for such learners' needs?
- Should the distinction between ESOL and literacy be reassessed?

We consider this last question in more detail in the next section, with reference to bilingual learners in literacy classes, their language needs, and the learning focus of their literacy lessons.

## 4 Language needs and learning focus of bilingual learners in literacy classes

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In Section 4 the focus is on literacy classes, and on the bilingual learners who are in these classes. Skills for Life literacy provision is a key concern of this project because so many bilingual learners with language learning needs either are placed in, or aspire to joining, a literacy class. This section raises questions concerning training for literacy teachers in supporting the learning needs of bilingual literacy learners. Furthermore, questions are also asked of the adequacy of the structures 'ESOL' and 'literacy' as they are currently conceived for bilingual learners at Entry 3 and Level 1.

First the substance of pedagogy, the focus of learning in adult literacy lessons, is under discussion. How is the subject literacy understood by those charged with teaching it? What does it encompass, and what does it exclude? Second, we ask how far literacy teaching as understood by Skills for Life practitioners meets the learning needs of bilingual learners in literacy classes. How far has literacy as a subject area kept pace with the needs of a super-diverse multilingual learning population? And finally, the language knowledge needed by literacy teachers with bilingual learners in their classes is in question. Has the training need encompassing language education for such teachers yet been fully met?

### 4.1 The learning focus of literacy lessons

Very broadly speaking, there are two current perspectives on literacy learning that are relevant to this study. The first has an understanding of literacy as plural, situated and contextualised social practices (e.g. Barton, Hamilton and Ivanič 2000; Baynham 1995; Street 1993). Proponents maintain that if adopted in teaching, the benefit of this 'literacy practices' approach is that it enables, even obliges teachers to take into account – and draw from – learners' lives and learning purposes in their planning and teaching. The NRDC has published a guide for practitioners on using a social practices approach (Appleby and Barton 2007). The second view is an established or traditional 'skills-based' approach to literacy which is evident from the initial inception of Skills for Life and the Moser report (DfEE 1999), through to the adult literacy core curriculum and on to the Leitch Review (2006). It is, for example, the approach underpinning this well-known quote from Moser (DfEE 1999):

Some 7 million adults in England – one in five adults – if given the alphabetical index to the Yellow Pages, cannot locate the page reference for plumbers. That is an example of functional illiteracy. It means that one in five adults has less literacy than is expected of an 11-year-old child.



And the national standards for adult literacy, as laid out in the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum (DfES online) state:

Literacy covers the ability to:

- speak, listen and respond
- read and comprehend
- write to communicate.

Amongst ESOL and literacy teachers in this study there is a general distinction made between the pedagogic focus of literacy lessons and that of ESOL: in a literacy class the emphasis is on reading and writing; in an ESOL class, teachers concentrate on speaking and listening. In addition, while descriptions of literacy are usually couched in functional and skills-based terms, allusion in descriptions of ESOL provision is often made to speaking and to the broader learning of 'culture'. Here an ESOL tutor at Rushton describes how she would describe the difference between an ESOL and a literacy class to a bilingual learner. An unchallenging and unproblematic decision is presented:

'And at the end of the day you ... can say to them, "Well if you are going to do a literacy [class] you are going to be working on your reading and writing ... predominantly. If you feel that you need to do ... quite a lot of work on your speaking then ... you need to choose an ESOL class because you'll be doing more ... spoken work".'

For a teacher at Cranshaw, ESOL teaching involves the teaching of vocabulary, and is topic-based and even culture-based. In contrast, literacy teaching is viewed on a functional if not technical level:

'But it's more that you're ... teaching the topic [in an ESOL lesson] and they're learning the language by the back door sometimes ... but you are often teaching the vocabulary that underpins the rest of the learning. Whereas, with the literacy ... you don't need to cover that. And I think [with ESOL] you teach the topic. You teach the whole culture background of the topic rather than you teach commas.'

These ideas of what the different areas of provision actually look like perhaps reflects teachers' assumptions about what learners are bringing to the class in terms of foundational or background knowledge of a topic. Yet as we saw in Section 3, learners with very similar backgrounds might find themselves in an ESOL or a literacy class. Nevertheless the approach to pedagogy is not seen as being similar in each case. Here a manager at Cranshaw explains that literacy learners can be expected to have some prior knowledge, perhaps cultural knowledge, while ESOL learners cannot, and this affects the approach to teaching in each case.

'I think with the ESOL you can't presume that they already know it. With the literacy you can go in and teach something with them having some kind of prior knowledge of what you are going to teach. ... With the ESOL you can't. You have to have complete... from the foundation you have to check that they have some kind of prior knowledge of this and then work through whatever you are going to teach.'

While it is well-established in other NRDC research that there is a diverse range of approaches to literacy teaching as well as to ESOL teaching in England (Grief et al. 2007;

Baynham, Roberts et al. 2007), literacy teachers at both Rushton and Cranshaw seem to favour a functional, skills-based approach combined with a text-based approach (see Appendix: case studies 3 and 6). This approach may have been influenced by the direction taken by Skills for Life policies.

The focus of the literacy lessons is also affected by 'washback', that is, the influence on lessons of a forthcoming summative external assessment of the learners' learning. In the case of Cranshaw, literacy learners are assessed using the Skills for Life National Literacy Test. At Levels 1 and 2 the entire literacy assessment comprises a 40-item multiple choice test taken on computer. There is no assessment of learners' writing, a factor which is at odds with even the narrowest definition of literacy (having something to do with writing as well as reading). Thus there is no beneficial washback effect from the assessment into writing lessons. More worryingly, the very construct validity of this assessment as a test of literacy is in question. Teachers therefore face a tension between meeting the writing needs of their literacy learners and ensuring that the learners achieve according to a literacy assessment which has no writing, speaking or listening components.

In this next extract, a literacy teacher at Cranshaw is describing the shortcomings of the Skills for Life literacy exams at Level 1 and 2. She is bemoaning the fact that learners are not under any obligation to actually do any writing for this assessment (not an unreasonable complaint!), and that the literacy course is exam-driven. In addition her discussion allows us an insight into what she thinks learners *should* be doing:

'If students are only reading and ticking answers – if they don't know how to lay out a letter, if they don't know how to do their paragraphing, if they don't know how to write a report, if they don't know how to write in a formal register or an informal register. If they don't know all this, ... you know.'

Writing, therefore, in her definition, is about knowing how to lay out a letter, about paragraphing, about writing a report, and about learning to write in formal and informal registers, essentially a text-based approach. Among learners the crucial aspect of literacy is more narrowly defined: spelling is the key focus in English literacy: 'It's good for us to know about spelling'; 'Yeah, we write something and we can't write a spelling mistake.' This view of literacy corresponds with what this group of literacy learners focus on in their lessons:

Researcher: What...what do you actually do in this class? How are you improving?

What are you doing?

S: We're doing spelling.

S: Dictation.

S: We have separate spelling books.

S: Everyday we do a spelling test. There is a different spelling book.

S: And dictation.

S: We ... we ... we ... dictation only and words beginning with the word. So I think this is good for us.

## 4.2 The language needs of bilingual literacy learners

It is not our purpose or intention in this section or in this report more generally to criticise literacy teachers for perceived deficiencies in their teaching. The problem is more fundamental: the ideas of literacy pedagogy and of literacy itself, at institutional level, as well as at training and policy level, have not kept up with the types of learners who are coming to literacy classes. That is to say, we note the inadequacy of a training and policy framework which allows literacy to be taught, and for literacy teachers to be trained, without fully recognising the fact or needs of bilingual learners who make up the majority of many urban literacy classes. Observations and conversations with these learners and their teachers suggest that they have particular identifiable language needs, particularly in oral accuracy, syntax and lexis, which are specific to bilingual learners and which would be familiar to ESOL teachers.

A key factor emerges from the data in this study: in a literacy class the oral language learning needs of bilingual learners are not fully taken into account or catered for. This can be seen most clearly with regard to the teaching of oral communication skills. In this extract, a literacy tutor at Cranshaw describes how she explained to a bilingual learner who had been resident in the UK for a decade what the difference was between her literacy class and an ESOL class.

'So then I tried to explain to him that yes, we will be doing some kinds of discussions and debates when we are looking at projects in that area but actual conversational skills, like you would do in an ESOL class, wouldn't happen in a literacy class. And that's the difference. For example, in a literacy class, you wouldn't be practising conversation using the terms "so" and "neither", in isolation, whereas in an ESOL class you'd spend a little time talking about that. You know, "so" means "also" as well, like "so do I".'

She makes it clear to the learner that the language focus of a literacy class is not geared towards those with a (second or other) language need. This may be because there is little history of bilingual learners with a language learning need being placed in literacy classes, as is the case at Cranshaw. More crucially it may equally be attributed to a broad, though not unquestioned, assumption that literacy learners do not have a spoken language need, as is the case at Rushton. At that college, as we have seen, fluency in English is a criterion for entry onto a literacy course. As one of the literacy teachers at Rushton puts it: 'if students can talk, communicate fluently, fluently enough for the teacher...to comprehend what he or she is saying, and vice versa, I don't see any real need for the students not to be ... in a literacy course.' It seems that fluency is being conflated with accuracy, perhaps at the risk of further language fossilisation i.e. the halting of second language development despite continued second language input (Selinker and Lakshmanan 1992) and that a learner's *prima facie* fluency suggests to literacy teachers that there is no oral language need to be addressed in class.

Literacy teachers at Rushton feel that the fact that most of the learners in the literacy classes are bilingual or 'second language' lies at the root of their slow progress. This sense is borne out by recent NRDC research findings in the teaching of writing to adults. On the affective plane, bilingual learners did not gain in confidence as much as first language speakers of English (Grief et al. 2007: 36):

Learners with English as their first language felt considerably more confident about their writing at the start of their course than those for whom English was an additional language and had gained more in confidence in all three situations [writing in class, writing at home, writing at work or in a public place] by the time they completed the post-questionnaires.

Such a strong conclusion suggests that literacy classes beyond those in this study are not addressing the particular language needs of bilingual learners. But how are those needs perceived by managers, teachers and learners themselves?

A literacy manager at Rushton describes the different and possibly conflicting language needs of three different groups of literacy learners: Bengali users, users of an African-Caribbean creole, and white working-class people:

'Oh, ... I think there are issues. There are particular issues. I mean, like in the Bengali language a lot of students will write and not ... use the definite article, "They" and "the" or whatever. And with creole, you know, missing endings of the words or writing the present tense when it means the past tense, and with white working class people maybe ... writing how they speak you know.'

To be able to cater in the same class for these very different language and literacy difficulties needs a level of training in language awareness and language education that perhaps goes beyond the current requirements. For example, literacy teachers should be aware that creole languages are structured languages rather than diminished dialects (see, for example, Sebba 1997; LePage and Tabouret-Keller 1985), and that emergent varieties show structural and lexical features that are quite different from those of standard British English. It also implies a sensitive approach to differentiation whereby many various types of exercise and activity would have to be produced to cater for needs in one class. The same manager suggests that this range of difference can be met through the judicious use of the Individual Learning Plan (ILP):

'... what happens is that if, say, grammar is your particular weakness, OK, that is your particular goal on your ILP and the tutor then will make sure that they incorporate your goals, or maybe in tutorial do extra work pertaining to what you need to work on.'

There is a risk, however, of confusing the ILP with the language-specific subject knowledge needed to cater for these particular needs. The ILP is a 'tool' of individualisation and differentiation in prior planning, but however useful it might be, its use alone is not enough to address gaps in subject knowledge among literacy teachers and managers.

Because of the relative status of ESOL and literacy, and in particular because literacy is seen by some bilingual learners – in Rushton if not elsewhere – as a progression from ESOL and the route to GCSE (as discussed below in Section 5), such learners in literacy classes are likely to downplay their language learning need for fear of being placed back into ESOL classes, a move to which they would perhaps be resistant. Thus it is difficult to ascertain from learners what the nature of any language learning need might be, and how separate this is from a literacy need, and indeed how different a bilingual literacy need is from first language literacy need. This is an issue for further research: What are the characteristic features of oral and written language production in ESOL learners and in bilingual literacy learners at similar levels? We might hypothesise that the language of both groups displays similar

characteristics, which differ from those of monolingual English-dominant literacy learners. The difficulty here is that neither bilingual learners nor monolingual English-speaking learners are in any way homogeneous groups.

#### 4.3 Recognition of a training need for literacy teachers

Among literacy teachers there is a recognition of the emergence of a group of literacy learners with broader language needs, and with it, a corresponding recognition of their own training need. This corresponds with the acknowledgement among ESOL teachers that they too have a training need when it comes to teaching ESOL literacy to 'new' readers and writers. Literacy teachers and managers are grappling with how they might think about this group of bilingual literacy learners with broader language needs. Do they consider them as a meld of literacy and ESOL learner? Or as an emergent new group with literacy needs which incorporate a language need, as well as some speaking and listening need (because the varieties of English they speak are so very different from standard English)? Here are some literacy and ESOL managers at Rushton in discussion about this issue:

M1: I think it might be an issue for some of the tutors, that they would like to understand more. Because they're...

M2: Yeah. I think it's thrown up training needs. ... And I think it's a really good development, in fact. But I think it's, kind of, throwing up training needs.

Researcher: Right. Ok. So it's a problem perhaps in a broad sense .

M2: No, not really. It's a challenge. I don't mean that cornily.

M1: You know, ... it is going to be a bit similar, isn't it. So ESOL tutors more and more want training ... in literacy for new readers and writers.

M2: And literacy want training in grammar.

It emerges from our interviews with literacy teachers and managers that there is some resistance to the explicit teaching of grammar in literacy classes. As a literacy manager at Rushton puts it:

'the literacy tutors that haven't got an ESOL background don't feel very comfortable about using grammar. So they'll, kind of, just talk about grammar in a communicative way, you know: "Does this sentence make sense?" And maybe do word order and ... just the bare basics, really.'

Such a vague approach to the teaching of grammar is not likely to be of benefit to the many bilingual literacy learners who also have grammar needs. As the literacy manager continues, she suggests there is a lack of understanding among literacy teachers of the very subject knowledge they would need to teach:

'But I could really understand literacy tutors that just know about teaching literacy but don't feel very comfortable about the parts of speech. They know how to put things

together, but they don't actually know what this particular word means or this particular adverb or a preposition for time, all those kind of things. They...they're not quite sure. They might think that they'll get into a muddle, so they'll probably shy away from it. And that's actually what happens.'

This perspective is ratified by a literacy teacher at Rushton who characterises grammar as 'a minefield'. The same teacher however discusses how he and his colleagues reacted to the suggestion raised during their training that they should develop subject-specific knowledge of English grammar. His trainers had taken the stance that as many literacy learners are bilingual, then literacy teachers should teach in a way which caters for this, including an explicit focus on the types of grammatical difficulties experienced by bilingual learners. This teacher and his colleagues rejected the notion:

'they were [saying] ... you need a session on grammar, basically. Because most of our students were second language speakers. And to be honest, my literacy peers on the course didn't want it, we stopped it. We don't want this. We don't want this.'

Undoubtedly many teachers of mixed and bilingual literacy groups would welcome support in how to integrate appropriate grammar teaching techniques into their pedagogy. And there is also no doubt that many literacy teachers and managers are sensitive to the general language needs of bilingual learners and cater for these needs competently. The above comments of the literacy tutor suggest, however, that at the very least there are some unresolved training issues, and resistance from some quarters.

Similarly, among literacy teachers and managers there is trepidation surrounding the teaching of oral communication skills in literacy classrooms. This time, however, there is the recognition of a need to teach such skills, and of a training need, at least among the literacy teachers and managers at Rushton who have large numbers of bilingual learners in their classes. Here again is the literacy manager at Rushton:

'I mean you can do that and we get students to do presentations, but, again, a lot of the literacy tutors are a little bit wary about speaking and listening, you know, because they're just thinking, "Well how do we do it?" ... I think every time we have a course review, they say, "Oh, well, we need some more training on speaking and listening".'

There have been many developments in teacher training for literacy teachers in recent years. These include an explicit focus on the language needs of bilingual literacy learners in the subject specifications for trainee teachers, and incorporation of this focus into many pre-service courses. Despite this, it would appear that literacy provision has as yet failed to engage fully with the reality of bilingualism and bi-dialectism in modern England.

#### 4.4 Summary

This study has identified some difficulties at the institution, policy and training level in recognising or adequately addressing the particular needs of bilingual learners in literacy classrooms. These needs, which require further investigation, lie particularly in the areas of grammar and syntax, lexis, and in oral communication, and are not dissimilar to equivalent language needs of bilingual learners in higher level ESOL classes. There is an equal concern regarding the need for a greater focus in literacy training on the nature of creole languages and of different emergent varieties of English which may be spoken by learners who report themselves to be English speakers. This is also an area in need of further research.

## 5 Placement, progress and status

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In this section the concern broadens out to how learners' placement in an ESOL or a literacy class relates to place, space and movement, understood both physically and metaphorically. We begin with the first step for learners: how they come to be studying at a particular centre. Proximity and word of mouth are, perhaps unsurprisingly, found to play important parts in the choices learners make. The discussion then turns to progress and progression, noting the strong spatial metaphors which relate to movement 'up', 'down' and 'across' provision. Particular attention is paid to movement between ESOL and literacy, as we explore the complexity of the relationship between the two. This complex matter is extended to encompass issues of learners' self-identification as ESOL or literacy learners, in relation to the perceived status of the two areas of provision. Negative connotations attached to ESOL in particular are found to be drivers of learners' desires to place or position themselves as literacy, rather than ESOL, learners.

### 5.1 Word of mouth

Discussions with ESOL and literacy learners highlight that geography plays an important role in the choices and options that are available to bilingual learners in each subject area. For example, a number emphasise that living in close proximity to ESOL/literacy provision is integral to their decisions to go to a particular college. As three learners in an ESOL class at Cranshaw College comment:

'I want to go to X [College] because it's closer [to home].'

'That's the nearest one so I choose Cranshaw College, and also Ivanka recommended it to me.'

'Well, my cousin brought me here because he was in the college before. So he advise very much for me here.'

It is clear from these comments that where learners live and their nearness to provision is seen as crucial in determining where they choose to study. Their comments also reveal how the decisions learners come to are also influenced by informal and family networks.

At Rushton College ESOL and literacy learners agree that living in close proximity to their college is important to them. Most learners live near enough to walk to the college or make short journeys by bus. Friends and relatives who are existing or past learners at the college also act as informal channels or conduits. As with the learners at Cranshaw College then,



decisions about attending Rushton are shaped both by the ease with which learners can get to the college and by the advice of family and friends. Most learners at Rushton have never considered studying at another college; Rushton is for them the obvious and only choice.

Perceptions of place also act to exclude some participants from obtaining appropriate provision elsewhere. In Rushton College, for instance, a Somali (ESOL) learner explained that he wanted to do a maths course which was not on offer at the college, but indicated that he would not consider studying at a different college. Familiarity with place, however, does not necessarily reflect an attachment to that place and many learners in Rushton College reveal that they do not like living in this borough. Rather than being attached to Rushton learners describe a sense of being fixed to the place, expressed in terms of their own immobility: 'We live here whether we like it or not.' This sentiment was echoed in the comments of an ESOL learner at Cranshaw College: 'I have to live in Cranshaw, I have no choice.'

Conversations with bilingual learners also reveal how the social meanings and cultural values suggested by places are crucial in terms of learners being able to gain access to, and therefore participate in, learning. In this way learners at both colleges report that it is important to attend colleges which are diverse as they are seen as progressive and conducive to learning. Homogenous monolingual non-English speaking spaces are viewed as static and regressive and are perceived to lead to a lack of progress in English. This is because learners feel that the absence of different cultures, and notably the absence of 'native English' speakers, hampers their development.

Learners also compare the college at which they are studying to other local colleges, when explaining their choice:

'...it's easier to be in Cranshaw because it's easy to enrol to Cranshaw College than [another] College [which] ... is always busy. They don't have a spare place for different students. Here are everybody always welcome, even if they ... don't have a space for a student they tell you, 'Oh, would you wait a bit longer and we will give you a call'. ... And the people here are very nice and kind.'

This student regards Cranshaw College as an open, welcoming and inclusive learning space, one which she is happy to return to.

Learner choice over where to study is modified by barriers other than geography. Furthermore, needs outside education bring learners to particular colleges. As two ESOL learners comment:

'I look into another college ... but not happy with another college, [it] is good for grammar but it can't fit in with my plans.'

'So I'm try to connect with my hours at work, because at this moment I had only night shift so I can manage. But before I work during for example, one week I had three shifts different, so it wasn't possible.'

The main constraints over learners in terms of the options available to them are conflicts over work patterns and issues of childcare, and they often choose colleges that have courses which match their timetables and childcare needs. While another college might offer more

focused provision, it is dismissed as an option if it cannot accommodate the specific non-academic needs of learners.

## 5.2 Progression

As well as the physical and social spaces where learners find themselves, there is another dimension to the spatial practices of placement. Learners are assessed and placed according to the Skills for Life national levels (Pre-Entry to Level 2) which creates in effect an abstract space that they move through as they progress, through achieving qualifications, towards ever higher levels. Progression (moving up a level) can be understood as a process in space. We see this in an extract from the interview with the teacher of the ESOL and Childcare course at Rushton:

'So the idea of the course is to move up...move on, into Entry 3 ESOL but to contextualise it, so that instead of doing, say, the Skills for Life materials which are about somebody ... other... you know, everything they learn will be about ... the language will be around childcare, but it's still at Entry 3.'

The language of levels and of the qualifications framework constructs learning, progress and achievement in terms of what we call, drawing on the sociologist Bernstein's notion of vertical and horizontal discourses (Bernstein 1996), a 'vertical trajectory'. Learners move up and on through ever higher levels which can be aligned with other kinds of achievement and qualifications (GCSE English for example).

Skills for Life is currently evaluated through performance in moving learners up through this vertical trajectory, measured by performance in exams. A horizontal trajectory would map learner achievement not just through the vertical movement through qualifications, but through achievements that cannot be quantified in exam passes: an ability to speak with and make friends with neighbours for example, or increased informed participation in children's schooling. In the same Rushton ESOL and Childcare class, none of the learners speak English outside the classroom except in service encounters such as shopping, going to the doctor's and so on. There was a general agreement among students that by coming to ESOL classes they could now do a lot of things they were previously unable to do:

S1: Especially English person. I used to feel ...

S2: Nervous.

S1: Nervous or something.

S3: They speak very fast.

S1: What if she ask me and I can't do anything.

S2: Especially doctor.

[laughter]

S2: I had to take someone with me.

Researcher: Just in case?

S2: Yeah, I don't understand. Now actually I can tell my problem to doctor, or to my son's school.

This is an example of a horizontal trajectory: achievement and progress that cannot be measured in terms of qualifications.

What is interesting is how the abstract spaces of a national framework of Skills for Life levels are appropriated by users, with the values of certain levels shifting over time. The Level 2 literacy qualification, contends a literacy teacher at Cranshaw, has limited currency among employers, attributing this to the narrow range of literacy skills it tests. A qualification can be set at a particular point in a qualifications ladder with equivalences established between other qualifications. But because of its questionable validity, if it has no currency other than its worth in attracting funding, it will not become established but remain an empty valueless shell. The qualifications ladder creates a graded abstract space which learners move through, on and up, but like other kinds of space, if this is not appropriated and valued it becomes meaningless.

The qualifications ladder has consequences which can again wash back to influence learner placement, as is the case in the ESOL literacy class at Rushton. As we saw in Section 2, classes up to Entry 3 have a parallel literacy course, called, for example, ESOL Entry 3 literacy. Learners are placed on these courses because they have a 'gap' between their speaking and reading/writing. The concept of the 'gap' is a key motif at Rushton in discussions around literacy and how to place learners correctly. The ESOL manager at Rushton also believes that the new accreditation now adopted in the ESOL department has forced the department to place learners more according to their literacy rather than their speaking, because many of them are struggling with the new reading and writing exams, and they are obliged to do all modes of the examination (speaking and listening, reading and writing) to get through a level. The way the exams are designed, and the requirement to pass all modes to progress, structures the placement practices, demonstrating the way that the abstract space of the qualifications ladder shapes and influences learner deployment into classes. Both abstract and physical spaces are intimately interconnected.

### 5.3 Differential valuing of ESOL and literacy

An example of differential valuing of ESOL and literacy and its consequences can be found at Rushton. Here the vertical trajectory of levels is not equal between ESOL and literacy. The department has guidelines about how people get placed in a level if they are ESOL: an ESOL level is regarded as a level below literacy, i.e. ESOL Entry level 3 is counted as the equivalent of Entry level 2 literacy. Hence some learners have passed the Entry 3 ESOL exam and are now following an Entry 3 literacy course. This is because the former accreditation placed more emphasis at this level on speaking and listening than on reading and writing.

The literacy manager at Rushton makes reference to a locally-generated chart which maps ESOL against literacy at one level lower, and which is used by teachers at placement. The chart is necessary, she maintains, if the learner being placed is among the problematic group of diverse bilingual learners with both a literacy and a language need. Here she explains how E3 ESOL maps against E2 literacy:

'And so I thought, right, OK, these are the levels for ... the ESOL department, E1 ranging right through to Level 2 ESOL. And then I basically thought about it and I tried to map our provision against the ESOL department, really, and then worked out the levels. Because just on experience we get a lot of students come in at E3 ESOL and they can make themselves understood, which is fine because the primary goal here, I suppose, is to speak and to make themselves understood and to communicate, but their writing will be substantially weaker. So I mapped it across to E2 literacy.'

The chart is also used if literacy is seen by the learner and the tutor as both a progression route from ESOL and a bridge to GCSE. The same manager understands that many bilingual learners with a knowledge of the British educational system are aiming for a GCSE, which she describes as: 'the kite mark, ... the gold standard as it were.' She describes a route for progression from E3 ESOL to E3 literacy and then onto a GCSE course.

'And then, you know, if they're good at speaking then they can move across to, maybe, if they're E3 ESOL, can move to E2 literacy and then build up, you know, all the way to GCSE. So I thought, let's try this. And actually it's worked because a lot of people have come in and said, I've done E3, and they're wanting to go from E3 ESOL to GCSE, and luckily I've done this, I've shown them this chart and explained to them and they realise they can't just jump from E3 ESOL to GCSE because there's a lot of learning that needs to take place there and, um, what's happened is that when they see this chart, and I've given it to them, they think, oh, they understand, they need to get as high up in ESOL and then they can transfer across. We are not saying that you can't do it, what we're saying is you can't do it just yet because you're not ready.'

The equivalence of levels (or the lack of equivalence) is something that is locally interpreted. This perception is shared by learners. There is a sense that ESOL is seen as a lower level, or something that you 'finish' and then move on from. ESOL is associated with slower progress and with low level speaking, as shown in this extract from an interview with a group of bilingual literacy learners at Rushton:

Researcher: ... can you compare this class with the ESOL class?

S1: Yeah. The ESOL class... the ESOL class is, you know, is, like, just basic English, but here is, you know, more writing, reading, writing.

R: More writing.

S1: More writing.

S2: Writing and spellings.

R: So when you say basic English, what do you mean?

S1: Basically just, you know, speaking and they give some, you know, some...

S2: Grammar.

S3: ...grammatic words.

S2: Easier.

S1: In ESOL they do missing words like ... easy words ... missing words, tense, past tense ... present tense, words, which one is right and that. Then, basically, grammar specialist is better, I think, is ESOL class.

R: For grammar?

S2: Basically it's lower than this class I know it is hard to write letter, how to mistake your letter and improve with it. And it's better this ... this is like quality of writing, and the thing, you know.

R: Yeah, I know what you mean.

S2: More improving in here.

S3: Yes.

S2: [So that's what I mean.]

R: [Do you all agree with him?]

Ss: Yeah.

The difficulty learners find in progressing beyond ESOL and literacy, and with movement between the two areas, are captured in Ahmed's story.

### Ahmed's story

Ahmed, from Bangladesh, has lived in London for 20 years, and is in an Entry 3 literacy class at Rushton. Three years ago he was placed in Entry 2 literacy, which he completed and then went on to Entry 3. After completing that he was moved to the ESOL department where he did an ESOL for Study course. He has now been placed back in Entry 3 literacy. He is frustrated with his progress and with the fact that he keeps being moved from one department to another. Ahmed believes he should be in at least a Level 1 literacy class, and his actual goal is an Access course. He describes the difference between ESOL and literacy thus:

'Basic Skills is more good because they're taking notes before the class. It's like more help for us. Yeah. But in grammar ways, there's a little bit more grammar in ESOL. And literacy is less grammar. So, I suggest ESOL is for the other language people. Yeah, isn't it? But grammar .... In literacy, literacy like E2 E3, I think is, ... because people can't read and write properly, that's why they're coming to college.'

Ahmed is contradictory in his discussion of ESOL and literacy classes. He says that the people in his ESOL class needed more speaking, but then says that most of them were like him, that is, people who had been in the country for a long time but had had few opportunities to speak English in their daily lives. He views literacy as a progression from ESOL, and clearly regards it as more prestigious and more likely to help him move in the direction he wants to go. Yet confusion is evident, because he also says that the most progress he has made was in ESOL: 'I improved in ESOL class because I understand it's been – I learn most of grammar. It's been hardest to change grammar. And how its level is going down and up. It's like tense, verb, how this change.'

Ahmed is also unclear about his future progression route. He talks of GCSE and Access and going to university, but has no real idea what he wants to do. He says he wants to be a doctor or a lawyer or maybe an engineer.

In terms of progression, moving from ESOL to literacy might be regarded by some as a move on and up the progression ladder. Learners like Ahmed, as well as practitioners such as the literacy manager at Rushton, shape and re-shape abstract notions such as progression, through rating one type of provision more highly than another, thus altering the 'pre-fabricated' design of the Skills for Life levels which does not in itself suggest that a given level in ESOL should be differently valued than 'the same' level in literacy.

But why should literacy provision be more highly valued than ESOL? The 'surface' reason is that literacy is regarded as the feeder for GCSE English; that is, if learners ask to be placed on a GCSE course but the enrolling tutor thinks their level is not adequate for GCSE, they are likely to be placed in a literacy class. Beyond this, one reason must be the literacy manager's positioning of ESOL at one level below its equivalent literacy class, which does little to help Ahmed feel a sense of progression. There is also the generally held, if not unquestioned, assumption that learners in literacy classes do not actually have a foreign or second language need. That is, they will not be language learners. Among learners at Rushton, for example, the institutional positioning of ESOL as of a lower level to literacy contributes to the notion that literacy is a route out of ESOL, a progression from ESOL. Learners are keen to move from ESOL to literacy, says the literacy manager, because they want to do more reading and writing:

'Some ESOL students have said, ... and this is not to be disparaging of the ESOL department, but what they have said and what I have picked up is, oh, they want to ... they really want to learn to read and write.'

But underlying this overtly expressed need to learn to read and write is the widely held assumption regarding the relative status of ESOL and literacy. Learners surely know from their experiences at placement, from listening to teachers, and from their peers, that ESOL and literacy are not equal in terms of level in the eyes of many at the college. They also know that literacy teachers assume that they, the literacy learners, have a near-native grasp of spoken proficiency in English. This leads them to the understanding, however mistaken, that if they manage to get into a literacy class they have largely solved their English speaking problems. So if they join a literacy class, and in particular if they 'progress' to a literacy class from an ESOL class, they assume that they have done very well in speaking. This is demonstrated in this extract of the discussion with ESOL and literacy teachers at Rushton:

T1: But they ... they think that they've kind of progressed up, and to then go from literacy to ESOL is ... [is a move downwards.]

T2: [Going down again.]

T3: But it's ... it's not if they have a lot of spoken language needs.

T1: But is that part of the perception that – certainly from the tutors point of view – to be on a literacy course, you have to have more or less native level speaking. So, in that sense ... It is an achievement to be on a literacy course.

From the teachers' standpoint, speaking is one skill that can be ignored in a literacy class, because the assumption is that if they are in a literacy class they are fluent speakers. But, as was argued in Section 4, many bilingual learners in literacy classes have spoken language learning needs (however ill-defined they might as yet be) as well as literacy needs. To equate fluency with native-like proficiency disregards the reality of language experience, whereby fluency cannot be viewed as a binary – a have or have-not – distinction. It also ignores the issue of accuracy: an individual can be a fluent yet still inaccurate speaker of English.

#### 5.4 Marginalisation

In Ahmed's case an individual's self-identification of his needs suggests to him that he is a literacy learner, and yet he has still found himself positioned institutionally as an ESOL learner when subject to the placement and enrolment process. Self-identification can also work in a deficit way, the case with many bilingual learners in literacy classes who identify themselves as *not* ESOL learners. Here the literacy manager at Rushton discusses what happens at placement when a tutor wishes to place a learner in an ESOL class, and yet the learner does not want to be associated with ESOL. Such learners are referred to the manager, who explains to them that they need to improve their general language skills before they can progress the literacy route:

'and then if it does transpire that they are ESOL, you know, and as a tutor if you feel a bit uncomfortable about saying that because the student is going to...argh I don't want to do ESOL and they are giving you a bit of a hard time, send them to me.'

A teacher of both literacy and ESOL at Cranshaw describes a conversation about ESOL and literacy with a Bulgarian learner, the one bilingual learner in her literacy class. He had commented to her that he felt there was not enough speaking practice in the literacy class, and the tutor had asked him why he was not attending an ESOL class. The people in the literacy class, she explained, 'are already able to converse and communicate in English. And they are primarily here to upgrade their literacy skills.' The Bulgarian learner had identified with a literacy rather than an ESOL course; as the tutor reports: 'And I remember he said, "With respect, I've been here ten years, and I can speak English really well," he said, "and I don't think I need to go into an ESOL class."' That is to say, he wanted more discussion and talk in his lessons, but not with ESOL learners.

It is only a short step from this position to a realisation that for many learners, ESOL is seen as a marginal subject. We have seen already that literacy is viewed as a progression from ESOL among both learners and some staff at Rushton College. ESOL has a status as marginal amongst learners in comparison with literacy, argues this manager at Cranshaw in the following extract. It is easier to suggest to an ESOL learner that she or he would be better off in a literacy class than vice versa, she contends.

'If they think they have come wanting English classes and you say, "Well we think you're an ESOL student", I'm not sure how comfortable I'd feel, you know, about always saying that to a student. I'd want to be quite sure that I was right. I'd probably want a second opinion ... if they come along asking to join Lynne's classes.'

It is not the college that marginalises ESOL or bilingual learners: far from it. Such learners are central to the college and its ethos. Rather, there are subtle situations whereby learners

do not always want to be classified as 'ESOL' learners. Teachers also may feel that people who have been in the UK for many years do not want to be told that they need an ESOL class to improve their language skills.

The student adviser at Rushton discusses the connotations attached to ESOL and literacy provision in his college. He says that there are some negative connotations attached to ESOL classes but less so to Basic Skills classes, which include literacy classes.

'I think that there is possibly a notion within students that if they are ESOL learners that is, there is a bit more of a stigma attached to that than someone who is on the basic skills courses.'

He goes on to discuss how people who are highly educated in their countries of origin do not want to identify with ESOL learners. They perceive ESOL as being for new arrivals. Moreover, there is a well-founded perception that in an ESOL lesson, they will be taught very functional 'survival English', and lessons will not be at all academically oriented. Ironically, the adviser maintains that a survival English course is what these learners need.

'Sometimes I get students and they are ESOL learners and I say, how long, because that is one of the questions we ask, how long have they been resident in this country and they say something like 15 years. You know, it depends on the person, you know if you have built up a bit of a rapport, why have you waited all this time then, why didn't you come before? They say well, you know well I am educated from Bangladesh I did a degree and I didn't want to come and be in with all these people who can't speak properly, and quite clearly that is exactly what they need.'

This is clearly a complex issue. Teachers and learner advisers have to face situations where the effect of telling someone that they need to be in an ESOL class produces the response that they do not then want to be associated with ESOL.

It should also be noted that a literacy need is something of a taboo topic in daily life for some monolingual literacy learners. This learner in the literacy class at Cranshaw avoids having to write in public, at the playgroup where she works, for example.

Researcher: Do they know at playgroup that you have difficulties?

H: I wouldn't tell anybody.

R: Really?

H: No, I wouldn't.

R: You wouldn't tell them? Why not?

H: [Pause] I don't know. Cos I suppose you don't actually come across people that can't spell and things, do you?

Adult literacy, then, has negative connotations attached to it, played on to good effect in the 'Gremlins' campaign. Such views are not always attached to ESOL. Yet they exist, even within Further Education, and far more so in public and media discourses of racism and linguicism.



ESOL is a subject area that some bilingual learners might understandably want to distance themselves from.

### 5.5 Summary

We began this section with a geographical perspective on how and why learners place themselves at their particular college. We then looked at progression in terms of movement through metaphorical space. A more critical stance on progression – from ESOL to literacy and beyond – was introduced firstly with an examination of the structural positioning of ESOL as 'lower' than literacy at Rushton; and secondly with Ahmed's story of moving back and forth between ESOL and literacy provision. Ahmed's story demonstrates how learners suffer from both a lack of clarity about appropriate routes through learning combined with imposed restrictions on progression. This critical take on placement and progression continued as we questioned why learners should regard literacy as progression from ESOL, examining the negative connotations attached to the latter subject area. If ESOL is positioned as marginal, certain groups of learners will distance themselves from it by identifying with what they see as the mainstream.

## 6 Conclusions, implications and directions for future research

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This study has found that the boundary between ESOL and literacy is not clear cut, and that the range of learning needs encompassed by the two subject areas is more complex than a rigid distinction can allow for. The findings, implications and recommendations for policy, training and practice expressed here stem from this overall conclusion.

### 6.1 Findings and implications

1. Many bilingual learners whose language level is around Entry 3/Level 1 on the National Qualifications Framework have literacy as well as more general language needs. This makes the distinction between ESOL and literacy a complex and contested area. A rigid division between ESOL and literacy *learners*; ESOL and literacy *pedagogy*; and the skills and training of ESOL and literacy *teachers* is potentially detrimental to the learning of a substantial and diverse group.
2. Bilingual learners have literacy needs which are specific to those with a dominant language other than English. This is an issue which cuts right across education, particularly in multilingual areas and in inner cities (Leung 2001). Where literacy classes contain bilingual learners, this has to be taken into account by teachers, planners and curriculum developers. The nature of literacy provision needs adjusting, rather than continuing to attempt to fit learners into provision which is not appropriate to their needs. This issue is too big for providers to deal with individually and so also needs to be addressed at the level of curriculum and policy.
3. Many bilingual learners fall into the Skills for Life priority areas. For example, they may be young adults, low paid workers, the unemployed or parents, have literacy needs as well as broader language needs. As this study has shown, bilingual learners are equally likely to find themselves placed in literacy as ESOL classes, such is the ambiguity and complexity of their status and needs. Changes in funding arrangements for ESOL, as distinct from literacy, may yet impact on sensitive placement decisions for bilingual learners. Placement needs to be equitable, and a result of learning needs.
4. Literacy teachers are concerned that they are not fully able to cater for bilingual literacy learners' general language needs, in particular their oral communication and grammar needs. Literacy teacher training has not in the past wholly equipped teachers for meeting the language needs of bilingual learners in literacy classrooms. Literacy teachers with bilingual learners in their classes need to learn in initial teacher training and professional development

about their learners' general language needs as well as their literacy needs, and how best to cater for these in their teaching.

5. The indistinct nature of the division between ESOL and literacy results in learners with similar language needs finding themselves in different provision, in different subject areas. This points to the value of cross-fertilisation of practice, including considering co-teaching of ESOL and literacy classes.
6. The effect accreditation and formal external assessment has on lessons – known as washback – appears to be distorting practice in some literacy classes, and hence is hindering language and literacy development. This applies most obviously to the National Literacy Test. Literacy surely encompasses writing, and a national literacy test that excludes writing is potentially damaging to learners' writing development.
7. There are many 'monolingual' learners in literacy classes from Caribbean and African backgrounds in cities such as London, who speak non-standard varieties of English or English-based creole languages. Literacy teachers and managers need to be fully aware of the issues specific to these speakers in terms of their literacy and oracy. Training for literacy practitioners should include an element of general language awareness, as well as language education appropriate for second language literacy learners.
8. English is dynamic, changing, fluid, and we are witnessing the emergence of new varieties of English, for example the English of urban multicultural and multilingual London. This is beginning to be recognised by teachers and managers, as is the need to adjust ways of thinking about standard English in relation to emergent non-standard varieties of English, to standard Englishes which are not British English, to English-based creole languages, and to dialects. This phenomenon needs to be addressed at the level of planning, training and pedagogy, for ESOL as well as literacy teachers.
9. For some groups of learners, ESOL is viewed as marginal. As a result certain groups of learners will distance themselves from it by identifying with what they see as the mainstream. Bilingual learners will continue to be drawn to literacy provision, as long as it is associated with mastery of English in a native-like way, and as long as it is seen as the route which will propel people to Higher Education. Skills for Life literacy needs to be able to cope with the demands of teaching literacy – and other areas of language – to learners who are bilingual and who have language and language learning needs specific to second language learners.
10. Gatekeepers, such as learner support, advice and guidance staff, play a crucial role in the placement of learners and need to be included in all relevant provider training programmes. In addition, managers and teachers need support in changing organisational structures to better meet the needs of this growing cohort of bilingual learners.

## 6.2 Directions for future research

As this research is exploratory, it is not surprising that it has uncovered a number of directions for future research and further investigation. Six areas in particular are mentioned here.

1. The most urgent direction of research is to ascertain how widespread the patterns described in this report actually are, particularly in relation to the overall theme. That is, how pervasive is the situation where the boundary between ESOL and literacy is not distinct? To what extent are ESOL and literacy providers around the country grappling with the issue of placement of bilingual learners with literacy needs?
2. There is a need for a greater understanding of the nature of bilingual and multilingual (including creole-speaking) literacy learners' language learning needs, and how these needs differ from those of monolingual learners. It is likely that these lie particularly in the areas of grammar and syntax, lexis, and in oral communication, and are in some cases not dissimilar to equivalent language needs of bilingual learners in higher level ESOL classes. Fuller investigation of these areas is required.
3. There is the need for a greater focus in literacy training and professional development on the nature of creole languages and of different emergent varieties of English which may be spoken by learners who report themselves to be English speakers. Description of these varieties and their status in literacy learning classes is in need of continued research.
4. A closer examination is needed of how literacy provision as it stands, including speaking and listening, takes into account groups which include bilingual non-English dominant learners, learners who are speakers of English-based creole languages, and monolingual/English-dominant learners.
5. Among some learners, movement from an ESOL to a literacy class is considered to be a marker of progression. Further work is needed to investigate how widespread this notion is, what is at the root of such a perception, and what the implications are for practice and policy.
6. Practical work is needed to model and to trial new teaching and learning strategies and culturally inclusive approaches for mixed groups of literacy learners, including those with more general language learning needs. This type of development activity may be best carried out as projects funded on a local level, employing classroom-oriented action research and exploratory practice.

## Appendix

### Case studies of six ESOL and literacy classes

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This appendix contains condensed versions of case studies of the six classes we examined in depth for this study, three at Rushton College and three at Cranshaw.

For each class, group and individual interviews were carried out with learners, and an in-depth interview was held with each teacher. At least one, and sometimes two lessons were observed in the Autumn of 2006. In addition, copies of schemes of work, lesson plans, materials and samples of learners' work were collected by researchers.

The case studies have been summarised here to focus on the learners and their lessons. The aim is to give the reader a flavour of what it might be like to study in these classes, who the learners are, what their learning needs might be, and what pedagogy the teacher employs.

The six classes are:

1. Helen's ESOL Level 1 class at Cranshaw
2. Carrie's ESOL and Childcare Entry 3 class at Rushton
3. Helen's literacy workshop at Cranshaw
4. Jane's ESOL Entry 3A literacy class at Rushton
5. Sue's ESOL Entry 2/3 class at Cranshaw
6. Tommy's literacy Entry 3 class at Rushton

#### **CASE STUDY 1: Helen's ESOL Level 1 class at Cranshaw**

This ESOL Level 1 class meets one morning a week for three hours. The teacher, Helen, has an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching background and the lesson as well as the learners have many characteristics familiar to EFL. Six of the eight learners in the class are from EU accession countries. All these learners have progressed to this class from the Entry 3 class the previous year, and they expect to progress to the Level 2 ESOL class next year. There is no feeling among the learners of needing their ESOL provision embedded within another subject area, or of needing literacy provision outside ESOL, nor is there any sense from the teacher that these should be offered. The learners will take all three of the Trinity ESOL tests at the end of the academic year, at Level 1 or Entry 3.

#### **The learners**

We met eight different learners on our visits to the class: five from Poland, one from Slovakia, one who was born in the UK but brought up in Iraq and one, the only man in the class, born in

Pakistan but who spent most of his childhood in Germany. All the learners apart from the man from Germany have been in the UK for more than two years. Five of the Eastern Europeans work in the care sector. The Iraqi woman is a trained civil engineer, but is not working; she is looking after her two young children but wants to work as a civil engineer in the UK. The young man from Pakistan via Germany is 19 and is not working, having only very recently arrived in the UK to join extended family. Word of mouth, friendship networks, family ties and geographical proximity are important factors in learners coming to the college, as opposed to other nearby colleges. For many learners it is the convenient local college. The part-time nature of the courses may have affected the choice for the shift-working learners.

### Learners' needs

Perceptions amongst learners of what they need to concentrate on in their ESOL classes vary, but interestingly there is a distinction between the Eastern Europeans on the one hand, who mention writing, grammar and vocabulary a lot, and the two learners from Iraq and Pakistan/Germany, who mention their speaking needs. This could be accounted for by the employment patterns of the Eastern European learners, as well as by notions of what should be studied in a language class, which in turn could be affected by experience in childhood. The learners who work as care assistants and nurses frequently need to write reports as part of their job requirements; paperwork is a necessary but very difficult part of the jobs that they do. And learning to write is also seen as very difficult amongst the Eastern Europeans. Moreover, the focus on grammar seen as important by the Eastern European learners is conflated with a notion of correctness, particularly in relation with Standard English versus the local accent and dialect.

### Helen on the class and learners

When talking about her ESOL teaching at the main site of Cranshaw College, Helen refers mainly to the learners from Eastern Europe, who she characterises in a particular way, positioning them as 'EFL' learners, rather than 'ESOL' learners. Writing is something she must focus on if the learners are to have parity across the skills spectrum, which she clearly sees as an ideal. She highlights the importance of progression and the qualification which she hopes the learners will gain.

Her focus in teaching is linked closely to the requirements of the assessment the learners are aiming for. Helen talks mainly of the requirements for the writing assessment, which she connects with spelling and grammar needs. She talks about needing to work on articles and prepositions, for example ('what I would call basic stuff'), and considers it necessary for these aspects of grammar to be in place before learners can make progress ('You definitely need grammar so people have some kind of structure to build on'), but sees the importance of integrating a functional strand to the syllabus as well ('There's no point having the grammar and not being able to function'). At higher levels of ESOL, she sees the focus on grammar and writing to be important, because learners' oral communication skills are largely in place, as she sees it. She talks of 'upgrading' skills.

'Because you know they're fairly good communicators. Verbal communicators. Yeah. But they want to be able to write. And, you know, upgrade their writing skills.'

The ESOL learners in the college are seen by Helen as a self-contained, if not isolated group, who stay in the same building when at college, do not visit the library or the main cafeteria, come for lessons and leave straight away, and do not consider the college as anything other than the place where they do their English lesson. 'It's just very functional. It's nothing to do

with leisure or .... No, definitely not. Not a place to hang out in.' This is because most of the learners are working, she says. They do not meet or make friends with other, non-ESOL, learners: 'Definitely they don't have interaction with any other college students.' They do however develop friendships among themselves.

### The ESOL Level 1 lesson

One lesson was observed for the project, a three-hour lesson, with four learners present. Consistent with the teacher's views on the nature of the main site ESOL learners, and her positioning of them as 'EFL' learners, the lesson adhered to an EFL-type pattern based around 'four-skills', making use of EFL textbooks and other published material. The overall aim of the lesson according to the lesson plan was 'develop listening skills and practise pronunciation.' The plan had aims expressed in terms of skills ('Students will practice vowel sounds; students will become familiar with the International Phonetic Alphabet').

The first activity was one where the learners had to take turns to write the next turn in a conversation, in the style of the game 'consequences'. A written dialogue was produced which the learners then practiced in pairs. Then the focus turned to pronunciation, in particular of /i:/ and (less so) /I/. Learners studied a copy of the International Phonetic Alphabet then did exercises from *Ship or sheep* (EFL pronunciation book, Baker 1981), using a mirror to make exaggerated mouth movements. Learners listen and repeat dialogues and sentences in Standard Southern British English: Edith eats three meat and cheese sandwiches; Would you like veal or beef? Would you like leek soup or pea soup? The teacher explains that as this is a pronunciation activity the sounds are exaggerated. After a break the class moves on to the course book (*Inside Out Intermediate*, Kay et al. 2001); learners have photocopies. The listening activity surrounds an anecdote told on tape. Learners towards the end of the lesson listen to a song for listening comprehension purposes; this is also an activity in the course book. The final activity, set for homework, is to write an email.

That this lesson did not explicitly connect with learners' out of class lives did not pose a problem to learners, who in elicitation of feedback stated that all the activities were useful. In fact, the lesson as a whole will have conformed closely to the majority of learners' prior experience and expectations of language lessons with a focus on producing 'correct' English.

## CASE STUDY 2: Carrie's ESOL and Childcare Entry 3 class, Rushton

The class takes place in the community outreach section of Rushton, in a community centre on a large estate in the east of the borough. The class is unusual for community outreach because the learners tend to travel certain distances to get to it, as it is the only ESOL and Childcare course in the community provision. The centre has a crèche where the learners will do their work experience later in the course. The course is a precursor to the higher level Pathway courses (at Level 1 and 2) to help prepare people to gain access onto those. After this course many of the learners will move on to a course at the next level at one of the main sites. The learners are serious and very motivated.

### The learners

There are around 16 learners attending, all women from Bangladesh (the majority), Pakistan, Turkey and Eritrea. They have been in the UK for between three and 18 years, with the majority over six years. They all have young children, and most are in their 20s or 30s. All have done courses in other sites at Rushton either in other community classes or at the main

site. Several have done other childcare courses, including one who did a course at Level 1. Others have done ESOL parenting courses. None have jobs or have worked before, except one who worked voluntarily in a crèche as part of a course she did previously. All are keen to work in crèches or playgroups but are not yet doing so. They are also keen to do voluntary work but feel they must improve their English first.

### **Learners' needs**

Their literacy seems to range from quite literate in English and their first or expert language, to quite low. All the learners say that their big problem is speaking and this class certainly feels like a traditional ESOL class. However, literacy is a big issue on this course; the learners are well aware that literacy is one of the issues making it difficult to get into a profession in childcare, and that this contrasts with the situation in the past when it was a profession requiring no qualifications.

The main reason why these learners are happy with this college and this class is that they get free childcare facilities, without which they would not be able to attend class. None of the learners speak English outside the classroom except in service encounters such as shopping, going to the doctor's and so on. There is a general agreement that by coming to ESOL classes they can now do a lot of things they were previously unable to do.

### **Carrie on the class**

Carrie has little prior experience in teaching childcare but firmly believes in the motivational aspect of vocational courses. She maintains that those learners who do better with literacy and speaking are those who are 'motivated'. However, she is struggling with the vocational content of this course and feels that she would benefit from more support from the coordinator at the main site. Despite the fact that Carrie is slightly unclear of the level required for her learners to be able to get onto the childcare courses at the next level, she makes a serious attempt to link classroom work with real life demands such as crèche observations. Carrie has run into particular problems with the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) form which seems this term to have taken over the timetable and is way beyond the literacy levels of the learners. For this she has had to enlist the help of the managers at the community centre and help all the learners one-to-one. She has done the in-house literacy training at Rushton (this is cascaded down from a literacy training course provided by the London LLU+ at South Bank University) but finds it does not really help when it comes to higher level real life literacy demands such as the CRB form and report writing and so on.

Carrie has mixed feelings about the levels demanded of care workers nowadays. While she is aware that the Rushton 'pathway' is a very long one and that some of these learners are going to really struggle getting to the level they need to be crèche workers (she says they need GCSE English to get onto higher level courses), she is also aware that standards need to be raised in the sector. Carrie also talks about the onerous nature of trying to make a course like this fit with the ESOL core curriculum. She spends a lot of time cross-referencing her lesson plans to the curriculum.

### **The ESOL lessons**

Two lessons were observed for this class. In the first, the lesson is based on a large picture of a dangerous kitchen, bathroom and so on which the learners have been working with for a few lessons. Carrie has typed out sentences previously provided by the learners which describe the hazards shown in the picture. She says they are going to work on the present continuous tense (i.e. embedded grammar in the topic of hazards). First they have a spelling



test of -ing words. Learners then read aloud the sentences about the picture, after which Carrie introduces the structure of sentences which contain 'may' or 'might' or 'could'. She elicits what might/could/may happen in the pictures. They are then asked to get into groups and produce accurate sentences about the picture using the target language. They are then given some rules and complete a grammar exercise. The focus throughout is on grammar and accuracy. There is little unplanned talk, and none at all in learners' expert languages. The class works very hard.

In the second lesson, Carrie is trying to carry out the internal college assessments, which involves learners being recorded. This is then moderated at the main site with the other E3 classes. At the same time the manager of the centre is trying to help people do the CRB forms they need in order to carry out their work placements. Assessment is at the sentence, rather than the text, level: they have to produce three sentences using 'should'. While they wait they are doing a worksheet again based on health and safety in domestic settings, with 'should' sentences embedded into it. Carrie uses a lot of institutional language: 'have you achieved this goal yet?', and places emphasis on everyone having the correct paperwork and folders etc.

The class spend a huge amount of time doing paperwork, assessments, putting folders in order, trying to fill out the CRB form and so on. It is perhaps an example of a situation in which the textualisation of the work of childcare is far more demanding than the job itself (cf Roberts and Campbell 2006). There is (perhaps inevitably, given the course focus) a strong emphasis in these lessons on punctuality, hygiene, absenteeism and so on, but less drawing on their own experience and opinions. Amongst all this is a grammar agenda too: both observed lessons consisted of worksheets about health and safety in which learners had to produce sentences with modal verbs.

### **CASE STUDY 3: Helen's literacy workshop at Cranshaw**

The literacy classes at Cranshaw are mostly populated by learners who are not bilingual, who have lived in the UK all their lives and need to improve their literacy skills. The literacy workshop is for all levels of learner, though in fact the learners observed are all Level 1/Level 2. None of them are bilingual, so in this respect the class acts as a type of comparison group for the project. Classes run for two hours a week over two semesters, and recruitment is continuous. The class is taught by Helen, who also teaches the ESOL class at the main site which is Case Study 1, another point of comparison.

#### **The learners**

We met four learners at the observed lesson of this class and three at the group interview. All are from nearby, were born and brought up locally, and are in their late 20s or early 30s. B works as a cleaner and is enrolled part time on an access course. H is studying part time to qualify as a child minder. S works as a nursery nurse at a special needs school. They are all aiming for the EDEXCEL Level 1 literacy test and expect to pass it and take the Level 2 qualification later in the year. They come to Cranshaw College because it is nearby and lessons are held at a convenient time. They each have work and career-related reasons for being on the course, with the aim of gaining a Level 2 qualification.

#### **Learners' needs**

The learners attribute their difficulties with literacy to their early experiences. They report

unhappy times at school, characterised by 'hating' the subject English and their English teachers, and by truancy. S says they are bad at reading and writing because they don't do them daily, and H says: 'I literally don't put pen to paper.' As far as specific needs are concerned, B says he reads a lot and needs to work at what he calls the 'technical' side of writing, punctuation and handwriting. S mentions reading being difficult as well, and H says she needs to do 'everything'. Both S and H say they need to 'go back to the start', and S talks of 'installing the language again'. The general concern with writing among the learners is at odds with their forthcoming assessment: the EDEXCEL literacy test at Levels 1 and 2 is a multiple choice reading comprehension test taken on a computer. All the learners have considered GCSE English as an alternative option to the literacy workshop and the Level 2 literacy test. H embarked on a GCSE course but dropped out because of the reading load and the literature. Literacy exams seem very much easier than GCSE (or ESOL) at the same level, and, notably, do not require candidates to do any writing. S also mentions the lower reading load in literacy being a factor in the choice between literacy and GCSE English. In her case, unpleasant memories of studying Shakespeare at school also influenced her decision: 'I went for this one so I didn't do William.'

Lessons, according to the learners, are useful, but they report being confused by the rules they are presented with in class, and in particular the exceptions to these rules: 'You can seem to sort of bend the rules a bit if it suits one word and [...] I think that's when you get thrown a bit, in't it, then?' The learners talk about the importance of group work and of a strongly collaborative, supportive spirit in the class. They do not enjoy working alone on computers in the literacy class, which is ironic in view of the fact that they engage in extensive electronic literacy practices in daily life (emailing, using the internet, and so on). The learners' concern with writing by hand as opposed to computer work has had the effect of making the class very collaborative; Helen now spends two-thirds to three-quarters of the lesson doing whole class activities, reserving the last half hour or so for individual work, which can include work on the computer (for example, doing practice national literacy tests). The sort of lesson content of the whole-class phase, according to Helen, includes 'discussion' and 'grammar points ... that can benefit everyone'. This more collaborative pattern is much appreciated by the learners. The lessons themselves seem to focus on content such as formal letters, punctuation, and basic study skills. Recent lessons have covered formal letters for job applications, and a spidergram for brainstorming and planning writing.

### **The literacy workshop lessons**

These lessons take place for two hours on Tuesday evenings. In the observed lesson four learners were present, sitting on two sides of a big central table.

The lesson began with a discussion about what to write on the learners' ILPs. Then the teacher elicited what was covered in the previous week's lesson, as a recap. The response was 'commas' and 'conjunctions'. The first activity was to do an exercise in pairs based around a worksheet on commas. In the feedback session, the teacher went into quite a lot of detail about relative clauses, and also gave long explanations of the differences in meaning between sentences with commas in different places (e.g. 'Go get him honey' vs. Go! Get him, honey!). There was also some discussion of the relationship between punctuation and sentence intonation. This continued for some time, and there was talk from the teacher about ambiguous sentences whose precise meaning depends on the exact position, absence or presence of a comma. The learners seemed a little mystified by all of this, though they give the activity a positive evaluation when asked. The next episode involved going over work done in an earlier lesson: an article on bird flu has been stripped of punctuation and capitalisation

and learners had to put this back in. The learners compared the corrected/authorised version with their own, and made corrections accordingly.

The learners move at different paces through the same materials. When giving explanations, and in particular when explaining a 'rule' for an ambiguous item, the teacher makes reference to the exam and the best approach to punctuation and conjunction use for exam purposes. Helen is trying to instil in the learners a notion of correctness and of one way of doing things, glossing over ambiguities in punctuation, for example. There is a focus on the exam, although the activities are not explicitly exam practice. Learners work at their own pace for much of the time, though all work on the same materials. With such a small number of learners, the teacher is well able to circulate, monitor, check and discuss individual learners' work, and does so continually. A model of literacy pedagogy is being followed here which has a focus on punctuation and functional literacy skills.

As there are no bilingual learners in this class, it can be compared with Tommy's literacy class in Rushton, Case Study 6, where the pedagogy is similar but the learners are widely different in language background.

#### **CASE STUDY 4: Jane's ESOL Entry 3A literacy class at Rushton**

The main tutor for the class is Jane, the course coordinator for ESOL at one of the main sites. The class is also taught once a week by an EFL teacher and who, according to Jane, gives them challenging lessons on grammar, which Jane approves of as she thinks it complements her literacy work. The class meets for 9.5 hours a week. Some of them also do a maths class. The class is part of a very large ESOL provision at three main sites and over 20 sites in community outreach. ESOL classes up to Entry 3 have a parallel literacy course, which this class belongs to. Learners are placed on these courses because they have a 'gap' between their speaking and reading/writing. The concept of the 'gap' arises constantly in discussions around literacy and how to place learners correctly.

##### **The learners**

Fifteen learners took part in the group interview, and there are 19 on the register. The learners are from Bangladesh, Somalia, Morocco and Poland. Some of the learners have been in the UK for quite lengthy periods of time, and all for over five years. Ismail, the interviewed learner in this class, came as a teenager and did some English medium schooling. Almost all of the learners have done other courses at Rushton. Several of the women were previously in the community outreach programme and have 'progressed' to the main site. There is a popular idea that the (almost exclusively) women in outreach provision refuse to travel outside their neighbourhoods, but there is also evidence that some resort to outreach because the main sites are full. Many have spent time on the waiting list, some for a whole academic year. Several learners are doing voluntary work in childcare/crèche work, with disabled people, the elderly or in local schools. One man (M, from Bangladesh) is doing a degree in IT at a university in London. The overall impression is of people who are active citizens and who wish to find work, get qualified and get on in some way, but who are facing certain barriers in doing so. In the case of the women one of the main reasons would seem to be childcare, but several learners talk about the problems of finding a job, even a low level one. Many people are looking for jobs below their level of ability or overseas qualifications and their aspirations are limited to the low-level jobs available to them.

### **Learners' needs**

Rightly or wrongly, these learners connect their English language skills with their lack of progress, so several say they need to improve their English before they can get work or do other courses. This would seem to be a characteristic of Entry level 3 learners in ESOL as well as literacy. There is a consensus amongst the learners that what is most important for them is speaking and listening. This seems to be a defining characteristic of ESOL classes (even those labelled 'ESOL literacy') and contrasts with the learners in the 'mainstream' literacy class. All of the learners are aware that they are in a class which is designated ESOL literacy. When asked if they have considered going to 'a literacy class', (i.e. mainstream literacy) they say 'this is a literacy class'. When asked what is most important for them in terms of literacy they all say 'spelling': 'for me is spelling is no good spelling is too much problem'. None of them talk about literacy in terms of texts, literacy demands at work or on other courses, or about any other aspect of literacy. The question in this type of class at this level is whether the literacy being taught/practised is relevant to the demands in the outside world, whether the literacy teaching should be more geared towards the outside world, or whether what they are doing will develop skills which are useful and transferable to other contexts.

All learners seem happy with their class, and compare it very favourably with other ESOL classes they have been in, for example, in the community outreach, in other centres and with other providers. The main praise for this class is reserved for the teacher whom they all hold in very high esteem. There is a strong sense from these learners that they are getting their needs well met by this course.

### **Jane on the ESOL Entry 3 literacy class**

Jane talks of the notion of the 'discrepancy' between speaking level (which tends to be around Entry 3) and literacy, which has a range. She talks of this 'gap', and about how the gap itself tends to vary considerably. This suggests that the nature of the gap is broad, and contested. Within the class Jane is aware that there is a level of diversity amongst the learners themselves. She describes one learner as very fluent in 'street English', having attended secondary school in London. She believes that the literacy problems of these learners are compounded by their attitude to learning, and as she sees it, their lack of autonomous study skills.

### **The ESOL literacy lessons**

Jane comes from a background of teaching EFL but has also worked for a training provider and has been at Rushton for a year. Her classes are a kind of mixture of practices and texts from EFL, ESOL and literacy, for example, writing texts with grammar embedded into them. There is a strong topic running through the lessons; the pre-reading activities and activities to activate schema and prior knowledge are all reminiscent of communicative language teaching (CLT) and activities in EFL textbooks. This is combined with a careful choice of topic which Jane hopes will be relevant to these particular ESOL learners. She is an example of a bricoleur (Baynham, Roberts et al. 2007) or perhaps a 'principled pragmatist' (Kumaravadivelu 1994). The way she approaches literacy in the class seems to be around the pace of the reading and writing activities, the support she offers to the learners while they engage in these activities and strategies such as writing frames. There is a weekly spelling test, but little other discrete literacy work. The main focus for literacy work is the whole text, although she does not seem to use many real or authentic texts. The use of topic as the main organising principle gives a structure to the three hour long lesson, while the regular shift of focus from whole class to pair work to whole class gives weight to the feeling that this is very

much a joint endeavour in which everyone is encouraged to help and support each other. The classes are characterised by a high level of learner involvement and lots of talk especially around topics related to texts. The teacher is lively and energetic, and genuinely interested in the learners and their lives. She draws a lot on their own socio-cultural knowledge and experience, uses a lot of playful humour but at the same time allows adult topics such as racism to arise in discussion.

### **CASE STUDY 5: Sue's ESOL Entry 2/3 class at Cranshaw**

This ESOL Entry 2/3 class meets two mornings a week in the Borderlands Community Centre, part of the offsite programme of Cranshaw College. Learners are preparing for various Trinity ESOL exams at Entry 2 and 3. The teacher, Sue, has organised a number of other courses at Borderlands for learners in this class: a First Aid course and an Introduction to Childcare course have taken place, and an Art class is planned.

#### **The learners**

There are 12 learners in the group, all women, except for one young male learner, a migrant worker from one of the Eastern European accession states. The majority of learners are asylum seekers, living in the housing estate surrounding Borderlands, from Congo, Somalia, Eritrea, Algeria, Palestine and Turkey. Most learners are recruited by word of mouth, and some of the asylum seekers have found out about ESOL courses at Borderlands at a drop-in morning held at the centre. Some learners have been referred to these classes from other sites, because the level is more suited to their needs and because of the crèche. Most of the learners are attracted to the classes by the convenience of the location and the fact that a crèche is provided. There is some diversity of levels in the class, with profiles ranging from Level 1 speaking and listening to Entry 2 reading and writing, and vice versa. Most of the learners speak three or four languages, and a lot of them studied English at school.

Because this is the second time that a researcher has visited Borderlands, it is possible to take a longer view of learner achievements. Some learners who were in a pre-entry or Entry 1 class when the centre was first visited in 2004 are now in this Entry Level 2/3 class and are demonstrating progress not just in exam success but in their everyday lives.

#### **Learners' needs**

While learners are quite naturally involved with the language and learning needs of their children, they are also looking forward to increased autonomy in their day-to-day interactions, with neighbours, in shops, at the doctors, as well as possibilities of training and work. Learners in the group interview mention fashion, hairdressing, childcare and art as work they aspire to. Issues of dialect variation and multilingualism come up: the challenges of using English in a new environment. Learners are aware of dialect variation in this Northern town and that their children are growing up speaking with a particular accent. And while the learners value all aspects of the class, and the focus on listening, speaking, reading and writing, it is clear that they value speaking most highly.

#### **Sue on the ESOL class and ESOL learners**

Sue talks about the impact of the mobility of asylum seekers on assessment and placement. At Borderlands it is an ongoing process, with learners arriving all the time. For Sue you can't just say: 'go away and come back on such and such a day.' Flexibility and responsiveness are characteristic of her approach. She is also concerned with how well testing and placement

tools deal with the variation in profile of learners across the four skills. In the classes at Borderlands it is typically the learner's spoken language skills that determine where they are placed.

The issue for this group is not so much whether they should be in ESOL or literacy provision, but more about studying ESOL and wanting to do other courses where they may be learning alongside English speakers. Sue's development work around the ESOL groups involves putting on First Aid and encouraging them to go along to the Childcare course held at the Centre. Although she does not say as much, it may be that for Sue, and indeed the learners, the clearest progression route is onto more broadly vocational courses in the 'mainstream' rather than more Skills for Life provision.

### The ESOL E2/3 lessons

Classes are held in a large open room, the first which a visitor enters coming into the building. Its gridded windows look out onto a pedestrian precinct with a newsagent, chemist, post office and medical practice. It is also the room through which parents and children must pass to access the crèche, the toilets and other teaching rooms. At the beginning of the observed lesson, the learners arrive in a piecemeal way, sign the register then start in on individual work, talking quietly to their neighbours. They seem to have organised themselves in language groupings (Somali, Arabic, Urdu). Sue circulates, talking to learners individually and in small groups. She has a special late note worksheet on the table nearest to the door: 'Sorry I'm late because ...'

One of the issues in this class is that of setting boundaries and creating a pedagogical space in this very fluid and open-ended space. Sue does this very effectively through framing activities, but this excuse sheet is part of the process. Sue then brings this stage of the lesson to a close by collecting the folders in and transitions to a spelling test (all the while people moving quietly across the room to other offices or classrooms). A father arrives with the child of one of the learners, she leaves to settle him in the crèche. Sue transitions into the main body of the lesson, linking it back to the lesson last week and introducing some Skills for Life materials and realistic examples of different kinds of notes and messages. She asks the question: What are they? Why have they been used? (While this is going on F. arrives late and rather distressed. Sue settles her down, talking sympathetically in a low voice and not insisting she completes the late excuse worksheet.) Sue goes on to contrast the different notes and messages in terms of formality and informality of register. The next phase of activity is an exercise on openings and closings in letters and messages. Sue groups the learners carefully for the activity, in pairs or individually. The next activity is a story sequencing one, followed by a break. After the break, Sue introduces a role-play which the learners engage in with great enthusiasm, involving a mother taking a child to the doctor. V. throws himself with some gusto into the part of the badly behaved boy!

As already noted, one of the most striking aspects of the lesson is the way that Sue and the learners created a busy and focused pedagogic space out of the 'anteroom' in which the class is situated. It is impressive how they manage to maintain concentration. The whole situation evokes the concept of 'liminality' (Latin: *limen* = threshold). Liminality is a theoretical construct, developed by the sociologist Turner in his work on ritual to characterise circumstances of 'in-between-ness', 'neither one thing nor the other' (Turner 1969). The class is literally situated in an in-between space, in a kind of anteroom where everyone must be able to pass through freely. The liminality of the physical space is echoed in the 'in-between-ness' of the asylum seekers life situation, in a kind of in-between space before the decision to

grant refugee status is decided, a process which for some of these learners has already taken many years. In this case the liminality can become a way of life, as Sue points out in her interview, decisions can be prolonged over as much as five years. The class seems to be characterised by an attitude of 'carry on as if'... as if in this case a learner's life in this country could be abruptly terminated by a decision not to allow asylum.

### **CASE STUDY 6: Tommy's literacy Entry 3 class at Rushton**

The class meets for 12.5 hours a week: one lesson a week is for IT. For most lessons the teacher is Tommy. The class is one of a wide provision of literacy and numeracy at one of the main sites at Rushton. The department has clear guidelines about how people get placed in a level if they are ESOL: an ESOL level is regarded as a level below literacy, i.e. ESOL Entry level 3 is counted as the equivalent of Entry level 2 literacy. Hence some learners have done E3 ESOL already and are now doing E3 literacy.

#### **The learners**

There are around 18 people registered for this class. They sound generally more fluent and accurate than Jane's ESOL group (see Case Study 4), but the range is wide and some struggle to express themselves more than others. Two learners, one from Jamaica and one from Zimbabwe, report as monolingual, but are bi-dialectical. The rest are all bilingual or multilingual. All were born overseas, in Bangladesh (the majority), Somalia, Morocco, Pakistan and Thailand. They have been in the UK for between 3 and 20 years, with most of them here over 5 years. Some have been here since early adulthood, one since she was 15 and one since she was 9, a Bangladeshi woman who came and went between Bangladesh and London, a quite common pattern which seems to disrupt literacy development. All the learners live locally now but have lived in other parts of England and other parts of London, where they attended other colleges or training centres. They compare this neighbourhood favourably with other places because they regard it as safe and friendly. Most of them say they already knew about the college, or found out about it through word of mouth or from others in the community. Two learners had done ESOL in community outreach but were dissatisfied with their progress there.

Many of the group are also doing GCSE or Level 1 Maths. Several learners have done courses at higher levels than this one, and there is some disparity of levels. For example one learner is doing NVQ Level 2 in Childcare and another has done Level 1 Health and Social Care. Many have applied to courses at a higher level such as Access and have been turned down and referred to the Skills for Life department. This is one of the ways bilingual people find themselves on literacy courses when they could just as feasibly be in an ESOL class: literacy and numeracy, not ESOL, are regarded as the route to GCSE, Access and higher level vocational courses by teachers as well as by learners.

#### **Learners' needs**

Learners say they are on the course as a route to better things, that without 'brushing up' their English, as one woman puts it, they won't be able to get onto courses which will enable them to get better jobs. Like the ESOL learners in Jane's class (Case Study 4) and in Sue's class in Cranshaw (Case Study 5), some of them seem to be postponing their job searches or decisions about what they want to do until their English is better. However, more people in this class have a clearer idea of what they want to do as a job or career and feel that this course is the first rung on a long ladder to their final aim. The careers mentioned by the



group are: accountancy, computing, teaching, nutrition, nursing, midwifery, business management and social work. Two or three learners say they want to go to university, one to do science.

ESOL is seen by learners as a lower level, something that you 'finish' and then move on from, and is associated with slower progress and with low level speaking. The literacy class is not seen as a place where speaking should be a focus. There is disagreement however about whether they need speaking in their class or not. Some say they speak only Bengali outside the class, while others believe their speaking is good enough and that what they need is to focus on reading and writing. However, it is striking that the learners in the class seem to have a narrow skills-based view of literacy similar to the learners in Jane's class. Most of them equate literacy with spelling, and seem unable to express their needs and interests beyond this.

The general feeling from this group is that they think highly of Tommy and enjoy their lessons. When asked about what they generally do in Tommy's class, they all said 'spelling' and 'dictation'. When asked what they write about, they said 'letters' and sometimes 'topics' by which they mean composition writing on topics of their choice, which they do with another teacher.

#### **Tommy on the learners**

Tommy has a strong belief that education is the key to progress and says the main thing he likes about the job is being able to help learners on their way to where they want to be. He places great store on 'patience' and persistence and quotes several examples of learners who have gradually worked their way up through the levels.

Although Tommy says that the main difference between ESOL and literacy is about fluency and knowledge of grammar, he later talks a lot about the fact that most of the learners in this class are bilingual or 'second language' and blames this for a lot of their problems and slow progress. He contrasts these learners with 'native speakers' such as J., the woman from Jamaica. Not only is she more fluent than the others, she does not confuse the meanings of words, and does not have big problems with vocabulary like the others do. Tommy identifies clearly that bilingual, L2 speakers have certain serious specific issues which affect them, but does not seem to have had the training to address these effectively

#### **The literacy lessons**

The scheme of work is organised along the lines of genre. Each week learners read and practise a certain type of text, such as: newspaper articles, advertisements, application form, a map, a book, an editorial and a formal letter. Each week there is a set of activities/focuses such as spelling tests and dictations, as well as the goal 'speak clearly to be heard'.

Two lessons were observed in this class. The first lesson is a continuation of a class which took place earlier that day, in which the learners had been reading job adverts. The text is teacher produced rather than taken from a newspaper or notice board. There is a reading comprehension attached to it. Tommy draws an outline of a letter on the board and elicits where to put the address and so on. He puts key words on the board (e.g. application form, etc.) and tells learners to write a letter asking for an application form to apply for one of the jobs. Tommy goes around monitoring, intervening to correct their grammar. He mentions articles, subject verb agreement and tenses. He is concerned that some people have written a CV, not a letter asking for an application form. Some of the fluent writers have taken this as a



chance to write at length and have done so regardless of the task. Others realise that the task requires a very short letter and finish very quickly. Some of these letters are fluent and written with few grammatical errors but with problems of register and style. Some seem to be written in an Asian variety of English. The task is different to that which produced the writing in Jane's ESOL literacy class, so comparison with them is limited, but there are similarities between them in terms of sentence structure, spelling and so on. This raises the question of what is ESOL writing and what is not? Furthermore, the texts and activities are certainly easier than the work done in Jane's class.

The second observed lesson begins with a recap of last week's session in which they had watched a video on health and safety. The group breaks into two tables to work on a task. The groups are to look at photos of industrial safety signs and write down on a piece of paper a possible accident that an employee might have on that particular work site. Tommy encourages them to have as much discussion about this as possible. Some learners write down 'wet floor' as a type of accident, others put down 'fights', and two or three of the learners are unable to do the task because they say they have never had an accident at work. Tommy stresses the word 'might' in the clause 'accidents an employee might have' but learners remain resistant or unable to complete the task. The activity is then extended to an exercise in which learners write individual sentences about accidents. Tommy goes round checking grammar (subject verb agreement). All the learners are on task and working together collaboratively. After the break there is a spelling dictation, in which target words are embedded into sentences. Tommy talks about English spelling being difficult (cereal, serial), how it has to become automatic, and how there is no such thing as a perfect speller. Learners finally tackle an exercise in which they have to change verbs in one sentence from the past tense to verbs in another sentence in the present, which proves very challenging.

The class is very pleasant, the learners are extremely lively, warm and friendly and Tommy is popular with the learners. He has a warm patient manner and takes his job very seriously. He believes that literacy and education are the keys to progress and change, and this is very much reflected in his own experience as someone who has started as a volunteer learning support worker in adult education before he became qualified. His approach is one of solidarity with the learners. However, he says that he lacks the linguistic knowledge necessary to address the needs of bilingual learners. There is no concession made in the observed lessons to their status or experience as speakers of other languages who are literate in other scripts, to their needs concerning lexis, grammar or genre or any of the many other issues which are specific to second or other language learners.

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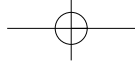
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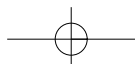
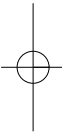
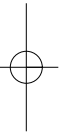
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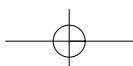
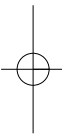
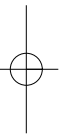
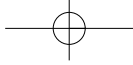
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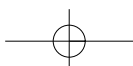
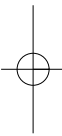
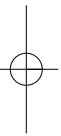
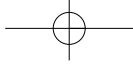


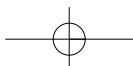
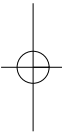
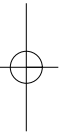
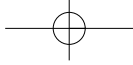
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This report is funded by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills as part of Skills for Life: the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department.

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