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Improving English Language Proficiency in Students with English as a Second Language

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Language and Literacy



Introduction

This report describes the educational challenge of international students with English as a Second Language (ESL), why a decrease in ability to learn ESL occurs and introduces a research-focused intervention to prepare Key Stage 4 and College students with a language deficit for Higher Education (HE). The diversity within the UK education system is rapidly increasing. It has become the 3rd most popular country in the world for international university students, and the number at UK universities has increased by 10.2% in the last 25 years (Universities UK, 2022). Although growing diversity has many benefits, it does produce a modern educational problem: educating children with ESL (Grad-Dreams, 2023). This is a challenge in primary, secondary, and HE; however, the concomitant effects of an English language and literacy deficit increase dramatically as the student gets older.

Research suggests a few reasons for the decrease in ability to learn ESL. A viral internet survey collected data from 666,000 individuals with ESL and found that language learning is most effective before aged 10 for grammatical accuracy, becomes more difficult through adolescence, and further stunted post-18 (Smith, 2018). The researchers infer that this may be due to social changes throughout life limiting the amount of time available to learn a language, interferences with a primary language and brain development. In some situations, learning ESL often happens earlier in development, usually when the move to the UK is planned or when a bilingual family is already living in the UK. This enables the child a longer amount of time to learn the language in-country through immersion and from a younger age as recommended (Abdullaev, 2021; Smith, 2018). However, in other cases, the move to England is not planned and people are pushed from country of origin due to external, often unpredictable factors. It is these children that if not supported, especially in a critical language learning period, will become susceptible to the educational challenge.

It is believed that facilitating the success of ESL students is the responsibility of the UK education system (Martinez & Colaner, 2017). Leong (2015, as cited in Li et al., 2018) considers English language proficiency alone as the primary barrier. Without, research has shown that students post-18 report feeling 'depressed', 'overwhelmed', and 'terrified' in HE (Martinez & Colaner, 2017; Pinarbasi, 2023). In terms of language, students with ESL struggled to write essays over 1000 words due to limited vocabulary and writing experience, which had then caused poorer academic outcomes. Yang (2017) supports this stating speed, accent and vocabulary are the main difficulties, causing lack of confidence to participate in classes verbally. As a secondary effect to the above, the students may suffer acculturative stress. Alharbi and Smith (2018) define this as a stress reaction in response to life events which occurs through dissonance of home and host language and culture.

Intervention

To intervene, a universal scale intervention is suggested to target the entire UK ESL student population. It will focus on providing those students with research-led support and schemes that will prepare them for HE not only to improve English language proficiency and literacy, but also to reduce the negative social effects that come with it. The intervention should target Key Stage 4 and college students aged 14-17; in a critical period to improve their English before moving onto HE (Smith, 2018). The first level of the intervention is individual. Students aged 14-17 years who are recognised as most the vulnerable are provided a mentor. The mentors may be a teacher already at the school, or if a school has the funding, an external body. The mentor provides weekly scheduled check-ins to identify weaknesses, strengths and use these to create a care plan. It would be helpful for the mentor to be culturally insightful and sensitive, as to create a mutual understanding to integrate educational success and home life (Yakunina et al., 2013). This scheduled time is necessary due to some ESL students being reluctant to help-seek: Chen and Kok (2017) found that Malaysian Chinese students associated speaking to a counsellor with behaviour problems, and so this may have been

discouraged due to pride. At a microscale level, ESL students is given a language-buddy within-school. O'Reilly et al (2010) found that a high level of social support is advantageous to an ESL student (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Getie, 2020). Their buddy should be a national English speaker of the same age who can help with pronunciation, frequency of English interactions, confidence building and other contemporary challenges such as colloquialisms (Grad-Dreams, 2023; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Finally, a better link between schools, colleges and universities would create a mesoscale level of intervention. The Student Administrations in Higher Education (NASPA) in the US organize first-year orientations, experience classes and sporting programs, which has been shown to improve writing, help ESL students become familiar with HE and promote skills such as resilience (Major, 2005; Martinez & Colaner, 2017). As a UK alternative, Universities can host annual integration weeks where ESL students can mix and find support in one another. Due to the nature of the intervention, it is estimated that there will be some individual differences within the ESL population (Abdullaev, 2021; Alharbi & Smith, 2018). Yeh and Inose (2003) found that European students are less likely to experience significant deficits in an English education system when compared with Asian, African, and Latin American students. East Asian students, for example, often have values of Confucianism; high moral duties to learn, perform well for their family and to other authority such as teachers (McMahon, 2011). This is contrasting to the Western individualist ways centred around free-will and choice (Li et al, 2018).

Conclusion

The intervention's success can be measured by HE students with ESL satisfaction and achievement. It should be approached on an individual level due to expected and unavoidable differences. To develop this intervention further, a macroscale level should be introduced to support students coming from foreign countries into HE post-18.

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