

International Schools and provision for Second Language Learners

An overview of the issues, and a model school of good practice

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The 2019 ECIS Multilingual Learning in International Education (MLIE) conference in London was the opportunity to launch *Second Language Learners in International Schools* by the present writer, with contributions from Patricia Mertin and Sarah Porter. The book aims to cover the whole range of issues concerned with this group of students, in a world which has seen the focus change from an acceptance of native speaker, usually English, predominance to one where global citizenship and multilingualism are the norm. Latest statistics not only show an enormous increase in the number of international schools but also demonstrate how the clientele has changed. Whereas the general norm previously was for the majority of students to be ‘international’, increasingly the local community is now providing a large proportion of students. ISC Research (2020) provides detailed statistics on these issues, showing that 98% of such schools are now ‘for profit’, with many British independent schools seizing the opportunities that are opening up.

The national educational systems of the Anglosphere have been influential in developing provision for instructional programmes for Second Language Learners. However, in each country – the UK, the USA, Australia, Canada – the development has followed a different trajectory, and the model adopted by an international school often depends on the predominant ethos of the school: British, American, Australian or Canadian. There is often an uncritical acceptance that the provision of Second Language (SL) instruction in the home country will automatically be the correct model for the international school. This can have either positive or negative consequences.

International schools are different from schools in national systems in many respects, but especially in a political sense – never more so than in the present climate, where immigrants have become the butt of many politicians’ aspirations to power. International schools can provide the context for an ideal SL model to be developed, that will consist of three elements, each of equal importance: a SL programme; continuing professional development (CPD) for all staff and administration; and a programme of mother tongue (MT) instruction. Virginia Collier notes that: ‘Most important is, first, to understand the crucial importance of the

mother tongue in the student's cognitive development. From hundreds of research studies of the relationship between students' mother tongue and cognition, we know that children must develop cognitively in their mother tongue until at least age 12 in order to be successful in curricular mastery in their second language' (in Carder, 2018: xvi-xvii). While Collier points this out as being the most important factor, in most international schools it is often very low on the agenda. At the very least, schools should make parents aware of what is at stake before they enrol their children.

CPD is a vital element for teachers and administrators. Collier, again, notes that: 'Now it is clear from the research that second language teaching strategies benefit all students' (ibid: xviii). Relevant CPD needs not only to be undertaken, but also to be reinforced and repeated, every three years. This leads to the central element: the nature of the SL programme. There is not space here to go into detail of the various models on offer, which focus on the vital need to have qualified, professional teachers of ESL (or other SL) to devise and deliver the programme. They will serve as SL programme designers, instigators of the CPD training, and 'centres of expertise' for all matters relating to bilingualism, such as the length of time needed for SL students to achieve proficiency with native-speaking peers; assessment; the need to distinguish between SL factors, and students requiring learning support. Non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) have advantages in this context: for example, they have the benefit of having learnt English as a SL themselves, and they are intimately familiar with the construction of the language. Additionally, SL students will often feel more affinity with a NNEST than with a native speaker.

Though the 'support' model of ESL can be problematic if it is taught by unqualified teaching assistants, and if SL students are treated disadvantageously, a recent visit to an international school in Asia showed the present writer how, with the complete backing of the administration, such a model can be hugely successful. International School Manila (ISM), in the Philippines, made a decision some years ago to change from an extraction ESL programme to a model based on inclusion. This ensured that students would be sitting in classes with their fluent English-speaking peers for most of the curriculum. An inclusion model, based as it is on ESL students participating in mainstream classes containing the sophisticated language of the various subjects, requires large amounts of pre-planning and cooperation between ESL teachers and subject teachers. The additional support given by teaching assistants in this activity is essential. Such a support model can easily be dismissed

as merely paying lip-service to a programme designated from above. However, after an intensive week at ISM where I visited many classes at different levels, being taught in the many different subjects of the curriculum, I encountered a model that is not only working but excelling. Timetabling is always a bugbear when it comes to scheduling ESL because of the need to back ESL against all the different subjects across multiple grade levels. ISM is to be commended for tackling this issue successfully. As far as instruction in the various subjects is concerned, there was repeated evidence of joint pre-planning by ESL teachers, content teachers and teaching assistants. This was substantiated by the high levels of technology visible, whereby students had templates uploaded to their computers before classes, all the teachers involved were clearly thoroughly acquainted with all the material being worked on, there was often frequent co-teaching, or back-and-forth sharing of instruction, and teaching assistants were either supporting students or directly instructing the class. Teachers informed me that much time was spent on lesson preparation and after-class feedback. The school is to be commended for developing, sustaining and being actively involved in a complex model of ESL support which can only be of benefit to all students, and will inevitably lead to positive outcomes at higher levels as literacy in English is the key to achievement.

References

ISC Research (2020) www.iscresearch.com/data

Carder M (2018) *Second Language Learners in International Schools*. Trentham Books: London

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