Closing the achievement gap: challenges and opportunities

Chapter 1

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Setting the context

Borders across the world are becoming increasingly fluid; figures from the Migration Policy Institute (2015) indicate that international migration has almost tripled since 1960, rising from 77 million at that time to almost 244 million in 2015. The island of Ireland, North and South, is likely to remain a destination of choice for people from parts of the world that have been ‘stripped’ by global capitalism (Bauman, 2007, p. 34), or who have been forced to move countries because of wars and conflict. Parekh (2009, p. 81) speaks of the range of human movement across the planet, from economic migration to returning diaspora, to asylum seekers and refugees, saying:

Since none of these and other sources of cultural diversity are likely to disappear in the foreseeable future, and since new forms of diversity appear as the old die out, it is a more or less permanent feature of modern life.

Such cultural and linguistic diversity is reflected in schools and classrooms across the island of Ireland. Statistics show that numbers of minority language pupils in the North of Ireland (NI) and Republic of Ireland (ROI) are increasing. In NI, at the time of writing, there are 11,900 minority language pupils, that is 3.5% of total school enrolment, compared with 7,899 in 2009/10 and 1,244 pupils in 2002 (NISRA, 2015).

The migrant population in the ROI stands at 11.6%; there are currently 200 nationalities in the country with approximately 182 different languages (Central Statistics Office, [CSO] 2017). Numerically, there are 612,000 people who speak a language other than English at home, with Polish, Romanian and Lithuanian being the most represented in Census figures (CSO, 2017).

In this context, teachers must provide differentiated instruction for pupils whose first language is not English, to ensure that these students are fully included in teaching and learning, and that their achievement is on a par with their English-speaking peers. The underachievement of migrant pupils is a long-standing concern in Europe and North America (Cummins, 2014; Faas, 2014). Data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has highlighted the achievement gap in many countries, for both first and second-generation migrant students (Cummins, 2014). PISA data in the ROI is perhaps more encouraging. According to Shiel, Kelleher, McKeown and Denner (2016a, p. 100), no significant differences are observed on overall Science scores among students in Ireland based on immigrant and language background. The authors qualify this statement by noting that “this may arise from the large standard errors around the mean scores for the two immigrant groups” (Shiel et al, 2016a, p. 100). In the 2015 PISA statistics, Shiel et al state that ‘native students’ have a mean score on Science that is ‘some 12.2 points higher than immigrant students who speak a language other than English or Irish at home’ (Shiel et al, 2016a, p. 100). They also point out:

1. Two immigrant groups’ meaning 1) those with English or Irish spoken at home, and 2) those with an ‘other language’ spoken at home.
The only significant difference in achievement observed between the groups is on reading literacy, with native students scoring some 25 points higher than immigrant students who speak a language other than English or Irish (Shiel et al, 2016b, p. 100, italics added).²

The NI Statistics Research Agency (NISRA) provides figures which are food for thought on the achievement of minority language pupils in that jurisdiction. In post-primary education in 2015-2016, 38.6% of ‘home’ pupils achieved 3 or more A levels at grade A* - C compared with 8.4% of ‘newcomer’ pupils; whilst 66.5% of ‘home’ pupils achieved 5 or more GCSEs at grades A* - C compared with 21.3% of ‘newcomer’ pupils.

These latest ROI and NI figures may point to a developing trend of underachievement, and therefore need to be monitored; they also underline the necessity for an on-going focus on EAL in pre-service teacher education (Ryan, O’Toole, Quinn, Hagan & Bracken, 2010) and in-service teacher education (Skinner, 2010). Such work must address: creating inclusive curricula, developing sound pedagogical practice, and establishing strong links between communities and schools. The next section explores some of the challenges learners and educators face in closing the achievement gap.

Vignette: Natalia’s Story

“My name is Natalia. I am 12 and from Lithuania. I have been in Northern Ireland for nearly two years. I enjoy Maths and I’m good at it but sometimes I can’t explain what I do or ask and answer questions because I don’t have enough English”.

Natalia has learnt her mother tongue, Lithuanian, and can use it fluently. However, she also needs to learn to speak, read, write and listen in English at the same time as maintaining her curriculum learning, which is also through the medium of English. Natalia needs subject-specific academic language such as:

- If you divide it by 100 and multiply by ten you get ….
- First you subtract (X) from (Y), then you estimate how many ....
- The difference between ... ?
- There are four sets of X, so this means....

Natalia also needs to socialise with children in a language she has yet to learn - daunting - and learn the social practices of the classroom and the school. These practices are culturally embedded and may be less consistent with her home background than for the majority language children in her class and in her school. Natalia is facing a moving target:

Starting school – the EAL learner’s task

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²According to the PISA data in the Republic of Ireland, the mean score for ‘native’ students in reading literacy is 524.7, while the score for immigrant students with a language other than English or Irish is 499.7 (Shiel, Kelleher, McKeown and Denner, 2016b, p. 6).
The graph shows the English language learning required for school attainment. In NI, minority language pupils can start school at any of the Key Stages. For example, at primary school they might join at Key Stage 1 (aged 5-7) or Key Stage 2 (aged 7-11) whilst at post-primary they might join at Key Stage 3 (aged 11-14), Key Stage 4 (aged 15-16) or Key Stage 5 (aged 17-18).

- dotted line = average ‘home’ pupil progression
- dark line = required EAL pupil progression
- thin line = possible EAL pupil progression

The EAL learner has to ‘catch up’ (the dark line) from a different starting point to her English-speaking peers. If Natalia can ‘catch up’ or near enough by the end of her first year, she may do well in the education system, although it is still important to remember that her development in English will not be complete at this stage and Natalia will require continuing support. If she cannot close the gap by the end of the first year it will get more difficult because the demands of the curriculum depend on increasing literacy skills in English. At this point she may find herself following the thin line, ‘possible EAL progression’, where she is learning but at a lower level than that of her peers. Catching up is basically Natalia’s problem. No one waits. The curriculum moves on. Natalia is faced with a moving target (Cummins, 2000, p. 36), as native speakers of English are making accelerated progress through school.

Natalia is moving into the intermediate stage of learning English: intermediate EAL learners would typically be able to communicate successfully and fluently in English (‘conversational fluency’ Cummins, 2001) and develop more control of functional language. Natalia’s spoken English, however, may not be fully accurate, with surface errors sometimes continuing for a number of years. The challenges for intermediate EAL learners remain. They may, for example, be able to use more extended sentences with greater accuracy and control than they could when they were beginners, but often containing errors in plurals, tenses, pronouns and prepositions. For example:

- over-generalisation of rules, e.g. He sitted on the floor; I saw some mouses
- omitting articles or putting them in the wrong place
- omitting ‘s’ on the end of 3rd person singular
- errors with tenses, e.g. She come to school late this morning; We watching a film on Saturday.

At this stage, the focus for teaching and support should be about increasing accuracy; intermediate learners need to be encouraged to notice key features of English and apply them in their own speech and writing.

**Academic language proficiency**

This vignette highlights the complexity of tasks facing the EAL learner. Whatever the age of the pupil he or she must catch up with their English-speaking peers and do so in a relatively short space of time. While rates of progress will depend on a range of variables, the learning and social context within the school will play a part in making the task easier or harder. Furthermore, Cummins (2001) has highlighted the distinction between social/conversational language and academic language proficiency. Conversational language is typically context-embedded and supported by paralinguistic cues (Cummins, 1979, 2001; Little, 2010) and is generally acquired within one to two years of a pupil arriving in school. Gibbons (1991) has referred to this as ‘playground language’, indicating its informal nature and informal origins. Academic language is context-reduced and more abstract; it comprises the more formal register of schooling, involving complex features and vocabulary such as hypothesising, persuading, classifying, arguing, and speculating. As Cummins (2001, p. 68) points out: “mastery of the academic functions of language is a... formidable task”. Although Little (2010, p. 19) cautions against clear-cut distinctions between these two facets of language proficiency, noting that “the distinctions are not absolute and boundaries are often blurred”, writers agree on the central role of school personnel in teaching academic language (Broeder & Kistemaker, 2015; Cummins, 2001, 2014; Creese & Leung,
Bildungssprache: a concept introduced by Ingrid Gogolin to denote academic language (cited in Grommes, 2014).

Gibbons (2002, p. 6) points to the proactive nature of teaching for academic proficiency, stating that merely placing students in classrooms is not sufficient; rather, teachers must intentionally focus on the development of academic language in their teaching. This highlights the importance of teachers possessing knowledge and understanding of EAL pedagogy. It underlines the need for education about EAL pedagogy to form part of pre-service provision and continuing professional development for teachers. How should this pedagogy be approached?

Questions for educators

Taking note of the above vignette featuring Natalia, along with the necessity for the development of academic language proficiency in school, there are certain dilemmas and challenges facing teachers who work with students whose first language is not English:

- How do teachers in diverse settings support the development of academic language proficiency while also recognising the languages and cultures of their students?
- How do teachers avoid holding a deficit perspective on language learners in their classrooms, when they are aware of the potential gaps in their academic language proficiency compared to that of their peers who speak the dominant language?

In summary: students must learn the dominant language in order to succeed academically. How do teachers approach this work within a social justice framework, i.e. without a) working from a deficit perspective or b) marginalising students’ first languages and home cultures?

As Little, Leung and Van Avermaet (2014, p. xxii) point out, while a primary focus on the development of academic language proficiency is understandable in educational policy and practice, “effective diversity management must address a number of issues in addition to the language of schooling”. Such issues include a recognition of students’ home languages and cultures. Cummins (2014, p. 9) states that effective education for minority language students must incorporate language support and an inclusive curriculum, and that it must also “view diversity as a resource and... establish respectful collaborative partnerships with parents and the community.” In an earlier publication, Cummins (2001, p. 71) notes that “school improvement efforts are likely to be futile if they continue to exclude issues of identity and power from their analyses of the causes of students’ academic difficulties and from recommendations for change”. Little (2010, p. 16) states that “use of the home language at school affirms the migrant pupil’s identity and helps to counteract any tendency to stigmatise him or her for membership of a group that is perceived as linguistically inferior”.

The challenge for educators is to enhance their classroom practice with minority language students in order to reduce the possibility of an achievement gap, and to approach this work in such a way that students’ first languages and cultures are included as an integral part of teaching and learning. A sociocultural theoretical framework is a useful starting point for this work.

The theoretical perspective underpinning EAL pedagogy, as understood by the authors, is informed by Vygotsky’s sociocultural perspective on education. Vygotsky (cited in Walsh, 2006, p.33) believed learning is a ‘situated practice’ which occurs in social contexts, through talking to others, before being internalized for cognitive development. Learning occurs best when practical activity and language come together. Vygotsky believed that this learning occurs most successfully through interaction with others who are more experienced than ourselves, the ‘expert knower’ (ibid.), often the teacher, but sometimes a peer.

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1 Bildungssprache: a concept introduced by Ingrid Gogolin to denote academic language (cited in Grommes, 2014)
An important feature of Vygotsky’s theory (ibid.) is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). This can be thought of as a metaphorical location where learners interact to construct knowledge. The term relates to the difference between what a learner can achieve on his or her own compared with when s/he is supported by a teacher or more able other. In an EAL context, learning occurs best if a learner interacts with someone who is within their ZPD, as the student is able to co-construct knowledge and perform at a higher level with the support of the other. Vygotsky proposes that to learn effectively we need a ‘significant other’ – for a pupil for whom English is an additional language this might be a good native speaker who can model and help scaffold their learning in interactive learning activities. A large part of a teacher’s role is to scaffold the language of EAL learners by exploring the actual language demands of the task and relating this to the pupil’s ability. For example, what key vocabulary needs to be identified so that the pupils can access the content? What is the syntactic complexity of the text, is it full of lots of conditional clauses, if so, does the pupil know the conditional in English and if not, will he or she realise that this is talking about something hypothetical, not real? Do the pupils know that the structure of some advertisements follows a problem-solution type pattern? And what about subject specific terminology inherent in this task?

In their research, Cameron and Besser (2004) lay particular stress on the problems advanced EAL learners have with what they term formulaic phrases, which they define as “a group of words that are "bound" together, in that certain words must, or tend to be, accompanied by other words” (2004, p. 8). For example ‘a black-and-white cat’ is a formulaic phrase; an EAL learner might write ‘a white-and-black cat’. Other examples would be ‘he waited for long’, instead of ‘he waited for a long time’, or ‘her best of all friend’ for ‘her best friend’. The basic premise is that skills need to be developed so that teachers and learners look at language rather than through it – this has become known as the ability to develop a Linguistically Responsive Pedagogy. Lucas and Villegas (2013 p. 99) explain that the key features of linguistically responsive teachers is that they value language diversity, are able to identify key language demands of task, have a repertoire of strategies for scaffolding English language learners and an inclination to advocate for minority language pupils.

In addition to being linguistically responsive, teachers of EAL learners need to develop a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. As Sharroky (2018) suggests, this is about being able to give validation and affirmation of the home culture for the purposes of bridging the student to success in the mainstream culture.

Culturally responsive pedagogy

The theoretical perspective underpinning this publication is informed by a sociocultural perspective on education, situating language use in its cultural and social contexts (Hawkins, 2010) and drawing from ‘culturally relevant pedagogy’ (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). The authors were concerned with prioritising the achievement of students from linguistic minorities but not at the expense of those students’ languages and cultures. Arnesen et al. (2008), argue that the sociocultural perspective by definition alone implies that
human differences are socially or culturally constructed. Consequently they maintain that from a sociocultural point of view, diversity is not neutral “but implies problems of discrimination and inequality”; (p. 17). By its very term, they argue, there is an implication of different status and recognition, and underpinning these differences, the question of societal power. Fitts (2006) argues that any educational programmes that attempt to address linguistic matters alone, without also looking at issues of status and power, will not succeed.

In her seminal 1995 paper, Ladson-Billings stated: “only the term culturally responsive appears to refer to a more dynamic or synergistic relationship between home/community culture and school culture” (Ladson Billings, 1995, p. 467, italics in original). She conducted a study in the US to challenge deficit views about the education of African American students through identifying ‘teaching excellence’ in the practice of eight successful teachers. Her aim was to establish how academic success and cultural success can complement each other. ‘Three broad propositions’ emerged from her research: “conceptions of self and others held by culturally relevant teachers”; the “manner in which social relations are constructed” by such teachers, and the “conceptions of knowledge they hold” (p. 478). For example, regarding ‘conceptions of self and others’, the successful teachers in her study demanded a high level of academic success from their students and believed students were capable of reaching this level: “students were not permitted to choose failure in their classrooms” (p. 479). Furthermore, in the process of working towards academic achievement, the teachers included student culture in the classroom as “authorised or official knowledge” (p. 483). Ladson-Billings (2014) identified three domains which underpinned the work of these successful teachers: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness, as in “the ability to take learning beyond the confines of the classroom...to identify, analyse, and solve real-world problems” (2014, p. 75).

Subsequent work has built upon, developed and critiqued CRP. Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti (2005) introduced the idea of ‘funds of knowledge’ which they describe as the culturally developed knowledge, including language knowledge, which students bring to school: the “historically developed and accumulated strategies (skills, abilities, ideas, practices) or bodies of knowledge that are essential to a household’s functioning and well-being” and that these are “abundant and diverse” (Gonzalez et al. 2005, p. 91-92). When students bring their own rich cultural and cognitive resources into the classroom, this can tap into students’ prior knowledge and can “bridge the chasm between home and school” (p. 40) through the creation of culturally responsive and meaningful lessons. Moll (2005, p. 276) states that when first languages are not recognized by schools, this curtails the “ability of teachers to build on the language and cultural experience of students” and can also lead to a ‘fracture’ between families and school.

This argument is echoed by other writers in the field. Cummins (1979, 1980, 2000, 2001), claims that the extent to which students’ language and cultural background are valued and promoted within the school actively supports or disables the learning and achievement of minority ethnic students. Cummins (2000, p. 48) states that interactions between educators and culturally diverse students are “never neutral with respect to societal power relations”, and that “in varying degrees they either reinforce or challenge coercive relations of power in the wider society”. Similarly, Phillipson (2003), Flynn (2007), Garcia (2009), Mc Daid (2011), Conteh (2012) and Conteh and Brock (2011) have written extensively on this theme. Delipit and Dowdy (2002), have emphasised the link between language and identity (“the skin that we speak”); while Mc Daid (2011) frames first language recognition as an issue of equality, stating that teachers have ‘pedagogic authority’ based on their institutional legitimacy as school authority, and can impose the selection of meanings by virtue of this authority.
Situating EAL teaching and learning in a sociocultural theoretical framework and within the broader context of acknowledging power differentials in society, is a unifying thread running through the following five chapters. The authors foreground the connection between language and identity, highlight the importance of first language recognition and inclusion of students’ cultures in school, while emphasising the necessity of academic achievement.

**Beyond culturally responsive pedagogy**

In conclusion, the seminars on which this publication is based were informed by a sociocultural theoretical perspective, in which the first languages and home cultures of minority students are recognised and valued as integral components of the teaching and learning process in schools. The concept of CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995) was central to the thinking underpinning the events, including the selection of speakers and rapporteurs. In recent years, several authors, including Ladson-Billings herself, have critiqued the ways in which CRP has been thought about and implemented in schools. Ladson-Billings (2014, p.82) states that the concept has “taken on a life of its own...and sometimes in practice is totally unrecognisable to me”, noting that simply adding library books depicting diversity or having classroom or school celebrations does not constitute a robust approach to CRP.

Pirbhai-Illich, Pete and Martin (2017, p. 4) offer a further critique of how CRP has been interpreted, arguing that it “has been and continues to be insufficient to address the global colonial power matrix”. They identify problems in the typical interpretation of CRP by white educators, whereby much of what was originally intended by Ladson-Billings has become ‘lost in translation’. These problems concern, firstly, the “focus on the Other, albeit from a positive rather than deficit position”, (Martin, Pirbhai-Illich and Pete, 2017, p. 236), which they say, enables white teachers to side-step white privilege because they can avoid looking at themselves and their own complicity in what Andreotti, (2016, p. 104) terms “epistemic blindness to ways of thinking”. Second, this preoccupation with ‘Other’ allows educators to ignore the Eurocentric nature of education systems. Finally, Martin et al. (2017, p. 236) state that CRP is generally interpreted at individual teacher level rather than systemically; it typically does not contain an examination of the “systemic and structural inequalities inherent in education systems” which, these authors state, have their roots in colonialism. Martin et al. (2017, p. 239) call for ‘critical interculturality’ which “requires centring the knowledges of southern, indigenous, and other marginalised peoples” and the creation of spaces for dialogue that address structural and systemic injustice and inequality. They argue for radical, decolonising pedagogy in teacher education.

The authors’ critique of CRP is a useful lens with which to examine the limitations of the seminars and to identify lessons learned that can inform future such events. The seminar focus was on the achievement of students from linguistic minorities within a sociocultural theoretical framework in which first languages and cultures are recognised and included. The policy context in Europe was also examined, particularly in the Dublin seminar by Piet Van Avermaet, thereby providing a focus on structural and systemic issues that impact on schools and on classroom practice. However, the ‘voice’ of the minority language speaker was largely absent from the seminars apart from video excerpts, case studies and stories from classrooms, which were introduced by presenters. So, while the events were deemed successful by coordinators, speakers and participants, a charge of “epistemic blindness” (Andreotti, 2016, p. 104) could well be levelled at the organisers (the current authors). While the perspective was “from a positive rather than a deficit position” (Martin et al., 2017, p. 236), the absence of the minority viewpoint in the selection of speakers could be seen to perpetuate white European privilege and is something to be addressed in future seminars.
References


