

Executive summary

The English Language Support Programme (ELSP) is one of six projects that together make up the Trinity Immigration Initiative's research programme on Diversity, Integration and Policy (2007–2010).

Ensuring that newcomer pupils and students can access mainstream education is one of the greatest challenges posed by the recent increase in immigration into Ireland. The challenge at post-primary level is particularly acute for three reasons:

- The older newcomer learners are when they first enter the education system, the more they must learn in order to catch up with their English-speaking peers.
- The post-primary curriculum is delivered by subject specialists whose formation has not prepared them to take account of non-English-speaking students in their classes.
- Much English language support at post-primary level is delivered not by specialists but by mainstream subject teachers who need to fill their timetable.

The ELSP has set out to build on the work of Integrate Ireland Language and Training (2001–2008), taking as a framework IILT's English Language Proficiency Benchmarks (the scaled curriculum for English language support) and its version of the European Language Portfolio for learners of English as a second language at post-primary level. The ELSP's specific goals are

- to carry out an extensive survey of current practice in post-primary English language support;
- to analyse the language of the different curriculum subjects and to identify essential vocabulary, key concepts and dominant structures;
- to use this analysis to develop an extensive array of subject-specific materials that support learning at the three levels of the Benchmarks;
- to use the analysis of curriculum language to develop a fourth Benchmarks level that corresponds to the more advanced language requirements of the Leaving Certificate.

This report presents the results of our survey of current practice. Between June 2007 and September 2008 Zachary Lyons interviewed 85 language support teachers and coordinators in 70 post-primary schools, some of them on more than three occasions. The purpose of the survey was to elicit information on the organization and delivery of English language support and to canvas teachers' views on the specific challenges that they must respond to and the deficiencies in the system that they must overcome.

The survey findings do not make encouraging reading. In many of the schools represented the provision of English language support was poorly coordinated; in some it was downright haphazard. Effective and sustained communication between language support and subject teachers seemed to be a rarity, and in some cases responsibility for the integration of newcomer students fell entirely on the language support teacher. There was a widespread tendency to take a "deficit" view of newcomer students' lack of proficiency in English and to assume that they belonged in the same category as students with special educational needs.

In the view of the teachers surveyed, these inadequacies of provision and understanding were not helped by serious deficiencies in the system. They identified lack of appropriate teacher training, pre- as well as in-service, as the single most significant deficiency, closely followed by a lack of

English language teaching materials that take account of the demands of the different curriculum subjects. Only 57% of the teachers surveyed declared themselves happy with the progress their newcomer students were making.

The policy response of the Department of Education and Science to the English language needs of newcomer students reflects little knowledge of the realities of language learning. In particular, the DES seems wholly unaware that for the past thirty years international research has distinguished between the basic interpersonal communication skills required for social interaction and the cognitive/academic language processing required in education. Until the DES forges a more flexible policy that takes account of international research findings, large numbers of newcomer students in our post-primary schools will continue to be at serious risk of educational failure.

In March 2009 the DES announced that it is cutting the provision of English language support. In the same month the ELSP launched a website that offers a wealth of teaching materials focussed on different curriculum subjects. The website will be developed continuously until the end of the project in the autumn of 2010. In this way we hope in some measure to ease the burden on newcomer students and their hard-pressed teachers.

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5 May 2009
