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## Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

### **Language made fun**

**Supporting disadvantaged children in their  
English language development**

**Policy Briefing**

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Raffaella Folli, Christina Sevdali, Catrin Rhys, Jacopo Romoli, Lynda Kennedy and Alison Henry (Ulster)

## **Abstract**

In linguistically diverse societies, language issues are recognised to mediate social inclusion and hence are significant for social inclusion policies. More specifically, failure to support the language needs of Newcomer pupils can lead to social exclusion and underachievement in education. This seminar will report on 'Language made fun', a play-based language intervention programme for primary school Newcomer pupils from migrant families. The project is a joint initiative between the Ulster Centre on Multilingualism (UCoM) and Barnardo's NI. UCoM, established by the linguistics team (School of Communication) at Ulster, is a service for parents and professionals dealing with children acquiring more than one language. 'Language made fun' is specifically aimed at supporting the English language skills of Newcomer pupils who may be vulnerable to exclusion and educational failure. Post-intervention evaluation of the pilot indicates improvements in both vocabulary and grammar as well sentence length and complexity. Parent reports also indicate positive outcomes for language and confidence in communication. At the policy level, the UCoM analysis of the pilot thus revealed that there is an immediate need for more linguistically-informed assessment of Newcomer pupils' language skills to meet their linguistic needs and facilitate access to the curriculum. This project showed that a relatively small investment in linguistic expertise can have a transformative effect on the language and confidence of the children involved. Local Education Authorities therefore should consider how they might appropriately access relevant linguistic expertise in a consistent manner for all Newcomer pupils. The programme is directly related to hot topics in Education specifically relating to Social Inclusion and Educational attainment and to the Programme for Government relating to English with specific reference to Newcomer pupil policies.

## **Background**

### ***Linguistic diversity***

The figures from the recent national census which was taken in April 2011 and the figures from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) show that the linguistic makeup of Northern Ireland over the past decade has changed considerably. The census asked respondents to identify their 'main' language and the results show that in around 3.1% of households in Northern Ireland (54,540), English was not the main language. This figures included those over the age of three so these figures are likely to increase as those children grow up speaking their heritage language.

- Additionally 2.13% of all households in Northern Ireland have no one person in that household who has English as a main language – (around 15,000 homes)
- Throughout Northern Ireland the census indicated that Polish is now the most common 'main language' in Northern Ireland after English (around 17,000 speakers)
- Other language communities with over 1,000 speakers were:
  - Lithuanian, Irish, Portuguese, Slovak, Chinese, Tagalog, Latvian, Russian, Malayam and Hungarian

These figures give us perhaps the clearest overall snapshot of the diversity that exists in Northern Ireland today.

### ***Bilingualism***

Although linguistic diversity is a relatively new phenomenon in Northern Ireland, multilingualism is the norm in many parts of the world. There is a significant body of research, which indicates that bilingualism is an asset with potential cognitive, social and even economic advantages (see for example Bialystok, 1988, Bialystok et al, 2009; Diamond, 2010; Siegal et al., 2010 among many others). Further, changing demographics in the UK and Europe have led to an increased number of children from culturally and linguistically diverse populations. This is reflected in the increased number of bilingual or multilingual children in our schools (Grech and Dodd 2007).

Despite the many advantages of bilingualism, we must also consider the challenge that children growing up learning more than one language face. This is particularly true of sequential bilinguals, i.e. bilinguals who do not speak both languages from birth. Often ESL children (now referred to as 'Newcomer pupils') are only exposed to English when they either move to another country or at school. Although their first language has a significant role in identity, learning and acquisition of further languages they may face initial challenges in their English language

development. Acquisition of English language skills is vital for integration and achievement in the educational system. Therefore children who are not proficient in 'the language of instruction' are at risk of experiencing difficulties accessing the curriculum and lack of inclusion due to poor communication skills in English. Research indicates that Newcomer pupils (particularly sequential bilinguals) are at risk of underachievement if not sufficiently supported with their second language (eg. Paradis 2008 among many others).

Families and education systems need to provide rich and sustained input in both languages as well as provide motivation and promote a positive attitude towards bilingualism (Genesee, Paradis & Crago, 2004, Baker, 2007, Wang, 2008, Bhatia & Ritchie, 2012 among many others).

### ***Newcomer pupils***

The steady growth of migrants in Northern Ireland has clearly given rise to a steady increase of newcomer pupils (formerly EAL, *English as an Additional Language*) in the classrooms. A Newcomer pupil refers to 'a child or young person who has enrolled in a school but who does not have satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum and does not have a language in common with the teacher'. The DENI *Supporting Newcomer Pupils* summary document reports that in October 2008 schools in NI had as many as 6,995 newcomer pupils, 3 times the number in 2004. According to the DENI'S School Census 2013/14, 10,698 newcomer pupils are currently in school in Northern Ireland. One fifth of the total number of newcomer pupils attend school within the Belfast Education and Library Board (2,139).

These figures in combination with the large number of *other language communities* indicated on the recent census give a clear indication of the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity of the local population. Despite the undisputed fact that linguistic diversity crucially represents an opportunity which we must harness for the benefit of children and young people who are now living in a more diverse society, and one which is integrated into a global economy and attendant cultures, it must be recognised that the promotion of multilingualism and recognition of the needs of non-standard speakers in this context cannot but present a challenge for teachers in the first instance.

These trends are at the source of DENI's drive to develop a formal policy 'Every School a Good School - Supporting Newcomer Pupils'. Both the consultation process and the analysis of finding from the consultations are available on the DENI website at

[www.deni.gov.uk/index/21-pupils\\_parents-pg/18-english-as-an-additionallanguage/](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/21-pupils_parents-pg/18-english-as-an-additionallanguage/)

As part of this drive to address the language needs to these pupils DENI has funded the setting up of a regional support service across the ELBs called the Inclusion and Diversity Service (IDS). IDS's role is 'to strengthen and improve support to Newcomer pupils, by ensuring a consistent level of support and specialist advice is provided to all grant-aided and special schools'. Additionally the IDS is responsible for a number of support services which are listed in the DENI's report and summarised below:

- Diversity coordinators.
- Interpreting and translating services.
- Multi-lingual website - [www.education-support.org.uk](http://www.education-support.org.uk)
- Toolkit for diversity in the primary school.
  - [www.education-support.org.uk/teachers/ids/toolkit-for-diversity-primary/](http://www.education-support.org.uk/teachers/ids/toolkit-for-diversity-primary/)
- Continuous professional development.

Each year DENI allocates funds to schools for each Newcomer pupil recorded on the school census. In the 2008/2009 financial year, the Department allocated a total of £6,545,000 to support newcomer pupils. These funds are to help the school '*build upon and maintain the expertise of their teaching staff and provide specific support to those Newcomer pupils who have been identified in the census by schools as needing support*' (DENI)

**Within the context of an increased need to adapt to a growingly culturally diverse environment and meet policy requirements relating to Newcomer pupils, our initiative aims to provide the necessary support to teachers working in a multilingual context by providing tailored resources and advice packs as well as promoting the benefits of maintaining the child's linguistic and cultural identity. We report on a recently completed pilot project "Language made fun" involving 3 migrant children that provides evidence that a relatively small investment into providing linguistic assessment and support for these children can have positive outcomes for language and communication skills.**

## The project

### ***Linguistics at Ulster and UCoM***

Research in linguistics at Ulster has a central focus on the application of core linguistic theory to linguistic phenomena of rich local significance. One central and overlapping research interest of the group is language acquisition and multilingualism, which inspired the establishment of UCoM (Ulster Centre on Multilingualism), a consultation service for parents, early years practitioners, speech and language therapists and other stakeholders with a role or interest in this area. UCoM delivers hands-on initiatives and services through online channels, specifically a website and a Twitter feed.

Since UCoM's launch, the linguistics team has been invited to give a number of talks for professional and special interest groups, and to provide advice to parents who are raising their children as bilinguals. These have included talks to social workers, speech and language therapists, parent and toddler groups, adoptive parents considering adoption of an older child from abroad whose first language is not English, teachers in Irish-medium education and major charities (for a full list of past and future events and initiatives see <http://www.socsci.ulster.ac.uk/ucom/events.html>). Feedback from these events indicates that they have had a considerable impact in changing both attitudes and practices towards speakers of multiple languages. Most notably, in 2013/14 UCoM collaborated with the charity Barnardo's to establish a programme of linguistic support called "*Language made fun!*". The programme is designed to support the language needs of the multilingual children of migrant children in Northern Ireland whilst promoting the maintenance of their home language.

### ***Barnardo's NI***

Barnardo's is a dynamic and innovative children's charity which is constantly changing and adapting the way it works to best meet the needs of the children and young people it supports. Its aim is to help children and young people turn their lives around and achieve the very best for themselves and their families. Barnardo's NI has more than 60 different services and programs working with over 8,000 children, young people and their families across Northern Ireland. Barnardo's range of work includes education support, fostering and early intervention as well as child and family support. It also campaigns on children's issues including child poverty, child sexual exploitation and the need for support for young people not in education, employment or training. In a recent departure from its traditional role Barnardo's has also begun working directly in schools and is now working in partnership with over 150 schools to help children achieve their educational attainment.

### ***Tuar Ceatha***

Tuar Ceatha (Irish for *rainbow*) works with families from a wide range of minority, ethnic, refugee and asylum seeking communities. Barnardo's Tuar Ceatha project provides a range of family support services to black, minority ethnic and refugee (BMER) families in the greater Belfast area. It offers support under the themes of empowerment, poverty and education and its aim is to meet holistic family needs through individual family support, culturally specific parenting programmes and the promotion of integration through the development of community groups in local areas. One of its strengths is its ability to grow and adapt to the changing social needs of diverse and transient communities, which have many of the same issues as local communities, but which also have the barriers of language and social isolation.

In 2013-14 Tuar Ceatha worked with families from over 35 different countries including over 200 migrant children whose parents had no or very limited English language skills.

### ***Language Made Fun!***

'*Language made fun*' is a play-based language intervention for school-aged children for whom English is not their first language. The initiative was specifically aimed at supporting the language skills of migrant or underprivileged ESL learners who may be vulnerable to exclusion and educational failure. At the same time we crucially wanted to encourage and support the child's use of their native language and promote the benefits of multilingualism.

# Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series 2014-15

A pilot of the project has recently been completed with three 6-7 year old (Key Stage 1) children. The project ran for the first time between June 2013-June 2014. Three linguistics student volunteers were paired with three children who were native speakers of Arabic. The children involved in the pilot were from Ethnic minority families who had been accessing Barnardo's Tuar Ceatha services. As this was a pilot study it was agreed that selecting children with the same native language would be the most efficient use of resources as it would allow us to compare grammatical needs of children speaking the same first language.

The project was presented to first and second year Linguistics students at Ulster University. Following this, students who were interested in the project were asked to submit a CV and a statement of interest. Selection was then based on academic scores, Interview with Barnardo's, Satisfactory Access NI clearance.

The broad aims of the project were to

- To develop the communicative language competence of migrant children in Northern Ireland in order to support their social integration and access to education
- To recognize and reinforce the value and importance of the child's home language whilst nurturing their competence in English
- To support children's access to education by prioritising the development of core linguistic skills in the areas of English vocabulary
- To use available expertise in linguistics to identify specific areas of grammatical difficulties which might be due to transfer from the native language

The specific objectives were three-fold:

For the child, the project would deliver

- Improved and rich exposure to English in a one to one fun and motivating context
- Improved confidence in communicating with peers
- Improved integration into school and the wider community

For the students the project would afford

- The opportunity to apply their academic knowledge and skills to make a meaningful impact on society
- The opportunity to improve their employability skills

For the school the project would provide

- A reduction in the burden on class teachers through the increased support for young ESL children provided by the language intervention

## ***The project timeline***

The project lasted 12 months and consisted of the following major phases: *recruitment and training, observation and assessment, target selection, intervention and evaluation.*

Following the selection process, successful students undertook a 4 tier training process:

1. Standard Barnardo's volunteer training.
2. Training by a specialist ESL teacher on engagement and communication techniques when working with sequential bilinguals.
3. Training by a Speech and Language Therapist on the administration of standardised assessment and language intervention techniques.
4. Ongoing support was provided throughout the remainder of the project with students receiving group supervision sessions with the linguistic team at Ulster on a biweekly basis.

Following the selection of children and the training of the students, the project began with a period of observation and assessment. This was an extended period (8 sessions) which allowed the students to establish a rapport with the children and begin non-targeted play-based activities which focused on general communication and language skills e.g. memory games, role play, story book reading. This helped the children to become comfortable with the sessions and for the students to determine which activities and intervention techniques would work best for the targeted intervention. **During this time the students recorded and transcribed the sessions with the children.**

## *Formal and informal assessment*

The next phase was the formal assessment where children were assessed pre and post intervention with the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals 2 (CELF). This is a standardised language assessment that covers a range of language areas in both comprehension/reception and production/expression. Four subtests were selected based on observations of the children; 2 receptive language subtests (namely (i) *basic concepts* which tests comprehension of basic concepts, (ii) *sentence structure* which assesses comprehension of a range of syntactic constructions) and 2 expressive language subtests (namely (i) *formulating labels* which assesses ability to use certain high to low frequency vocabulary items, (ii) *word structure* which assesses ability to use morphological markings e.g. verb tense, agreement etc).

Formal assessment was paired by another informal type of assessment, which included parent and teacher interviews which were carried out by Barnardo's staff in liaison with UCoM. Throughout the observation and assessment period, the students also kept reflective logs of their sessions with the children. This period was crucial in allowing the team to form a detailed communication and linguistic profile of the children, indicating both actual and perceived strengths and weaknesses across different communication settings (for example, home, school).

## *Target selection*

Following the observation and the assessment phase, the student volunteers, the linguistics staff and the SLT assistant on the project selected language targets for the intervention phase. Assessment with the CELF revealed that all 3 children showed evidence of a delay in expressive vocabulary development. 2 out of the 3 children were at the lower range of normal for expressive syntax/morphology and had scores within the normal range for receptive syntax and basic concepts. One of the children showed a delay in receptive and expressive syntax and expressive vocabulary.

**Crucially the project team found that the grammar subtests of the CELF were not sensitive to the grammatical errors of these children and hence targets were identified based on the linguistic analysis of the spontaneous speech samples.** Remember that during the observation period, weekly sessions were recorded and transcribed by the students. The transcriptions were then analysed in detail by the linguistic team at Ulster who have knowledge of a wide range of languages to identify any error patterns. Therefore it was the analysis of the language samples that allowed us to look in detail at the grammatical errors of the children. These would not be readily observable or described by teachers or those without linguistic training. This emphasizes the value of linguistically sophisticated analysis as well as the background knowledge in the native language of sequential bilinguals.

## **Vocabulary**

Vocabulary items were selected which were from both tier 1 (basic vocabulary) and tier 2 (expansion of basic vocabulary) in order to improve their functional communication and with particular emphasis on items which were important for comprehension of the 'language of instruction' in the classroom.

## **Grammar**

In terms of grammar, we identified 3 common main errors from the samples, which were exhibited by all 3 children.

1. Subject-verb agreement (particularly number) e.g. *The eyes is closed, the girl have the red coat*
2. Auxiliary and copular omission e.g. *I in there, Why not working?*
3. Pronoun case errors (subject/objective/possessive) e.g. *He is looking for him's shoes*

## *Intervention and evaluation*

Students received training in session planning. They then completed a targeted session plan for each weekly session. This included targets for each session, intervention techniques/games to be employed and materials required. Students were shown how to use these techniques to meet the individual needs of the children. Students were required to complete a reflective log after each session to log which intervention methods worked best with the child to ensure sessions were tailored to the child's interests and method of learning. Targeted intervention was flexible in terms of the techniques and particular methods depending on the individual child. Students received training from a qualified Speech and Language therapist on the use of intervention and elicitation techniques.

Post intervention assessment with the CELF showed minor improvements for 2 out of 3 children from expressive vocabulary and syntax. Considering that this assessment did not provide sufficient information for target selection in the pre intervention assessment it is not surprising that the post intervention assessment failed to show significant improvements. **Crucially, detailed analysis of the language samples from the children after the 6 week intervention period showed explicit gains in terms of expressive grammar.** The table below provides some examples of errors detected pre-intervention and then the correction of these on post intervention analysis.

### ***Summary of main findings and lessons to be learnt***

All 3 of these children exhibited expressive grammatical errors many of which could be directly explained in terms of transfer from their native language, namely Arabic. The children engaged well in the play based language activities which were specifically tailored to their personal interest and learning style. Speech samples taken at the post-intervention stage indicate a reduction in the number of grammatical errors in the 3 areas previously noted. The parents of the children reported a positive impact of the intervention including enjoyment, increase in vocabulary and improvement in English overall.

Crucially, we found that standardised language assessment was not sufficiently sensitive to identify the particular grammatical errors of these children and hence could not be used as a measurement of change. Several informal outcome measures were also employed to supplement the standardised assessment. **Detailed linguistic analysis of recordings of the children speaking English during play-based activities provided rich information regarding the particular linguistic areas these children were having difficulty with. Furthermore, these errors would not be explicitly observable to a teacher.**

### **The future: How to continue to make Language fun ☺**

The UCoM analysis of the “Language made Fun” pilot revealed that there is an immediate need for more linguistically-informed assessment of Newcomer pupils’ language skills in order to be able to determine their linguistic needs. Local Education Authorities therefore should consider how they might appropriately access relevant linguistic expertise in a consistent manner for all Newcomer pupils.

In practice, this smallscale pilot project has revealed the potential that is intrinsic in a more co-ordinated collaboration between linguistics experts at Ulster University and the IDS. **The project has shown that it is possible to provide a cost-effective option for the use of DENI funds allocated to schools for Newcomer pupils since the in depth study of a relatively small amount of language samples can help identify areas that require intervention.** UCoM’s aim is therefore to expand the project to involve a larger number of children. Ideally the next phase would allow us to use the data to compile linguistic information on the top 5 Newcomer languages in NI and identify common areas of transfer in these top languages. This data would then be used to develop resources for teachers and other professionals to specifically target these common areas of transfer which are at the basis of language difficulties in young ESL speakers.