



Northern Ireland
Assembly



Queen's University
Belfast



The Open
University



Ulster
University

Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Dr. Caroline Linse, School of Education, Queen's University Belfast c.linse@qub.ac.uk

Formal and informal translation and interpretation for immigrants and asylum seekers

Context-

During the Troubles there were very few individuals, based in Northern Ireland, who had originated from countries where English was not the dominant language. After the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, the number of individuals coming to Northern Ireland from non-English dominant countries increased tremendously.

The data provided by DE (Department of Education) show that the increase of newcomer population in primary and post-primary schools in the last 10 years has been constant. Whereas in the year 2004-2005 just over 2,000 learners in all schools in Northern Ireland (including primary and post-primary) were classified as "newcomers", in the academic year 2014-2015 the total newcomer population was of 11,565 learners. Newcomers, is the term used throughout Northern Ireland to refer to learners who do not possess sufficient proficiency in the English language to be able to function without support in a curriculum delivered through the medium of English. Newcomers represented 3.5% of the total population of primary and post-primary learners in Northern Ireland as of summer 2015. At that time the six languages most spoken by learners in schools in Northern Ireland, other than English and Irish, were (in descending order) Polish, Lithuanian, Portuguese, Other (which included an unspecified number of languages and/or dialects), Cantonese and Filipino.

Linguistic Diversity and Language Equity and Linguistic Discrimination-

There are numerous social challenges facing individuals who come from other countries to live and work or study in Northern Ireland and attempt to integrate in local society (Bell, 2016). One huge obstacle for many is language. Individuals from other countries may be linguistically diverse and may not be proficient in English. *Linguistic diversity* refers to individuals who possess linguistic capital in a variety of home languages. It refers to language differences rather than language deficits. From a pragmatic standpoint, it is important to consider how language differences can impact individuals wishing and needing to participate in a community that uses English as the primary means or mode of communication. (Although it is necessary to recognize the importance of Irish as a minority language, speakers of Irish can function effectively through the medium of English and do not have the same language communication challenges as other individuals who speak a minority language.) Even though it is not feasible to establish linguistic equality for all individuals whose primary language is not English or Irish, *linguistic equity* is a worthwhile goal. Linguistic equity requires all

individuals who are linguistically diverse be treated with respect and consideration Baquedano-López, Alexander, and Hernandez (2013). To achieve linguistic equity, it is necessary to provide individuals, who are not proficient in English, with access to information, and consequently services, in a means that is comprehensible to them and adheres to the overarching spirit of linguistic equity. Linguistic equity runs counter to the practice of *linguistic discrimination* where individuals face discrimination based on their lack of linguistic capital in the majority language which in Northern Ireland is English. In many circles it is still considered appropriate to harshly criticize individuals whose home language is not English by saying, "They don't even speak English! They're too lazy to learn English." The comment listed above may seem innocuous enough on the surface, but sadly it reflects negative attitudes towards linguistic diversity.

Home School Communication

Schools recognize the importance of establishing and maintaining positive relationships with all families and the fact that positive home school relationships will greatly increase learners' success. Continuous and effective home school communication that takes place between schools and homes is considered to be paramount for a school-age learners' success. If schools and families work together they are more likely to help children overcome any challenges that they face which can impact on their schooling as well as their development. It can be challenging for schools to connect with families who are culturally and linguistically diverse.

Methodology-

Research which examined how schools accommodated for language differences was part of a larger study that examined how schools in Northern Ireland connected with families of newcomers. The research was procured by the Inclusion Diversity Service during the 2014-2015 school year. The study aimed to provide an insight on the best practices used by primary and secondary schools in Northern Ireland to communicate and connect with culturally and linguistically diverse families. The research also aimed to describe the challenges faced by schools and families when they attempt to communicate with each other in order to support pupils' education.

The research was conducted in 21 schools, throughout Northern Ireland, serving newcomer pupils. Some schools had very few newcomer pupils whereas other schools had up to 80 per cent newcomers. Face to face semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 newcomer parents and 58 school staff (teachers, principals, school secretaries and classroom assistants) in Northern Ireland. Parents and school staff were asked to describe the types of connections that occur between newcomer families and schools. Participants were asked what advice they could offer to schools and families wishing to establish or improve home-school connections. Research was conducted throughout the region in rural and urban areas serving a variety of linguistic groups. Schools with extensive experience as well as those with less experience working with newcomers and their families were included in the research. Both primary and post primary schools were included with a greater number of primary schools participating because they have a greater percentage of newcomers than do post primary schools.

The spirit of linguistic equity was addressed throughout the research process. The researchers worked with the Inclusion and Diversity Service to ensure the research instruments were written utilizing the principles of plain English. Plain English refers to language which is easier for second language learners to understand because it generally is free of complex structures and vocabulary and is especially appropriate for individuals who may not be fully proficient in English (Linse & vanVlack, 2015). The consent form and the interview

guides were written in plain English so that they could be more easily translated and also so that they would be more readily understood by parents who chose to be interviewed in English and were not completely confident in their own English language abilities. The Inclusion and Diversity service also reviewed the research instruments and clarified some cultural items which newcomer families may have found confusing.

Findings-

Respect and accommodation for linguistic diversity emerged as a major overarching theme. Schools that participated in the research exhibited an ethos of linguistic equity and a sophisticated level of respect for linguistically diverse individuals. In other words there appeared to be sincere and concerted efforts to treat everyone with respect regardless of their home language and level of English language proficiency. Language mediation and accommodations for individuals not fluent in English emerged as a means to respect and connect with families who are linguistically diverse.

There were a number of aspects related to linguistic accommodation which ensured families felt comfortable with their linguistic diversity. Many schools demonstrated an awareness and appreciation of linguistic diversity by posting signs in learners' home languages. Schools also provided welcome books designed specifically for newcomer families. Finally, translation and interpretation was an important component of the overall linguistic accommodation approach.

The schools acknowledged and respected linguistic diversity. Northern Ireland school staff spoke about individuals who are linguistically diverse in a manner which demonstrated an amount of empathy for the struggles newcomer families have when functioning through the medium of English, a new language. One principal explained that he wished his Spanish was a fraction as good as the newcomer parents' English. In addition, schools demonstrated their acceptance of linguistic diversity in the positive approach schools used to arrange interviews with newcomer families for this research.

Schools posted signs in learners' home languages. The signs posted in learners' home languages served several functions. They provided learners and their families with information such as the location of the library. More importantly they also served as a public acknowledgement and display of the existence of learners' home languages. Displaying multilingual signs representing stakeholders' own languages is considered a culturally and linguistically public acknowledgement of stakeholders' linguistic identities. This tangible display can be as significant and meaningful as flags being displayed in the public space.

Schools prepared welcome books specifically for culturally and linguistically diverse families. The Inclusion and Diversity Service helped schools design welcome books for culturally and linguistically diverse families. The Welcome Books were created to provide information in a manner that was comprehensible for newcomer families who are unfamiliar with education in Northern Ireland and possessed differing levels of English language proficiency. Schools produced Welcome Books containing information specifically tailored to their schools. The Welcome Books also contained information supported by visuals. For example, there are pictures of all of the key members of staff with their names printed below. In some Welcome Books special annual events for each school are also listed. The Welcome Books were useful for parents but also served as a staff development activity for school staff. By putting together the books, school staff considered the type of information which would be most useful to newcomer families. All Welcome Books contained photographs

Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series 2015-16

of school staff and other relevant visuals. In some cases the books were translated into the most common languages represented by newcomer families.

Translation and Interpretation Services were offered to all newcomer families.

Schools were committed to ensuring all families who desired translation and interpretation services were accommodated. With one exception, everyone who was interviewed commented on the importance of providing translation and interpretation for any newcomer families who desired the services. In one school different teachers took turns arranging for officially licensed and vetted interpreters contracted by the Inclusion and Diversity service. In other cases a school administrator or other member of staff arranged for an official translator. There understandably were guidelines which assured the efficient and cost effective use of interpreting service.

Both formal and informal translation was utilized by families.

There were different types of translation services utilized by newcomer families. When families first arrived at the school they tended to arrive with a colleague, friend, neighbor or relative who would translate, ad-hoc for them and who also served as a language and culture broker. The advantage of using the friend, neighbor, relative or colleague was that the newcomer parent was generally comfortable with the individual who provided assistance. The disadvantages stemmed from the fact that the "friend" rarely possessed the skillset that Perez-Gonzalez & Susam-Saraeva (2012) describe as the professional skillset.

The ad-hoc translator and interpreter did not necessarily possess the vocabulary used in a school setting. The informal translator and interpreter also did not have any official commitment to maintaining confidentiality. Formal interpreters on the other hand possessed the skill set as well as certification to ensure protocols including those related to confidentiality are adhered to.

Formal or Professional Interpreting and Translation was utilized in two different ways

There were two different sources for professionals who possessed the skills needed to provide accurate translation and interpretation for newcomer families. In some schools with larger concentrations of newcomer pupils, there were bilingual members of staff who were able to provide translation and interpretation services. Bilingual members of staff are fluent in both languages and possess the contextual knowledge to provide accurate translation. The other type of translators and interpreters were professionally certified translators and interpreters who provided contract translation and interpretation services, One of the disadvantages of professional translators and interpreters is that often they need to be booked in advance.

Translation of Written Documents

Although linguistic equality would be a noble goal it is unrealistic there are not adequate financial or human resources to provide all of the interpretation and translation that would be needed to ensure every language was equally represented. Every piece of documentation could not be translated into every language. Schools can access a data base of key letters and forms for home school communication in twelve home languages. In addition, there are other parenting information booklets available in six languages.

Recommendations-

Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series 2015-16

Listed below are a set of recommendations for agencies wishing to connect with culturally and linguistically diverse families.

Promote a spirit of linguistic equity.

Provide linguistic equality training for all members of staff both professional and administrative.

Review all documentation to ensure that clear straightforward language is used. Simple sentence structures and simple clear vocabulary should be used.

Whenever appropriate hire bilingual staff with the requisite professional background and training.

Use fully certified and licensed translators and interpreters.

References-

Baquedano-López, P., Alexander, R. A., & Hernandez, S. J. (2013). Equity Issues in Parental and Community Involvement in Schools What Teacher Educators Need to Know. *Review of Research in Education*, 37(1), 149-182.

Bell, J. (2016). Migrants: keeping a foot in both worlds or losing the ground beneath them? Transnationalism and integration as experienced in the everyday lives of Polish migrants in Belfast, Northern Ireland. *Social Identities*, 22(1), 80-94.

Linse, C., & van Vlack, S. (2015). Plain English: Applying principles to home school written communication considering diverse families. *ITL-International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 166(2), 254-277.

Pérez-González, L., & Susam-Saraeva, Ş. (2012). Non-professionals translating and interpreting: Participatory and engaged perspectives. *The Translator*, 18(2), 149-165.

