Teachers' Perspectives on Strategies to Support the Oral Language Development of Children with English as an Additional Language

Researcher: Paula Casey | Research supervisor: Dr David Mulrooney

Hibernia College

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Oral language (OL) plays a central role in supporting children's learning, identity, and participation (NCCA, 2019). Children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) may face barriers to classroom engagement because of differences in language proficiency and confidence.

This study arose from the researcher's school placement experience, during which the researcher noticed that many pupils with EAL found it difficult to understand instructions and engage in classroom activities. Some were also reluctant to speak and appeared to lack confidence. While teachers applied various strategies to support OL development, these varied significantly and were often used without a consistent framework or EAL-specific training. These observations led the researcher to explore how teachers perceive the effectiveness of different strategies to support the OL development of pupils with EAL.

THE LITERATURE

Gardiner-Hyland's (2021) qualitative study found that teachers supporting children with EAL often lacked specialised training and were uncertain about the effectiveness of their practices.

STRATEGIES IDENTIFIED

The research highlighted a range of strategies to support the oral language development of children with EAL. This study focused on:

Digital technologies
Interactive language learning (Batardière et al., 2023; DOE, 2024).

Home languages
Drawing on children's linguistic knowledge (NCCA, 2019; DOE, 2024).

Fostering a sense of belonging
Inclusive relationships and participation (DES, 2019; Sloan et al., 2024).

Corrective feedback
Responding sensitively to language errors (Ó Duibhir and Cummins, 2012; Cregan, 2019).

RESEARCH AIMS

1. Explore teachers' perspectives on strategies that support the OL development of pupils with EAL.
2. Examine how experience and EAL-specific training influence these perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

- **Design** — Quantitative questionnaire study within a positivist paradigm.
- **Sample** — 21 qualified primary teachers in one DEIS Urban Band 1 school in Munster. Convenience sampling.
- **Collection** — Online questionnaire with five-point rating scales, closed questions and open-ended responses.
- **Analysis** — Descriptive statistics and review of written responses.

✓ Ethical approval ✓ Informed consent ✓ Pilot with two teachers ✓ Critical-friend review ✓ Reflexive journaling

KEY FINDINGS

How all 21 teachers rated each strategy

1 Resourcing and training

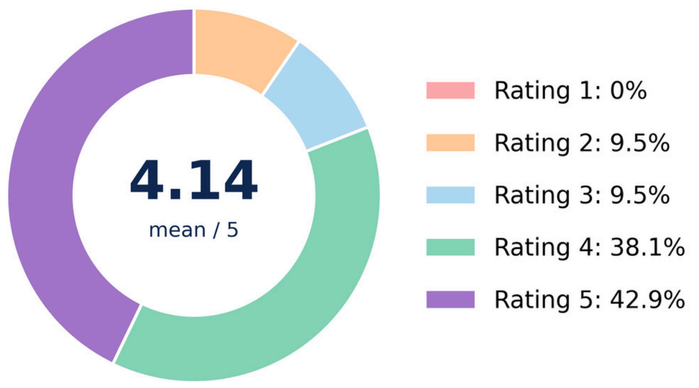
Only one-third had received EAL-specific oral language training. These trained teachers rated themselves as more adequately resourced (3.57 out of 5) than those without training (2.93 out of 5). No respondent selected the highest resourcing rating.

Strategy ratings by training

Strategy	With training	Without training
Digital technology	4.0	4.2
Home-language inclusion	3.0	2.9
Belonging	3.5	4.3
Corrective feedback	2.7	3.8

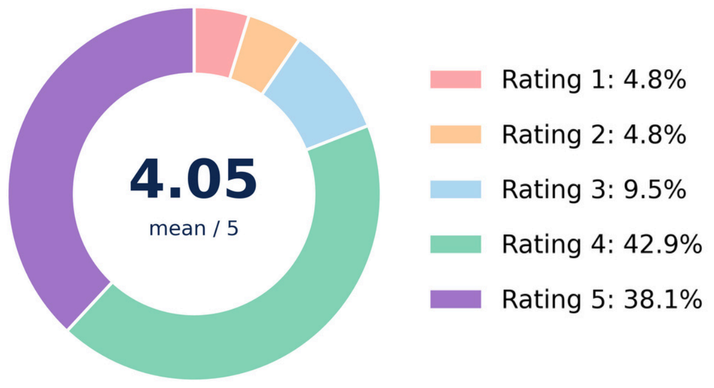
1 = least effective; 5 = most effective.

2 Digital technology



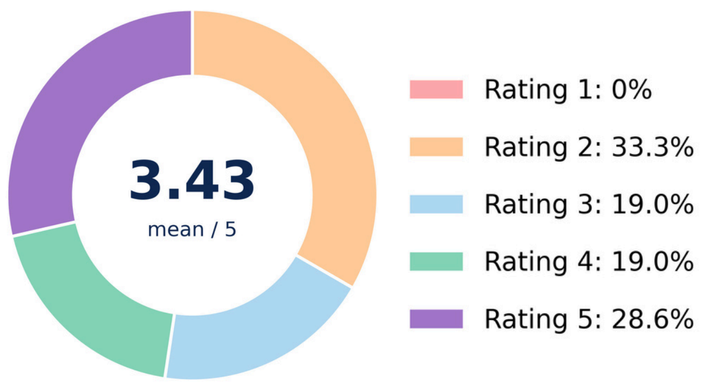
Digital technology was the highest-rated strategy overall. 42.9% rated it 5/5 and 38.1% rated it 4/5; approximately 81% combined. Teachers with 1-15 years' experience rated digital technology more highly (4.4/5) than those with over 16 years' experience (2.3/5).

3 Fostering a sense of belonging



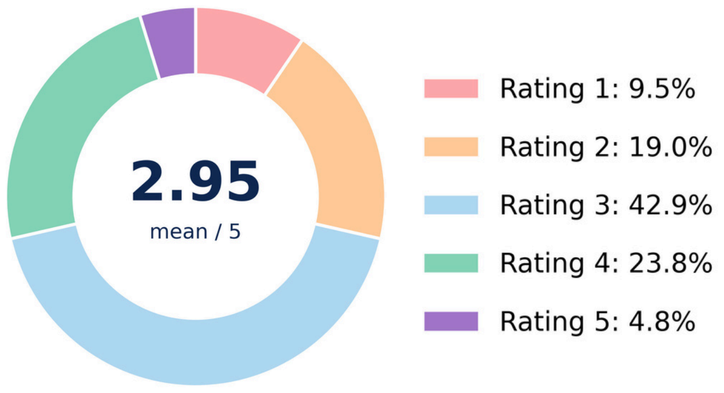
Fostering a sense of belonging was strongly endorsed across all groups, with female respondents rating it slightly higher (4.1/5) than male respondents (3.8/5). Ratings were highest among teachers with 6–10 years' experience (4.5/5), followed by those with 11–15 years (4.3/5), 1–5 years (3.9/5) and over 16 years (3.7/5).

4 Corrective feedback



Ratings were mixed. Most teachers (71.4%) corrected errors during tasks; 28.6% preferred post-task correction. Early-career teachers particularly favoured in-task correction.

5 Home language inclusion



Home language inclusion was the lowest-rated strategy (mean 2.95/5). Only one respondent selected 5/5. No teacher reported encouraging home-language use 'very often'. Teachers with 6–15 years' experience rated it highest (3.5/5), followed by those with 1–5 years (2.7/5) and over 16 years (2.3/5).

Shared rating colours: 1 least effective; 5 = most effective — 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

LIMITATIONS

A small, single-school convenience sample limits generalisability. Self-reported perceptions may involve response bias and do not measure pupil progress. One questionnaire limited triangulation. Group comparisons are descriptive.

CONCLUSION

Teachers perceived digital technology and belonging as valuable supports for children with EAL. Limited specialist training and more reserved views of home language inclusion suggest opportunities for professional learning and clear guidance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For policy makers:

Fund EAL-specific and digital technology CPD. Integrate multilingual practices into curriculum guidance. Strengthen guidance on digital tools and practical frameworks for oral language support.

For further research:

Study strategy use across diverse Irish schools, long-term training impacts and home-language support. Explore experienced teachers' challenges with digital technology.

For teaching practice:

Plan collaboratively and share strategies. Use multilingual displays and dual-language resources. Balance digital tools with teacher-led and peer-supported oral language activities. Tailor corrective feedback to learner confidence and needs.

REFERENCES

- Batardière, M-T., Berthaud, S., Ćatibušić, B. and Flynn, CJ. (2023) 'Language teaching and learning in Ireland: 2012–2021', *Language Teaching*, 56(1), pp.41–72. Available at: http://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444822000374.
- Cregan, Á. (2019) 'Promoting oral language development in the primary school', *NCCA and Primary Developments*. Available at: https://ncca.ie/media/4677/promoting-oral-language-development-in-the-primary-school-1.pdf (Accessed: 15 December 2024).
- Department of Education (DOE) (2024) *Meeting additional language needs: whole-school and classroom approaches for inclusive language learning: findings from primary and post-primary school inspections of English as an additional language.* Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/284884/43debd6d-6362-4bdf-b46d-0326f3de13bd.pdf (Accessed: 29 September 2024).
- Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2019) *Wellbeing policy statement and framework for practice*. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/24725/07cc07626f6a426eb6eab4c523fb2ee2.pdf (Accessed: 30 September 2024).
- Gardiner-Hyland, F. (2021) 'Don't forget us! challenges supporting children with EAL in Irish primary schools', *European Journal of Applied Linguistics and TEFL*, 10(2), pp.177–199.
- NCCA (2019) *Primary Language Curriculum*. Available at: https://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/2a6e5f79-6f29-4d68-b850-379510805656/PLC-Document_English.pdf. (Accessed: 19 December 2024).
- Ó Duibhir, P. and Cummins, J. (2012) *Towards an integrated language curriculum in early childhood and primary education (3-12 years)*. Available at: https://ncca.ie/media/1503/towards_an_integrated_language_curriculum_in_early_childhood_and_primary_education_rr_16.pdf (Accessed: 05 December 2024).
- Sloan, S., Martinez-Sainz, G., Devine, D., Symonds, J., Ioannidou, O., Moore, B., Davies, A., Bohnert, M., Stynes, H., Senior, J., Osborne, K., Crean, M., Barrow, N., Grieves, M., Gleasure, S., Donegan, A., Samonova, E., Farrell, E., O'Giobuin, R., Smith, A. and Farrell, J. (2024) Children's school lives: children's wellbeing in Irish primary schools (2019-2023). Available at: https://ncca.ie/media/rspn05qa/csl-report-number-7.pdf (Accessed: 19 December 2024).