Skills for Life in England, Wales and Northern Ireland *or* Be careful what you wish for

by James Simpson

This article concerns a policy initiative in England, Skills for Life, and how it has impinged on the lives of teachers in adult basic education, in particular teachers of ESOL—English for Speakers of Other Languages[1]. Historically, adult basic education in England was characterized by a lack of cohesion and overall coordination; funding was patchy and *ad hoc*, and teachers' conditions and pay were often poor. In the 1980s and 1990s in particular, practitioners felt that adult and community education was particularly threatened. Hence the general welcome of a new policy for adult basic education at the turn of the century, one which promised to improve both its funding and its organization.

Now imagine you are an English teacher, just returning to England after spending ten years teaching English as a Foreign Language in countries around the world. You have enjoyed teaching, and want to continue now you have come home. You want to put your talents as a teacher to good use; the private sector is very poorly paid, and teaching in Higher Education holds no appeal for you. A friend tells you about teaching ESOL to new arrivals to the UK. These students, says your friend, urgently need to learn English. With eyes wide with hope and idealism, you apply for a job teaching ESOL at your local College of Further Education. Preparing for your interview, you do some background reading, and discover that ESOL is part of something called Skills for Life.

Skills for Life and ESOL

The policy directing the funding of Adult Basic Skills—Literacy, Numeracy, ESOL and more recently ICT—in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is Skills for Life. Early in Tony Blair's first New Labour government, a review of basic skills (DfEE 1999) recommended the launching of a national strategy to reduce the number of adults with low levels of basic skills.

ESOL was not originally included as a 'skill for life'. ESOL activists lobbied hard for its inclusion: here was a chance for proper funding, as well as an opportunity to be taken seriously. Pressure from practitioners contributed to the government working group report (DfEE 2000) which led to ESOL entering wholly into the adult basic skills agenda for the first time. Skills for Life brought with it the creation of statutory core curricula for ESOL, Literacy and Numeracy, new teacher-training and inspection frameworks, and qualifications mapped against national standards. Literacy educators Mary Hamilton and Yvonne Hillier have this to say about Skills for Life:

> By 2001, Skills for Life had emerged as a cornerstone of the newly integrated Learning Skills sector. Basic skills were claimed to be crucial not only for employment, but—in line with New Labour's commitments to social inclusion and 'joined up government'—also to personal, family, citizenship and community participation (Hamilton and Hillier p. 14).

At your job interview, your future manager asks you about your qualifications. You are keen to stress your degree in English, your Diploma in teaching EFL to Adults, and your experience teaching abroad. You are surprised to be told that you will probably have to do a post-graduate teaching qualification and a subject specialist course for ESOL.

Standards and standardization

In a drive to set standards across Skills for Life, teachers are required to hold or be working towards standardized qualifications. These are a Certificate of Education, together with a 'Level 4' (i.e. post-graduate) subject specialist qualification in their area. So no matter how well qualified they already are to teach in other contexts, teachers entering Skills for Life are obliged to follow courses designed to ensure that they are qualified to a standard—and standardized—level. This can cause resentment among practitioners. As one ESOL manager said recently:

> On the whole, the drive to standardize qualifications in the sector—obligating often

[1] Some of the text in this article is adapted from a forthcoming book, *ESOL: A Critical Guide* (Cooke and Simpson, 2008).

highly-qualified practitioners to assign precious time to a course which they feel has little worth—has had a substantial negative impact. Anecdotal evidence includes: experienced teachers leaving the profession as they feel the commitment is not worth making on a fractional contract; resentment towards 'management' imposing the requirement and a resulting downturn in good vibes; lack of time and inclination to do other, more relevant (?), CPD [continuing professional development] options; and probably more.

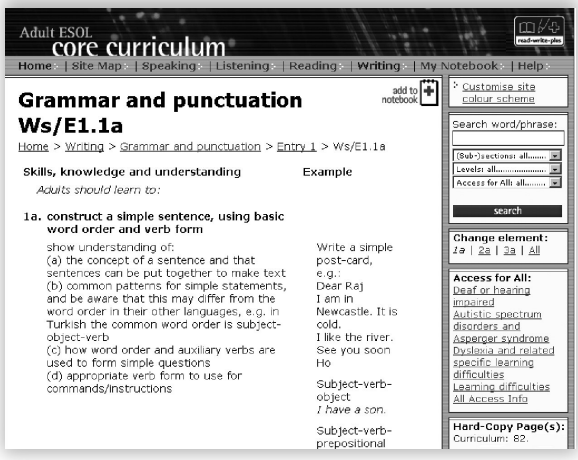
You are offered a job by the college, as an hourly-paid ESOL teacher, on condition that you spend a day a week working towards your Cert. Ed. and Level 4 qualifications. You have 12 hours teaching, and you begin to realize that you are going to struggle financially. But you enjoy your work, your students like you and respond well to your enthusiasm. You have two different classes, each meeting for six hours a week. The students in your ESOL beginners class have little or no literacy in their first language. Teaching them literacy in English proves very challenging, and you arrange to attend an ESOL literacy training course in addition to your other courses. Your ESOL and Citizenship students are desperate to pass their upcoming exam. They are mostly refugees, applying for permission to remain in the UK, and to be eligible they have to demonstrate progress on an ESOL course which has a citizenship component.

You have developed a bank of materials and lesson plans from your previous work teaching EFL abroad, and you spend time every evening adapting them to your current students' needs. At the end of your second week in your new job, your manager observes a lesson. In the debriefing, she asks why your lesson plan is not mapped to the ESOL Curriculum.

The Adult ESOL Core Curriculum

Literacy, numeracy and ESOL in Skills for Life each have a statutory curriculum. In ESOL prior to Skills for Life, there was a dearth of resources and direction for teachers. This was to change drastically with the introduction of the national Adult ESOL Core Curriculum (DfES 2001) and the subsequent publication of materials to accompany it.

The curriculum is organized around reading, writing, speaking and listening (though with little reference to beginner ESOL literacy). It is a functional curriculum with an integrated grammar curriculum. Areas of the curriculum are identified with codes (e.g. 'Ws/E1.1a'–writing sentence/Entry Level 1, section 1a), with descriptors and sub-descriptors (e.g. 'Skills, knowledge and understanding/Adults should learn to: 1a. construct a simple sentence, using basic word order and verb form/show understanding of: (a) the concept of a sentence and that sentences can be put together to make text;' etc.). Examples and sample activities are also given.



www.dfes.gov.uk/curriculum_esol/tree/writing/grammarpunc/e1/1a/

The curriculum as a tool to help teaching is dauntingly dense and complex, and is currently undergoing a review. It was originally meant to be used as the basis for placement, programme design, and assessment. Over time its status has shifted from being a source of advice and recommendation to become a prescriptive document. Inspection and audit, and the need to provide 'evidence' for learning, has resulted in some managers demanding full referencing ('mapping') of lesson plans and materials to the curriculum.

Your manager also asks you why you are not making more use of the Skills for Life materials. These are the professional-looking materials which you were told were circulated by the Government to all teachers of ESOL. You have not used them much because you feel they do not quite fit the needs of your students, particularly those in your beginners class, who are learning to read and write for the first time.

Practitioners using the arts to reflect on practice at the 2007 RaPAL conference held at Queen's University, Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Skills for Life materials

The curriculum is accompanied by learning materials for each level. Just as ESOL materials of earlier times were influenced by prevailing attitudes to immigrants, the Skills for Life materials reflect current concerns with multiculturalism, integration and social cohesion. They therefore show thriving multicultural communities in which migrants are welcome to maintain their traditions and identities, but within a framework of integration and social responsibility. Thus there are activities which draw on festivities such as weddings and traditions from various cultures and religions alongside examples of harmonious interactions between neighbours from different ethnic backgrounds using English as a lingua franca. There is coverage of 'survival' English in subjects such as local transport, finding a doctor, and phoning the emergency services.

The response of ESOL teachers to the Skills for Life materials was mixed. In some institutions the materials were used from the start as the syllabus for ESOL courses; this tended to lead either to slavish adherence to the materials or to their outright rejection. Confusion reigned over whether inspectors would demand they be used to the exclusion of other materials. One teacher commented:

> [W]hen it was inspection earlier this year we were discouraged to use EFL-type books when the inspector was around because they had to be ESOL materials for ESOL students. So I go and use the ESOL books, the Skills for Life stuff, and I got inspected in one of the classes, in the community, and it was fine. But one question she did ask was, 'Do we just use Skills for Life material?' and I said, 'No', because we use other books as well. So, I was able to give examples. I didn't like to say, 'Oh, this is one of the very few lessons I've used this, and that's only because you're here, otherwise I wouldn't have used it.

More typically though, teachers were given the materials as a new resource which they could use as they deemed fit. There was more criticism than praise amongst teachers for the materials, especially in their scant coverage of grammar and functional approach to literacy. Teachers have since found themselves spending hours supplementing and adapting the very materials that were supposed to be an answer to their problems.

As well as making some use of the Skills for Life materials, you continue to use your home-produced materials, but you ensure they are mapped against the curriculum using the correct code. Referencing your materials and lesson plans means that you are spending even longer hours at night on planning, to satisfy bureaucratic, rather than learning, needs.

The following month, your manager tells her team during a staff meeting, 'We are having an inspection next month, and I need to see your ILPs.' You are not surprised to hear groans from your colleagues.

The individual learning plan (ILP)

ILPs have been a central part of ESOL teaching since 2001; 'how to write an ILP' features on all teacher training programmes, and in the pages of a handbook on ESOL (Schellekens, 2007). NIACE, the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education, has this advice on ILPs:

> This [the ILP] is based upon screening, initial and diagnostic Assessment, and follows agreement with the learner on goals and targets. A completed ILP should include:
> - Results of assessments;
> - The learner's long-term goals;
> - The goals of the program to be followed, cross-referenced to the national standards or core curriculum;
> - Any other goals that the learner wishes to achieve, both social and personal;
> - Targets and dates for meeting them;
> - A programme of dated progress reviews;
> - Space to record achievement of targets and any developments in the ILP;
> - Signatures of learner and teacher.
>
> www.niace.org.uk/projects/learningfromexperience/EBS/Good-Practice/ILP.htm

ILPs were first used in literacy classes configured as 'workshops', where students learn individually, at their own pace. Government policy rhetoric lays heavy emphasis on 'individualization' and more lately 'personalization' of learning, and ILPs have been promoted tirelessly by the Government and inspectorates for use across Skills for Life. They are, however, far from accepted as 'common sense'. Many ESOL teachers know they have no theoretical basis, and are not suited to the group processes through which much ESOL learning happens. As one ESOL teacher educator commented:

> It is this idea that, somehow, they are good practice, and I feel that there is no evidence to show that they improve learning or don't. I mean, they might, but do we know? And I think that is what really exasperates me, the way that they have been kind of taken on as the gold standard, for no reason.

Beginning life as a recommendation, the ILP has become interpreted as a prescription by inspectorates and by managers faced with inspection. The ILP continues to be the subject of considerable controversy and resistance across ESOL. Responses to ILPs amongst teachers vary from rejection to resignation or a kind of 'strategic compliance'.

Your manager assures you that the ILP is necessary to ensure that you differentiate between learners of mixed abilities. But you argue that your differentiation is done mainly in ongoing classroom talk, not months in advance on a learning plan. What is more, you know that the students in your beginners class cannot articulate their needs in English in any depth. You also know that there is little point spending time writing ILPs for all the students in the class when most of the learning they do happens in groups. Nonetheless, you acquiesce to your manager's demand, and ask how best to complete an ILP. She says that you need to state the learners' goals in terms of SMART targets.

SMART targets

In writing ILPs, there is a frequent requirement that students' aims be expressed in the form of SMART targets. SMART is an acronym from management training, and stands rather neatly for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound. Applying SMART targets to language learning and teaching opens them up to critique, as they encourage a disproportionate focus on atomistic aspects of language which are easily observed, at the expense of less tangible, more profound language needs.

Teachers in the debate over ILPs have drawn consistently on their own knowledge of language learning. There is much evidence to show that language learning is neither unidirectional, nor linear, nor uniformly paced. As Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada say in *How Languages are Learned* (p. 189):

> Learners may use a particular form accurately at stage x (suggesting they have learned that form), fail to produce that form at stage y, and produce it accurately again at stage z....Language development is not just adding one rule after another. Rather, it involves processes of integrating new language forms and patterns into an existing interlanguage, readjusting and restructuring until all the pieces fit.

It is also clear that the rate at which development takes place is highly idiosyncratic and varies greatly from person to person. Here one teacher appeals to knowledge gained through observation of her own students' learning when making criticisms of SMART targets:

> Learners are quite inconsistent with their mistakes. So, you know I get three pieces of writing, and I think I could make some SMART targets according to these pieces of writing. But if I look back at the previous ones, they didn't make the same mistakes then, and they keep changing.

You have now been teaching ESOL for a few months. You are becoming tired of the long hours spent preparing lessons, handling the bureaucracy which you regard in many cases as unnecessary, trying to maintain your integrity as a teacher in the face of a mountain of paperwork. You are starting to wonder whether ESOL in Skills for Life is actually the best career path for you.

Bureaucracy

In a recent interview a teacher talked about the paperwork involved in her job:

> We have the scheme of work for the year and a lesson plan for every lesson. They've got their ILPs, that has to be filled in with all their personal information, their assessment results and diagnostic results from the initial assessments, their learning goals, what they're working towards. There's some information, such as asking asylum seekers how long they've been here, all that kind of personal information. Then they have a sheet that has the course objectives, the group goals with curriculum references and then their individual targets for half term. We have a review form to do at the end of every lesson and then for every student we have to say what stage they are at. That comes from the inspection when they said we weren't keeping formal records enough. There's also a bit to put any test results on, for each student and whether you're taking any action on their ILP. There's an evaluation on the end of the lesson plan and for every student, an evaluation of every student's progress during that lesson. At the end of term there's all sorts of other forms.

The teacher continued in this vein, giving a lengthy description of the bureaucratic tasks she undertakes every academic term. In total she described seventeen separate pieces of paperwork that have to be completed.

The last word

Along with many ESOL teachers, you display a strong sense of vocation in your practice and in the way you talk about your work. Vocation and commitment are the reasons you decide to stay in ESOL teaching, despite unhappiness with other trends. Strong commitment to students, although a common characteristic among teachers, does not always sit easily with the managerial demands which have crept into the field in recent years. Skills for Life undoubtedly brought much-needed resources to adult basic education, but the price appears to be a bureaucratic imposition on you and your colleagues, prompted by heavy demands of standardization, inspection and audit, demands which practitioners seem unable to resist. ■

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SOURCES:

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Schellekens, Philida (2007). *The Oxford ESOL Handbook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

WEB RESOURCES:

NATECLA (the National Association for Teaching English and other Community languages to Adults): www.natecla.org.uk/

RaPAL (Research and Practice in Adult Literacy): www.literacy.lancs.ac.uk/rapal/

The ESOL-Research email list: www.jiscmail.ac.uk/ESOL-Research