

Submission to Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper

It is commendable that the quality of the initial teacher education is being examined as part of more effective teaching in the classrooms. And I am particularly pleased to see that the Expert Panel has focussed on how new learning takes place, and the understanding that 'novice' learners' learning pathways are likely to be different (in the sense of pedagogical inputs) to those of 'expert' learners. Much of the recent 'reading wars' (that I personally witnessed) have resulted from the conflation of novice and expert learners.

Having said that, I wish to point out that under the heading 'Enabling factors' (e.g., the Table on p. 7), cultural and social milieu of learners is mentioned, but there is no mention of 'language of instruction' and what its effect is on both the quantity and quality of learning, especially when instruction is in the learners' weaker language. In this submission I do not wish to go down the pathway of the debate about which language should be used in the early year(s) of schooling, especially in ATSI contexts. But I do wish to point out the importance of new teachers having the requisite skills to teach in classrooms where, for many students, the language of instruction is likely to be their weaker language that is insufficiently developed to cope with the cognitive demands of the curriculum.

An integral part of ITE has therefore to be to develop strategies to facilitate the learning of EAL/D learners. If language is the largest part of the cognitive load students are grappling with, then grasping the concept the teacher is trying to teach might not be in short-term memory long enough to make it into long-term memory. John Sweller, whose ideas about cognitive load underpin the Report's proposed core content, had this to say about the effect of weaker language on cognitive functioning:

Students learning a second language are constantly dealing with novel information. A sentence that may be easily parsed in a native language ... may impose an impossibly high working memory load in a second language. All instructional procedures need to account for the fact that students are constantly under a high cognitive load. (Sweller, 2017)

In writing to ESOL teachers in 2017, Sweller encapsulates one of the increasingly critical features of our classrooms. It relates to the second item in the Table on p.7 of the Report: effective pedagogical practices. Such pedagogical practices therefore have to take into account an understanding of the role language plays in effective instruction. It is imperative therefore that this understanding is incorporated into the proposed core content explicitly so that institutions take this factor into consideration in developing appropriate teacher training programs.

An added reason that new teachers should emerge from training institutions with enabling pedagogical skills with EAL/D students is shown in the statistics that New South Wales has on the composition of their student population: one out of every three students is an EAL/D student (NSW Dept of Education Publication, June 2021, p.7). Even in regional cities, classes are increasingly not composed only of monolingual English speakers. If this is the trend, then it is incumbent upon us to ensure that our next generation of teachers have been trained to teach in 21st century Australia – classes where monolingualism in English is not going to be the norm.

This is not an issue that only Australia confronts. In America also there are questions being asked about ITE. Villegas (2018, p. 132), for example, guest-edited an issue of *The Educational Forum*, in which she commented that:

... teacher education programs have yet to catch up with this mainstreaming trend, classroom teachers who are now expected to teach ELLs [EAL/D] find themselves unprepared for the task. (emphases added)

We have this opportunity to make a profound change in the way we train our teachers to meet the requirements of the classes as they exist today and likely to be in the near future. One of the recommendations in this report should therefore relate to the core skill of teaching students for whom the language of instruction is not their strongest language.

Reference

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2021), *Schools: English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) learners, 2015 to 2019*, NSW Department of Education. (nsw.gov.au/cese).

Sweller, John (2017). Cognitive load theory and the teaching of English as a second language to adult learners, Ontario: *TESLOntario*, May, 2017. [Downloaded on 13 April, 2023]: <http://contact.teslontario.org/cognitive-load-theory-esl/>

Villegas, Ana Maria (2018). Introduction to “Preparation and development of mainstream teachers for today’s linguistically diverse classrooms”. *The Educational Forum*, 82: 131-137.

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