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Problems EAL Professionals Face when Teaching Roma Teenagers

Abstract: The aim of this study is to investigate the problems English as an Additional Language (EAL) professionals face when providing English support to Roma teenagers in secondary schools in Derby in North England. In addition, this study aims at finding out how intercultural awareness can help those professionals overcome these potential issues. There is a limited research on Roma teenagers and English language learning. Thus, this may cause great difficulties to EAL professionals who offer English support to Roma students. Roma culture is very unique and shows many aspects which other societies may not relate to, for example social exclusion, Special Educational Needs, English as a second language and challenging behaviour. A potential solution to this problem may be intercultural awareness and its value in teaching minority groups. The method for this study is quantitative. The questionnaire of 16 questions with open, closed and rating scale questions along with an opportunity to add additional comments was used. The study highlights the factors of challenges and issues EAL professionals face when teaching Roma teenagers, for example low ability and level of literacy skills, behavioural issues and poor attendance. The study confirms that intercultural awareness can

help when providing English support to Roma teenagers. In addition, the study highlights the importance of trainings and workshops.

Key words: second language acquisition, culture, intercultural awareness, education, English language teaching

Introduction

A significant amount of research has been undertaken on Roma, Gypsies and Travellers considering education, aspects such as social exclusion, achievement, behavioural issues and culture. However, it is believed that not enough research has been done regarding this minority group which has settled in the United Kingdom. English language professionals should be equipped in knowledge and strategies regarding the support of English as a second language effectively. They should be aware of students coming from different and culturally diverse environments. Finding straight forward strategies on how to teach English as a second language to Roma teenagers appears to be a challenge. Some of those learners may have never been to school before; they may have different values and beliefs about education and some others may have no motivation in learning English.

The aim of this study is to investigate what problems EAL support professionals face when teaching a minority group of Roma teenagers in secondary schools and how intercultural awareness can help them overcome these identified issues.

Review of the Literature

According to Cemlyn and Clark (n.d.) Gypsies and Travellers have been in Britain for at least 500 years. As Lloyd and McCluckey (2008) suggest, there are different groups that fit under one term of Gypsies

and Travellers such as English Gypsies and Travellers, Romanichal, Irish Travellers, Scottish Gypsies and Travellers, Welsh Kale and European Roma. This study concentrates on European Roma coming mainly from Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. According to Fremlova and Anstead (2010–2011) the majority of Eastern European Roma migrated to the UK in the 1990's to seek freedom and escape racism against them. Fremlova and Anstead (2010–2011) suggest, the minority of Roma population settled down in the East Midlands, Kent and London. In addition, there are Roma communities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

There are some key features this group represents. According to Drakakis-Smith (2007) the Roma minority group may lead a nomadic lifestyle. As Cemlyn and Clark (n.d.) suggest, the group is family orientated and also has strong and at the same time different values and authorities at home rather than at school. Experience of financial poverty may make them more socially excluded from the majority of the society. According to Lloyd and McCluskey (2008) they are more likely to pass their low skills or occupations from generation to generation. Consequently they may not be interested in learning new skills provided by education system or learn English to improve their potential. Being provided with skills and occupations by their relatives, they tend to mix only with people of the same ethnic background. Thus, this may also suggest they exclude themselves from interacting with wider society.

It may be often the case that secondary Roma pupils go to school for the first time in their teenage age so it makes it more difficult for teachers to plan lessons. Roma students may often struggle with writing and reading as there is no such academic culture of learning for them. They seem to communicate better in spoken language with support of visual objects.

This review has sought to establish the potential problems EAL support professionals face when supporting English learning of

Roma teenagers. It was found that Roma culture is very unique and the professionals may experience issues such as, for example, social exclusion, behavioural issues and low level ability skills. It was also found that there are as well different values to Roma learning processes.

Moving further the term 'culture' needs to be explained. According to Cortazzi and Jin (1997, cited in McNamara, & Harris, 1997) culture can be divided into three subcultures such as Academic Culture, Culture of Communication and Culture of Learning. It is worth considering all three when it comes to providing English support to minority ethnic groups. Culture is strongly connected with intercultural awareness; thus, it is crucial for EAL professionals to understand and appreciate different cultures represented by their learners in order to make intercultural communication easier (Gillett, 1997; Holiday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2010). The Acculturation Model introduced by Schumann in 1978 is crucial for EAP professionals. They have to be aware of culture changes learners may go through when learning a second language (L₂).

Methodology

The study consisted of both quantitative and qualitative methods. The questionnaire consisted of 16 open, closed and rating scale questions. In addition, because there were open questions included it can be said the data was also qualitative. Although there are other ways of collecting data, they were rejected due to this research to be taking place within only three months, therefore there was not enough time to carry, for example the interviews.

There were thirty questionnaires sent out or handed in to participants. There were nice 'White British' participants and four 'White Other' respondents who had various years of experience of providing English support to Roma teenagers. Five participants had from 0-2 years

of experience, four participants had from 2–4 years of experience and finally the last four respondents had between 4 and 6 years of experience.

Results

100% of participants answered that they are aware of the term ‘Gypsies and Travellers’; everybody was aware of the term ‘Roma’. Moreover, 100% EAL support professionals answered that they are aware of similarities between ‘Roma’ and ‘Gypsies and Travellers’ groups. However, when it comes to the differences between these groups the answers varied. Hence, 62% gave a positive answer to the question, so they are aware of these differences; nevertheless, 38% said they are not aware of any differences between these two minority groups.

77% were aware of the cultural awareness between these two groups; however, 23% indicated that they are not aware of these differences. 31% respondents mentioned a different attitude towards education and its value; 30% indicated a first difference of traditional culture and another 30% said there are differences in attitudes to relationships and 9% indicated Roma’s very positive attitude towards music and dance.

85% of participants were aware of the term ‘social exclusion’, but surprisingly 15% were not. 85% said that they noticed forms of social exclusion in schools they work in; however, 15% have not noticed any forms of social exclusion in their schools.

36% identified both attendance and behavioural issues as problems they often face when supporting EAL to Roma teenagers. 12% identified value of education as a common problem Roma teenagers show. 4% of participants indicated other problems such as Roma teenagers being uncomfortable with a school’s and/or lesson’s structure, language barrier, low ability and financial situation. What is more, 100% indicated low literacy skills in their first language (L1) as well as the same problems, as the outcome of L1, in their second language (L2).

Regarding the methods and strategies when providing English support, 15% of EAL professionals used games as one of the most popular strategies. 10% of participants used drama and role play with their learners and another 10% used flash cards and visuals. Participants also mentioned using debates, brainstorming, pictures, films, repetition, toys and internet. Significantly, only 5% of respondents mentioned the Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP) method.

46% of respondents rated the effectiveness in methods using as 4 on a 5-point scale; 1 meaning 'not effective' and 5 meaning 'very effective'. Moreover, 23% participants rated it as 3 and another 23% as 2. Finally, 8% said the use of methods is not effective, which left them with 1 on a 5-point scale measurement. However, from the gathered questionnaires, it was observed that 1 participants out of 13 made additional comments that the effectiveness of methods as well as strategies really depends on an individual's ability and willingness.

Regarding the effectiveness of strategies, it is seen that 38% rated their answer as 4, another 38% as 3, 15% as 2 and only 9% rated as 1. In addition, 23% of respondents stated they were provided with very limited training. 77% of participants indicated that they were not provided with any training that could help them to approach this group of learners. What is more, 92% agreed that intercultural awareness can help them when providing EAL support to Roma learners; however, 8% stated that they do not believe this can help them.

Some participants spoke about their experiences in the open questions from the questionnaire.

'Supporting these students can be very challenging at times. Due to the inconsistent attendance of some of them, a lot of learning opportunities get missed and the continuity of support is lost. Unfortunately, very often, their frustrations of lack of understanding manifest themselves as bad behaviour. Sustaining the motivation of such

learners is in my opinion the greatest challenge facing the professionals supporting this group of EAL learners'.

'I have observed that Roma teenagers struggle with autonomous learning and hardly depend on teachers and TAs support... gaps in education and low ability skills, especially literacy and numeracy skills, are the outcomes of not being able to learn independently. The lack of skills in comparison with their peers often causes low self-esteem which also impacts on their difficulties with autonomous learning'.

The participants spoke about experiencing issues with behaviour, attendance and motivation when providing EAL support for Roma learners. In addition, it was suggested the problems of EAL support staff are related to Roma teenagers' low literacy skills, autonomous learning as well as self-esteem and confidence of these learners.

Analysis and discussion

36% of EAL professionals identified attendance problems and behavior management issues as two of the most common issues they face in secondary schools. According to Derrington (2005) irregular attendance of these students may cause serious problems in relation to their achievement, relationship with others and sense of belonging to a school.

Surprisingly 4% of participants identified low ability (low literacy skills in L1 and L2 and language barrier) as one of the issues they face. This could be explained by Lloyd and McCluskey (2008), who suggested that Roma are more likely to pass their low skills or occupations from generation to generation. Consequently, if this happens they may not want to learn new skills provided by education system or simply learn English to improve their potentials. It has been observed that Roma students may often struggle with reading and writing as there is no such culture of learning for them. When the participants were asked about

what academic problems they recognize when providing EAL support 100% indicated low literacy skills in their L1 and L2.

From the questionnaire it was established that EAL teaching staff are using different methods and approaches to their teaching. These findings are supported by Scrivener (2011) who affirmed that teachers seem not to have one favorite method and/or approach of their own. That should be due to learners' ability, cultural background and learning styles.

The most common answer to the question on usage of methods and strategies in ELT to Roma teenagers was using games (15% of participants). As Scrivener (2011) suggests the use of games can have a wide application not only with small groups, but also as pair work. Only 5% of respondents mentioned debates as a teaching tool. Group work and peer learning were mentioned by again only 5% of participants. This may indicate how difficult it is to apply strategies and/or techniques according to learners' culture and ethnic background.

10% of participants use drama and role play with these particular learners and others use flash cards, music and visual materials. As Scrivener (2011) suggests when EAL teachers use flash cards, learners can visualize the images or words and hopefully remember them better. Drama, music and visuals may be very popular when working with Roma learners as these factors are shared with their culture.

The majority of participants, 77%, stated that they are aware of the differences these learners may have. However, 23% of respondents were still not aware of these differences.

Finally, majority of respondents, 92%, agreed that intercultural awareness can help professionals when providing English support to Roma students. Culture is strongly connected with intercultural awareness; thus, it is crucial for EAL professionals to understand and appreciate different cultures presented by their learners in order to

make intercultural communication easier for both professionals and learners (Gillett, 1997; Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2010).

Theme 1 – low ability and low literacy skills

It is clearly seen that 100% agreed on Roma learners having low ability and literacy skills which often happen in both L1 and L2 due to their lack of education in home countries. Low ability leads to not being able to learn independently by these students. As mentioned, Roma learners lack literacy and numeracy skills and may have difficulties with autonomous learning. As Smith (1997) suggests, Roma students may often struggle with reading and writing as there is no such culture of learning and communication for them.

Theme 2 – challenging behavior and attendance issues

The study found that 36% of participants pointed out the attendance as one of two main issues they face. The second problem was behavior issues and that was pointed out by another 36% of respondents. Attendance issues might be related to gender differences where girls are often asked by their parents to babysit younger siblings. Moreover, behavioral issues may link to more freedom being allowed at home by parents and as a consequence lack of respect and authority in a school (Darrington, 2005; Cemlyn et al., 2009).

Theme 3 – motivation

Motivation of Roma learners was mentioned by one participants in their additional comments. Nevertheless, it is a valuable point to be mentioned. Motivation of these learners might be affected due to different factors, for example cultural differences that involve different values, family commitments and needs.

Conclusion and recommendations

Significant problems EAL professionals face when teaching Roma teenagers in secondary schools were identified. Almost 100% of

participants agreed that intercultural awareness can help when teaching minority groups, in this case Roma learners. There were four objectives formulated before the study was conducted namely:

- 1) To investigate what teaching methods these professionals use and if they are effective.
- 2) To investigate if these professionals are aware of cultural differences learners may have.
- 3) To find out if these professionals were provided with any training that may have helped them to deal with this particular group of students.
- 4) To investigate whether intercultural awareness can help when teaching this particular minority group of learners.

EAL professionals face many challenging issues related to both academic and non-academic factors. Attendance and behavioral issues were the major problems EAL teaching staff face. Due to inconsistent attendance, a lot of learning opportunities can be missed and the continuity of EAL support may be lost. Behavioral issues may have a significant influence on students' learning processes. Challenging behavior may exclude them from school life which again leads to an interrupted continuity of EAL support.

One of the main solutions and recommendations would be provision of a training and/or workshop so EAL professionals, other teaching staff and all students in a school could benefit from that. Roma Support Group, according to their web site (2012) has been empowering Roma communities since 1998. This group offers both trainings and workshops. One of the trainings they deliver is training for those who work in education.

In addition, schools should engage parents in everyday life and events so that parents could get that identity of belonging to a wider community. It is important that parents of Roma teenagers are offered

some support courses such as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) so they value the language learning first and they can pass this value to their children.

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