Teacher perspectives on strategies to support English as an Additional Language (EAL) students with Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in middle and senior mainstream classes in the primary school setting

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Teacher perspectives on strategies to support English as an Additional Language (EAL) students with Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in middle and senior mainstream classes in the primary school setting

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Abstract

This study aimed to ascertain primary school teachers' perspectives on supports for children in middle and senior classes for whom English is an additional language (EAL). The study focused on resources for teaching EAL children who no longer qualify for support via withdrawal from class. The research methodology employed in this study was qualitative, involving five semi-structured interviews and informed by an Interpretivist paradigm. Findings suggested older EAL children have difficulty accessing the curriculum due to inadequate proficiency with academic English. The findings recommended greater provision of relevant teacher training, and further research on these learners' unique needs.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Acronyms and Glossary

BERA British Educational Research Association

BICS Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills

CALP Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency

CEFR Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

CLIL Content and Language Integrated Learning

CPD Continuing Professional Development

DES Department of Education and Skills

DoE Department of Education

EAL English as an Additional Language

FCÁT Foghlaim Comháite Ábhar agus Teanga

IILT Integrate Ireland Language and Training

ITE Initial Teacher Education

NCCA National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

RTA Reflexive Thematic Analysis

SESE Social, Environmental and Scientific Education

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The number of children entering Irish primary schools who do not speak English as their first language has risen significantly in recent decades (Murtagh and Francis, 2012; Batardière et al., 2023). Research shows that the language needs of these children vary over time due to increased academic challenges, and failure to recognise this is impacting older (above 1st class / eight years old) English as an additional language (EAL) children's ability to access the curriculum (Cummins, 1992; Strand et al., 2015; Strand and Hessel, 2019; Hessel and Strand, 2023). EAL describes children who are non-native speakers of the English language. This chapter provides overviews of the origin of the dissertation, the current educational policy concerning EAL children, the rationale for the study as well as an outline of the structure of the dissertation. The origin of the dissertation is discussed in the first person.

1.2 Origin of the dissertation

As a former teacher of English as a second language, I noticed during initial teacher education (ITE) that EAL materials assumed children would no longer receive support upon attaining an intermediate level of English. Based on my familiarity with the limited linguistic competencies of students at an intermediate level, I became concerned that it was inappropriate to withdraw support from these children in the more academically demanding middle and senior classes. I was also surprised at the dearth of training targeting the needs of EAL children during ITE. Upon inspection, I observed that the existing literature aligned with my concerns.

1.3 Background to the project

In 2016, over 76,000 primary school children (13% of enrolments) did not speak English at home (Central Statistics Office, 2017; Oireachtas Library and Research Service, 2020, cited in Batardière et al., 2023). By February 2024, 11,165 Ukrainian children had enrolled, representing 2% of the primary school population (*Department of Education Inspectorate*,

2024a). Though data is not available regarding EAL children as a percentage of all current enrolments, it can be estimated based on the data above that the figure is approximately 15%.

Presently, the needs of EAL children are provided for by the system established in 1999 through which up to two years of English support is rendered by Language Support Teachers (Murtagh and Francis, 2011, p.201). To this end EAL children are placed in mainstream classrooms, but are usually withdrawn by support teachers for small group English tuition once each school day for thirty minute lessons (as per *Integrate Ireland Language and Training* (IILT), 2003 guidelines) These guidelines aim to equip the child with the linguistic skills to 'be fully integrated in the mainstream' (ibid., p.2) after two years of support. This thesis explores whether teachers perceive that this approach is appropriate.

1.4 Rationale

Much research criticizes the two-year support limit for *all* EAL children in Irish schools (Wallen and Kelly-Holmes 2006; Nowlan, 2008; Murtagh and Francis, 2010). This limit is especially pertinent for EAL children tasked with accessing the middle and senior curriculum (1st class – 6th class) where academic language skills — referred to as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1980) — are needed. However, there is little mention of the need for CALP in documentation published by the *Department of Education*. With ever increasing numbers of EAL children entering Irish primary schools, it is imperative that their needs at each stage of schooling be studied, so that these children can be best supported to access the curriculum. This study therefore aims to determine whether teachers perceive the achievement gap reported in the literature (Hessel and Strand, 2023) between EAL children and their non-EAL peers in middle and senior classes, and whether this gap can be attributed to inadequate focus on CALP in current provisions made for EAL children. Five semi-structured interviews (n=5) were used in line with an Interpretivist paradigm to maximise the exploratory potential of the research and thus increase the possibilities of providing findings that are unanticipated in the literature review.

1.5 Dissertation layout

This dissertation is set out in six chapters. Within these chapters subheadings are provided to enhance clarity. Chapter Two: Literature Review, provides an exploration of research on teacher training for working with EAL children, theories of language acquisition as they relate to CALP, and the evidence for the existence of an achievement gap between EAL children and their peers. The methodologies of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) are also examined for the purposes of fostering CALP, and, finally, gaps in the research are identified from which emerge the research questions. In Chapter Three: Methodology, the research paradigm of the study is identified and defended, and an overview is given of the study's research instruments, sampling, ethical considerations, piloting, and actions taken to maximise rigour. The findings are presented in Chapter Four: Findings, and are then interpreted with reference to the literature in Chapter Five: Discussion. Chapter 6: Conclusion presents a summary of the findings, the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

1.6 Conclusion

Though the number of EAL children continues to increase in Irish schools, the needs of such children in middle and senior classes may not be fully acknowledged. The existence of an achievement gap between EAL children and their non-EAL peers in these classes would suggest the policy of withdrawing support after two years disadvantages older EAL children. While the *National Council for Curriculum and Assessment* (NCCA) (2006, p.14) place the burden of post-withdrawal support on the class teacher, this study aims to investigate teachers' perspectives on the adequacy of resources to equip post-withdrawal EAL children with the CALP needed to access the middle and senior curriculum. The next chapter explores the pertinent research literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research is to ascertain teachers' perspectives on strategies to support EAL students with Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) across the curriculum in middle and senior mainstream classes (approximate ages: eight to twelve). The literature review undertaken to contextualise this goal is presented in three parts. Firstly, a definition of CALP is drawn from the literature followed by a discussion on the relationship between CALP and academic achievement of students with EAL. The second section explores assessments of teacher training for teaching EAL children. Finally, an overview is given of strategies to support these children in acquiring CALP.

2.2 The influence of CALP

2.2.1 Definition of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)

Cummins (1980) makes a distinction between two varieties of language which a speaker must master to succeed in education. Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) is language used in everyday communication contexts, and is primarily oral. This type of language is characterised by a vocabulary that is confined to high frequency words and simple sentence structures. According to Cummins (2008), it may take an EAL student between one and three years to develop a competence in this type of language that is comparable to a native speaker's. The second type of language is 'Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency' (CALP). This is the language of higher-level abstraction and subject-specific discourse. While no exhaustive definition exists for all of the practices that constitute academic language, Saunders (2010, p.49) provides a description: 'academic language refers to the specialised vocabulary, grammar, discourse/textual, and functional skills associated with academic instruction and mastery of academic material and tasks.' Cummins (2008) asserts that it takes between five and seven years for a non-native speaker to attain the CALP of their native speaker peers, which suggests lack of CALP may be the cause of EAL children's underachievement in academic contexts.

2.2.2 Language proficiency and academic achievement

Proficiency in the language that education is delivered in is a major predictor of academic success (Cummins, 1992; Genesee et al. 2005; Ammermueller, 2007; McKendry and Murphy 2011; Strand, Malmberg and Hall, 2015; Strand and Hessel, 2019; Hessel and Strand, 2023). As an indicative datum, in the Irish context, primary school EAL learners in 4th class scored on average 531/1000 points in the 2011 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Curtin et al., 2016, p.21) while their peers who regularly speak English at home scored 556 points. In a research review concerning language teaching and learning in Ireland, Batardière et al. (2023, p.11) describe this achievement gap as 'significant'. It is important to note that the PIRLS data makes no reference to differing levels of proficiency in English among EAL children. However, Hessel and Strand (2023, p.2) argue that an achievement gap becomes more apparent when primary school children's level of English proficiency is considered instead of merely EAL status. These authors claim (ibid.) that English proficiency 'accounts for up to six times more variance than other student background variables (ethnicity, gender and socio-economic disadvantage) combined.' Given such potential for disadvantage, it is necessary to examine the appropriateness of available support to ensure EAL children are equipped with the language skills to succeed academically, i.e. CALP.

2.2.3 CALP and the withdrawal of support at the B1 level

EAL children arriving in Irish primary schools are entitled to two years of EAL support (*Department of Education and Skills* (DES), 2007; 2009). This usually occurs via daily withdrawal in small groups for short lessons (Batardière et al., 2022, p.11). This support aids children in their acquisition of English up to what is termed a 'B1 level' according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). Throughout Europe, the CEFR is used to categorise the levels of attainment of language learners. It provides six levels of proficiency from A1 (Basic User), to C2 (Proficient user), where B1 is an 'Independent user'. Though the CEFR scale does not make explicit reference to CALP or BICS, Jones (2011, p.45) is categorical: 'in the CEFR 'CALP' is very much the stuff of the C levels.' According to IILT (2003), primary school EAL children in Ireland are expected to fully integrate into the mainstream with no further EAL support after two years, when it is

expected that the child will have reached the IILT's benchmarks based on the CEFR's B1 level. This level is described by the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001, p.24) as when a user 'can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered.' While IILT (2003) state that the B1 level is the point at which children no longer require support via withdrawal, Catibušic's (2011, p.329) positive assessment of the appropriateness of the IILT benchmarks nevertheless recognises that

> [for] older pupils [in 1st - 3rd class], B1 proficiency in both reading and writing is a *minimum* requirement for ESL [EAL] pupils to reach their full academic potential in the mainstream classroom. (Emphasis added).

This comment seems to suggest that for students in 4th- 6th class, the B1 level is not sufficient. This perception is supported by *Guidelines for Teachers. DRAFT* (NCCA, 2005, p.17), a support document for teachers who work with EAL children, which recognises that the B1 level does not entail independent access to the curriculum:

> the need to provide particular guidance and support for the child's engagement with the curriculum will continue in the mainstream setting after language support has been withdrawn.

Large-sample quantitative research in the UK by Strand and Hessle (2018) and Strand and Lindorff (2020), showing that underachievement by EAL children is associated with their English proficiency being lower than their native English speaking peers, seems to validate the position that a B1 level is insufficient for academic success. While it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions due to the use of different language proficiency scales in the studies, qualitative research in the Irish context provides further evidence.

Wallen and Kelly-Holmes' (2017, p.324) interviews with class teachers working with EAL children in Ireland suggest support for the view that after two years of EAL withdrawal — when, according to Catibušic (2011), children have generally succeeded in attaining a B1 level — children have typically failed to attain CALP. Furthermore, even in cases where EAL children are assumed by teachers to have attained CALP, it is possible that these teachers may be mistaken. Wallen and Kelly-Holmes point to Cummins' idea of the 'linguistic façade' (Cummins, 1994, p.4, cited in Wallen and Kelly-Holmes, 2006, p.147) where a language-

learning child's level of CALP is overestimated because oral fluency in day-to-day contexts can mask difficulties with higher level comprehension.

Research on the particular needs of EAL children after two years of support is lacking. However, an OECD report on migrant education in Ireland (Taguma et al., 2009, p.9) pointed out that EAL children 'will need longer [than two years] support to achieve mastery of academic English' and to this end the report recommends (ibid.) teacher training and 'professional development for all teachers as "language teachers".'

2.3 Teacher training for supporting EAL children

Murtagh and Francis' (2012, p.203) review of Irish initial teacher education (ITE) for primary school teachers fails to find a course with a dedicated module focused on supporting EAL students. A more recent study by Gardiner-Hyland and Burke (2018, p.11) records teachers' self-reported lack of confidence in meeting the needs of EAL learners and the authors identify the prevalence of a 'trial and error' approach. In light of standardized EAL modules during ITE in Australia, Skinner (2010) recommends a compulsory EAL component in all ITE courses in Northern Ireland. This call is echoed by Kelly (2014, p.25) regarding the Republic of Ireland, and is reminiscent of Murtagh and Francis's (2012) recommendations for a 'standardised approach to training in EAL teaching across initial-teacher and CPD education providers.' More contemporary research is lacking on current teacher training and continuing professional development (CPD) for primary school teachers working with EAL children.

2.4 Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) to support CALP

2.4.1 Definitions and origin of CLIL

Though the discussion up to now has focused on support for EAL students, EAL students are not unique in Europe in their need for assistance in acquiring CALP. In fact, as Wolff (2012, p.109) argues, for native speaking students proficient in BICS, CALP is analogous to a second language in which they are much less proficient. Students who are non-native speakers of

the language in which education is delivered, on the other hand, are not just less skilled in the BICS but also have a 'very low proficiency' (ibid.) with regard to CALP. Across Europe the solution has increasingly been to train content subject (i.e. non-language subjects) teachers to use a 'language sensitive approach' (ibid, p.10) — a pedagogical focus on developing the linguistic competencies which are prerequisites for engaging with lesson content — to foster greater CALP.

Prominent in the literature, *Content and Language Integrated Learning* (CLIL) — a term introduced by Marsh (1994) — is one such language sensitive approach. It has come to be subsequently defined by Coyle et al. (2010, p.1) as 'a dual focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language.' The approach has its origins in Quebec, Canada where to ensure English-speaking children attained high levels of French, parents would provide for education in non-language areas of the curriculum, e.g. geography or history, to be delivered *through* the target language (Pérez-Cañado, 2012). While there are competing definitions of CLIL in the literature (Cenoz et al., 2014), it can be conceptualized as an umbrella term that represents a broad family of approaches for delivering positive learning outcomes in terms of content *and* language. Therefore, CLIL may be an ideal source of ideas for how Irish primary school teachers can support EAL children lacking in CALP. Support for this view can be found in the Irish government's interim report (Government of Ireland, 2024, p.19) on the implementation of its *Languages Connect* strategy (DES, 2017) 'CLIL methodology will also support EAL learners in accessing the curriculum.' Curiously, this potential of CLIL is not mentioned in the support materials for the *Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA, 2019), which recommend CLIL only as a means to foster children's acquisition of Irish. While much recent work has been undertaken to promote CLIL for the purposes of teaching Irish (where it is known as 'Foghlaim Comháite Ábhar agus Teanga' (FCÁT); Batardière et al., 2023, p.59), there is an absence of literature on the use of CLIL for supporting EAL children in Irish primary schools.

2.4.2 Instructional practices for supporting CALP with CLIL

The methodological suggestions that emerge from CLIL (Leisen, 2010, pp.12-96, cited in Wolf, 2012, p.113) are numerous. In CLIL, the importance of word study is underlined for the development of CALP. There is a particular emphasis on polysemy and word building i.e. nominalization (DiCerbo et al., 2014, p.461). Echevarria et al. (2006) recommend building redundancy into input by planning for paraphrasing and repeating. The use of visuals and other extra-linguistic aids to support content language is another ubiquitous strategy (Rutgers et al., 2020, p.24). Student output is also scaffolded. Crisfield (2022, p.56) recommends starting with what 'we want students to be able to do at the end of the unit/task…describe, compare, predict' and using these functions to inform the modelling of the relevant grammatical structures. While these suggestions assume an immersion style and mono-lingual context, more recent research (Moore, 2023) demonstrates CLIL's compatibility with strategies that explicitly leverage students' first language.

2.4.3 Role of EAL children's first language

Cummins' (1984) 'dual iceberg' metaphor of common language proficiency depicts the first language and second language of a learner as two protrusions above water of a unified iceberg of competences taught through both languages. In other words, a common language proficiency is a resource drawn on for comprehension in either language. Cummins (1979) refers to this as the Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis and in recent years it has come to receive empirical backing (Granados et al., 2022). For this reason, modern iterations of CLIL draw on students' own languages for support (see e.g., Rutgers et al., 2020, p.24). With particular reference to CALP, it is claimed (Chalmers, 2019, p.17) that

> it is more efficient to teach the more abstract CALP skills in the L1 [first language] knowing that these skills will be available in English when the surface features of English have had time to develop.

Informed by the Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) uses the phrase 'plurilingual' to describe the form of language education it advocates. Plurilingual education is defined as that which aims to foster 'a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact'

(ibid., p.4). This perspective on language is also evident in the integration of English and Irish in the *Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA, 2019). Another term commonly associated with plurilingualism is 'translanguaging'. Despite subtle differences in connotations regarding philosophical outlook and historical development (García and Otheguy, 2020, p.18), in relation to classroom pedagogy, both terms can be said to correspond to 'the planned alternation of two (named) languages to embrace a more flexible, more multilingual approach' (Moore, 2023, p.29). How plurilingualism/translanguaging may be implemented in Irish schools is a prevalent question in recent literature.

Kirwan (2018, p.30) argues that though a teacher in an Irish school may not be equipped to instruct in EAL children's first languages, this is not a hindrance. In describing the case of a successful creation of a plurilingual environment in a Dublin school, Kirwan argues that putting the onus on the child to bring their home language to school where it was not just recognized in a tokenistic fashion, but was actively included and used in the classroom resulted in a 'huge increase in learner autonomy' (ibid.). The literature is replete with suggestions on how to include home languages in the classroom for the purposes of developing CALP: these include the creation of dual language texts, allowing children to create drafts of texts in their first languages, asking colingual children to brainstorm in their shared first language, etc. (Lin, 2016; Chalmers, 2019; Little and Kirwan, 2021; Moore, 2023). Nevertheless, though it is not controversial that such practices greatly assist in fostering the well-being of an EAL child in schools (Chalmers, 2022), it is not uniformly accepted that they are particularly beneficial for the development of CALP.

Lin (2016, p.285) highlights the role of cognitive maturity and first-language academic literacy in students as factors which moderate the success of plurilingual strategies in the classroom, and she calls for further research into their use at primary levels. Chalmers (2022, p.214) categorises as merely 'correlational' that research which suggests there are 'positive relationships between the more academically oriented language skills, such as literacy, in the languages regularly used by multilingual learners.' He goes on to classify the 'strong claims' for the use of EAL children's first language —i.e. that monolingual approaches are ineffective and plurilingual varieties more effective in producing learning — as not currently supported

by the types of studies needed to licence them. Whether Irish teachers subscribe to these 'strong claims' is unreported in the literature.

2.5 Conclusion

The literature review revealed two main areas for investigation that inform the present study. From the published research there emerged strong evidence of an achievement gap between EAL children and children who speak English at home (Strand and Hessle, 2018; Strand and Lindorff, 2020). Cummins (2016) argues CALP is a variety of language that is important for all children to master for success at schools, and failure to do so on the part of EAL children may account for the achievement gap. The second theme concerns the resources in Irish primary schools to equip EAL children with CALP. This is especially pertinent given the criticism in the literature of removing support from EAL children at the B1 level (Wallen and Kelly-Holmes, 2006; Murtagh and Francis, 2012), and similar negative appraisal of teacher training aimed at meeting EAL children's needs (Skinner, 2010; Murtagh and Francis, 2012; Kelly, 2014). There exists a gap in the research regarding the specific issue of teacher perspectives on how to foster CALP with children who no longer receive EAL support. This is important given the possibility that the lack of CALP is hindering the academic progress of these EAL children from 1st class onwards. In light of this, the study aims to interrogate the following research questions:

1. What are teacher perspectives on the connection between the level of language acquisition of EAL children and their academic achievement?

2. How do teachers view the provision of resources for equipping EAL children with Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)?

The answers to these research questions were sought using the research methods outlined in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This study aimed to explore teacher perspectives on supporting EAL students with Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) across the curriculum in middle and senior classes. The researcher sought to obtain a nuanced understanding of how issues relevant to this work were perceived by teachers, while acknowledging the existence of a plurality of interpretations and perspectives. This goal informed the research paradigm and methodology employed in the study. This chapter outlines and defends the philosophical positions that underwrite how the study was conducted. The chapter then progresses to discussions of sampling, ethical considerations and limitations.

3.2 Research paradigm and methodology

The research methodology employed in this study was qualitative, informed by an Interpretivist paradigm. Scott and Morrison (2006, p.131) describe Interpretivism as emerging from the conviction that it is social actors' attempts to interpret or construct meaning about their world that constitute reality. Blaxter et al. (2010, p.61) relate the Interpretivist paradigm to the work of Weber who suggests that it is the aim of 'understanding' (i.e. empathising with how social actors construct meaning), rather than 'explaining' (i.e. identifying causal relations) that is the distinctive feature of Interpretivist research. Creswell (2016, p.25) contrasts this paradigm with those others that use research to deductively confirm or falsify a pre-existing theory such as Positivism with its ontological commitment to objective reality and epistemological verifiability. Under Interpretivism, researchers use inductive reasoning to develop a theory having first conducted the investigation. Given the absence of a theory to be tested and the presence of a desire to 'understand' rather than explain, Interpretivism emerged as the more appropriate paradigm. Though this paradigm is particularly compatible with the use of qualitative methodology, there were also factors that argued against the competing alternative of employing a quantitative methodology.

Quantitative methodologies aim to collect statistical data based on empirical enquiry in an effort at attaining maximum generalizability. However, the field of education has been identified as suffering from particularly poor levels of replication (Makel and Pucker, 2014, p.1)., i.e. the ability of other later studies to replicate the findings of earlier studies. Perry et al. (2022) and Makel and Pucker (2014) identify the use of a large sample size as a methodological check to guard against such failings. This was not an option for this study given its limited scope, a fact which disfavoured the employment of a quantitative methodology. While the researcher acknowledges weaknesses inherent in the qualitative approach in terms of generalisability, transferability and limited triangulation of the findings, Bassey (1999, cited in Bell and Waters, 2018, p.10) argues that in qualitative research 'relatability' is to be sought over 'generalizability'; this is to say that the present study aimed to provide details that are 'sufficient and appropriate' (ibid.) to aid decision making for a teaching practitioner working in a comparable context, for which generalizability is not necessary.

For these reasons the use of qualitative data collection in the form of five semi-structured interviews of between twenty and thirty minutes in duration was deemed philosophically coherent and methodologically justifiable. Further details concerning the decision to pursue a Case Study approach under this philosophy are provided in the next section.

3.3 Research design

Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.11) define qualitative research as 'any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification.' However, within this definition there exists a plethora of approaches. Given the philosophical and methodological commitments outlined in the previous section, the researcher selected a Case Study approach. Creswell (2016, p.97), offers a concise description of the approach: 'case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases)'.

With the research questions resulting from the literature review in mind, the Case Study approach, given its 'bounded' nature, was deemed particularly appropriate for two reasons. In identifying the setting for the research, primary schools in Leinster, and focusing on teachers' perspectives on supports for EAL students to develop competence with academic English, clear cases were identifiable. A further animus for deciding on conducting a Case Study arose from the literature review where the approach emerged as an established tradition of ascertaining the perspectives of teachers on issues related to EAL support (Hall and Cajkler, 2008; Gardiner-Hyland and Burke, 2018; Skinner, 2020). In light of a gap in the literature concerning teacher perspectives on the narrower question of CALP for EAL students, it followed that the precedent be adhered to.

3.4 Research instruments

To permit the collection of data in line with the qualitative Case Study approach outlined above, five voice-recorded, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately twenty-five minutes in duration were chosen to enact the research (n=5). Bell (2010, p.161) identifies the interview as a powerful research tool capable of providing a depth of data which is unattainable by the questionnaire due to the interviewer's ability to account for non-verbal cues as well as the potential to seek further clarification. Given the variety of interview formats that exist, the researcher must decide on the most appropriate.

O'Leary (2004, pp.423-424) outlines a number of options for conducting an interview in the context of a research project. In terms of the contrast presented between structured and unstructured interviews, O'Leary (ibid.) views the former as most appropriate for the collection of standardized data. However, in light of the exploratory goals of the Case Study, the wholly structured interview was considered inappropriate. Likewise, the unstructured variant was rejected as the researcher lacked the experience required to conduct such an interaction without 'leading' the interviewee. The semi-structured interview using a topic guide (see Appendix 7.4) offered the optimal balance to both facilitate comparison in the data analysis phase and to accommodate unexpected data. To maximise the value of the topic guide, the instrument was piloted.

In the interests of validity, credibility, and feasibility (Lincoln and Guba, 1986), the research instrument was piloted twice in a context similar to that of the main study. Piloting is considered crucial in the literature (Malmqvist et al., 2019). Two mainstream teachers who met the inclusion criteria but who were not included in the final sample were interviewed using a draft topic guide. As a consequence, two topics were removed due to the infeasibility of including the lengthy discussions they prompted in the time allotted. The wordings of a number of questions were altered in response to reflection that they were leading the participants.

3.5 Sampling and participants

The inclusion criteria for participation in the study specified primary school teachers with experience of teaching EAL children. Five participants were chosen to participate in the study via non-probability sampling. Given the particulars of the research questions as they related to EAL students and CALP, purposive sampling — a non-probability sampling method — was initially chosen to ensure access to what Cohen et al. (2007, p.115) term 'knowledgeable people'. Exclusion criteria were drawn up to pre-filter the candidates: no newly qualified teachers (defined here as having fewer than three years' experience), retired teachers, or any third parties (e.g. psychologists) were considered eligible. However, while initially only class teachers with experience of EAL students in middle and senior classes were sought, the unavailability of this profile necessitated a shift to snowball sampling where additional participants were recruited through the recommendation of existing participants. This required the opening of the inclusion criteria to accept EAL support teachers. Similarly, while teachers from a single school were initially sought, the same unavailability mentioned above resulted in teachers from two schools in Leinster being recruited. Approval from the principals of the schools to undertake research with staff was sought in writing (see Appendix 7.2) and participants were informed of the aims and methods of the research with an information sheet (see Appendix 7.1). Before data collection could begin, participants were asked to sign consent forms (see Appendix 7.3) which laid out their right to withdraw and the researcher's commitment to confidentiality.

3.6 Data analysis

The recordings collected from the five interviews were subjected to Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). Braun and Clarke (2020, p.4) define the aim of RTA to 'to identify and make sense of patterns of meaning across a dataset.' The analysis consisted of five steps. Firstly, interviews were transcribed and these transcripts were reread to attain intimate familiarity with the data. They were then inductively analysed as per Patton (2002) to uncover patterns in the data. To do this in line with Braun and Clarke's RTA (2019), discrete ideas or 'codes' were marked (see Appendix 7.5). Under RTA these codes are understood to be the product of the researcher's interpretation of the data and there is no expectation that these codes should be objectively verifiable. Such codes are viewed as 'constructions' of the researcher that are nevertheless faithful to the interview subject's communicative intentions; they are the product of 'the researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process' (Braun and Clarke 2019, p.594). The third step comprised the comparison of codes marked across the data set and the aggregation of these into coherent, superordinate 'themes'. These candidate themes were, in the fourth step, subject to a recursive review to ensure their relevance to the research questions and to ensure sufficient availability of meaningful supporting data. Patton's (1990) 'dual criteria for judging categories' were observed to ensure there was 'internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity' within and among themes. Once final themes were settled upon, definitions and names of themes were decided in line with Braun and Clarke's (2020) advocation that theme names be 'catchy' yet communicate the central feature of the theme.

3.7 Robustness: rigour, validity, dependability

To maximise the robustness, or trustworthiness, of the research's findings, the researcher endeavoured to follow four recommendations by Lincoln and Guba (1986) with regard to qualitative research. *Table 1* shows each of Lincoln and Guba's criteria for rigour along with recommended techniques to meet the criteria, as well as action taken by the researcher in light of these.

Criterion	Suggested technique	Researcher action
Credibility: the level of 'internal validity' of the findings.	Peer debriefing. Triangulation of data. Topic guide tested by pilot interviews.	Disinterested peer consulted on interpretation. Topic guide modified in light of pilot interview.
Transferability: the ability to generalize the findings to other settings.	'Thick descriptive data' (Lincoln and Guba, 1986, p.77) on the context and method of the research should be provided.	In this methodology section, both the context and method of the study are outlined extensively.
Dependability: the level of confidence that the data collected would be the same if the research was repeated.	The creation of an audit trail (Lincoln and Guba, 1986, p.77). Clear documentation of the research process (Nowell et al., 2017, p.3)	The creation of an audit trail was not feasible given the scope of the study. This methodology section ensures the research process is logical and traceable.
Confirmability: that the product of the research, its interpretations and findings, is as free from bias as possible.	The use of a reflexive journal.	A reflexive journal was maintained by the researcher as recommended by Watt (2007) and is available for consultation.

Table 1: Lincoln and Guba's (1986) criteria for rigour in qualitative research and researcher action

Robustness was enhanced by reflexivity. Reflexivity is a process by which the qualitative researcher recognises that what Mauther and Doucet (2003, p.415) call 'the positivist model of the absent or neutral researcher' is impossible, and that he inevitably influences the results of his own research. The researcher's inescapable position as a member of the same social world he seeks to study must therefore be foregrounded to allow readers to interpret where the researcher's 'self-presentation' (ibid., p.416) influences, or biases, his 'representation' of the world. To this end the researcher here acknowledges his background in the hope it mitigates the influence of his biases: with fifteen years of experience teaching English as a foreign language, he approached the issue of supporting EAL children in Irish primary schools with curiosity. Noticing a lack of familiar teaching methodologies led to feelings of disappointment but also to a belief that his English teaching skills could be beneficial. It is hoped that this disclosure along with the keeping of a reflexive journal in which the researcher recorded emotional reactions to participants' contributions allows for a more informed and less biased interpretation of the study's findings.

3.8 Ethical considerations

This research project received ethical approval from Hibernia College. For this, the researcher needed to demonstrate compliance with ethical standards concerning consent, confidentiality and data protection.

To ensure the wellbeing of participants in the research, as well as to meet responsibilities that arise with regard to other stakeholders, including sponsors of research and the broader community of educational researchers, guidance by the *British Educational Research Association* (BERA) (2018) was followed. These guidelines are formulated according to the principle that

> all educational research should be conducted within an ethic of respect for: the person; knowledge; democratic values; the quality of educational research; and academic freedom. (ibid., p.5)

As part of Hibernia College's Ethical Approval procedure this research was permitted only once voluntary informed consent (BERA, 2018, p.9) of the participants was sought in writing (see Appendix 7.3). Participants were informed of the aim and nature of the research as well as their right to withdraw from participation at any point up to one month after data collection for 'any or no reason' (ibid., p.18). Their identities were protected by the confidentiality of their data and the use of pseudonyms in the research. A research information sheet provided to the participants outlined channels for communicating concerns about their participation (see Appendix 7.1). As per the *Data Protection (Amendment) Act 2003*, any data that related to a participant was available to them upon request and their participation in the research could be terminated up to one month after data collection. Their data was stored on password protected devices without identifiers that would compromise their confidentiality. Participants were informed that this data would be stored for three years and then, in compliance with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), be securely destroyed.

3.9 Limitations

While every effort has been made to maximise the value of this research project, it must be acknowledged that it suffers from a number of limitations. The three most salient are 1) the unavailability of five class teacher participants, 2) a small sample size, 3) a lack of triangulation in its design that did not allow for corroboration of data obtained in the interview format. As Cresswell (2016, p.98) comments 'relying on one source of data is typically not enough to develop … in-depth understanding.' This negatively affects the study's dependability and transferability in spite of the actions taken above in line with Lincoln and Guba's (1986) criteria for rigour. Nevertheless, the study's goal of exploring teacher perspectives on supporting children with EAL to acquire CALP is believed to be sufficiently 'relatable', in line with arguments by Bassey (1999, cited in Bell and Waters, 2018, p.10), to form a valuable contribution to the literature.

3.10 Conclusion

In this chapter the rationale for the decision to undertake a qualitative study under an Interpretivist paradigm was outlined. Further decisions relating to the selection of a Case Study approach using semi-structured interviews were defended. Overviews of how the research sought to attain both academic rigour through reflexivity, and compliance with ethical norms in research were given before a discussion of the study's limitations. The following chapter discusses the findings obtained in the course of the study.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

The research was conducted using a qualitative methodology. Data was collected by means of five semi-structured interviews, and in the process of thematic analysis of the results, four main themes emerged. These themes were: 1) the influence of English proficiency on academic achievement; 2) teacher training for working in EAL; 3) strategies and resources for developing academic language; 4) the use of EAL children's first language in class. In this chapter each theme is discussed with reference to assorted subthemes. Each of the five interviewees is identified using Teacher one, two, three, four and five to preserve anonymity, and quotations are provided verbatim.

4.2 English proficiency and academic achievement

Four of the five teachers interviewed agreed on the existence of a positive relationship between an EAL child's English proficiency and their overall academic achievement. Teachers one and five converged on the position that progress with the English language was related to these students' success at school, with the former noting

> Yeah, definitely. The ones you know, who have made more progress in [the] English language. I definitely would feel academically, they would be stronger.

In contrast, Teacher two responded to the question about the influence of English proficiency on academic attainment by observing 'it is not something I would have automatically remarked on,' but nevertheless this participant also identified a 'frustration there' on the part of EAL children in his sixth class given their struggles with the language in terms of reading. The reason for this frustration is potentially related to issues with CALP, but the interview did not clarify this.

4.2.1 The linguistic façade

When asked about the potential for EAL students to surprise either positively or negatively with their academic achievement given expectations shaped by their proficiency in English,

the responses from the participants varied considerably. Teacher five reported being positively surprised by the lack of difficulties of some EAL children in class, remarking

> Yeah, well, you would be surprised positively, like, some of them are, you know, great. Like, you know, … and they wouldn't struggle at all.

Nevertheless, this teacher also noted that for other students their oral fluency can belie a lack of deeper command asserting 'they're able to, you know, speak it, but…write it or sometimes understanding it can be hard for them.' This was a view shared by Teacher one who affirmed that EAL children are often 'a lot weaker' in reading and writing relative to their conversational skills. Similarly, Teacher four identified a 'big discrepancy' between adeptness with expressive language and the kind of language needed for problem solving, and pointed to 'understanding [as] the piece, I think, that is often missing.' In interesting contrast to these perspectives, Teacher three responded that 'just because they can't speak, the English [sic], doesn't mean they don't understand it.' For children who can speak the language to a B1 level, concerns were raised about the withdrawal of support.

4.2.2 Withdrawal of support at B1 level

There was an unexpected recurrence in the data of a perceived need on the part of EAL support teachers to monitor older EAL children who no longer qualify for dedicated EAL support due to their having attained the B1 level. Though working in separate schools, Teacher three and Teacher four both commented on the need to 'keep an eye on those children' and to 'look after them in other ways'. The inappropriateness of choosing B1 as the level at which EAL children exit support is further evidenced by Teacher three's comment that

> [t]hey would generally end up coming back to us for learning support...They definitely would make up a generous proportion of our older groups definitely.

Despite the children in question being 'capable and smart' in terms of problem solving in mathematics, this teacher averred that 'just reading [a problem] and finding what type of problem it is can totally throw them off.' Teacher five meanwhile asserted

> They wouldn't be able to write a decent essay as you know, so even after a B1, like, you know, … like, their understanding of complex language wouldn't be … anything up to the standard of … what their class level will be doing

and expressed frustration with the expectation that children in classes 3rd and above 'get their B1 and just integrate.' The consequential need for these children to be supported after B1 attainment with non-EAL dedicated resources was not uncontroversial with this teacher, who continued

> I suppose it's not really fair in a way because it's putting pressure on your learning support that, you know, you might have to take out other children.

These concerns with the B1 level as the taken-for-granted point of full mainstream integration are compounded by the participants' reservations regarding teacher training.

4.3 Teacher training for working with EAL

4.3.1 Deficit in initial teacher education (ITE)

All of the teachers interviewed articulated a sense of insufficiency with regard to ITE for working with EAL children. Teacher three observed that EAL was 'definitely not' covered in her teacher training. Teacher four described not feeling 'adequately prepared' due to there not having been 'a mention at all' of EAL during ITE. Teacher one commented 'at the start I definitely didn't feel equipped.' This sense of deficit was visible though less pronounced in discussion surrounding CPD.

4.3.2 Access to and quality of continuing professional development (CPD)

Teacher two, a mainstream class teacher, was the only participant who had not undertaken CPD with a specific EAL focus. The remaining four participants, being dedicated EAL teachers, had diverse views on the quality of the training. Teacher one remarked of online courses she had attended that 'one hour is not really going to give you a huge amount of information.' Teachers three and five, EAL teachers in the same school, both expressed overwhelmingly positive opinions regarding the quality of training they had received. Despite this, there were nonetheless problems reported with access. Teacher one criticised the timetabling of training webinars:

> It's pretty impossible to actually sit down at 7PM to do webinars and a lot of them aren't recorded for some reason, like they're not willing to give out the recording. So yeah it's a bit baffling.

Similarly, Teacher three described difficulties procuring substitute cover to access courses run during the teaching day. Teacher five, praised the quality of the training saying 'you'd be crying out for more,' but 'it's very hard to get [teacher trainers].'

All of the participants admitted a need to engage in an auto-didactic approach to further their development in teaching EAL children. This included relying heavily on peer support, internet searches and on-the-job, trial-and-error learning. Teacher five summarised her perspective

> You kind of just have to do your own training…a lot of it would just be taking it on your own back. Like for us, from my situation anyway, researching it yourself, like, you know, I have different teacher pages, and I'd research stuff myself.

Teachers four and five commented on the lack of training focused on children who have attained a B1 level and thus no longer qualify for dedicated EAL support. Teacher five described the attitude informing such a lack of focus on the part of trainers '"their two years were done and they should be alright" — which is not the case.' Such a limited focus and the ad-hoc approach to developing professional practice might explain the relatively narrow spectrum of strategies and resources reported for developing CALP.

4.4 Strategies and resources for developing CALP

The majority of the respondents mentioned the centrality of familiarising children with relevant vocabulary before a lesson as a core strategy for developing CALP. Teacher one focused on 'just differentiating…based on…the normal curriculum' and listed hands-on strategies of providing physical examples that illustrate the meaning of content-obligatory vocabulary. Teachers two and four highlighted the utility of translation software to scaffold academic language acquisition. Teacher two also emphasised 'modelling' of the use of academic language and elaborated on his practice of dedicating a full 'dictionary work lesson' before a Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) session. Teacher one

was unique among the participants in commenting on the need to improve not just EAL children's receptive skills but also their expressive language via 'sentence extension' as such children's output 'can be quite, you know, basic and short.' The relatively limited discussion of scaffolding of expressive language is perhaps to be expected given the participants' lack of familiarity with the methodologies of CLIL.

4.4.1 Use of CLIL

There was a clear divide evident between the single classroom teacher participant, Teacher two, and the four participating EAL teachers with regard to their familiarity with and attitudes towards CLIL. Teacher two described himself as 'a big believer in CLIL' for teaching *Gaeilge*. This participant went on to illustrate the prominent use of Irish in subjects such as PE and music in his classes. All other participants reported having received either no training in CLIL or that, according to Teacher five, the training received amounted to

> Basically, what was nearly said to us was you know, you you're teaching and just throw in a few phrases *as Gaeilge* [translation: *in Irish*] you know, or a few words, you know?

Despite being unique among the respondents in claiming familiarity with CLIL, Teacher two communicated a curiosity about 'what are the things that we can transfer' between teaching Irish with a CLIL approach and teaching academic language to EAL children, but interestingly admitted being unable to elaborate on the connections between these strategies during the interview.

4.5 The use of EAL children's first language in class

Attitudes of participants towards the use of EAL children's first language in the class varied. Teachers two, three and four communicated perceived benefits in terms of the disposition of the children towards education, and their academic performance. Teacher two positively evaluated the effectiveness of allowing EAL children to complete writing tasks in their own language as 'something that definitely increases the child's engagement and motivation.' This participant demonstrated particular concern with EAL children's attitude towards education:

> I think that's something that I need to be very cognizant of, because I don't want to be the person to turn [an EAL child] off education for life either…you want a child who is positively disposed towards coming to school.

Teacher three praised the effectiveness of using bilingual worksheets: 'they seem to be working really well.' The value of having dual language texts in classrooms and school libraries was seen as particularly beneficial by Teacher four as '[the children] get such a kick out of that.' Of using these texts to perform a comparative grammar analysis for identifying parts of speech in both English and the child's first language, teacher four remarked 'they absolutely loved it'; that it can facilitate 'a bit of a lightbulb moment for them.'

Teachers one and five were more ambivalent about the use of EAL children's first language. While Teacher five recognised the merit of including greeting signs in the first languages of EAL children in the school, she clarified that her goal was to 'try and steer them towards, you know, speaking as much English as they can when they're in school.' Teacher one likewise recognised that for 'interest and motivation', the incorporation of a first language is useful, but expressed scepticism regarding a deeper integration of first languages in the classroom: 'how much schools are actually incorporating that…I don't really believe.' This participant communicated feelings of frustration when working with groups of EAL children who persist in using their first language in support lessons:

> I will try and say that when we're here, can we please just use English? Because that's what we're trying to do. We're trying to improve our language, and that's only through practising.

With particular reference to written tasks completed initially in the child's first language, she remarked 'they might come in with something done. And you can tell, it's just been put into Google.' Nevertheless, these reservations were later qualified: '[there] should be definitely some integration of [the child's first language]', and agreed that peer support between colinguals is beneficial.

4.6 Conclusion

The four themes and sub themes discussed above provide fitting lenses through which the research questions can be addressed. On the question regarding resources for equipping

children with CALP, the participants' contributions revealed a number of areas of agreement in their perspectives, particularly in relation to a paucity of teacher training and a lack of familiarity with CLIL. Reports of the existing approach to developing CALP were heavily focused on receptive rather than expressive skills. However, there were differing opinions on the relationship between academic success and English proficiency. In the following chapter the findings presented here are discussed in light of this thesis' research aims and the literature review.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter a critical discussion of the findings of the research is provided with particular reference to the literature explored in Chapter Two. The aim of the study was to ascertain teacher perspectives on whether EAL children in middle and senior classes were adequately supported in their acquisition of CALP by the current provision of resources. While the participants in the study demonstrated high degrees of concern for and dedication to the EAL children with whom they work, a number of issues are apparent in the data which may be interpreted as impeding their efforts. This was especially true of work with children who have already achieved the B1 level of English proficiency and are thus no longer eligible for dedicated EAL support.

5.2 Academic achievement and English proficiency

The literature review revealed substantial evidence for an achievement gap in middle and senior classes of English-speaking schools between the academic performance of children who speak English as a first language and those for whom English is an additional language (Curtin et al., 2016; Strand and Hessle, 2018; Strand and Lindorff, 2020; Hessel and Strand, 2023). While quantitative data was lacking for the Irish context, the present study's findings revealed a perception among teachers of a positive relationship between English proficiency and academic attainment among EAL children. This was expected given previous qualitative work in Ireland (Murtagh and Francis, 2012; Wallen and Kelly-Holmes, 2017) that revealed similar attitudes among teacher participants. Of note is the dissenting opinion of the only class teacher in the present study, who commented 'it is not something I would have automatically remarked on.' This is perhaps attributable to his position as a class teacher with less extensive experience of working with EAL children. Of further significance regarding the findings of the present study is the awareness among three of the five participants of Cummins' linguistic façade (1994, p.4, cited in Wallen and Kelly-Holmes, 2006, p.147); all three were cognizant that EAL children's facility for acquiring BICS did not predict their ability to engage fully with academic tasks that required CALP. One participant

stated of these children 'they wouldn't be able to write a decent essay.' The question of why these children experience such challenges was also explored.

The literature review did not reveal a consensus on the source of academic difficulties for EAL children in older classes who no longer receive EAL support in Ireland. This to say it is ambiguous whether such children are not attaining the CEFR level of B1 in the time allotted and are therefore unable to fully engage with the curriculum, or whether the B1 level is not sufficient for unsupported access to the curriculum (Murtagh and Francis, 2012). However, the majority of the participants in this study were categorical in their criticism of the practice of withdrawing support from middle and senior class children at the B1 level. The description of an ad-hoc practice to continue to support such children with non-EAL dedicated resources, i.e. through general learning support, was given by participants from two separate schools who deemed it necessary. One participant in the current study described the practice as

> not really fair in a way because it's putting pressure on your learning support that, you know, you might have to take out other children [from learning support].

As participants in this research were referring to children who attain the target B1 level using the Primary School Assessment Kit (IILT, 2007), it remains unclear if this assessment kit gives a false reading of children's level of English, or if the B1 level is inherently inadequate for the demands of older classes. Catibušic's (2011, p.329) statement that the B1 level is a 'minimum requirement' to meet the academic demands of 1st-3rd classes lends weight to the assessment that the level itself is unsuitable due to the inadequate CALP it represents.

5.3 Resources for developing CALP

5.3.1 Teacher training and CPD

The literature review suggests there exists a lack of training for working with EAL children in ITE courses in Ireland (Wallen, 2006; Murtagh and Francis, 2012; Gardiner-Hyland and Burke, 2018). The participants interviewed for this study agreed with this assessment. In slight contrast to the finding in Murtagh and Francis (2012, p.206) which conveyed teachers' overwhelmingly favourable perceptions of CPD available on EAL teaching, most of the

participants interviewed for the present research, though sharing a positive opinion of the content of the training, mentioned logistical difficulties with access. This finding was surprising given the emergence of blended learning opportunities in recent years (Han, 2023), and raises the question of whether professional development services have more work to do to leverage the advantages of online learning. Furthermore, that the participants should assert that the available training fails to address strategies for working with EAL children after they have attained a B1 level is not unexpected given that the role of teachers in the area is to enable EAL children to acquire this B1 level.

5.3.2 Awareness of CLIL

In line with the proliferation of accounts in the literature of EAL teachers 'learning on the job' with a 'trial-and-error' approach (Lueng, 2001; Murakami, 2008; Foley et al., 2018; Gardiner-Hyland and Burke, 2018), the participants in this study were unanimous that self-directed research was central to their practice. Given the prevalence of such an approach to professional development, it is unsurprising that CLIL, despite featuring in the new *Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA, 2019), was found to be largely unfamiliar to participants. They reported receiving no CLIL-specific training and there was a lack of awareness of the appropriateness of the approach for improving the CALP of EAL children. The participants were unanimous in associating CLIL with *Gaeilge*. This is likely due to how CLIL is discussed in the Support Materials for the *Primary Language Curriculum* for English and *Gaeilge* (NCCA, 2019a; 2019b) as being primarily concerned with delivering content lessons *as Gaeilge* in English-medium schools. Teacher two's (the only classroom teacher in the study) interpretation of CLIL focused on the importance of integrating *Gaeilge neamhfhoirmiúil* (informal Irish) meaningfully into the school day and the use of commands *as Gaeilge* during PE lessons. This participant demonstrated a keen awareness of the importance of second language exposure beyond discrete second language lessons. While this mixture of first and second languages during content instruction is certainly part of the CLIL approach, it is worth examining how practices recommended in the CLIL literature and the methodologies the participants reported using to support CALP converge and differ.

From the contributions of all participants, it was clear there was strong awareness of the need to assist EAL children with the ability to recognise content-obligatory vocabulary. This was reported for such children whether pre- or post- the B1 level. With regards to developing CALP in the post-B1 child, the repeated reports of translation technology, dictionaries, word banks etc. as central to practice point to alignment between the participants' methodologies and those suggested in the CLIL literature on the question of how to foster receptive skills. Likewise, there was convergence on the need to minimise language-based anxiety and the importance of creating a sense of safety for the learner (Rutgers et al., 2020). However, as a mark of possible divergence, there was a notable lack of discussion among participants on the need to identify the *productive* language functions such as describing, comparing, predicting etc. required for children's success in content subjects. Crisfield (2022, p.57) makes the assertion with regard to developing CALP that it is through 'developing from the function, we can determine what grammatical structures are needed to successfully perform the function.' For example, if a child is required to make a prediction in Science, the grammatical structure known as the first conditional will be required: 'if the iodine *is* added to that food, it *will* change colour.' The accurate use of this structure requires awareness of the appropriate verb form for each clause of the sentence and must be explicitly taught (Ellis, 2002) to the EAL child. Linking language instruction to such communicative needs in content subjects is viewed as essential in the CLIL literature (Chadwick, 2012; Rutgers et al., 2020). Despite limited mention of 'modelling' by participants in the present study, explicit teaching of language forms needed for producing language during academic tasks was absent. Nevertheless, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. It is therefore impossible to conclude that teachers' practice fails to align with the methodologies in the CLIL literature to support the productive language functions of CALP. However, a clearer picture regarding the deliberate use of the EAL child's first language for this purpose did emerge.

5.3.3 The use of EAL children's first language

Participants' perspectives on the use of the EAL child's first language suggested an ambivalence that is reflected in the literature. There is much recent enthusiasm regarding the practice, particularly under the guises of 'the plurilingual approach' (Kirwan, 2018; Little

and Kirwan, 2021) or 'translanguaging' (Van Avermaet, 2018; Chalmers, 2022; Moore, 2023). This is especially true in terms of creating a welcoming and respectful environment for EAL children. There was acknowledgement among the teachers interviewed for this study of the affective benefits of recognising and validating the EAL child's first language. However, the utility of an EAL child's first language in fostering CALP in English was less unanimously agreed upon. Because of plurilingualism/translanguaging's status as a 'relatively young idea' (Moore, 2023, p.38) and the fact that the evidence base from which it gains its support is merely 'correlational' (Chalmers, 2022, p.209), it is unsurprising that the participants reported low commitment to its use in developing CALP.

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter the findings' convergence with previous research was noted along with points which were unanticipated in the literature. It was found that teachers in the sample perceived a link between English proficiency and academic achievement in the middle and senior classes, a perception matched by the limited quantitative data on the topic. Participants also identified the B1 level as inadequate for accessing the curriculum in middle and senior classes. Furthermore, teachers' descriptions of resources, including training, for assisting post-B1 level EAL children with CALP suggested a paucity of relevant training and a sense that teachers felt compelled to educate themselves on how to provide support. Familiarity with CLIL, despite its presence in the *Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA, 2019), was found to be low and there was no evidence that teachers had been made aware of its appropriateness for assisting EAL children with CALP. The use of EAL children's first language was regarded positively by participants; however, it was not unanimously recognised as a resource for cultivating CALP. In the following concluding chapter, the implications of the study for the researcher's teaching practice will be discussed along with research and policy recommendations suggested by the findings.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This study was conducted to ascertain teacher perspectives on 1) the relationship between EAL children's proficiency in English and their academic achievement in middle and senior classes; 2) resources for equipping EAL children with Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). This chapter notes the most salient issues from Chapters Four and Five, discusses the limitations of the research, and makes further recommendations regarding research, policy and professional practice.

6.2 Summary of findings

In interrogating the research questions, this study found that EAL children in the middle and senior classes who no longer receive EAL support often have unmet needs regarding CALP. This study found evidence that such children were often assigned support from learning support teams to ensure access to the more academically demanding curriculum of the latter years of primary. While the *Guidelines for Teachers* (NCCA, 2006, p.14) specify that such children will need 'continued attention and guidance from the mainstream teacher,' teachers reported little or no training targeting the specific language needs of this cohort. This is despite the inclusion of CLIL in the documentation of the *Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA, 2019a) and its widespread use across Europe for such purposes.

6.3 Limitations of the study

This study used a qualitative methodology and as such the results suffer from limited transferability and generalizability (Creswell, 2016), a weakness compounded by the small sample size (n=5). Furthermore, due to issues with acquiring sufficient participants who fit the initial inclusion criterion of class teachers, the sampling shifted to a snowballing method. Four EAL support teachers and one senior class teacher were recruited. This is a particular limitation of the study as the research questions would have been better addressed by obtaining perspectives from middle and senior class teachers working with EAL children who

no longer receive support via withdrawal. Despite these issues, by recruiting knowledgeable participants from two schools, the study can be said to provide a deeper 'understanding' of teacher perspectives on issues faced by older EAL children, even if it fails to provide causal 'explanations' for such perspectives, (a distinction provided by Blaxter et al., 2010, p.61).

6.4 Recommendations for policy

The findings of this study support the claims of Wallen and Kelly-Holmes (2006; 2017) and Murtagh and Francis (2010) that the current model of two years' dedicated EAL provision is insufficient. However, this needs to be caveated somewhat by a discussion regarding the age at which learners arrive in Irish schools. Given the specific needs of children at a B1 level in senior classes in terms of CALP, it is apparent that the inclusion of specific modules during ITE focused on pedagogical strategies that support CALP, such as CLIL, would be advisable.

6.5 Recommendations for research

Collection of longitudinal data on the academic achievement and English proficiency of EAL children would help inform pedagogical practice in supporting these learners. To this end undertaking the research necessary for the creation of an expanded set of benchmarks based on the CEFR and informed by the CALP required for accessing the middle and senior curriculum is advisable. As the prevalence in the literature grows for calls to make greater use of EAL children's other languages (Lin, 2016; Chalmers, 2019; Little and Kirwan, 2021; Moore, 2023), there exists an urgency to establish an evidence base for the efficacy of such approaches.

6.6 Recommendations and implications for teaching practice

Due to potentially masking effects of Cummins' linguistic façade (Cummins, 1994, p.4, cited in Wallen and Kelly-Holmes, 2006, p.147) teachers should be cautious not to overestimate the language proficiency of children at a B1 level, i.e. those who have "graduated" from EAL support. There is furthermore a risk that teachers assume the same differentiation strategies

that are used to support children with learning difficulties are appropriate for supporting EAL children with CALP (Gardiner-Hyland and Burke, 2018, p.5). This study may therefore benefit the wider teaching community by drawing attention to the underreported needs of older EAL children and by advocating acquaintance with CLIL methodologies. The researcher's own teaching practice will likewise be enhanced by the study as it has clarified the need for vigilance against the linguistic façade, and the importance of assisting EAL children with the expressive language needed to participate in academic contexts.

6.7 Concluding remarks

The limited mention of EAL children's needs post-support in the documentation pertaining to best practice in the area (NCCA, 2005; DES, 2024) suggests an oversight that may be contributing to inequalities in education for EAL children. This is evidenced by participants' reports of the need to use resources intended for children with special educational needs to ensure older EAL children had access to the curriculum. Furthermore, participants reported a lack of appropriate training to maximise older EAL children's potential. In conclusion, if the goals of the plurilingual *Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA, 2019) are to be realised, the unique needs of the ever growing number of EAL students in middle and senior classes require greater recognition and further study.

Word count: 10,991

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Appendices

Appendix 7.1: Research information sheet

Researcher:

Organisation: Hibernia College Dublin

Supervisor:

Title of study: Teacher perspectives on strategies to support EAL students with Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) across the curriculum in middle and senior mainstream classes.

Outline of research study:

This research aims to investigate teachers' perceptions and practices in supporting EAL children who are no longer deemed in need of specific one to one English language instruction. Given the recent increase in the numbers of EAL students in our primary schools coupled with the legacy of austerity era cutbacks to EAL supports, the question of how EAL children's needs are met is topical. The research suggests that the two years of one to one provision allowed for by the department of education is inadequate in ensuring these children can successfully access the curriculum.

Objectives of the project:

The goal is to gain an overview of how teachers feel about the educational attainment of EAL children and the resources available to teachers in assisting them.

The research questions for this study are

1. What are teacher perspectives on the connection between the level of language acquisition of EAL children and their academic achievement?
2. How do teachers view the provision of resources for equipping EAL children with Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)?

What would I need you to do?

Your participation in this research project is greatly appreciated. This research project has received ethical approval from Hibernia College Dublin. If you agree to participate, you will participate in a short semi-structured interview with the researcher. Any information you provide about your own identity or that of the school will be anonymous and confidential. Quotes from the interview may be used and may also be published in the research. However, your name and the name or location of the school will not be published/identifiable. The

interview will be audio recorded and transcribed, and a copy of the transcript will be available to you on request. This research will be used in a publication of a thesis for Hibernia College Dublin. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time up to one month after data collection.

What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of the research is to complete a small-scale study which forms part of the final year of the Professional Master's of Education (Primary) with Hibernia College Dublin.

Appendix 7.2: Principal's letter

Dear Principal,

As part of my Professional Master's in Primary Education with Hibernia College, I am investigating teacher perspectives on strategies to support EAL students with Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) across the curriculum in middle and senior mainstream classes. This letter aims to provide you with an introduction to the research project and to seek consent from you for the project to move forward to inform my future professional practice as a teacher.

With your permission, I would like to interview teachers of middle and senior mainstream classes in your school. The staff members will be asked to partake in a semi-structured interview to gain an insight into the aims of the project. Please find enclosed for your perusal, a copy of the information and consent forms. Only those respondents who return a signed copy of the consent form will be purposely selected to take part in the study.

Any data gathering will strictly be underpinned by the school's and Hibernia College's robust Ethical Code of Conduct ethical code of conduct. No students will be interviewed. Information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. The school's name will not appear on any research findings. Interviews will be recorded, and all data will be securely held in adherence to Hibernia College Research Ethics Guidelines.

Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time up to one month before the submission date. The results from this research study will be reported in my research project and may be disseminated through professional publication.

I would appreciate your cooperation in providing access to the staff at the school over the coming weeks. If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Researcher: Tel No: Email:

This research study has received Ethical Approval from Hibernia College Dublin. If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact: Hibernia College Dublin. Tel (01) 6610168

If you consent to the conduct the research as outlined above, please provide your signature below.

Principal's Signature: _____

Date:

Researcher’s Signature: _____

Date:

Appendix 7.3: Participant consent form

Researcher's name:

Organisation: Hibernia College Dublin

Title of study: Teacher perspectives on strategies to support EAL students with Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) across the curriculum in middle and senior mainstream classes.

Have you been fully informed/read the information sheet about this study? Yes/No

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? Yes/No

Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? Yes/No

Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time up to one month after the interview without giving a reason for withdrawing and without your withdrawal having an adverse effect for you? Yes/No

Do you agree to take part in this study, the results of which are likely to be published or presented at a conference? Yes/No

Have you been informed that a copy of this consent form will be kept by the researcher? Yes/No

Are you satisfied that any information you give to the researcher will be kept confidential? Your name and the name of the school will not appear in the research report. Yes/No

Participant's name:

Participant's signature: _____

Date: /2024

Researcher's signature: _____

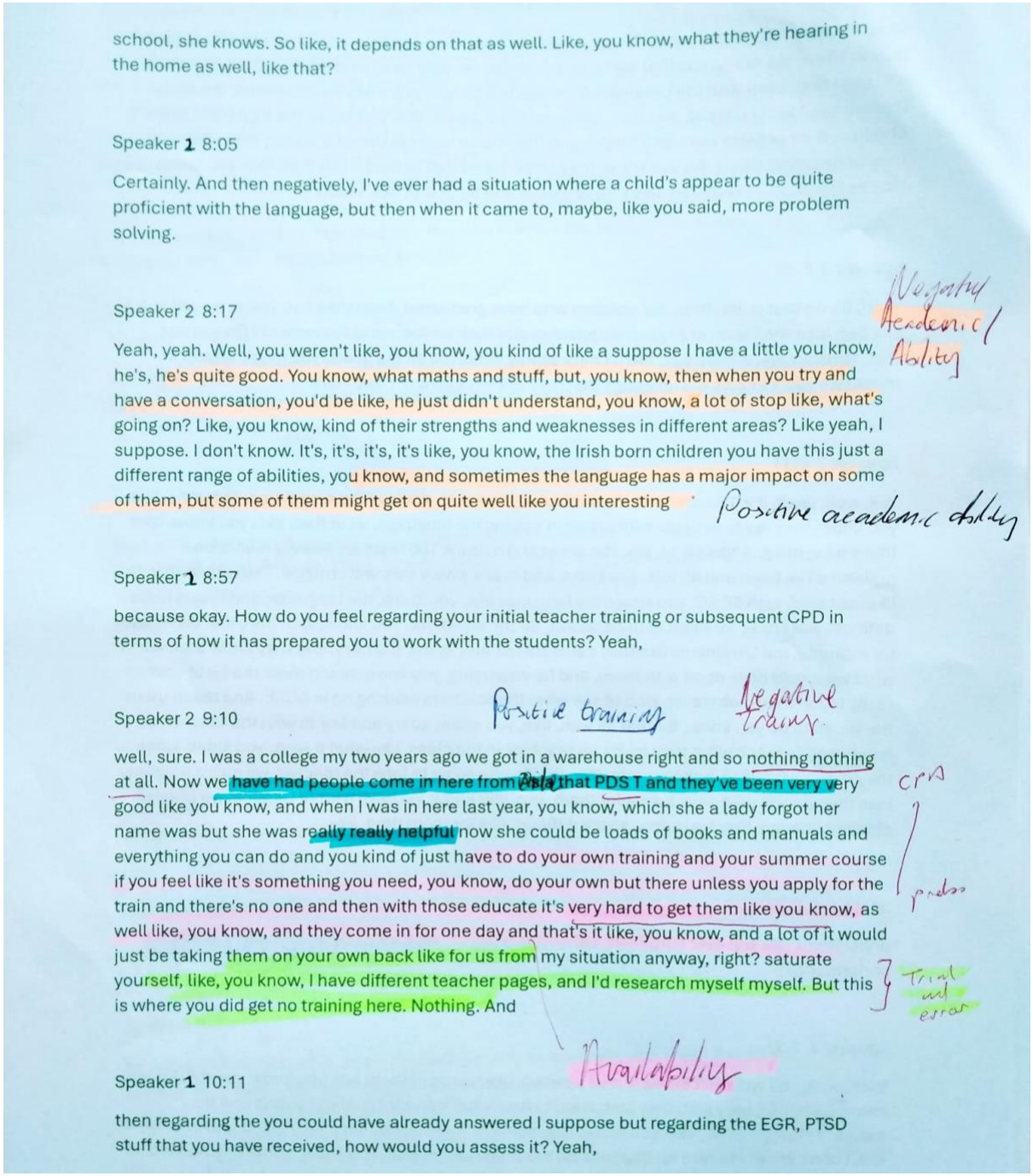
Date: /2024

Appendix 7.4: Topic guide

Focus area	Question	Probe
Opener	Tell me about your teaching career to date including years of experience overall and especially your experience with EAL children in the middle and senior classroom?	How would you look back at your early work with EAL students?
Current provision	Can you tell me what provision for EAL students looks like in your classroom in terms of strategies, classroom organization including UDL, the use of an SNA?	How different is your provision for students who are receiving one to one support compared to those who no longer do so?
Perceived link between acquisition and attainment	Regarding EAL children who are no longer withdrawn from the mainstream classroom, do you see a link between their stage of English language acquisition and their academic performance across the curriculum?	Are you often surprised (either positively or negatively) by an EAL child's academic performance in a non-language subject?
Training and development	How do you feel regarding your Initial Teacher Education or subsequent Continued Professional Development in terms of how it has prepared you to work with EAL students?	How would you asses this training in terms of the needs of EAL students who no longer receive one to one support?
CLIL	How do you feel regarding your Initial Teacher Education or subsequent Continued Professional Development in terms of teaching content subjects through Irish?	Do you apply similar strategies in differentiation for EAL students
CALP	How do you help students, not just EAL students, acquire academic language in your practice?	How do you view resources to support your work in differentiating for EAL students in this area?
Home language	How do you feel regarding the use of an EAL child's home language in the classroom?	

Table 2: topic guide

Appendix 7.5: Coding samples for thematic analysis



school, she knows. So like, it depends on that as well. Like, you know, what they're hearing in the home as well, like that?

Speaker 1 8:05

Certainly. And then negatively, I've ever had a situation where a child's appear to be quite proficient with the language, but then when it came to, maybe, like you said, more problem solving.

Speaker 2 8:17

Yeah, yeah. Well, you weren't like, you know, you kind of like a suppose I have a little you know, he's, he's quite good. You know, what maths and stuff, but, you know, then when you try and have a conversation, you'd be like, he just didn't understand, you know, a lot of stop like, what's going on? Like, you know, kind of their strengths and weaknesses in different areas? Like yeah, I suppose. I don't know. It's, it's, it's, it's like, you know, the Irish born children you have this just a different range of abilities, you know, and sometimes the language has a major impact on some of them, but some of them might get on quite well like you interesting

Speaker 1 8:57

because okay. How do you feel regarding your initial teacher training or subsequent CPD in terms of how it has prepared you to work with the students? Yeah,

Speaker 2 9:10

well, sure. I was a college my two years ago we got in a warehouse right and so nothing nothing at all. Now we have had people come in here from [illegible] that PDS T and they've been very very good like you know, and when I was in here last year, you know, which she a lady forgot her name was but she was really really helpful now she could be loads of books and manuals and everything you can do and you kind of just have to do your own training and your summer course if you feel like it's something you need, you know, do your own but there unless you apply for the train and there's no one and then with those educate it's very hard to get them like you know, as well like, you know, and they come in for one day and that's it like, you know, and a lot of it would just be taking them on your own back like for us from my situation anyway, right? saturate yourself, like, you know, I have different teacher pages, and I'd research myself myself. But this is where you did get no training here. Nothing. And

Speaker 1 10:11

then regarding the you could have already answered I suppose but regarding the EGR, PTSD stuff that you have received, how would you assess it? Yeah,

Orange highlighting = code 'proficiency and achievement; Blue highlighting = code 'good training'; Pink highlighting = code 'availability of training'; Green highlighting = code 'trial and error approach'.