

## Evaluation report of EQUAL/Aspire-funded project

### **ESOL through Art**

Matthew Boulton College of Further and Higher Education  
Birmingham

## **1 Introduction**

In 2006 Matthew Boulton College applied for EQUAL: Aspire funding to pilot an innovative model by teaching English through creative art. The proposal was designed to benefit beneficiaries who were asylum seekers and who were living in Birmingham.

The aim of the project was to incorporate Matthew Boulton College's strength as a Centre of Excellence in Art (or CoVE) in the delivery of ESOL through creative arts, such as illustration, photo-graphics, textiles, printing and print finishing. Since the participants on this course would all have English as their second language, English language support for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) would also be provided.

The proposal outlined the following delivery model: the course would be delivered by a language tutor and a team of art/craft tutors for 15 hours a week over 21 weeks. The students would consist of 15 beneficiaries. They would be taught for three hours a day. The daily programme would consist of two hours of art and craft classes; and one hour of English language support to consolidate and develop the learners' language skills.

The projected outcomes in the proposal were:

- ◆ To develop the learners' language skills through the offer of fast track ESOL, in particular grammar, vocabulary, understanding of English, pronunciation and writing.
- ◆ To raise the learners' language skills by one level, e.g. Entry 3 to Level 1 in 22 weeks, as opposed to the normal duration of discrete ESOL courses of 33 weeks. All learners would have the opportunity to take the Edexcel ESOL exam at Entry 3 or higher.
- ◆ To develop the beneficiaries' craft skills and enable them to take creative arts qualifications.
- ◆ To increase the beneficiaries motivation and confidence by combining their language study with newly acquired skills in communication through art, theatre skills and trips to art exhibitions
- ◆ To evaluate the model of delivery and assess its potential for adoption in the college's mainstream provision

## **2 Evaluation process**

The evaluation of the ESOL through Art project was carried out through:

- ◆ desk research of documentation and progress reports on the project
- ◆ two visits, once during the course itself and a second time during the final project celebration
- ◆ interviews with eight of the students, of which five were recorded
- ◆ interviews with the ESOL tutor/manager of the project and two vocational tutors

## **3 Learner recruitment**

Learners were predominantly recruited using the existing waiting list at Matthew Boulton College. Of the 30 learners interviewed and assessed, 19 were offered a place on the course. Those with levels of English below Entry 1 were offered a place on Matthew Boulton College's discrete ESOL provision. Of the 19 who were offered a place, 13 started their course in January 2007. Three learners dropped out early because of ill health and relocation to Stoke.

Staff at Matthew Boulton College then recruited a further number of students via the college itself or through City Celeste, a local refugee organisation. In total 22 learners attended at least part of the course and 15 completed it in July 2007. This means that the project has met the projected target for learner participation.

## **4 Profile of the learners**

The learners attending the ESOL through Art course consisted of a wide range of backgrounds and nationalities. They came from countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Congo, Ethiopia and Georgia. Their backgrounds included people who had had no previous formal education, largely because they had grown up during major conflict in their countries of origin. There were also a substantial number of trained professionals, for example a qualified nurse, an engineer and a teacher. Others were still in education when they came to the UK, e.g. one student on the course had been a trainee in hotel management. Many of the students had psychological problems through trauma experienced in their country of origin. Some were on medication to manage their symptoms. The ESOL tutor was acutely aware of this and was sensitive to their needs.

## 5 Accreditation

It had been the intention to accredit the achievement of the students' craft skills through craft qualifications. However, LSC guidance on this aspect came forth after the beginning of the course. This indicated that, because of the learners' status, it would not be feasible to record the learners' craft skills. Instead the college opted for the accreditation of the learners' language skills. For information on achievement, see section 10.

## 6 The learners' language levels

Although it had been the original intention to accept learners who were at Entry 1 or higher, two learners at below Entry 1 were recruited after the course started. This meant that the range of levels covered the whole spectrum of the national standards from Entry 1 to Level 2. The language tutor was skilful at supporting the lower level learners and creating opportunities for them to participate in the arts activities. Nevertheless, there is a concern that even skilled language tutors are unable to deal with such a wide mix of learners effectively. While both tutors and learners worked hard to communicate, in practical terms this aspect made it difficult for the vocational tutors to communicate with one of the learners. Having said that, there was a good atmosphere in the group in which the learners were very supportive of each other.

**Matthew Boulton College should use the experience of the ESOL through Art course to consider the language skills requirements of their mainstream/vocational courses. This should include a language audit of the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. The results of the language audit should be used to:**

- ◆ **project minimal levels of language required on entry to vocational courses**
- ◆ **anticipate likely support needs for language learners who enter vocational courses**
- ◆ **build progression routes from discrete ESOL to vocational training courses**

## 7 The quality of the provision

One of the major objectives of EQUAL-funded provision is to explore new ways of delivering new ways of teaching and learning; and the potential for replicating provision elsewhere. In this section we shall explore these aspects of the pilot, starting with how the learners, vocational tutors and the ESOL tutor perceived the ESOL through Arts course.

### 7.1 The learners' perspective

The learners provided a variety of responses to the question of what they had got out of the course. All were full of praise for the input of the team of vocational and language tutors. While they felt well-supported, there was an interesting range of responses which, on analysis, split into two broad groups. The first group consisted of the most advanced language learners. They rated the course really highly, especially the opportunity to communicate with the vocational tutors whose first language was English. These learners commented:

*'The ESOL class I was on earlier, I did not like. Communication with English teachers is better. ESOL teachers talk slowly, outside [the classroom] no one talks slowly.'*

*'We have good teachers here. J [the ESOL tutor] is fantastic. He is doing everything to help. The other teachers are good, too.'*

*'This class is completely different. It's better than straight ESOL.'*

On the other hand, some of the learners with lower level language skills reported that they would have liked to have focused primarily on the development of their language skills.

*'I do not get enough grammar. I need more language.'*

*'Time is not enough to learn English.'*

Some of the learners were at such a low level of English that they had difficulty communicating with their vocational tutors. Both they and their tutors reported that they felt this keenly at times.

Thus a distinct pattern can be detected in the perceptions of the learners. Those with more advanced language skills felt that they had benefited most from this type of course. This applied most to learners who were working towards level 1 ESOL. This finding reinforces the recommendation made above that colleges and other providers should consider at which level the learners are in the best position to benefit from integrated language and vocational courses. This should be accompanied by planned progression routes for language learners.

## **7.2 The vocational tutors' perspective**

Two vocational tutors were interviewed for this report. They stated that they had enjoyed teaching on the ESOL through Art course and that they had benefited from it in major ways.

Both tutors reported that they had been surprised at the high standard of work produced by many of the learners. As they said:

*'It has been a challenge but you can see clear progression. This is a fantastic group. I would definitely work with students like this again.'*

*'Some ESOL students produce to a better standard than A level work.'*

The arts and craft tutors were interested to see that the learners were able to learn new skills very quickly. For example, one tutor found that he needed far less time to explain new techniques to the language students than to an equivalent group of general college students. He felt that this was at least in part because this particular group of learners had good study skills: they concentrated and stayed on task extremely well. Also interesting was to see the student who had been an engineer gradually adapting his considerable technical drawing skills to the more free style, artistic drawing required for the course.

Neither vocational tutor had experience of working with people whose first language is not English. The tutors stated that they would have been very reluctant to engage but that, with the ESOL tutor's support, they had developed the skills and confidence to deal with this group of learners. They had learnt new techniques of teaching, for example how to repeat and check back with the learners that they had understood instructions. They had reviewed the language used on their worksheets and made sure that it was not unnecessarily complicated.

In their experience many vocational colleagues in the college had experienced difficulties working with ESOL students. They recommended that their vocational peers should have access to working with a language specialist both to help making the learning process more effective but also to learn the types of techniques that they themselves had learnt from the language tutor. Considering the location of Matthew Boulton College in inner city Birmingham, the college can expect many students to have English as their additional language. The college may also wish to consider that the delivery of integrated language and vocational training is increasingly taken into account during OFSTED inspections.

**The college should consider using the skills and experience of the vocational tutors and the language tutor built up during the ESOL through Art course to benefit the wider teaching community.**

**The arts and craft tutors should disseminate their newly acquired language awareness and teaching techniques to other vocational colleagues in the college.**

**The skills of the ESOL tutor and his colleagues should be used to develop the ability of vocational and other tutors to deliver effective teaching across all college provision. This may be best done using the same model as applied for the ESOL through Art course: by spending some time together in lessons to instil some of the teaching techniques commonly used in the ESOL classroom.**

### ***7.3 The ESOL tutor's perspective***

The ESOL tutor had been the driving force behind both the development and the implementation of the course. The creative craft sessions were dual tutored with the ESOL tutor assisting, supporting and taking notes from which to generate further language work. He had designed language development materials which related to the vocational content and also extended the learners' skills in other ways. Not only grammar and spelling exercises were used to extend language but also poetry, both for reading and as a prompt for the learners' own writing. Much of this work was of high quality. The appendix contains some samples of teacher-designed and learner-produced work to show the breadth and skill of the language activities undertaken during the course.

One of the ESOL tutor's aims was to accelerate language learning by boosting student motivation and confidence through allowing them to express themselves in a variety of ways and valuing that expression. He was also keen to use creative activities to reduce symptoms of stress or trauma which students were likely to have experienced due to their circumstances as asylum seekers. It was clear from the students' comments that they were aware of and appreciated his pastoral and language-specific support.

The language support consisted of in-class support as well as language development after the art sessions had taken place. This had worked well. However, there had not been time to plan for the delivery of the language skills which the learners would need prior to the vocational lesson. This would be considered for any further courses. If adopted, this would serve to make more transparent the value of language learning in an occupational context. It would alert those students who were dubious about this type of learning to the types of language they were going to encounter.

**The language and vocational tutors should consider further developing the effectiveness of the language component by making the link between the language and vocational content more transparent to the learners, thereby motivating them better.**

## **8 Punctuality and attendance**

While overall, attendance has been satisfactory, in that most learners stayed the course, punctuality and attendance at individual lessons has been erratic. On the one hand, this can be explained by the fragmented lives that many asylum seekers lead, in which they do not necessarily have control over their own time. For example, they may need to attend appointments with government officials, lawyers and the benefit office. Many asylum seekers also need to visit the doctor more often than the local population. Nevertheless, many learners appeared to drift in late without realising that this interrupted the class and inconvenienced other learners and the tutors.

**The college should consider applying strategies to achieve improved attendance and punctuality.**

## **9 Equal opportunities**

The EQUAL project brief stressed as important the monitoring of and adherence to equal opportunity policies. There can be no doubt that the ESOL through Art project has met this aspect of the brief to an outstanding extent. In the first place, all learners participating in the project came from ethnic minorities. They were all asylum seekers who are often amongst the most excluded in our society. Secondly, second language speakers may access to discrete ESOL training but it is still rare for them to be able to access vocational training. These learners were able to participate in a course which offered opportunities to learn new craft skills as well as English.

## **10 Achievement**

Fifteen students took one or more of the Skills for Life exams in ESOL Speaking/Listening, Reading and Writing. Their wide range of language skills, outlined in section 6, was reflected in their test results. For example, two students achieved at Entry 1; seven achieved at Entry 2; two achieved at Entry 2; and four achieved at level 2.

In addition, one of the ESOL through Art students was awarded a Beacon award at the college.

## **11 Conclusion**

The feedback from the learners and the vocational tutors shows that the ESOL through Art course has been very successful. All learners benefited from the course, with the more advanced learners getting the most out of it. For example, their spoken and written language skills as well as the confidence with which they handled visitors at the course celebration were clear indicators of good development in communication skills.

One of the main benefits observed was that the learners learnt to understand real, naturally occurring language in the vocational context. It was also good that the vocational tutors did not adjust their language to the same extent as ESOL tutors often do. This meant that the learners had access to language which is very similar to what they encounter outside the classroom. In most ESOL language classes the language is adapted to the level of language that the learners can understand. While this technique is valuable at the lower levels, higher level language learners benefit from access to 'real English' when communicating with native English speakers.

The materials and activities developed by the language tutor were very imaginative and provide good opportunities for the learners to develop and reflect on their language skills.

Much of the learners' written work was of a good standard, e.g. describing new techniques that they had learnt such as reverse appliqué and their own evaluations of the lessons. There were also extension activities reading and writing poetry, which were very successful. In the lesson observed the learners worked well and were on task throughout.

The outcomes of the course and its delivery reflected the project proposal very well and the targets which were in the control of the college were achieved.

## **12 The wider application of the model of training**

The pilot project and its success show that the model of integrated language and vocational training has clear potential for the delivery of mainstream courses at Matthew Boulton College. Staff at Matthew Boulton College are to be commended for the enthusiasm and skill with which they managed and delivered this pilot. I very much hope that the college will be able to build on its experience.

In addition, the exhibition organised by the tutors and learners showed that it was not just a celebration of the learners' achievement in-house. There were several teachers from other organisations in Birmingham who were clearly interested in this model of delivery. It would seem, from this interest alone, that there is the potential to apply this model of delivery elsewhere.

Dr Philida Schellekens  
25 July 2007

Dr **Philida Schellekens** is an independent consultant, researcher and teacher trainer in the field of language learning and teaching, particularly English language provision for migrants and refugees. More widely, she also provides consulting in EFL, foreign languages, interpreting and translation, and the communication skills of first language English speakers. Philida is an associate inspector in adult and further education, and teaches English part-time at Greenwich Community College, both of which enable her to maintain her perspective on - and direct contact with - language learning at all levels. Philida is author of the *Oxford ESOL Handbook, which was published by Oxford University Press in 2007*. Other recent publications include: *English Language as a Barrier to Employment, Education and Training* (2001) DfES; *Language in Construction* (2004) CITB; and *Full on English: The English language needs of ethnic minority people born in the UK* (2005) Birmingham & Solihull LSC.

## **Appendices**

Please find below a sample of materials which were used on the course and which offer an insight into the quality and range of the resources used.

### ***12.1 Language auction***

We studying on the ESOL through art programme.

The programme use the arts to provide subject matter.

We not only learning English but learn art skills as well.

On Monday we use, "photo shop", a photo graphics programme.

On Tuesday we learn technique relating to fabric printing.

On Wednesday we explore decorative sewing techniques.

Thursday is our days for 3D model making with David.

We doing illustration with Michelle on Friday.

John is the ESOL specialist and he provides language support and lessons.

We go on trips to gallery and exhibitions.

With John we use poetry and drama techniques for help our speaking.

Currently we are making scarves, utilising many of the skills we now have.

We will displayed our scarves at our exhibition at the end of the course.

We will also presents our designs, illustrations, models, cartoons and poetry etc.

There will be a magazine full of our images and writing as well.

#### Homework

What grammar tenses have been used and why?

Underline and learn any new vocabulary.

Write your own account of the course and say how you feel about it.

## **12.2 A collective poem**

This poem was created by a group of students attending the English through Art course.

### I am

A student  
A student at MBC  
Patient  
Lovely

A nice person  
Elegant and intelligent  
A gentleman  
Flexible, beautiful and intelligent

Healthy  
Rich in the world  
A peaceful person  
A singer of spiritual songs  
A helpful, peaceful person

Comfortable  
Delightful  
Generous  
Helpful  
Relaxed and peaceful

Hungry  
Ambitious  
Flexible at work

A bird alone who is entrapped in a wooden cage  
A small fish trying to survive in the ocean  
A song of a sad man  
A beautiful man

A mum  
A serious woman  
Very sweet  
A beautiful flower in a forest

A deer who runs from a hunter's aim  
The father of the house  
A spirit floating among people without any aim  
Lonely because the world where I live is not mine

.....

### **12.3 Comments on the exhibition**

To celebrate the end of the course, Matthew Boulton College organised an exhibition of the students' work. It was displayed attractively and the exhibition was attended by 100 visitors, consisting of fellow teachers and students from the college itself as well as other colleges in the area. Staff from other organisations also attended, e.g. Birmingham & Solihull LSC as well as visitors from India. A sample of visitor comments can be found below:

The students seem to have got so much more out of this course than a standard ESOL course in terms of their learning and their well-being! The work is really impressive and inspiring! This needs to be shared as much as possible! Thanks

Motivating and inspiring. The way forward for ESOL. Language development in context will always have a greater impact and this is totally evident in the progress your students have made. Well done.

This is great! The students have really achieved great things here. Well done to all.

I can see some very useful links with the Equal Engage Project for your students. Really worthwhile building their confidence - fabulous media, clay and textiles

Brilliant work. Really loved the scarves. Very inspirational and have taken away some good ideas.

An amazing collection of work. Very inspiring. It's amazing seeing the journey that students have travelled throughout the year.

Some terrific work has been done here by both students and tutors. This is what "education" is about!

The work is amazing. One is able to see the improvement of students' use of language.

Very interesting way of learning English. Very creative. Well done everybody.