Setting Research Priorities for English as an Additional Language: What do stakeholders want from EAL research?

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Introduction: research is for everyone
People who do research are not usually the people who use research. Therefore, if the research that people do is to be meaningful, relevant and useful to the people whose practice it is intended to inform (research users), it is important that research users tell researchers what kinds of questions they should try to answer. When researchers know what research users want from research, this helps to ensure that their research is meaningful (it addresses questions about which there is demonstrated interest), it is relevant (it addresses uncertainties that have emerged from the practical experiences of research users), and is useful (it informs practice). Research that is informed by the stated interests of research users helps researchers to move towards the holy grail of research impact: “the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy” (ESRC, 2021). In sum, when researchers and research users work together to identify and address uncertainties, everyone stands to benefit.

For this project, we set up a priority setting partnership (PSP) with research users in the field of English as an Additional Language (EAL). The aim of the PSP was (i) to find out which uncertainties are most common among EAL research users, (ii) to refine those uncertainties into questions amenable to investigation through research, then (iii) to prioritise those questions in a Top 10 list, to be publicised to EAL researchers and research funders in the belief that they would welcome this information to help new EAL research to be meaningful, relevant and useful to the people to whom it matters most.

What is a priority setting partnership (PSP)?
Priority Setting Partnerships (PSPs) are a well-established method by which end users of research work together to set and publicise research priorities (James Lind Alliance, 2019). To date, PSPs have largely been confined to fields in healthcare. Since the first healthcare PSPs in the early 1990s, the process has been successful in shaping research agendas (Staley
& Crowe, 2019). Research communities now have trustworthy evidence on topics for which PSPs have been conducted showing what research users want from research.

One of the principal conveners of PSPs in healthcare is the James Lind Alliance (JLA). Over nearly two decades of experience, the JLA has developed and refined a robust approach to running PSPs (James Lind Alliance, 2021). This involves establishing a steering committee consisting of individuals who collectively represent the relevant research users and who have oversight of the entire project. An open call for uncertainties is then made to relevant stakeholders. An ‘uncertainty survey’ is distributed, through which research users are encouraged to say what unanswered questions they have about the area of focus. A data specialist then analyses the submitted uncertainties to identify common themes, combines uncertainties that address the same or similar themes, and creates a list of more formally worded ‘research questions’ from the assembled data. This list of research questions is then published in a ‘ranking survey’. Research users are again asked to contribute by ranking the research questions by order of priority. The average level of priority for each research question is then calculated, and the top twenty-five questions reserved for discussion and further prioritisation in the final stage of the project. This final stage was a workshop in which representatives of relevant research users debate and discuss the twenty-five items prioritised through the ranking survey to ultimately arrive at a Top 10 list of research priorities for the field.

What did we do?
We adopted the JLA approach. We set up a steering committee consisting of a secondary school EAL specialist teacher, a primary school EAL specialist teacher, an Ethnic Minority Achievement Services (EMAS) manager, and a parent of EAL learners. The steering committee informed the creation of the project website and the uncertainty survey. The survey was publicised through user networks, Britain’s EAL subject association (NALDIC), professional bodies, such as the Chartered College of Teaching and the Southern Association of Support Services for Equality and Achievement, parent groups, and personal contacts of the steering committee members. The educational press was informed via the press office at the University of Oxford, and we created short video clips and animations to help explain the project and encourage participation. These were distributed through our personal and professional social media channels.

The uncertainty survey attracted 225 individual respondents, representing EAL specialist teachers, mainstream or subject teachers, parents, current or recent EAL pupils, EMAS providers, school governors, headteachers and bilingual learning assistants. Between them, they submitted 767 individual ‘uncertainties’. We sorted these ‘raw’ uncertainties into main categories based on the general focus of each question. Then we looked at the specific focus of the questions in each category and collapsed similar questions into one ‘research question’ to reflect each area of focus. This gave us 81 Research Questions in all. These 81 research questions were presented in an online ‘ranking survey’. Respondents were asked to rate how much of a priority each question was on a scale from 0 to 100. In total we received 84 valid responses to the ranking survey. Approximately half of the respondents identified as EAL specialist teachers. The remainder represented a cross-section of the same groups who took part in the uncertainty survey.
We calculated the average level of priority for each question and used these data to rank all of the questions from the highest to the lowest collectively expressed priority. We selected the top twenty-five for discussion at the workshop.

In addition to the steering committee, eight EAL research users attended the workshop. These were: two bilingual learning assistants, who were also parents of EAL learners, a generalist primary school teacher, two EAL leads from UK independent schools, an EAL lead from a multi-academy trust, an assistant principal at a UK secondary school, and an EAL specialist teacher and consultant.

The workshop took place online. Those attending were split into two groups to discuss the top twenty-five priorities. The aim of the discussions was to explore each question, discuss its nature and merit and the clarity of its wording, then to confirm or adjust the ranking as appropriate. The newly ranked lists created by each group were then combined to take into account the decisions of both groups. The groups were then re-shuffled to create two new groups. These then discussed the aggregate list of twenty-five priorities, with the aim of agreeing a Top 10. Finally, the agreed Top 10 of both groups were combined to arrive at the consensus Top 10 of EAL Research Priorities (see Appendix).

What does it all mean?
For the first time as far as we are aware, people who work and live directly with EAL learners have collaboratively and democratically articulated what they feel are the most important questions for researchers to address relevant to improving the education of EAL learners. Researchers and research funders now have evidence about what sort of research they should fund and conduct, assuming their aim is to make their research relevant, meaningful and useful to the people whose practice it is intended to inform. We encourage researchers to take this Top 10 into account when deciding what research to do next, and we encourage funders to prioritise projects that address the questions in this list.

We note from some of the questions in the Top 10 that research evidence exists that might be argued to address some of the questions in the Top 10. However, much of this has been conducted in contexts that differ substantially from the UK context, a context in which the construct of EAL differs in important ways to related constructs elsewhere. Almost no relevant research on these questions has been conducted in the UK, and the preponderance of research on EAL that seeks to identify causal relationships between practice and education has not tended to adopt designs that would support confident identification of causality (Murphy & Unthiah, 2015; Oxley & de Cat, 2019). We believe that the priority among researchers and funders should first be to synthesise existing research on the Top 10 questions using systematic reviews, so that the whole community is in a better position to judge the extent, quality and applicability of existing relevant research, should any exist.

We also note that many of the questions in the Top 10 are amenable to interpretation for specific contexts. Indeed, to an extent, this was deliberate. We encourage researchers to follow our lead and involve EAL research users in building from this Top 10 list to formulate the specific questions to be addressed in any given research project, and to involve users in designing and conducting the ensuing research.
We hope this project has demonstrated the value of involving users in research and that the outcomes will be taken up by researchers and funders in the field to help to make EAL research more relevant, meaningful and useful to the people to whom it matters most.

Appendix

Top 10 Research Priorities for EAL

1. What is the impact of inclusion teaching vs pull out teaching for EAL learners’ English language development? Does this vary with age, time spent learning English, and/or stage of English language development? If so, in what ways?

2. What are effective strategies for subject teachers to use to combine English language teaching and curriculum content teaching?

3. In the context of mainstream British-model education systems, what approaches to supporting new to English pupils are most effective? In particular, what are effective approaches to maximising the potential of late entry new to English pupils’, and how can intellectual challenge be maintained for all new to English pupils?

4. What are effective strategies for building on social language proficiency to develop and maintain proficiency in subject- or genre-specific academic language proficiency?

5. What are effective/reliable ways to identify Special Educational Needs and Disability in EAL learners that differ from normal and expected language learning needs?

6. What are effective ways to adapt instruction and assessment for EAL learners with different Special Educational Needs and Disabilities?

7. What are the effects of explicit (formalised) instruction vs implicit (immersive) exposure to English on the learners’ proficiency and progress?

8. How can EAL learners, including those without the English necessary to articulate pastoral needs or emotional wellbeing, be best supported in their socioemotional development?

9. What are the characteristics of their educational experiences that EAL learners consider most beneficial for their learning of English language and curriculum content?

10. What are the characteristics of successful whole school policies for supporting EAL learners? This includes, but is not limited to, sub-questions such as: In schools that are successful in supporting EAL learners in the mainstream, who takes responsibility, how is cross disciplinary consistency maintained, how are resources allocated, how is information about EAL learners communicated to staff, and so on?
References


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