Setting research priorities for English as an Additional Language

What do research users want from EAL research?

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We report a priority setting partnership (PSP), which sought to establish the priorities for new research among research users (educators, parents, and learners) in the field of English as an Additional Language (EAL). A steering committee consisting of members of these research user groups was established to oversee the project. An online 'uncertainty questionnaire' was distributed to research users inviting them to identify areas of their practice about which they are uncertain. These 'raw' uncertainties were consolidated and converted into a list of research questions, which was then distributed to the same groups to rank in order of priority. The 25 highest ranked questions were then discussed and debated in a workshop, consisting of research user representatives, to collectively and democratically produce a final Top 10 list of questions. The Top 10 shows what EAL research users regard as priorities, which we hope will inform research agendas and funding decisions.

Keywords: EAL, research priorities, education, public engagement in science, participatory research

1. Introduction

Research is for everyone. It responds to our natural curiosity about the world and provides us with knowledge. Knowledge that, ideally, helps us to perform our roles within society effectively, and increases our understanding of how that performance influences our immediate and wider ecosystems and the other people in them. There is a responsibility, therefore, on those who conduct and fund research (and perhaps especially applied research, such as in the field of education) to ensure that it reflects the concerns of the people whose decisions it aims to inform.

It seems almost too obvious to note that researchers who know what the intended beneficiaries of their research want from it will be well positioned to ensure that their research is meaningful (it addresses questions about which there is demonstrated interest), relevant (it addresses uncertainties that have emerged from the practical experiences of research users) and useful (it informs policy and practice). Historically, however, it has been unusual for the intended beneficiaries of research (people we designate 'research users') to play a direct and equal role in deciding which questions should be addressed through research. Far more common is for people we designate 'research producers' (researchers and research funders) to set research agendas. While we defend the right of researchers to pursue avenues that they feel are important and which may not be so immediately apparent to research users, there is nonetheless an important place in this decision-making process for research users to contribute to decisions about what research should be done. By involving research users, researchers help to move them from people that research is done *to*, to people who research is done *with*.

When research is done *with* research users, research producers not only promote their own capacity to attain the holy grail of research impact by generating findings that are more likely to influence policy and practice, but they also stand to improve the quality and relevance of the way they think and the things they do. Staley (2017) conducted a systematic review of published examples of research user involvement in research, to explore "whether there was evidence of researchers learning from involvement and how this had influenced their work" (p.159). She found that user involvement in research helped researchers acquire new knowledge or enhance existing knowledge, prompting them to explore new avenues of enquiry and 'see' important aspects of the research context that had hitherto been opaque to them. She found researchers reporting that engaging with research users had helped to correct misassumptions about the context in which they were researching, change their ideas about what outcome measures were important, motivate them to pursue avenues that had been dismissed as irrelevant by 'authorities' in their fields who had not worked with research users, improve their communication of their research to lay audiences, and change their attitudes towards user involvement more generally. In sum, when research producers and research users work together to identify and address uncertainties in their fields, everyone stands to benefit.

1.1   Participatory research in applied linguistics

In addition to involving research users in the process of research production generally, participatory research has enjoyed attention in the field of applied linguistics specifically. In their article "Do teachers care about research? The research

pedagogy dialogue", Sato and Loewen (2018) express disappointment that, despite researchers in the field of instructed language learning having produced "considerable empirical evidence that teachers can reliably use in the classroom" (p. 2), teachers seem unprepared to apply the fruits of this work. Tavakoli (2015) sheds light on why this might be through analysis of ESOL teachers' attitudes towards the research-practice relationship. She found that teachers viewed teaching and research as two different communities of practice, divided by "limited mutual engagement, absence of a joint enterprise and lack of a shared repertoire between them" (p. 37). Sato et al. (2022) add to this general assessment, identifying potential barriers to constructive research-practice dialogues, including a top-down attitude on the part of researchers. According to Sato and Loewen (2022), the overriding responsibility for fostering inter-community dialogue lies with researchers, and that this is possible through fostering collaborative mindsets in both groups, and establishing venues in which that dialogue can take place.

Both Sato and colleagues and Tavakoli argue that teachers and researchers should be willing to work together to narrow the gap between the aspirations of both groups. We propose that this gap might be effectively narrowed, not by trying to retrofit work that researchers have already done into different pedagogical contexts, but by assessing what sorts of research teachers in those contexts want before embarking on it. As Ellis (2010) contends "it is always the teacher who ultimately determines the relevance of SLA [second language acquisition] constructs and findings" (p. 197). It seems logical, therefore, that this determination should come before research is carried out. Tavakoli (2015) supports this view, saying that research that is intended to inform teacher practices should be informed by teachers' knowledge and expertise, and "should be designed to address their needs and requirements" (p. 49). McKinley (2019) agrees, stating that applied linguistics researchers should "collaborate with teachers to ensure research questions are driven by practice-based problems" (p. 876). McKinley's concern was principally located in the action research paradigm, which, by design, is very specific to a single teacher or school. By broadening the scope of what participatory research can mean, consulting widely with the relevant teaching community, and arriving at a sense of what teachers, collectively, want from research, the research community can demonstrate seriousness about bringing both communities of practice together to produce research that is more generally relevant to the practice it is intended to inform.

To pursue the aspiration of bringing research users into the process of setting research agendas, the project reported here was a Priority Setting Partnership (PSP), with the goal of identifying research needs in the field of English as an Additional Language (EAL). The project aimed to help research producers understand the demonstrated priorities of EAL research users and respond to these by funding and conducting new research related to these priorities.

1.2   English as an Additional Language

The focus for our PSP relates to the education of children learning EAL. EAL pupils are learning curriculum content through English while, in many cases,[1] still learning the language itself. In England, 19% of pupils in state-funded education are classified as EAL learners; 10% in Scotland; 8% in Wales; and 5% in Northern Ireland (Chalmers & Murphy, 2022). The term is also used in Australia, where over 600,000 pupils in government funded schools are classified as EAL learners (Holroyd, 2021). It is also routinely adopted in the international school sector, where it applies to almost all students in the more than 13,000 English-medium international schools worldwide (ISC Research, 2022). EAL, therefore, refers to a significant proportion of the school population in a variety of contexts. It should be noted that EAL refers to a slightly different population to other designations, such as English Language Learners (ELL), which is used principally in the USA, or English as a Foreign Language (EFL), used to describe learning English as a stand-alone subject. Both of these terms tend to focus more on the language element, whereas EAL includes other demographic characteristics such as migration, refugee status, and wider ethnolinguistic considerations. As such, the uncertainties of research users in this field are likely not to be limited only to issues related to English learning.

EAL, as a discipline distinct from language learning more generally, is under-researched. Two systematic reviews of research into EAL (Murphy & Unthiah, 2015; Oxley & de Cat, 2019) found little research done in this area, and in particular, few studies that can inform practitioners about the relative effects of different approaches to meeting the needs of EAL learners. Notably, they reported that almost no relevant research of this sort has been conducted in the UK and the international sector. While we can learn from research in contexts related to EAL (research on language learning more generally, or research from different contexts, such as in the USA and Canada), there is value in exploring the applicability of that research to the field of EAL. For example, it would be worth replicating research from different contexts to assess whether findings transfer to the EAL context, and defining hitherto unexplored areas that deserve attention. EAL as a distinct field is thus ripe for exploration and almost limitless in terms of what new research might be prioritised. We believe that asking the people directly involved in delivering support to EAL learners is the appropriate starting point for guiding research producers as they prioritise new areas for exploration.

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1.   The official DfE definition of EAL is children who are "exposed to a language at home that is known or believed to be other than English" (DfE, 2019, p. 9), so includes those who are fluent in English as well as another language, or for whom English may be their dominant language.

1.3   Aims

Our aims for the project were as follows:

1. to find out which uncertainties are most common among EAL research users,
2. to translate those uncertainties into research questions, and
3. to prioritise those research questions in a Top 10 list, to be publicised to EAL research producers.

2.   Method

Our approach to establishing the research priorities among EAL research users followed the format pioneered, developed and evaluated by the James Lind Alliance (JLA, jla.nihr.ac.uk). Over two decades, the JLA has developed and refined an approach to establishing research priorities among stakeholders in healthcare. It has overseen more than 170 PSPs, addressing topics that include everything from acne to womb cancer (James Lind Alliance, 2022). Since the initial healthcare PSPs in the early 1990s, the process has been successful in shaping research agendas by taking into account what research users want from research, with important implications for the quality and inclusiveness of that research. In addition to informing research producers about what matters to research users, JLA PSPs have "enabled patients to expand and enhance their involvement in other parts of the research system, improved the reputations and status of researchers, and changed clinicians' clinical practice" (Staley & Crowe, 2019, p. 4). We hope that adopting this approach will lead to similar positive effects for research, policy, and practice in EAL.

The JLA process is an adaptation of the Delphi-method of convening a panel of experts to collectively address questions of importance (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963), but goes beyond this by framing the users of research as the 'experts', and intentionally excluding the producers of research from involvement in deciding what topics should be prioritised. The process involves establishing a steering committee consisting of representatives of various research user groups to oversee the entire process, asking the wider community of research users to voice uncertainties about the topic under investigation using an open-ended questionnaire; formulating research questions on the basis of all of the uncertainties expressed in that questionnaire; asking research users to rank these research questions in order of priority; then convening a workshop during which research user representatives discuss and debate the ranked list to arrive at a democratically and collaboratively agreed Top 10. The JLA handbook provides detailed information about

how to conduct a PSP using this model (James Lind Alliance, 2021), and we used this to guide our PSP.

2.1   Establishing the steering committee

We operationalised our research user groups as educators and parents of EAL learners, and EAL learners themselves. We explicitly excluded researchers and academics, including university-based teacher educators, as these groups already have a voice in setting research agendas. We also explicitly excluded materials developers because, (a) materials are often created by or in close consultation with researchers and academics, and (b) their motivations are likely to differ from the motivations of research users, as we have operationalised them. That is, they are more likely to have commercial concerns that may be at odds with the concerns of chalk-face teachers and learners. On the basis of our definition of research users, we aimed to recruit as broad a representation among this group as practical.

At the time of the PSP, the third and first authors were Chair and Vice Chair of NALDIC, the UK's subject association for EAL. This gave us access to the largest formalised community of EAL practitioners in the country, and (we hope) a sense of trustworthiness about our motivations for asking them to contribute to the project. We posted information about the PSP on NALDIC's online discussion forum and on the Facebook pages of NALDIC's regional and special interest groups, inviting teachers to express an interest in joining the steering group, and asking them to pass on information to any parents of EAL learners and learners themselves who they thought might also be interested. In addition, we emailed colleagues with whom we had existing professional relationships, and whom we felt were well placed to contribute to the steering group. These included EAL coordinators and teachers in state primary and secondary schools and in the independent and international sectors, educators working in Ethnic Minority Achievement Services (EMAS), EAL consultants, and parents of EAL learner children. From both approaches we had several positive responses in principle. Ultimately, however, we were unsuccessful in recruiting from the independent and international sectors, nor were we able to recruit any current EAL learners to sit on the committee.

The final steering committee consisted of an EAL specialist teacher working in a primary school, a mainstream teacher with curriculum responsibility for EAL in a secondary school, a parent of EAL learners, and the lead advisor of a Local Authority EMAS. The authors (all academics) also sat on the committee, but their role was restricted to facilitation of the discussions and guidance on research methods, including describing the key aspects of conducting a JLA-style PSP. They played no part in the ultimate decision-making processes.

Once established, the steering committee set the terms of reference for the PSP, decided appropriate ways to gather data, and agreed approaches to encourage participation from the wider EAL community. The decisions of the committee are elaborated in the description of the methods that follows.

2.2   The uncertainty questionnaire

The committee decided that the appropriate first step would be an open-ended online questionnaire that allowed respondents to express their uncertainties about their EAL-related practice in as much or as little detail they liked. They recommended use of pointers to guide respondents' thinking and provide structure to the exercise. The committee discussed the nature of these pointers, aiming to settle on themes that occur frequently in discussions of EAL policy and pedagogy among their communities of practice. On the basis of the committee members' experiences, a number of candidate themes were debated for inclusion. The committee ultimately agreed on seven themes that they felt addressed the most common areas of discussion and debate, and an eighth 'open theme' for anything not covered by the previous seven. Accordingly, a questionnaire was created which consisted of eight items, each addressing a broadly defined topic. These invited respondents to express uncertainties related to:

– New to English learners
– Advanced English learners
– EAL learners' home languages
– Working with families
– EAL and Special Educational Needs
– Pastoral care
– EAL learners and mainstream classes
– and a final 'open' item for anything not covered by the previous seven.

The questionnaire also included a section to collect demographic information about the respondents, such as their role in relation to EAL (e.g., EAL specialist, mainstream teacher, teaching assistant, parent), the sector in which they worked (e.g., state-maintained school, independent school, local authority), and their location (UK or overseas). We also included an option to leave an email address if they wished to be notified when the next phases of the project became available to contribute to, and to receive a plain-language summary of the project on its completion. Additionally, we created a project website, which included more information about the purpose and methods of the PSP and provided a place for us to post updates as the project progressed (ealpsp.wordpress.com). The wording and aesthetics of the questionnaire and website were reviewed by the committee, and

adjustments for clarity were made before both were published online. The questionnaire was open for responses from December 2020 to February 2021.

The uncertainty survey was publicised through user networks such as 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 and community groups, and personal and professional contacts of the steering committee. 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, and can be viewed at the project website.

2.3   Analysing responses to the uncertainty questionnaire

After harvesting the responses from the uncertainty questionnaire, we first removed any that were not expressed as uncertainties or questions. For example, we removed responses that were statements (e.g., "in primary schools, I think bilingual pupils receive very good pastoral care at the moment") and recommendations for practice (e.g., "practice writing essays and how to write professionally"). We retained all responses that were direct questions (e.g., "how can I implement translanguaging strategies into classroom learning routines?") or implied/indirect questions (e.g., "how we can engage families when they do not have enough language and understanding and switch off from communications").

We then conducted a qualitative content analysis (Selvi, 2020) to support a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches; to process data for statistical analysis, while taking context into consideration, to provide meaning from the processed data. This type of analysis can adopt a data-driven or a theory-driven approach (Mayring, 2000). We used a data-driven approach, as our aim was to explore the themes that emerged from the data, and because the novel nature of PSPs in the field of EAL means that a reliable and applicable theory from which to work is yet to be formulated. Accordingly, we adopted an inductive process for creating a coding frame for the data. We read and re-read all uncertainties identified and drew out the themes represented therein. We took an iterative approach, generating candidate categories, defining these, then revising the frame as new data were analysed. Once we were happy that we had captured the main themes that had emerged, we went through the responses again and assigned each to its appropriate theme. Sometimes, this involved splitting those that voiced more than one theme into their constituent parts. For example, a multi-part question such as "Are there specific EAL needs for students with tonal language backgrounds? Have any case studies been conducted for the pro-

vision and progress of EAL students from different first language groups, and should students from different language groups be treated any differently?" was split, reworded, and assigned to the themes, 'understanding development', 'L1' and 'models of support'. To assign responses that could be interpreted as belonging to more than one theme, we took context into account. In particular, we considered the role of the individual who asked the question to pinpoint the dominant theme in the question.

Finally, we collapsed the uncertainties in each theme into one or more overarching research question(s). In some cases, one research question covered all individual expressions of uncertainty in that theme. In others, several questions were formulated to capture the nuances contained in the body of data assigned to that theme.

2.4   The ranking survey

In the second phase of the project, we asked research users to rank in order of priority the research questions that had been generated in the first phase. We created an online questionnaire that listed all questions, presented over six themed pages (e.g., Models of Support, Bi/Multilingualism, Social & Emotional Concerns) to help structure respondents' engagement. Each question was accompanied by a sliding scale from 0 to 100. Respondents were asked to use the slider to indicate how much of a priority each question was for them; 0 indicating that the question was not a priority at all, and 100 indicating that the question was of the highest priority. By asking respondents to indicate the level of priority for each question on its own terms, rather than asking them to create a ranked list of all questions, we were able to accommodate any attrition or non-responses, for example in the case of people only partially completing the survey. We emailed respondents who had left their email addresses in the uncertainty questionnaire to invite them to participate in the ranking survey, and we publicised the ranking survey using the same methods as described in Section 2.2, including creating a new 'explainer' video to help respondents navigate the survey (see project website). The ranking survey was available for responses during April and May 2021.

2.5   Analysing the responses to the ranking survey

To generate a ranked list of priorities we calculated the mean scores and standard deviations of the valid responses to each item. This gave us an average level of priority for each item. We then ranked these averages from highest to lowest. We took the top 25 priorities and used these as the basis for the final phase of the PSP – the workshop to agree the Top 10.

2.6   Workshop to agree the Top 10 research priorities

In the final phase of the PSP, we convened a workshop where representatives of our research user groups discussed the 25 highest ranked research questions, with the aim of reducing these to a final Top 10 of EAL research priorities. We invited anyone who had left their email address in the ranking survey to participate. In addition to all members of the steering committee, eight research user representatives agreed and attended the workshop: 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 discussions were facilitated by the authors, but they took no substantive role in directing the nature of those discussions nor in endorsing (or otherwise) the final outcome.

The workshop took place online. Attendees were split into two groups, and used a virtual bulletin board (Google Jamboard) displaying virtual post-it notes, each containing one of the 25 research questions. Each group began by triaging the questions into three tiers: questions that everyone agreed should be in the Top 10, questions that everyone agreed should not be in the Top 10, and questions about which more discussion was required. They also reviewed the clarity of the wording of the questions and discussed any items that were similar in focus and which might be usefully combined. The virtual post-it notes were shuffled and reshuffled throughout the discussion, until the group had agreed on a rank order, with particular focus on the first ten of these.

The newly ranked lists of both groups were then combined to create an aggregate list. The contents and ranking of the aggregate list was, again, discussed in groups, which had been shuffled so that each new group was made up of members of both original groups. Discussions focussed on the first ten questions, minor adjustments were made, then confirmed by the group. Finally, the lists were combined, and a discussion was held with all participants to approve the wording of the questions and confirm the final Top 10. This list was then ratified by ballot.

2.7   Validity

Maxwell (1992) describes five types of validity related to the collection of qualitative data: (1) descriptive (not distorting the data), (2) interpretive (not allowing conscious/subconscious biases to obscure the interpretation of the data), (3) theoretical (whether the explanation fits the data), (4) generalisation (whether the explanation extends to other samples), and (5) valuation (looking critically at the data). With transparent reporting at every stage of the PSP, we are confident that

we achieved descriptive validity. The fact that different groups of research users submitted, ranked, debated, consolidated and prioritised uncertainties over the course of the project leads us to believe that we have also established interpretive and valuation validity. While any sample of a population has inherent limitations in its representativeness of that population as a whole, the relatively large number people who took part in the project across all phases reassures us that we have collected data that can be trusted to represent that population, i.e. are generalisable. In lacking an agreed theoretical frame for this work, because of its novelty in the field of EAL, it is difficult to confidently assert that we have met theoretical validity. Nonetheless, over the course of the project responses that did not meet the theoretical aim of collecting uncertainties that can be addressed through research were naturally filtered out by the ranking and discussion processes, leaving only those that did meet that theoretical aim. We are confident that our data reflect research users' uncertainties about their practice, and therefore to that extent are theoretically valid.

2.8   Ethics

The research project was approved by the Central University Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford, ref ED-CIA-21-045. Participant information was provided on the first page of the online questionnaires used in the project, and via email to members of the workshop, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before participating.

3.   Results

3.1   Results of the uncertainty questionnaire

In total, 199 people responded to the uncertainty questionnaire. Of those, 55 self-identified as EAL Specialists, 54 as Teachers/Educators, 34 as Pupils/Ex-Pupils, 21 as Ethnic Minority Achievement Services (EMAS) providers, 16 as Parents, 6 as Teaching Assistants, 3 as Head Teachers/Principals, 3 as Bilingual Assistants, 1 as a School Governor, 1 as a Trainee Teacher (Primary QTS), 1 as a Speech and Language Services coordinator, 1 as a School Librarian, 1 as a Supplementary School Umbrella Support Group Chair, 1 as a Learning Improvement Consultant, and 1 respondent who did not record an occupation. Thirty respondents were located overseas, otherwise all respondents were located in the UK.

Between them they generated 767 uncertainties, which fell into 29 distinct themes (Table 1). After similar uncertainties had been collapsed, 81 unique overarching research questions remained (see supplementary materials).

Table 1. Themes emerging from the qualitative content analysis of responses to the uncertainty questionnaire

Theme	Number of individual questions relating to theme[*]
Assessment	29
Attitudes	19
Content learning	34
Content and language integrated learning	13
Demographics	65
Family engagement	33
Fossilisation	5
Grammar	9
Home languages and cultures	41
Language registers	10
Late entries	4
Literacy	17
First language	89
Third language	16
Models of support	85
Online teaching	10
Oracy	8
Pandemic	6
Phonics	4
School organisation	65
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities	21
Settling	10
Socioemotional development and integration	49
Staff knowledge and professional development	36
Strategies	28
Student perceptions	20
Terminology	6
Understanding development	25
Vocabulary	10

[*] figure includes identical or similar questions voiced by different respondents

3.2 Results of the ranking survey

One hundred and ninety-three people contributed to the ranking survey. However, only 83 of these continued past the first section, which collected only demographic information. Sixty-five respondents completed the entire survey (i.e. expressed an opinion about all 81 questions across all six themed pages). Two respondents completed five pages, one completed four pages, four completed three pages, six completed two pages, and six completed only one page before dropping out.

Of the 83 respondents who completed at least one themed page of the survey, 41 self-identified as EAL specialist teachers, 23 as teachers/educators, 6 as EMAS providers, 3 as headteachers, 2 as teaching assistants, 1 as a school governor, 1 as a parent, 1 as the CEO of a supplementary school umbrella group, 1 as an EAL support officer, 1 as a deputy headteacher, 1 as an education programme manager, 1 as a librarian, and 1 respondent who did not record an occupation. Twenty respondents were located overseas, and all other respondents were located in the UK.

The 25 highest ranked research questions, their means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum responses are presented in Appendix.

3.3 Results of the workshop – the final Top 10

The final Top 10 EAL research priorities as expressed by EAL research users are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The Top 10 EAL research priorities expressed by EAL research users

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?

Table 2. *(continued)*

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?

As can be seen from this list, questions of effectiveness dominate. EAL research users are interested in research that will help them to decide what approaches are most likely to address the substantive linguistic and curricular needs of their EAL students. For example, there are questions about the relative effects of targeted and direct instruction compared to mainstreaming or immersive approaches. The research users articulate the importance of generating evidence on how to support curriculum learning as well as English language learning through questions related to strategies that incorporate both. They also acknowledge the challenges associated with late entry to English-medium schools. This is especially important given that a significant number of EAL learners join the school system after Reception Year. Research by Strand and Lindorff (2020), for example, found that 30% of EAL learners are late entrants into the UK school system. Research users also identify as a priority maintaining intellectual challenge for children who are still developing their English proficiency, and they want to know how this can be achieved. There was considerable interest throughout the process in the intersection between EAL and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). This is reflected in two questions on this theme, relating both to identifying and differentiating between these needs and helping to address them through pedagogy.

In addition to questions relating to effective instruction, the list includes questions related to knowing EAL learners better. That is, what types of school experiences do EAL learners say that they value and how can their pastoral and socioemotional concerns be understood? The final question relates to learning from others about systems level policy and practice for schools with EAL learn-

ers, which speaks to more involvement by research users in addressing questions of priority for this field.

These questions lend themselves to a variety of different methodological approaches, though we would argue that well-focussed and appropriately contextualised experiments should be prioritised for those that readily lend themselves to this kind of evaluation. This reflects the findings of the systematic reviews by Murphy and Unthiah (2015) and Oxley and de Cat (2019), both of which identify the paucity of this kind of research. Nonetheless, there is space in this Top 10 list for alternative methodological approaches that will add important evidence to our body of knowledge. As such, we feel that there are important implications for research producers from a variety of disciplinary and methodological backgrounds.

4.   Discussion and conclusion

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 research questions for the EAL research agenda. This has important implications for the nature of relevant research going forward. The Top 10 questions we have reported here provide empirical evidence about what matters most to EAL research users and, thus, should be reflected in what EAL research producers prioritise. Doing so will help to make EAL research more relevant, meaningful, and useful to the people whose practice it is intended to inform.

In conducting this study, we have responded directly to calls for better dialogue between researchers and teachers (see Section 1.1). We have put the knowledge and expertise of practitioners at the heart of the endeavour, and, in so doing, aspired to address the disconnect between the two communities of practice that Tavakoli (2015) identified. We hope to have softened the sense of a top-down attitude on the part of researchers identified by Sato et al. (2022), by building a virtual venue in which discussions about EAL research can take place, and by demonstrating a collaborative mindset with regards to the interplay between these two communities (qv. Sato & Loewen, 2018, 2022). We have responded to McKinley's (2019) suggestion that research should address practice-based problems as articulated by teachers. We contend that this study has advanced the theoretical basis for participatory research by demonstrating the value of cross-disciplinary collaboration. And we hope to have provided a model from which other researchers can build when addressing the warrant for any proposed new research, to ensure that it addresses research users' substantive needs.

The theoretical value of fostering strong representation by EAL research users in establishing research priorities, rather than unequal representation relative to that of research producers, is underscored by comparing the results of this PSP with a similar exercise by Duarte et al. (2020). Their study aimed to establish research priorities in the field of multilingualism and language education, a field with considerable overlap with EAL. As with our PSP, Duarte et al. used a Delphi-style approach. While some of the participants they consulted were described as educational practitioners, the vast majority (75%) were academics. It is interesting, and perhaps telling, that none of the priorities established in Duarte et al.'s study was reflected in the priorities voiced by the research users involved in ours. We wonder whether this perpetuates the top-down attitude of researchers identified by Sato et al. (2022). While we reiterate our defence of academics in pursuing their specific theoretical and empirical interests, clearly, there is value in promoting better representation from EAL research users to ensure that the efforts of research producers address their substantive priorities.

We note that some of the questions in the Top 10 may be addressed by existing research evidence. However, as we have also noted above, much of this work has been conducted in contexts that differ substantially from the EAL context. An important first step will be to synthesise existing research on the Top 10 questions using systematic reviews. By doing so, the whole research community will be in a better position to judge the extent, quality, and applicability of any existing relevant research. This process will also allow us to see where there are gaps in the evidence, and therefore to assess if and how new related research should be conducted to narrow those gaps.

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 so that it is maximally applicable to their contexts.

We hope that these expressions of priority will be welcomed by research producers, and that new research will be informed by the demonstrated priorities articulated here. We have written to major funders of related research in the UK (the Bell Foundation, UKRI, Leverhulme, the Education Endowment Foundation, and Nuffield), providing them with a summary of our study and the Top 10 list, and encouraging them to look favourably on applications for funding that are based on that list. We hope that researchers will use the findings reported here to add weight to any new applications for funding that they make.

Moreover, we hope that the project reported here will encourage members of other educational fields to consider adopting a similar approach to setting

research agendas in their disciplines, such that education research can be as meaningful, relevant, and useful as possible.

Funding

Acknowledgements

Declaration of interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Supplementary materials

The 81 research questions included in the ranking survey (see ...).

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Appendix The 25 highest ranked research questions following the ranking survey

	Question	Mean	SD	Min	Max
1	What models of support for late entry new to English pupils maximise the potential of these students?	80.23	21.48	9	100
2	What are effective strategies for meeting SEND and EAL learning needs at the same time?	79.70	20.00	20	100
3	What are effective ways to support EAL learners with SEND?	79.20	21.12	18	100
4	What are reliable ways to diagnose SEND in EAL learners?	79.06	25.37	3	100
5	What are effective training approaches to help teachers determine and cater for EAL learners' needs and wants?	78.71	22.63	11	100
6	What is the impact of inclusion teaching (in mainstream classrooms) vs pull-out teaching (in EAL classrooms)? Which of the two methods is best for promoting language and content learning?	78.64	24.23	0	100
7	What are effective strategies for subject teachers to use to combine English language teaching and curriculum content teaching?	78.52	21.14	0	100
8	What are the methods that EAL learners consider most beneficial for their learning of language and curriculum content?	78.09	21.99	8	100
9	How can teachers be trained and/or assisted in understanding the differences between EAL and SEND learners and how to address these in the school context?	77.56	19.75	19	100
10	In the context of mainstream lessons, what are effective ways of providing appropriate levels of intellectual challenge for learners with low levels of English proficiency?	77.45	22.91	0	100
11	What are effectives strategies for supporting the transition from social language to academic language among EAL learners?	77.27	22.61	0	100
12	What are the ways to assess EAL learners with SEND?	76.41	25.48	0	100
13	What are the characteristics of successful whole school policies for supporting EAL leaners (e.g. Who takes responsibility? How is cross disciplinary consistency maintained? How are resources allocated? How is information about EAL learners communicated to staff?)	75.94	25.04	0	100

Appendix *(continued)*

Question	Mean	SD	Min	Max
14 How can EAL pupils' understanding of curriculum/ academic concepts be best assessed in mainstream classes?	75.56	23.50	0	100
15 What are the best models of support for pupils that are new to English? (e.g. Should they start in the mainstream classroom on arrival or given one-to-one support? For how long does this remain the best approach after arrival?)	74.55	28.33	5	100
16 What are effective strategies for supporting proficiency in subject- or genre-specific academic language?	74.26	24.50	0	100
17 What do EAL learners say are the most important things they can do to maximise their chances of success during and after school?	73.69	24.95	0	100
18 How much support should EAL learners receive? How should this support look like at different timepoints, and who should provide it?	73.51	27.11	1	100
19 How can EAL learners, including those without the English necessary to articulate pastoral needs or emotional wellbeing, be best supported in their socioemotional development?	72.95	27.07	4	100
20 What do EAL learners say they value in terms of academic and emotional support?	71.61	25.93	6	100
21 What are effective approaches to boosting confidence and motivation among EAL learners?	71.36	26.24	9	100
22 How do EAL and SEND interact?	70.81	24.22	0	100
23 What are the factors that can delay language acquisition in EAL learners as well as EAL learners with SEND?	70.72	26.56	0	100
24 What are the effects of explicit (formalised) instruction vs implicit (immersive) exposure to English on the learners' proficiency and progress?	68.19	27.57	0	100
25 What types of vocabulary should be prioritised for instruction?	68.13	27.57	0	100

!EAL PSP Long-list of Unanswered Questions

It lists the 81 'unanswered questions' that were included in the ranking survey, organised by theme.

TERMINOLOGY	2
PANDEMIC	2
ONLINE LEARNING	2
GRAMMAR	3
PHONICS	3
FOSSILIZATION	3
LATE ENTRIES	3
LANGUAGE REGISTERS	3
L3	3
VOCABULARY	3
L1	4
SOCIOEMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT & INTEGRATION	4
DEMOGRAPHICS	4
HOME LANGUAGES	4
STRATEGIES	5
SCHOOL ORGANISATION	5
EAL AND SEND	5
ATTITUDES	5
ASSESSMENT	6
ORACY	6
CLIL	6
FAMILY ENGAGEMENT	6
CONTENT	6
MODELS OF SUPPORT	7
STAFF KNOWLEDGE	7
LITERACY	7
UNDERSTANDING DEVELOPMENT	8
SETTLING	8
STUDENT PERCEPTIONS	8

Terminology

How is the label 'EAL' perceived by teachers, children and parents? What are the implications of these perceptions?

Are there any patterns in the subject choices and academic pathways of children classified as learning EAL?

Pandemic

In what ways has the Covid-19 Global Pandemic affected the educational and social development of EAL learners?

Online Learning

What digital technologies are effective in supporting EAL learners?

How are online technologies most effectively blended with in-person teaching for EAL learners?

Grammar

What are the most effective ways to teach English grammar (e.g. explicitly, implicitly, through witing/speaking, using the L1, among higher proficiency learners, with absolute beginners)?

Is teaching of English grammar improved when teachers are taught about the grammatical conventions of the L1s of their EAL learners?

Phonics

What approaches to reading instruction are most effective for new to English learners? Does this vary with age?

Fossilization

What are effective approaches to retrospectively addressing fossilization?

Late Entries

What models of support for late entry new to English pupils maximise the potential of these students?

Language Registers

How can EAL learners be supported in their acquisition of social language?

What are effective strategies for supporting proficiency in domain specific academic language?

What are effectives strategies for supporting the transition from social language to academic language among EAL learners?

L3

In what ways can EAL learners' existing multilingualism be leveraged in MFL lessons?

What are the developmental implications for EAL learners of learning a third language?

Vocabulary

Is explicit vocabulary teaching more effective than implicit/incidental vocabulary learning? Does this vary with vocabulary type?

What types of vocabulary should be prioritised for instruction?

L1

What are the effects of well-defined approaches to using the L1 (e.g. bilingual materials, bilingual TAs, drafting in L1 etc.) on substantive educational outcomes?

How effective is English-only instruction / communication relative to approaches that also use the L1?

What are the effects, both positive and negative of language transfer from the L1 to the English? Do these vary with different types of L1?

What are the implications for student wellbeing of using the L1?

What are the implications of different levels of L1 proficiency on the effects of multilingual approaches to learning?

What are the effects of maintaining L1 instruction/exposure or revitalising heritage languages on the educational experiences of EAL learners?

Socioemotional Development & Integration

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

What are effective approaches to boosting confidence and motivation among EAL learners?

What are the experiences of EAL learners in forming and maintaining friendships? What are the implications of these experiences for the wellbeing of EAL learners?

Demographics

What are the demographic characteristics, beyond those routinely collected, of EAL learners in a given context (including but not limited to past educational experiences, family characteristics, home language practices, and L1 literacy)? What are the implications of these characteristics for their education?

How can teachers determine the L1 proficiency of EAL learners?

What are the patterns of educational achievement and progression among EAL learners?

Home Languages

What are the effects of different family language policies on outcomes such as wellbeing, English development, overall academic attainment, etc.?

How can cultural norms and expectations (both those of the EAL learners and of the school) be understood and taken into account in the education of EAL learners?

How can home language maintenance and development be best achieved?

Strategies

Are there any general principles of strategy use that reliably promote learning among EAL learners?

What are effective strategies for meeting SEND and EAL learning needs at the same time?

What is the role of context in successful language learning, (e.g. language through litera-ture, or language through mainstream content)?

What are the effects of the Young Interpreters Scheme relative to alternative strategies?

School Organisation

What are effective approaches to community engagement?

What are effective practices and policies for school engagement with parents/carers of EAL learners?

What are the characteristics of successful whole school policy to supporting EAL leaners (e.g. Who takes responsibility? How is cross disciplinary consistency maintained? How are resources allocated? How is information about EAL learners communicated to staff?)

EAL and SEND

What are reliable ways to diagnose SEND needs in EAL learners?

What are the ways to assess EAL learners with SEND?

What are effective ways to support EAL learners with SEND?

What are effective ways to teach EAL learners with SEND?

Attitudes

What are characteristic attitudes towards different types of EAL learners and what are the impli-cations of this for understanding these groups?

What characterises (and what are the implications of) differing attitudes towards lan-guages and the speakers of those languages?

Assessment

How, when, and with what frequency should the English proficiency of new to English learners be assessed?

What kinds of formal assessment are of value to EAL learners (e.g. IELTS, GCSEs, TOIEC)?

Oracy

What are effective approaches to developing oral fluency?

What are effective approaches to developing oral accuracy?

CLIL

What are effective strategies for mainstream teachers to use to incorporate English language teaching into mainstream curriculum content?

What are the characteristics of effective commercial resources (textbooks, audio visual materials etc.) for supporting Content and Language Integrated Learning?

Family Engagement

What are effective ways to inform and/or educate parents of EAL learners about supporting their child's education outside of school? (e.g., Providing detailed information about curricu-

lum content and the English needed to access it? Providing family literacy clubs? Giving workshops about the British educational system?)

What are successful ways for schools to engage with parents and families of EAL learners who are new to English themselves?

How to comfort and reassure parents about their child's learning at school?

How can parents be encouraged to use and develop the L1 at home?

How can monolingual households be included in language learning?

Content

How can EAL pupils' understanding of curriculum/academic concepts be best assessed in mainstream classes?

In the context of mainstream lessons, what are effective ways of providing appropriate levels of intellectual challenge for learners with low levels of English proficiency?

What are the most difficult and easy aspects of mainstream subjects for EAL learners?

Models of Support

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

What are the best models of support for pupils that are new to English? (e.g. Should they start in the mainstream classroom on arrival or given one-to-one support? For how long after arrival does this remain the best approach? etc.)

What is the impact of inclusion teaching (in mainstream classrooms) vs pull-out (in EAL classrooms)? Which of the two methods is best for promoting language and content learning? (e.g., What are the effects of inclusion and withdrawal? Do these effects change over time? Are these effects different in different subjects?)

What are the teaching tools (e.g., textbooks, apps) that support EAL learners' acquisition most effectively?

What are the linguistic domains that should be prioritised in EAL learners' acquisition?

How much support should EAL learners receive? How should this support look like at different timepoints, and who should provide it?

Staff Knowledge

What are effective training approaches to help teachers determine and cater for EAL learners' needs and wants?

How can teachers be trained and/or assisted in understanding the differences between EAL and SEND learners, and how to address these in the school context?

What CPD exists (commercial, Local Authority) and how effective is it?

How can teachers find out more information about EAL pupils' languages? What can non-mainstream teachers do to assist their mainstream colleagues in catering for EAL learners?

Literacy

What are effective ways to understand and support EAL learners' literacy development (e.g. storybooks, interventions), especially if the learner is illiterate in the L1?

When should writing be taught, and what are the most effective ways to teach it? Do these differ for different kinds of texts/learners?

Are there differences in the ways teachers should approach different genres of text with EAL learners?

Understanding Development

How do EAL learners' brains develop as a result of being exposed to multiple languages?

What are the benefits of bilingualism?

What are the predictors of EAL children's educational and linguistic attainment and progression?

What are the factors that can delay language acquisition in EAL learners as well as EAL learners with SEND? How do EAL and SEND interact?

How can adequate quantity and quality of linguistic input be guaranteed?

Settling

Which enrolment and induction procedures help new arrivals settle and feel integrated in a new class (e.g. bilingual assistants, language buddies)?

Student Perceptions

What are the methods that EAL learners consider most beneficial for their learning of language and content?

What do EAL learners say they value in terms of academic and emotional support?

What do EAL learners say are the most important things they can do to maximise their chances of success during and after school?

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Publication history