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An exploration of school communication approaches for newly arrived EAL students: applying three dimensions of organisational communication theory

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

This article explores the modes of school communication associated with language and cultural diversity, demonstrating how organisational communication theory can be applied to the analysis of schools’ communication responses to the presence of pupils who have English as an additional language (EAL). The article highlights three analytical dimensions: the external factors influencing school communication systems; communication models reflected in school structures; and the content of communication between stakeholders. An exploratory study of a primary and a secondary school in the East of England, involving 32 semi-structured interviews with school managers, teachers, EAL staff, parents and newly arrived Eastern European students, reveals the interactional and transactional models of communication in the primary school, while the secondary school frequently used a linear approach. Communication in both schools showed a lack of information on EAL students and their parents, hindering a sustained outreach and empowering partnership, and possibly placing these students at a disadvantage.

This article aims to focus attention on the importance of professional communication structures and interaction in the context of English as an additional language (EAL). English schools must respond to growing ethnic and linguistic diversity in the population and are under increasing pressure to work with pupils and parents/carers more effectively.\textsuperscript{1,2} We demonstrate that organisational communication theory (Harris \& Nelson, 2008) can be applied productively to analyse the quality, directions and blockages regarding school communication systems, with implications for improving school practice. We explore how migration, as an external factor, impacts on school communication systems and how schools respond to newly arrived migrant pupils who have been classified as having English as an Additional Language (EAL). Two areas are addressed in particular here: (i) formal communication structures relating to EAL within the school and between the school and home, analysing to what extent these structures reflect specific models of communication, i.e. linear, interactional and transactional (see Harris \& Nelson, 2008; Schneider, 2016); and (ii)
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communication content and specifically the levels of information and assumptions school staff have about newly arrived EAL pupils, their parents and the wider migrant community they represent.

UK schools have more than a million EAL children between five and 16 years old who speak in excess of 360 languages between them, in addition to English (NALDIC, 2014). It is estimated that one in six primary school children and one in eight secondary school pupils in England are categorised as EAL (NALDIC, 2014). Eastern European languages were the fastest growing language group in English primary and secondary schools between 2008 and 2012 (Tereshchenko & Archer, 2014); although Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Chinese and Indian students still form the large majority of EAL pupils. There is a continuing gap in achievement between EAL and non-EAL learners, which applies especially to EAL students from White Other (including Irish, Traveller of Irish heritage, Gypsy/Roma and Any Other White Background), Black African and Pakistani ethnic groups (Strand, Malmberg, & Hall, 2015). However, EAL students in areas such as London, Manchester and Coventry outperform pupils who have English as their first language (FLE) and some EAL groups do significantly better than others (NALDIC, 2014; Strand et al., 2015). The category EAL refers to the need for English as Additional Language Support, where EAL pupils are meant to be offered support from specialist teachers. However, in recent years the government has introduced substantial changes to EAL funding. The Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant (EMAG) was funnelled into the Direct Schools Grant in 2011 and as a consequence services for EAL support are no longer provided free of charge by local authorities and schools have to buy these services, if they have not been axed altogether. These changes mean that EAL provision is no longer ring-fenced and schools can decide how much they spend on EAL provision. EAL provision varies from school to school therefore, which has a potential negative impact on the achievement of EAL students, particularly those who are economically and socially disadvantaged (see Evans et al., 2016).

The context of this study is that of England, although the approach offered has direct relevance to the many educational systems globally, which are expected to cater for the needs of newly arrived pupils whose mother tongue is not the language used for teaching by the schools. There is a body of research that investigates school responses to non-English-speaking parents and children. Since the 1990s authors have researched school strategies regarding Spanish-speaking migrant communities in the United States, evaluations of government initiatives to help African and Asian refugees to integrate into Australian schools, and sociological studies of migrant children's experiences in Ireland (see, for example, Block, Cross, Riggs, & Gibbs, 2014; Coady, Cruz-Davis, & Flores, 2009; Devine, 2009; Naidoo, 2013). The integration of Eastern European children and their families has been looked at more recently in the context of the UK educational system (Arnot et al., 2014; Evans et al., 2016; Hamilton, 2013; Tereshchenko & Archer, 2014). The findings of such studies highlight the centrality that communication has in supporting such children's education and preventing social exclusion of pupils and their parents. Although authors mention school communication it has not been looked at in more detail and with reference to communication theory. Studies that explicitly research EAL also under-research communication within school organisations, focusing mainly on: teaching practice (Chen, 2009); language development, bilingualism and the role of first language (L1) (Conteh, 2012; Lugo-Neris, Jackson, & Goldstein, 2010); educational achievement (Christensen & Stanat,
This article addresses the above gaps in the literature, by analysing whether schools are establishing effective communication systems for those EAL pupils and parents who have low levels of English and/or have recently arrived in the UK (see Arnot et al., 2014; Evans et al., 2016). It highlights that more sensitive communication, which is based on factual information rather than assumptions and generalisation, is necessary. For example, teachers cannot assume parents’ levels of English on the basis of country of origin, nor can they assume that those with good levels of English who have arrived recently or those who have been in England for longer (but have low levels of English) necessarily have a good understanding of the school system.

We bring together organisational communication theory and the findings of a year-long exploratory study of two schools in the East of England. The East of England has seen an increase in the number of children from Latvia and Lithuania and Poland, as a result of the recruitment of European citizens to the agricultural and care industries following the enlargement of the EU in 2004 (Schneider & Holman, 2011a, 2011b). Our key questions for this preliminary study were:

- How are schools’ communication systems affected by migration and how do schools respond to it?
- What types of communication models are reflected in school communication structures addressing EAL pupils and their parents?
- What messages are transmitted in the communication nexus between school staff, EAL pupils and their parents and to what extent do they reflect information and assumptions regarding EAL?

We begin by describing the research design and methodology used to investigate the responses of a state primary school and a state secondary academy to the presence of newly arrived EAL children in the East of England. In the second section we outline the three key dimensions in organisational communication theory that guided the interview data of EAL specialists, teachers, school managers and EAL students: (a) the external factors (e.g. migration, speed of change, digital age) influencing communication; (b) communication models (i.e. linear, interactional and transactional models) reflected in communication structures with pupils and parents; (c) the content of communication (e.g. information and assumptions). We present the findings of our study with reference to the above dimensions and conclude by discussing the implications for communicating effectively with EAL students and parents who have recently arrived and/or have low levels of English.

**Research design**

The project used a comparative case-study design to examine the professional communication structures and interactions relating to EAL (see Yin, 2013). One primary and one secondary school were selected to explore the similarities and dissimilarities relating to these different school types and to investigate to what extent the different school contexts of primary and secondary schools might hinder or enhance the communication structures and interactions regarding EAL. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather qualitative data to compare the following areas: the external factors (e.g. migration and the digital
impacting on the school, formal communication structures regarding EAL within the school, the communication role of EAL teachers and EAL advisors in local authorities, communication structures and strategies within the classroom, formal communication structures between school and home, and levels of information concerning EAL available to teachers.

A total of 32 semi-structured interviews were conducted with school staff responsible for EAL (4), teachers (8), headteachers (2), parent and school governors (2), parents (1), local authority EAL advisors (3) and newly arrived EAL students from Eastern Europe (12) between February and July 2013. All interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min. Our main database comprised staff perceptions regarding the availability of communication structures within schools to facilitate interaction with EAL pupils and their parents. The parental view on school communication is only represented to a limited extent, which is mainly due to severe difficulties in recruiting parents to the project in a relatively short time and within the context of overstretched EAL staff (outlined further below).

Formal ethical approval at the university and school level (headteachers) was gained before starting the data collection. Ethical approval related to a range of areas including: anonymising all names (including schools and interviewees); participant consent (in the case of pupil interviews both parents and pupils gave their consent); participant information (all participants were informed about the aims of the project before they consented); Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks for all researchers before starting the data collection; the presence of two adults in all interviews with pupils; and data storing. A purposive sample was used (e.g. subject teachers representing specific areas such as sciences, humanities, maths, creative subjects were approached) and the EAL staff within the schools coordinated the selection and the organisation of the interviews with staff and pupils. Following ethical guidance, participation among the selected staff and students was voluntary. Researchers who were trained in interviewing and ethical procedures conducted the interviews. The interview questions with school staff, EAL advisors and EAL students related to the broader areas of knowledge and information regarding EAL, language development (English and use of L1), assessment (initial and continuous), educational achievement, social integration and communication between the different stakeholders. This paper will refer specifically to the findings relating to communication and information and knowledge regarding EAL.

All interviews were transcribed and uploaded onto the qualitative coding programme NVivo* (QSR International (UK), Daresbury, UK). Following Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 57) a qualitative coding strategy was applied to develop ‘descriptive’ and ‘pattern codes’ which reflected the various dimensions of communication between the different stakeholders within the school and between the school and the home, for example formal communication structures regarding EAL, the communication role of EAL teachers within the school and information and assumptions in the communication process with EAL students and their parents.

Below we describe in more detail the data collection within our two case study schools and the limitations we encountered in accessing and understanding the range of school practices in this area.

Brenton primary school (a pseudonym – all names have been anonymised), with a school roll of around 500 pupils, was selected as a case study because it had an intake of over 20% of EAL pupils, which was above the local authority (LA) average (9%). A large proportion of recently arrived pupils were from the new Accession countries (A8 countries), which joined
the European Union in 2004, especially from Poland (which is the A8 country with the largest population). Brenton was located within an urban setting in the Eastern region and had considerable experience of including pupils and families with different home languages (with nearly 50% of their EAL students having Bengali as their home language). Windscott Academy (a pseudonym), with a roll of around 1000 students, was selected because it also had an intake of 20% of newly arrived EAL students, mainly from Poland, Latvia and Lithuania. This is substantially above the LA average for state-funded secondary schools of 7%. In contrast to Brenton, Windscott Academy was located in a semi-rural area and had relatively little experience of EAL prior to the arrival of the students from the A8 countries.

The primary school interviews were conducted with the headteacher, a parent governor, a parent, the EAL coordinator, a specialist EAL teaching assistant, a class teacher (Year 4) and a teaching assistant (Year 6). Ten EAL children (six Polish, one Lithuanian, one Latvian, one Bulgarian and one Slovakian/Roma) in Years 3–6 were also interviewed after parental consent was given. There were some shortcomings in the research, including the potential bias by the EAL teaching assistant to select ‘successful’ pupils and the difficulty of recruiting parents of EAL children (despite positive approaches to parental liaison in the school). In the secondary school a sample of six teachers in English, History, Drama, French, Science and PE were selected. Interviews were also conducted with the EAL lead teacher, the staff member for pastoral care who was also responsible for EAL, the headteacher and a school governor. Unfortunately, only two EAL students from Latvia were interviewed and no parent could be recruited via our research link (i.e. the EAL lead teacher, who was under substantial pressure, as she was also a subject teacher).

While we are aware that our research is based on limited perspectival data and cannot be generalised to other schools, it raises important issues concerning the preparedness and fitness for purpose of the organisational response to the increasing language diversity of schools. We start by outlining three conceptual dimensions that Harris and Nelson (2008) highlight in the context of applied organisational communication theory, i.e. external factors, communication models and communication content. These three dimensions were invaluable in helping us explore the undercurrents in our case study interview data and their significance for practice.

**Organisational communication theory: three important dimensions**

The analysis of our interview data on school communication practices has greatly benefited from the theoretical modelling of communication found in organisational communication theory. As Harris and Nelson (2008) argue, communication is more than a central aspect of any organisation (together with motivation). It is, arguably, one of its most complex elements. We have only to reflect on the nature of schools as institutions to recognise the multiple tiers, levels and sites in which communication processes and interactions need to happen. Communication therefore has to be effective between different stakeholders (pupils, parents, teachers, EAL specialists, school leaders/managers and, in the case of the UK, local authorities). Wherever located, within these communication processes:

… each individual is both an actor and reactor to the communication events. We introduce our own perceptual and inter-relational lens to others’ communication behaviour. Because we simultaneously produce and respond to behaviour the possible implications are truly
astonishing. Each time we choose a particular behaviour, the communication impact is highly
dependent on a host of circumstances. (Harris & Nelson, 2008, p. 15)

The following three dimensions of communication are particularly significant (ibid.):

- external factors affecting communication in organisations;
- models of communication reflected in communication structures and interactions;
- the content of communication.

Harris and Nelson (2008) signal the importance of taking into account the effects of wider
external factors on communication systems such as: (a) globalisation leading to diversity;
(b) the speed of change; and (c) the digital age. Although Harris and Nelson discuss glo-
balisation in the context of organisations such as businesses and their ‘diverse’ workforce,
their insights can be applied to schools and to the communication between management,
teaching staff, pupils and their parents. Globalisation, and here especially migration, is likely
to have a major effect on school communication structures since it requires ‘organisations
to embrace change, use different communication and distribution systems and devote more
attention to diversity’ (ibid., p. 7). However, speed of change is also an important factor.
In the context of A8 migration the demographic change has come fairly rapidly, posing a
challenge especially to those schools that are fairly new to language diversity in their pupil
population (such as Windscott Academy). These schools may need time to respond effec-
tively, especially if communication systems are not creating feedback loops with migrant
communities, informing schools about their specific needs and resources.

Harris and Nelson’s (2008) external factor of the ‘digital age’ is closely connected to diver-
sity and speed of change. Digitalisation of communication can have a significant impact
on the range of opportunities for schools to facilitate and improve communication with
different linguistic communities. Many schools already use digital devices for learning and
communication – for example, the distribution of iPads to the entire school population
for use in the classroom and at home, electronic homework sites and ParentMail to com-
municate with parents. A key consideration therefore is whether schools and individual
teachers are using this potential to ensure successful communication with EAL pupils and
their parents who have recently arrived and/or have low levels of English.

The second dimension we focus on relates to models of communication – in other
words the types of communication structures that facilitate interaction between different
stakeholders. This dimension directly relates to the goal of achieving cross-cultural effec-
tive communication (see Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2013). Communication theory,
according to Harris and Nelson (2008), distinguishes between three different models of
communication – the linear, the interactional and the transactional. Linear models have
been criticised for lacking a feedback loop in the communication process and ignoring the
power dynamics of the communication process; in a school context this relates to the power
relations between teachers and pupils and their parents (Hamilton, 2013). In comparison,
the interactional model is two-directional since it incorporates feedback. Nevertheless, it can
also fail to offer the full dynamics required by a communication process. The third model,
the transactional approach, deals with the above shortcomings and emphases, in contrast,
a mode of communication that is ‘complex, dynamic, irreversible, ongoing, contextual, and
simultaneous’ (Harris & Nelson, 2008, p. 17). Transactional communication is therefore
interactional but also flexible and ‘dynamic’ to deal with ongoing change. This is particularly
relevant in the case of migration, which is a continuously changing and fluid phenomenon.
In the context of our case studies we will discuss in particular the formal communication structures within the school, the communication role of EAL staff, communication within the classroom and school-home communication and analyse to what extent they reflect linear, interactional and transactional communication models.

Content of communication, the third dimension, refers here to the information and assumptions reflected in the messages governing the communication process. Correct and in-depth information is a basic building block for effective communication to avoid (wrong) assumptions, generalisations and stereotyping, in particular in the context of cross-cultural interaction (see Heath & Bryant, 2012; Samovar et al., 2013). For example, staff information concerning EAL families, their aspirations and their funds of knowledge at home (see Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2013) is as important as providing accessible information regarding the school system for EAL students and parents who have newly arrived and/or have low levels of English. Information therefore plays a central role in transactional communication, but is often insufficient in the school context. A lack of information risks (wrong) assumptions, which can lead potentially to labelling and stereotyping and hinder the development of mutually acceptable and effective strategies for the successful inclusion of EAL pupils and their parents in the English education system. As we know from research, migrant students – such as Eastern European students who have recently arrived and have low levels of English – can find themselves classified as ‘the new Other’ (Tereshchenko & Archer, 2014). This status (of not being ‘like us’) is often associated with negative (sometimes racial) assumptions and stereotypes (ibid.). False assumptions also relate to staff views that parents are uninterested in their child’s schooling if they do not attend parent evenings, ignoring research findings that migrant parents have high levels of educational motivation and involvement in their children’s schooling (see Tomlinson, 2000; Tereshchenko & Archer, 2014; Evans et al., 2016).

These three dimensions of external factors, models of communication and content of communication are used to present the data on teachers’ and pupils’ perspectives of communication practices in the two case-study schools. Below we start by reporting on the first dimension – considering how schools have responded to the external factors, which could affect in a positive or negative way their communication processes.

**External factors affecting school communication**

Both schools are situated within the East of England, which has been a main destination for the European citizens arriving from the A8 countries since the EU enlargement in 2004, reflecting the active recruitment of regional employers in Accession countries to overcome labour shortages in the agricultural, care and building sectors. The majority of the first wave of migrants were young, single and arrived with few dependants (see Schneider & Holman, 2011a; Spencer, Ruhs, Anderson, & Rogaly, 2007). However, by 2013 increasingly children of parents from the A8 countries, in particular, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, have entered schools clustered around employers who have actively recruited from the A8 countries. In this context, Brenton primary school and Windscott Academy experienced fairly rapid change, with over 20% of EAL children enrolled, which is higher than the average of their local authorities as outlined above. Windscott Academy had hardly dealt with language diversity before, while Brenton had more experience with EAL students. The arrival of A8 students in schools comes at a time when a mainly negative representation of European
migration in the political debate and the media in England has impacted on local communities (see Schneider & Holman, 2011a). Furthermore, governmental changes relating to the financing and accessing of EAL support by schools has also contributed to tensions concerning EAL provision, as already outlined.

Although the arrival of students with diverse language, national and cultural backgrounds challenges conventional school communication systems, it should be seen as an opportunity as migrant families provide potential assets and resources that can benefit the school in preparing its pupils for a globalised world (see Arnot et al., 2014; Evans et al., 2016). In our study it was noticeable that neither school had an overarching policy on how to respond to the increased diversity in its organisation. We found very good and innovative practice, but it was inconsistently applied among staff and across the school and some staff members (in particular in the secondary school) acknowledged no difference between EAL pupils and non-EAL pupils and their parents with regard to communication.

As regards the ‘digital age’, both schools made use of digital communication tools, although neither school had a universal policy regarding the use of digital tools to facilitate communication with EAL pupils and their parents. Staff used digital devices such as Google Translate to different extents – although not necessarily offering perfect translations, these programmes help to facilitate communication between staff and EAL children and parents with low levels of English (see Evans et al., 2016). Overall, the primary school appeared to use a greater variety of digital communication tools than the secondary school, including a tablet device for EAL pupils, ParentMail and a website facility, which offered translation into different languages. The interviews with the teaching staff discussed below also highlighted that the primary school had a more consistent approach than the secondary school towards the use of digital tools to enhance multilingualism, with all staff acknowledging the importance of pupils’ home language (L1) within and outside the classroom. In this respect the primary school staff recognised migration and language diversity as an asset and opportunity for the pupils and the school, rather than a deficit (Lugo-Neris et al., 2010).

**Models of communication: linear, interactional and transactional**

Both schools had a number of formal communication structures, processes and interactions relating to EAL, which reflected to different degrees linear, interactional and transactional models of communication. It was noticeable that neither case-study school had a communication plan (see Windahl, Signitzer, & Olson, 2008) that explicitly outlined the formal communication structures regarding EAL provision across the school, or in its external relations. As a consequence, there was a certain degree of inconsistency among staff and across the schools, as will be outlined below.

Applying the models of linear, interactional and transaction communication, we analyse our interview data in more detail below in terms of:

a. formal communication structures within the school;

b. the communication role of EAL teachers and EAL advisors in local authorities

c. communication structures and strategies within the classroom;

 d. formal communication structures between school and home.
(a) Formal communication structures within the school

Both schools had a range of formal communication structures to enhance the mutual understanding between the different stakeholders, including: an introductory meeting with EAL pupils (and their parents) and senior management; regular meetings between EAL staff and EAL students outside the classroom; a buddy system between non-EAL and EAL pupils; and young interpreters’ training. These strategies offered opportunities for transactional communication. Brenton offered a range of additional structures that were characterised by a transactional mode of communication, such as regular meetings between EAL staff and EAL pupils within the classroom and a specific induction on EAL for new staff (delivered by the EAL coordinator), addressing topics such as communication with EAL pupils and parents and stereotyping. In contrast to Windscott Academy, Brenton also offered an innovative and wide variety of transactional structures to communicate with parents of EAL students, which will be outlined further below. Furthermore, the induction meeting for newly arrived EAL pupils and their parents at Brenton communicated information to the parents, but was also used to receive information about the pupils’ and parents’ country of origin, former schooling etc. In contrast, Windscott tended to use a linear mode of communication during induction, emphasising the transfer of information from the school to the parents and not vice versa (apart from asking for the pupil’s English-language ability). Overall, Brenton school offered a wider range of communication structures with pupils and parents that were transactional, while Windscott had a smaller range that often reflected linear modes of communication, as discussed in more detail below.

(b) The communication role of EAL teaching staff and EAL advisors in local authorities

Teaching staff who dealt specifically with EAL issues within the schools were in the centre of communication regarding EAL. Brenton primary school employed a full-time EAL coordinator and a part-time EAL specialist teaching assistant. In contrast, Windscott Academy did not have an EAL coordinator. Instead, the person responsible for pastoral care and an EAL lead teacher (who was also the teacher of a school subject) dealt with EAL issues, working together with two part-time bilingual teaching assistants. As the Academy had over 200 EAL students, the lack of a designated EAL coordinator was more than problematic, especially as the EAL lead teacher struggled to combine her role as a subject teacher with EAL responsibilities. Nevertheless, EAL members of staff in both schools represented a communication and information hub for and about EAL pupils, EAL parents, teachers and senior management. They described their role:

… but since [the EAL specialist teaching assistant] has been in the school and that is her job, it's much better, because you can go to her and she will say, well you know we ought to do this or we ought to do that, which is fantastic. It's very important that you have guidance from somebody who knows what they are doing. (EAL coordinator, Brenton Primary School)

The EAL Lead Teacher was initially ‘a go-to person' if people were unsure what was the best avenue or strategy to use in class and, kind of, community cohesion. (EAL Lead Teacher, Windscott Academy)

The responsibility of school-based EAL staff was gathering information on EAL teaching, facilitating effective communication about EAL among staff and encouraging communication
between teaching staff, EAL pupils and their parents. Designated EAL staff were directly involved in communicating with EAL pupils through induction meetings, dealing with the administrative side of EAL provision and providing one-to-one support inside and outside the classroom. The EAL coordinator and EAL teaching assistant at Brenton could address EAL at various levels within the institution, whereas the teacher who had been appointed as EAL lead teacher at Windscott said that she had more of a ‘head of department role’, dealing with the setting up of EAL programmes, including assessment and achievement data analysis. She emphasised that EAL was ‘very much more progress led rather than strategy led’. Her aim was to move all EAL students up to level 4 in English (or above). However, she could not be directly involved in the one-to-one tuition and the Enhanced Provision for EAL students, which was provided by other staff members. In that respect, the position and role of the EAL coordinator at Brenton allowed for transactional communication, which offered feedback loops and could acknowledge change. Although the EAL staff at Windscott were to a certain degree a central point for teaching staff, the EAL lead teacher’s position did not enhance interactional or transactional communication with EAL pupils and their parents. Her prime responsibility was to set up an EAL programme. The bilingual teaching assistants at the secondary school were in charge of facilitating communication between the school, EAL pupils and their EAL parents. However, we will see later that their communication with parents was linear rather than interactional or transactional.

External local authority advisors (LA) are also crucial to support schools in facilitating and enhancing communication with EAL pupils and their parents. The advisors offer a wide range of strategies relating, for example, to the admission process of EAL families (e.g. disseminating a new arrivals’ guidance booklet), to parental engagement (translated letters, support with homework tasks) and student assessment (bilingual support and translations of assessment tasks). However, we found a certain amount of ambiguity concerning the extent to which schools in the region took their recommendations and services on board. Brenton primary school seemed to have better contacts with the LA advisory teachers than Windscott Academy, which may be explained by the latter’s more independent status. Overall, the reduction in bilingual translation services provided by the local authority makes communication with parents of EAL students who have lower levels of English increasingly difficult.

(c) Communication structures and strategies within the classroom

Our interviews with Windscott Academy teachers revealed a mixed approach towards language diversity and a tendency to follow their own belief systems in the absence of an overall school policy (see Mackinney & Rios-Aguilar, 2012). For example, a science teacher translated her slides that she used in the classroom into different languages (via Google Translate) as she had new arrivals from a variety of countries, whereas a drama teacher was reluctant to make adjustments regarding the language diversity, as she believed in the importance of teaching in English:

I have key word sheets that are translated, English-Polish and English-Lithuanian, all these, trying to build up an archive of those. (Science Teacher, Windscott Academy)

I do try and say that in my room, because drama is a subject that’s closely related to English, that it’s an English-speaking room. (Drama Teacher, Windscott Academy)
Pupils at Windscott were, therefore, confronted with a range of different communication strategies which were not perceived positively by the pupils we interviewed (although we are aware of the limited evidence for EAL students at the secondary school). The two Latvian secondary school students indicated that they were confronted by various communication patterns, which either encouraged mutual understanding by allowing the use of their first language L1 (to a certain extent), or which did not allow any use of L1 in the classroom. Windscott teachers’ perceptions of their communication with EAL pupils mirrored these pupils’ views. Some teachers, especially those who used L1 within the classroom (such as the Science teacher quoted earlier) thought that their communication with EAL students and their parents was good, even if pupils’ and parents’ language skills were low. Other teachers suggested that their communication with EAL pupils was problematic and gave a variety of explanations for this. Apart from linguistic issues, they referred to the (often assumed) background of the children, e.g. their experiences of migration, and their educational, social, financial background in their home country and in England. Some teachers who did not allow L1 in the classroom felt that EAL students who used L1 were not respecting their rules and felt uncomfortable because they could not follow their conversations:

I don’t know what they are talking about or who they are insulting, offending, or what’s going on. (Drama Teacher, Windscott Academy)

In contrast, Brenton teachers reflected a more consistent approach towards L1, and the use of EAL assistants within and outside the classroom facilitated good transactional communication between teachers and pupils. Translations were used consistently for newly arrived pupils, for example, and it was common practice for the EAL coordinator to translate for children within and outside the classroom, using a digital device. The 10 EAL pupils we interviewed at Brenton primary school suggested that good communication existed with class teachers. All EAL pupils at the primary school said that they felt confident and found it easy to speak with teachers within and outside the classroom (especially during break time).

(d) Formal communication structures between school and home

Most social scientific research on school–home relations has recognised the importance of the involvement of parents in a child’s schooling, since it is widely accepted as critical to the child’s educational success (see Goodall & Vorhaus, 2010; Walker, 2014). In our case studies there was a clear distinction between the primary and secondary school, regarding communication with parents of EAL children. Brenton primary school had a variety of structures in place to communicate with parents, which facilitated, to a large extent, a transactional approach. For example, it offered a comments box for parents in the foyer, a feedback site (in different languages) for parents on the school website, a ‘parent buddies’ system in which parent volunteers supported communication with newly arrived parents of EAL children and a (EAL and non-EAL) parent group. The school also conducted a survey that explored parents’ preferences regarding the mode of communication with the school. These structures employed oral and written means of communication, facilitated feedback loops and catered for the dynamics of communication. In contrast, communication with EAL parents in the Windscott Academy was based primarily on written correspondence (in English) and the school generally relied on children to translate for their parents, although parents were informed that they could ask for translations if necessary. The two
multilingual assistants engaged mainly with EAL pupils and generally only communicated with parents when negative messages had to be transferred (relating to children's absence or negative behaviour). In that sense the communication with EAL parents at Windscott Academy was mainly linear.

In the light of the assumption that oral communication is more important than written communication (see Harris & Nelson, 2008), Brenton primary had an advantage over Windscott because the informal meetings between teachers and the parents of EAL students at ‘pick-up time’ were an important feature at the primary school and allowed for transactional communication. In addition, Brenton set up ‘ParentMail’, which seemed to offer more and quicker communication processes between school and home. It appears to be an efficient and effective communication strategy for routine communication of positive, neutral and negative messages between the school and EAL and non-EAL parents. Although ‘ParentMail’ reflects a linear communication process (as there is no feedback loop), it offers a tool whereby school management and teachers can disseminate fairly easy messages; templates for such messages could be developed in different languages. The same strategy might have overcome the problem at the Windscott Academy, where the communication with parents seemed to be very limited and linear. Although the secondary school had two part-time bilingual translators they generally communicated with parents to transfer negative messages, such as lack of attendance or bad behaviour, rather than positive or neutral messages. Although a few teachers made an additional effort to reach out to parents, some thought that the existing school–home communication system works for all parents even if parents of EAL pupils had never contacted them for a meeting:

Well I’ve never had an EAL parent request an actual meeting with me. It’s there [email system for parents], they can use it, but it’s never been done. (Drama teacher, Windscott Academy)

School–home communication needs to be transactional rather than linear, so that the school understands the changing situations, resources and needs of parents of EAL students and can develop appropriate strategies for parents to engage successfully (at home and at school) in their child’s learning. A transactional approach would allow parents to communicate with the staff about the school system and potentially make contributions and recommendations to this system. Translations and translators are crucial for transactional communication. While the primary school often translated material for parents automatically, the secondary school only offered translations for parents if required. This is not ideal as parents might not understand that translations are available in the first place and they might be reluctant to ask (especially if it is on a continuous basis). Digital translation tools are not perfect but they can offer a short-term solution although other strategies such as bilingual parent networks, bilingual community services and a collection of translated templates should be developed and/or accessed whenever possible.

**The content of communication: information and assumptions**

The interviews highlighted that both primary and secondary teachers’ knowledge regarding countries of origin, their school systems, families’ economic and educational backgrounds in their home country and in England and EAL pupils’ former learning and achievement was very limited. The limited (or lack of) information they had about EAL pupils and their families represented a strong barrier with regard to more effective and efficient communication.
Knowledge was gathered via mainly informal communication with EAL pupils, or from other teachers. As the Specialist EAL Teaching Assistant at Brenton commented:

There is a bit of information. I usually find that out by chatting to the teachers, because the teachers have been seeing the parents at the beginning and end of the day … but I don't really have a lot of information about the parents, I have to say. (EAL Specialist Teaching Assistant, Brenton Primary School)

The lack of information led to a variety of assumptions by teachers about EAL children and their parents:

I know that the girl who's come to me has beautiful handwriting and has great imagination. So I think she's done a lot of literacy. (Class Teacher, Brenton Primary School)

I mean I think that’s the difference is you kind of just assume … they’ve come over to work in the factories and sometimes you forget that maybe the families that are coming over aren’t necessarily just that demographic, they’ve got a different background…. I mean I would assume maybe her parents come over here with quite a high level and quite well-paid jobs. She is such a bright and well-spoken young lady, so that’ll be interesting. (History Teacher, Windscott Academy)

I think sometimes you have children who arrive, and they just feel bad about themselves. Maybe they weren’t that bright at their last school. Maybe they were a high-achieving child, and suddenly they’ve had this huge setback. Maybe they were comfortable at home, and they lived in a nice big house, and now they’re living in a draughty caravan. Maybe they’ve lost all their friends. Maybe they’re just having a really rough time. (EAL Specialist Teaching Assistant, Brenton Primary School)

The above quotes reflect the wide range of assumptions teachers made during the interview and highlight their lack of information. Several teachers assumed parents’ educational level via their children’s performance, which is problematic. Overall, teaching staff appeared to assume that parents of EAL pupils from the A8 countries had generally low levels of education because they were working in the agriculture or service industries in England. Staff were not aware that the majority of A8 migrants downgrade their employment status when they arrive in England and ignored the fact that, even if parents work in low-skilled jobs, the majority of European citizens from the A8 countries arrive with high or very high levels of education (see Rienco, 2014; Schneider & Holman, 2011a). The quote by a teacher with a migration background at Windscott also reflects the issue of low-skilled employment despite having good educational qualifications:

I can tell you now from a Polish person's point of view … I’ve been working in many different places because I couldn’t speak English, so I’ve been working in factories, I’ve been working in warehouses. It wasn’t easy. At the same time I’ve been studying in college because I want to learn … and many people there, they’re highly educated, you know, in warehouses or factories but they can’t speak English or they’re maybe – they’re too shy or they don’t believe themselves that much they can achieve in this country…. My father-in-law is a Polish language teacher for many years. He’d been – he lectured in university even in Poland. And my mother-in-law she’s a 25 years' nursery principal in Poland. But everything just collapsed there and you know now they work in a chocolate factory. So you see. But at home for example, if they got kids, they can teach them very well because they’re both teachers. (Teacher, Windscott Academy)

Teachers at Windscott Academy in particular mentioned poor communication with parents and referred to a variety of educational or social assumptions, such as lack of educational background, a lack of interest in education, language issues, a lack of communication
between children and parents and shift work. Communication (and parental interest in their children’s learning) with parents was often measured via the attendance at parent evenings and teachers did not seem to be aware that these evenings, or conventional school–home communication strategies in general, might be problematic for newly arrived parents with low levels of English and limited knowledge of the English school system (see Power & Clark, 2000). As outlined earlier, research has shown that migrant parents have high levels of interest in their children’s learning.

Overall, the above issues highlight that a lack of information and effective communication structures leads to unsuccessful communication with EAL pupils and their parents, which in turn encourages problematic communication processes about EAL pupils and their parents. In that respect, Brenton primary school appeared to have better communication structures, which led to more successful communication with EAL pupils and their parents when compared with Windscott Academy. However, staff in both schools lacked sufficient information on countries of origin and migration and made a range of assumptions, which hindered the communication process.

**Reflections**

Communication lies at the heart of achieving social integration of new and diverse communities. In this paper we have used organisational communication theory to analyse the responses of two different types of school to newly arrived EAL students, in this case mainly Eastern European students. The three dimensions (external factors, communication models and communication content) identified by organisational communication theory offer an important framework for future research on the interface between schools and linguistically diverse migrant families. Our exploratory study touches only lightly on the complexity involved in each of these dimensions. It will be important to pursue such themes in a wide range of schools, evaluating the impact of different school responses to external factors, different models of communication, and the shaping of communication content. The study focused mainly on voluntary migration from the European Accession countries and does not address specifically other migration scenarios, such as forced migration from outside Europe. Although communication issues outlined in this article will also be relevant for migrants other than EU citizens, further research needs to be conducted to analyse the specific implications for pupils and families with different migration backgrounds.

We have shown that there could be important differences between the primary and secondary communication cultures. While both schools were keen to offer communication strategies that facilitated mutual cultural understanding with EAL pupils and their parents, the primary school seemed to be more successful in achieving this by developing structures which offered an interactional and transactional approach. Communication structures at the secondary school were less developed and often reflected a linear approach. Because secondary schools confront a range of structural disadvantages when compared with primary schools (e.g. achievement rather than child-centred pedagogy, lack of potential communication between teachers and parents at the end of the school day, large size and wide catchment area), they require a broad range of innovative communication strategies to facilitate interactional and transactional communication between staff, EAL pupils and their parents. Newly arrived EAL pupils and parents with low levels of English need other communication strategies than non-EAL pupils and parents. Translations and translators are central to effective communication. The primary school reflected a variety of strategies...
including digital tools, translated templates for routine messages, parental networks for parents of EAL and non-EAL pupils and the use of bilingual community services. Schools lack data regarding the needs, resources and barriers for effective communication with EAL pupils and their parents, which is exacerbated by the fact that parents of EAL pupils are hardly ever represented in wider schools’ decision-making (e.g. being Parent Governors) (see Evans et al., 2016). Schools need to find ways to receive feedback from EAL communities and Brenton’s idea of a feedback box (catering for different languages) and a parental survey on preferred means of communication (translated into different languages) are good examples for interactional communication.

Communication structures and interactions need to be culturally inclusive, providing ‘an open and clear exchange of information’ and ‘creative approaches and sustained efforts in building relations with minority ethnic/linguistic parents’ which reflect an ‘outreach mentality’ (Hamilton, 2013, pp. 309–313) – a view that is strongly shared by researchers working with Spanish-speaking migrant families in the United States or refugee families in Australia. Teachers should be encouraged to move from seeing migration and language difference as a ‘problem’, to seeing it as a resource and opportunity for all children (Coady et al., 2009; Schneider, 2016). Our analysis of two schools’ communicative structures suggests that there is still much that needs to be done to achieve these communicative goals – where external factors such as migration and diversity become opportunities, where communication modes are fluid, engaging and responsive to change, and where the content of communication is based on knowledge and awareness rather than (wrong) assumptions and potential stereotypes. Clearly such goals are challenging. It requires ‘proactive teachers who critically reflect on the complexity of experiences faced by minority ethnic and linguistic families and attempt to remove discriminatory barriers’ (Hamilton, 2013, pp. 313–314). If communication is to be ‘respectful, collaborative and reflexive’ (ibid., p. 313) then it needs to be based on strong school–community partnerships that remove anachronistic and conventional models of communication. For example, partnerships between higher educational institutions, schools and migrant communities could support specialised initial training, in-service learning placements and certificated expert teachers (Naidoo, 2013). In so many of the research projects, teachers are found to lack knowledge and confidence, and to be out of their comfort zone when pupils and parents do not speak their language (Arnot et al., 2014; Hamilton, 2013). Government, community and school support is essential if communication systems are to improve.

The content of communication may be shaped by risky assumptions regarding migrant children and their families, as indicated in our exploratory case study. This point relates directly to the need for staff to know about areas such as countries of origin and their educational systems, pupils’ former school achievements, the migration complexity (e.g. potential downgrading of parents in employment despite having good educational levels), and parental engagement and interest in their child’s learning at home (even if parent evenings are not attended) (Tomlinson, 2000; Evans et al., 2016). In a recent article Schneider (2016) has also highlighted the need for teachers’ awareness of transnational living as increasingly pupils and/or their parents have lived in more than one country, experienced more than one education system and speak more than one language; transnational living has emotional, social and educational consequences and offers challenges and opportunities for schools that need to be acknowledged in school communication. Overall, such information and awareness does not only locate migrant children (and their parents) in the English educational culture, but also counters wrong assumptions and enhances teachers’ empathetic dispositions and
behaviours when communicating with newly arrived EAL pupils (McAllister & Irvine, 2002). As Devine (2009) points out, migrant students do not come from homogeneous communities – such communities are themselves shaped by social class, gender and ethnic divisions. Migrant groups have diverse psychosocial, educational and cultural backgrounds, as well as different histories of migration and settlement. Yet it seems such information is not always available or necessarily sought, nor are the child’s abilities and capabilities easy to assess or effectively assessed, especially if bilingual tests are not used (Arnot et al., 2014). In this context, the category of EAL is not helpful since it masks diversity of language, family values, knowledge and experience, which are valuable assets and opportunities for non-English-speaking students (Devine, 2009; Evans et al., 2016).

Communication systems need to offer opportunities for dialogue, recognise the value of ‘Others’ and be adaptable to change – this model captured in the concept of transactional communication. Conventional and linear modes of communication risk ineffective communication, characterised by lack of information, misunderstandings and misinterpretations, not only between teachers, EAL pupils and their parents, but also between non-EAL pupils and EAL pupils and their parents. This leads potentially to stereotyping, to missed opportunities by the school for tapping into resources migrant families can offer, and to underachievement among EAL students. The arrival of new migrant communities represents the litmus test for the school’s commitment and delivery of inclusion (Pinson, Arnot, & Candappa, 2010). In this case, the litmus test is whether the schools’ communicative structures, processes and interactions facilitate an informed dialogue between teachers, migrant pupils and their parents, and are compassionate and empowering, while helping young people to engage successfully in a fluid and changing globalised world.

Notes

1. Unless stated otherwise the term ‘parents’ includes carers and refers to parents of EAL students.
2. EAL is a concept developed in the English context and refers to ‘all pupils whose first language is not English, but who are living and attending schools in England’ (see Arnot et al., 2014, p. 12). Other terms are used in the English context (e.g. English as a second language, ESL or English for Speakers of Other Languages, ESOL) and in different countries (e.g. English Language Learner, ELL, in the United States) (ibid.).
3. A8 countries: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.
4. Five non-EAL students were recruited to understand the social interaction between EAL and non-EAL students. This area will not be included in this paper.
5. The number of current pupils from A8 countries is not comparable with the number of immigrant pupils who entered schools in inner-city areas, such as London, Birmingham and Manchester, during the 1960s.
6. Informal communication between staff, EAL pupils and teachers is another aspect regarding the EAL communication process of both schools, but will not be investigated further in this paper.
7. The awareness of transnationalisation is also relevant for the higher education context including teacher training (see Schneider, 2013).

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