"I have to know. I have to understand how to do this!"

Exploring personal and professional experiences of ESOL practitioners in Ireland during and since the COVID-19 pandemic

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Acknowledgements

This has been quite a journey. Relocating to the north west of Ireland a decade ago; naturalising as an Irish citizen in early 2020; taking the difficult (scary!) decision to walk away from a long-standing role with City & Guilds; taking a career break; acquainting myself more closely with the adult education landscape on this island; applying my previous experience of working with ESOL tutors and provider organisations – albeit mostly within England and Wales; considering the rapid growth of ESOL in Ireland over the last few years; reliving key moments during and since March 2020.

And now, hopefully, providing some insight into the personal and professional experiences of ESOL practitioners in Ireland during and since the pandemic that will be of interest to others working within this arena. I'd also like to think that there are some useful 'takeaways' for those with policy interest and involvement in ESOL – on this island and beyond.

Inevitably, there's a list of thank yous (and apologies to anyone I might have omitted):

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  I'm hoping this research will provide the branch with food for thought as we plan our future island-wide activities.
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Last, but certainly not least, my **eight participants**, who were all so generous with their time and so willing to speak candidly.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound effect on how many of us view our professional and personal lives, including my own. For teachers of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) there was an immediate disruption as lockdown restrictions were announced in March 2020, with an imperative during that initial period to maintain contact with learners and facilitate online teaching and learning where possible.

This study explores the personal and professional experiences of ESOL practitioners working on the island of Ireland during and since the pandemic. It considers how they felt and what they did, but also how far they felt supported and who they might have collaborated or kept in touch with.

Before embarking on this study, I had spent the previous two decades working for City & Guilds where I managed, supported and advised on its ESOL, literacy and numeracy qualifications and services. Most of that work involved supporting practitioners and provider organisations in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, though since relocating to Derry a decade ago my role had become home-based but nevertheless involved almost weekly commutes across the Irish Sea to meet with colleagues and customers. The pandemic provided me with pause for thought, an opportunity to consider how I might apply my knowledge and experience of language and literacy learning closer to home.

Based on qualitative interviews, eight ESOL practitioners' insights and reflections are distilled across four themes:

- equity and learner engagement
- practicalities of lockdown and using technology
- collaboration and communication
- enduring changes.

The study also considers the wider context of Ireland's publicly funded ESOL programmes, and especially why ESOL has not have gained the same level of high profile and cross-government support that can be seen with the ten-year Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) strategy.

"I have to know. I have to understand how to do this!"

Personal and professional experiences of ESOL practitioners in Ireland during and since the COVID-19 pandemic

In September 2022 I enrolled on a full-time MEd in Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University in Co. Kildare. This is my thesis topic.

As an experienced education professional who had worked within the arena of adults' literacy and language education for more than two decades, I was curious to understand more about the experiences of ESOL practitioners as they navigated the extraordinary challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

My previous work with ESOL practitioners had largely taken place within England and Wales, although as an immigrant to the island of Ireland I was keen to focus this study on those working within Ireland's publicly funded English language programmes for migrants.

Eight conversations with eight practitioners

Julia	Co-ordinator - suburban
Geraldine	Tutor - rural
Alicia	Tutor - rural
Ciara	Tutor - suburban
Zabel	Co-ordinator - suburban
Marie	Tutor - suburban
Lauren	Tutor - rural
Edel	Tutor – FE college in NI

Key takeaways

- **Urban vs rural disparities** not just scale of provision, but organisationally; rural tutors frequently working alone.
- **Uncertainty about ESOL's place within wider FET landscape** especially alongside Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) strategy.
- **ETBs moved impressively to provide resources** e.g. laptops, books.
- **Pandemic encouraged some to share resources** one participant forced her team to plan/deliver lessons in groups!

Four themes...

Equity and learner engagement

Changed plans
"I seemed to spend a lot of time putting stuff on screens."
"I wrote off that year ... it would have been box-ticking."

Learners' use of tech
"Families might have one computer but they had kids that needed it for school work."
"People talking over each other ... or one confident person would answer every question."

Lost learners
"We sent them links in text messages to apps, but we knew a lot wouldn't even be able to do that."
"I became very frustrated ... trying to undo social problems."

Practicalities of lockdown and using technology

Preparedness
"We assumed at the beginning it would just be a few weeks."

Making it work
"We wanted to keep our tutors getting paid, so needed to figure out a way they could teach."
"I drove myself to drink almost, worrying about not getting it right."

Platform issues
Conflict between what learners could easily use (e.g. WhatsApp and Zoom), and those supported by ETB (e.g. Teams).

Management
"I would have even more respect for how they pulled and pushed [to get] resources."

Collaboration and communication

Wellbeing
"Those [tutors] who weren't used to working on the computer ... for them it was a lot of stress."
"We went for a walk most days ... and that kept us sane too!"

Team collaboration
"ESOL teachers are a very specific type of teacher ... they like to have their own little chest of treasures."
"I wanted a camaraderie between colleagues but there's just nobody there."

Wider collaboration
"We had loads of CPD ... A lot were optional, but I had lots of time."
Neither could recall coming into contact with any outside their immediate teams.

Enduring changes

Continuing tech use
"We acquired a lot of new skills that there wasn't the incentive or motivation to do prior to [lockdown]."
"The expectation is much higher because all communication is done on [MS] 365."
"If the internet is down there's uproar because the class wasn't prepared for that."

Human interaction
"They're talking to someone while walking to the class, in the class, during the break, while walking out."
"The thoughts of getting out there again, putting on makeup and heels ... you almost get out of practice!"

City & Guilds

I was able to draw on my time managing, supporting and advising on **City & Guilds'** language, literacy and numeracy products; adapting and applying what I knew and understood to the landscape in Ireland.

I relocated to **Derry** a decade ago. In March 2020, less than two weeks before lockdown, I naturalised as an **Irish Citizen**.

Most publicly funded ESOL in Ireland is delivered by 16 **Education and Training Boards (ETBs)**. Provision has grown massively in recent years, yet ESOL remains a relatively small part of what ETBs do.

Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) is the Irish government's ten-year strategy for literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. It's described as 'cross-government, cross-society and cross-economy'. Meanwhile, there's no distinct national ESOL strategy!

Ireland's **National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)** is organised around ten levels. There is no prescribed ESOL curriculum or national standards, although many learners complete **Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)** awards. Some ETBs also offer **Cambridge English Qualifications**, perceiving these to have more currency with employers and portability (especially since they align with the **CEFR**, rather than the NFQ).

I'm hoping these ESOL practitioners' stories about the pandemic, especially their insights about how and where they collaborated, will provide food for thought for **NATECLA's Island of Ireland Branch** (and for others too!).

NATECLA Island of Ireland Branch | SOLAS learning works | NALA | etbi | ELT Ireland | Maynooth University National University of Ireland Maynooth

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This research poster, summarising the study, was exhibited at the **National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA)** Conference in Birmingham on 23-24 June 2023.

Glossary of terms

Abbreviations and acronyms

AEC	Adult Education Centre
AHEAD	Association for Higher Education Access and Disability
ALCE	Adult Literacy Community Education
ALL	Adult Literacy for Life (the Irish government's ten-year strategy for adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy)
ALO	Adult Literacy Organiser
ALOA	Adult Literacy Organisers' Association
AONTAS	Aos Oideachais Náisiúnta Trí Aontú Saorálach (*National Adult Education Through Voluntary Unification*; National Adult Learning Organisation)
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (*Centre europeén pour le développement de la formation professionelle*)
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (see *Appendix E*)
CELTA	Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (a teaching qualification offered by Cambridge Assessment; previously known as 'Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults')
CEN	Community Education Network (a network of independent community education providers, established in 2007 by AONTAS)
DFA	Department of Foreign Affairs
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
DIUS	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (British government department responsible for further and higher education in England between 2007-08)
DOJ	Department of Justice
EAL	English as an Additional Language (typically offered to school-aged learners)
EAP	English for Academic Purposes (offered within, or as a means of gaining access to, universities)
EFA	English for Action (efalondon.org)
EFL	English as a Foreign Language (typically offered within private language schools and colleges)
ELT	English Language Teaching
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages

ESL	English as a Second Language (this term is sometimes used interchangeably with ESOL)
ESP	English for Specific Purposes (sometimes also described as ‘Language for Specific Purposes’ (LSP))
ETB	Education and Training Board (there are sixteen regional ETBs across Ireland)
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland (national representative body for the sixteen ETBs)
ETI	(Northern Ireland) Education and Training Inspectorate
FÁS	An Foras Áiseanna Saothair (former Training and Employment Authority, replaced by the ETBs and SOLAS in 2013)
FET	Further Education and Training (commonly used to describe the range of adult and further education programmes and courses publicly funded through SOLAS and offered within ETBs)
GCSE	General Certificate in Secondary Education (qualification mostly taken by 16-year-olds in England, Northern Ireland and Wales).
IALS	International Adult Literacy Survey (conducted by OECD)
IATEFL	International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language
IELTS	International English Language Testing System (a language proficiency test, developed by the British Council and Cambridge Assessment, that is widely used for admission to academic institutions and employment in English language-dominant countries)
ICA	Irish Country Women’s Association
INAR	Irish Network Against Racism
IRPP	Irish Refugee Protection Programme
IVEA	Irish Vocational Education Association (effectively superseded by ETBI in 2013)
MAEDF	Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund (a fund established by DFHERIS in 2020 to support Community Education; now known as the Reach Fund)
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NATECLA	National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications (see *Appendix D*)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (government inspection service for education in England)
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland (state agency responsible for the external quality assurance of further and higher education and training)
REALT	Regional Education And Language Teams (REALTs were established in each of the ETBs during 2022, specifically to support Ukrainian families arriving in Ireland)
RLSU	Refugee Language Support Unit
RQF	Regulatory Qualifications Framework (used by qualification regulators in England and Northern Ireland; RQF levels also correspond with the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW))
SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachas Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (Further Education and Training Authority, an agency of DFHERIS)
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
VEC	Vocational Education Committee (the 36 VECs were replaced by sixteen ETBs in 2013)
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme

Online communication platforms referenced in this study

Facebook

FaceTime

Google Classroom

LinkedIn

(Microsoft) Teams

Twitter

WhatsApp

Zoom

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1 Introduction

1.1 My back story: how I came to research ESOL in Ireland

In the 25 years before embarking on this MEd. programme I had worked in various roles for The City and Guilds of London Institute (City & Guilds). I had commissioned assessments, developed qualifications, liaised with regulators, built relationships with government officials and other stakeholders, as well as supporting and guiding practitioners involved in preparing learners for City & Guilds assessments.

For most of that time I looked after City & Guilds' qualifications in literacy, numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). My initial involvement in these areas coincided with two major policy initiatives in England: Curriculum 2000 saw the introduction of Key Skills qualifications across the 14-19 curriculum (Hodgson & Spours, 2002), whilst Skills for Life (DfEE, 2001) set out to improve levels of literacy and numeracy amongst the adult population that had been highlighted in the Moser Report (1999).

A discrete ESOL strand followed a couple of years after those for literacy and numeracy, and I became involved in this from 2005 when I took over managing City & Guilds' ESOL Skills for Life qualifications. I quickly realised how far second/additional language acquisition intertwined with broader questions of migration, social cohesion and integration, especially as the British government introduced minimum English language requirements for settlement and naturalisation. Positioning migrants' language acquisition alongside the 'basic skills' of literacy and numeracy was also contentious for many within the sector.

Whilst my job included working with qualification regulators and other stakeholders, I became frustrated in the ensuing years by how little opportunity there was to influence policy decisions, and how little appetite there was amongst City & Guilds' senior leaders to advocate for change within such a politically sensitive area. As long as the literacy, numeracy and ESOL qualifications were meeting their revenue targets then they would be happy, but unlike other aspects of further education and skills policy within England they showed little interest in deepening their understanding of this arena or wanting to position the organisation as a thought leader.

In the meantime, I relocated to Derry and was increasingly working with regulators and officials responsible for literacy and numeracy within the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland and Wales as they developed their own Moser (1999) inspired strategies and qualifications. Living outside England, I found myself becoming something of a counterweight to City & Guilds' internal culture of Anglocentrism and bias towards England-specific policy discourses. I was still travelling to England most weeks, though after 2015 my role changed to offering technical advice and support to literacy, numeracy and ESOL programme managers and practitioners preparing learners for City & Guilds qualifications.

The Technical Advisor role allowed more room for horizon-scanning. Whilst City & Guilds has almost no involvement in literacy, numeracy or ESOL within the 26-county Republic of Ireland (see 1.4.3), I began to develop my own interest in Ireland's Further Education and Training (FET) landscape. Initially this was through becoming a member of AONTAS (National Adult Learning Organisation) and the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), though later I helped establish an Island of Ireland branch of the National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA).

Having relocated my personal life to the island of Ireland a decade ago, I had begun to think about how I might relocate my professional life. The 2010s had been a dismal time for post-16 and adult education in England, with funding for adult learning reduced by half in real terms (Lewis & Bolton, 2022). Literacy, numeracy and ESOL were hit especially hard as the Conservative-led government sought to repudiate the Skills for Life strategy of its Labour predecessor (BIS, 2012) and position 'good' General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) English and Mathematics grades as the preferred outcome for all learners.

I decided to take a career break from the autumn of 2022, principally to complete this Masters but also to consider how I might work with literacy and ESOL closer to home. Despite attending AONTAS and NALA member events for some years, I was conscious my understanding of FET in Ireland was still not as deep and nuanced as that in the jurisdictions where I had worked more extensively. Coming from a job role and environment that was heavily focused on qualifications, quality and accountability measures, my initial impression of Ireland's FET structures and policy discourses was that they were far more learner-focused and less overtly neoliberalist than the environment I had grown used to. It was both refreshing and exciting.

1.2 Setting the scene

> Lá Fhéile Pádraig shona daoibh!
>
> This is a Saint Patrick's Day like no other. A day that none of us will ever forget.
>
> Today's children will tell their own children and grandchildren about the national holiday in 2020 that had no parades or parties, but instead saw everyone staying at home to protect each other.
>
> In years to come, let them say of us, when things were at their worst, we were at our best.
>
> **Leo Varadkar TD**
> **An Taoiseach, 17 March 2020**

(Varadkar, 2020).

On the evening of Tuesday 17 March 2020, I sat at home watching the Taoiseach's St Patrick's Day address. A few days earlier I had returned home to Derry after working in England throughout the previous week. Two weeks earlier I had attended my Irish citizenship ceremony in Killarney. Naturalisation was something I had planned to do since relocating to Derry, although my 'adopted' Irish identity strengthened after the 2016 Brexit referendum and the imminent loss of free movement provided an impetus to get on with this.

The moment when Brexit was 'done' at the end of January 2020 was a difficult moment for me, having been an anti-Brexit activist and supporter of the People's Vote (second referendum) campaign for the previous three and a half years. Much as I loved my job and the people I worked with, I felt increasing unsure about how much longer I wanted to continue weekly commutes to England. I knew looking for a similar role within the island of Ireland would not be straightforward, so the idea of taking timeout to complete a Masters seemed appealing.

However, before I could take any serious steps to pursue this, the pandemic struck. Suddenly there were no more early morning flights, Premier Inns or weekends feeling exhausted! I was able to continue my job, and actually spent more time speaking with practitioners than I had been able to when dashing between in-person meetings. There was also a pressing need to support as much as I could whilst practitioners grappled with the alternative assessment arrangements City & Guilds had been given regulatory dispensation to apply to its qualifications. The external-facing nature of my job meant I was already comfortable using online communication tools and platforms; I also had a safe and stable home environment.

However, I was very aware that was not the case for some of my colleagues, and that our jobs had been disrupted far less than those in teaching roles.

1.3 Why ESOL? And why COVID?

1.3.1 Defining ESOL

Before setting the purpose and scope of this study, it is important to clarify what I mean by ESOL, and how this might be distinguished from other forms of English Language Teaching (ELT).

The term ‘ESOL’ is generally used within the islands of Ireland and Great Britain to describe the teaching of English to adult (post-16) migrant learners. That might include people seeking asylum or international protection, as well as those with refugee status or who might have settled in an English language-dominant country for other reasons; it might also include individuals within settled migrant communities where English is not widely spoken (at least not by all within that community). ESOL is also sometimes described as ‘English as a Second Language’ (ESL), more commonly within Australia, Aotearoa – New Zealand, Canada and the United States (IATEFL ESOL SIG, n.d.).

Schellekens (2007) provides a more thorough and nuanced definition of ESOL, including differences in emphasis between ESOL and other forms of ELT such as English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The latter normally describes ELT within countries where English is not the dominant language or where it involves short-term attendance at private language schools. That distinction is helpful in some respects: for example, ESOL learners are living within an English language-speaking environment and tend to be motivated to learn the dominant language for reasons of survival and integration; whereas EFL learners, where they are attending a private language school within an English language-dominant country, are more likely to have relocated temporarily, at their own expense (or that of an employer) and for the specific purpose of learning English.

Gakonga provides a more accessible guide to some of distinctions and similarities between ESOL and EFL. Like many with experiences of both, she is keen to avoid overstating the differences, noting, “In both cases, after all, what you are trying to do is to help people to learn a language” (2021). Where the distinctions become more significant is in the extent to

which ESOL learners might also be attempting to process broader disruptions to their lives as a result of (often forced) migration and possibly trauma, whilst in some cases simultaneously having to navigate issues around their migration status, housing and employment situations. With this in mind, it is not difficult to understand why ESOL might be perceived as more of a social practice than EFL within a fee-paying language school. As Mishan observes:

> English language support is just one cog in the immigration wheel that flings refugees and asylum seekers into the path of shifting political and social attitudes to integration, citizenship and national identity (2019, p. 5).

1.3.2 My introduction to ESOL

Having managed the assessment of City & Guilds' literacy and numeracy qualifications, in 2005 I became Product Manager for both these and the recently launched ESOL Skills for Life qualifications. These new qualifications were closely aligned to the British government's Skills for Life strategy and were markedly different from the more internationally focused ESOL qualifications City & Guilds had previously offered under its Pitman Qualifications brand.

In particular, they were largely assessed internally (by tutors, with internal and external quality assurance), which seemed an anathema to many ESOL and EFL practitioners who were used to externally set and marked examinations they would prepare learners for, but not be personally involved in conducting or assessing. I recall being viewed almost with suspicion at the first NATECLA conferences I attended in 2006, with an unspoken sense that I somehow personally represented the 'dumbing-down' of ELT!

Gradually I noticed a change, particularly as automatic fee remission for all ESOL learners in England was removed from 2007 onwards[1] and I began to work alongside NATECLA's board members as we engaged in conversations with the British government's Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) about a new suite of ESOL for Work qualifications. As far as I could within the constraints of my role, I also became more vocal on social media about my own support for migrants' rights and against the British

[1] This coincided with Tony Blair being replaced as British prime minister by Gordon Brown, and early stages of the global financial crisis. Fee remission (i.e. no fees charged to the learner) was retained for unemployed/low-income adults, whilst awarding organisations were asked to develop a discrete set of 'ESOL for Work' qualifications designed specifically to support language for the workplace in the hope employers would facilitate and co-fund these. Funding for these qualifications was subsequently phased out after 2010 by the coalition government led by David Cameron.

government's Hostile Environment policy (JCWI, 2021), as well as endorsing NATECLA's calls for a national ESOL strategy within England. Internal assessment gradually became more popular with a greater number of ESOL practitioners, as they warmed to the much greater flexibility it offered them over exam scheduling and especially resits.

Whilst I had not taught ESOL learners myself, I increasingly felt I could claim to be an 'ESOL ally', with an appreciation that the role of an ESOL practitioner involves considerably more than language acquisition and appreciation that it needs to be seen within a wider political and social context.

1.3.3 My experience of ESOL within Ireland

My initial introduction to ESOL on the island of Ireland was through supporting the further education colleges in Northern Ireland as they began offering ESOL Skills for Life qualifications during the 2010s. At that time all six colleges also used City & Guilds' Essential Skills qualifications with their literacy and numeracy learners, and one of my early challenges was persuading the ESOL and Essential Skills teams they should talk to each other. There was an obvious crossover insofar as the latter were experienced with internal assessment and quality assurance, and were also increasingly having to support ESOL learners needing to complete Essential Skills to meet the mandatory literacy and numeracy qualification requirements within their apprenticeships.

I had had less involvement with ESOL practitioners in the Republic of Ireland, other than attending a few NALA ESOL events, although towards the end of 2021 I became involved in helping to launch an island-wide NATECLA branch.

1.3.4 Through the lens of a crisis

The disruptive effects of the pandemic provide an almost unique set of circumstances to consider the position of ESOL within Ireland and how ESOL practitioners regard themselves. The participant interviews took place almost exactly three years after the introduction of lockdown measures and just over a year after most of these restrictions had been lifted, so allowed participants to reflect on that period in its entirety without being so long after the event that memories would be likely to have faded.

I was conscious my own experience of the pandemic had been largely positive, but that it had nevertheless given me pause for thought. I was also aware pandemic restrictions had been far more disruptive for practitioners than they had been for people like myself, and that it would be illuminating to understand more about their experiences.

1.3.5 Networking and collaboration

My interest in exploring practitioners' opportunities and inclination to network and collaborate with one another was partly based on my previous role with City & Guilds where I had sought to bring together ESOL, literacy and numeracy practitioners across a range of settings to discuss and share practice. During the pandemic this had moved entirely to online meetings and webinars, having previously been a mixture of online and in-person. I found it harder to persuade online participants to engage spontaneously with one another (in the way they might during a coffee break when meeting in-person), though it could be far more convenient for busy practitioners to 'dip into' a short online meeting than to spend whole days travelling to and from an in-person event. I also sensed it tended to be easier for people who already knew each other to continue engaging online than it was to make new connections.

I was also inspired by research carried out by some of my England-based contacts within NATECLA, most notably: Diana Tremayne's exploration of the informal and self-directed professional learning by educators, for example via the *#UKFEChat* Twitter forum (Tremayne, 2021); Laïla El-Métoui and Nafisah Graham-Brown's reflections on the digital gap experienced by practitioners and learners, and creation of a public Facebook group (Digital Pedagogy for ESOL Teachers) as a source of mutual support (El-Métoui & Graham-Brown, 2021); Rachel Öner's (unpublished) examination of the effectiveness of non-formal practitioner meets to contribute to the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) of ESOL tutors and managers. I was keen to understand if anything like these examples of informal collaboration and praxis might have replicated amongst ESOL practitioners in Ireland, and particularly whether it might have done so virtually during the pandemic.

1.4 Research parameters

1.4.1 Research question

The study is a qualitative exploration of the following:

- how ESOL practitioners in Ireland adapted professionally and personally during the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- how, and with whom, they might have communicated, collaborated and sought mutual support in their practice;
- what enduring changes there might have been to their professional practice as a result of the pandemic.

It draws on my own knowledge and understanding of ESOL from before and during the pandemic. However, the focus is on hearing specifically about the lived experiences of ESOL practitioners in Ireland during this time.

1.4.2 What I will not be covering

The study does **not** consider specific theories of e-learning or the use of digital learning resources, other than where these are raised by its participants whilst discussing their experiences of the pandemic. It similarly does not examine particular theories or strategies for language learning, other than where these might be raised incidentally.

The extent to which ESOL is intertwined with wider questions of migration is of huge contextual importance to this study, as is the position of ESOL within Ireland's wider FET landscape. However, the study itself focuses on the experiences and stories of individual ESOL practitioners and how they made sense of the pandemic's extraordinary circumstances.

1.4.3 Use of terms

Ireland (and beyond)

This study is focused primarily on ESOL practitioners working within the 26-county Republic of Ireland, although it is informed by my own experiences of working with ESOL practitioners elsewhere. Having migrated from England to the island of Ireland, and especially because I live in the city of Derry but within walking distance of County Donegal, I am sensitive to the use of terminology when referring to places on this island and beyond. I am also mindful of the policy and contextual differences when comparing ESOL (and adult

education more generally) across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, to the extent that it is often problematic to generalise about practice within the United Kingdom.

Where I use the term 'Ireland' within this study I am normally referring specifically to institutions and practice within the 26-county state (unless in the context of more general references to the Irish nation); where I use the term 'island of Ireland' this is to clarify that I mean all 32 counties on the island; where I use the term 'Northern Ireland' I am referring specifically to the six counties within that jurisdiction.

Similarly, I have generally avoided referencing the 'United Kingdom' or 'UK' within this study; instead being specific about the constituent part(s) to which I am referring. I sometimes use the term 'Great Britain' to describe England, Scotland and Wales collectively.

Practitioner, teacher, tutor, educator…

Whilst these terms might be used interchangeably, for the purposes of this study I have chosen to us the term 'practitioner' to describe those involved in teaching and/or coordinating the teaching of ESOL. Where other terms such as 'teacher' 'tutor' or 'educator' are used, this is usually to reflect comments made by study participants or within relevant literature.

Learner, student, pupil…

Similarly, I have used the term 'learner' throughout, except where reporting comments made by study participants or when referring to relevant literature.

1.5 Summary of chapters

Chapter **2** provides more context for this study, examining the background to Ireland's current FET structures and ESOL's place within these. I also contrast the relatively modest amount of public policy attention given to ESOL when compared with adult literacy, and how ESOL practitioners in Ireland might view themselves and discuss the implications of this for ESOL.

Chapter **3** sets out the methodology and parameters for this study, my theoretical and other bases, and how I set about recruiting participants. Chapter **4** introduces the eight participants and sets out a collective story of their experiences during and since the pandemic. Chapter **5**

expands upon this with some further analysis of how these experiences vary and how they might be seen in the context of ESOL provision in Ireland.

Finally, Chapter 6 seeks to draw together key themes from this study, identifies how these might be of interest to others with an interest in ESOL within the island of Ireland and beyond, and suggests possible areas for further research.

2 Context and literature

2.1 Overview

Whilst this study is focused on the experiences of adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) practitioners during and since the COVID-19 pandemic, to evaluate this meaningfully it is necessary to have some contextual understanding of ESOL, its provision in Ireland and how ESOL practitioners might view themselves as educators. In particular, it is important to acknowledge relationships between language acquisition and broader questions of migration, integration and belonging (Simpson & Whiteside, 2015). As de Kadt states, "Language pervades every aspect of our lives, is never neutral, it empowers and disempowers" (1991, p. 1).

In this chapter I outline some of the background to the current Further Education and Training (FET) structures and institutions within which most publicly funded ESOL provision for adults in Ireland takes place. I then track the relatively recent emergence of ESOL for migrants as a significant area of activity within Ireland's FET landscape, considering some of the factors that might have influenced how ESOL is currently positioned and prioritised by policymakers. With the recent launch of the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) ten-year 'cross-government' strategy to support adults' literacy, numeracy and digital literacy (SOLAS, 2021a), I contrast the status of ESOL as something of a 'Cinderella' within FET and across other aspects of public policy concerned with migration and integration.

Drawing on my own experiences of working with ESOL practitioners and provider organisations, most notably within England, I discuss how the position of ESOL in Ireland might compare with that in other English language-dominant countries, with pertinent points to understand practitioners' experiences during the pandemic.

Ireland is not unique in lacking a coherent national strategy for ESOL and, as Simpson & Whiteside observe, it is not uncommon for migration policy responses in English language-dominant countries to be uneven and contradictory (2015, p.1). However, they also suggest ESOL practitioners might be quite accomplished in finding their own ways of working around national policy inconsistencies or absences:

> Novel pedagogic practices are emerging to enable newcomers to gain access to the languages of wider communication, practices that often involve the adoption of a critical stance (Simpson & Whiteside, 2015, p.1).

Finally, I explore the extent to which ESOL tutors might regard their role as having a broader social purpose, and how far this reflects in their practice. Whilst I am personally drawn towards the collective emancipatory principles of learning advocated by Paulo Freire (1970), as well as being sympathetic towards criticisms of 'deficit modelling', and I recognise that language is inherently political, I appreciate not all ESOL practitioners will necessarily share all of these perspectives. Moreover, I am realistic about how any practical application of dialogical and critical pedagogies might be constrained by systemic, organisational and other factors.

2.2 Background to adult education in Ireland

2.2.1 Structures, historical contexts and policy tensions

Publicly funded ESOL provision largely takes place within Ireland's sixteen Education and Training Boards (ETBs). These are overseen and funded by SOLAS (An tSeirbhís Oideachas Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna, the Further Education and Training Authority), with its own remit and priorities largely set out in a five-year Further Education and Training (FET) strategy (SOLAS, 2020). SOLAS is an agency of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS).

The current FET structures date from 2013 (Coolahan, 2017, pp.263-273), when the two distinct strands of adult education and employment-related training that had previously been overseen by Vocational Education Committees (VECs) and An Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS) were brought together. Both Connolly (2014) and Murtagh, (2014b) describe a long-term shift in the orientation of adult and community education away from an ethos of social inclusion and emancipation towards a narrower 'training' focus on serving the needs of the economy.

This pattern is by no means unique to Ireland, indeed Hurley points to a range of international influences, most notably the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and European Commission, in reshaping adult education discourse towards a prioritising of economic concerns (2014, p.68). He goes on to highlight the pervasiveness of the human capital theories, observing these have, "Largely attained uncritical currency" (Hurley, 2014,

p.80). Their influence in the recent development of skills policy in Ireland is discussed further by O'Sullivan & Rami (2022), along with the extent to which policy discourse and practice has been influenced by developments in Great Britain versus those across the rest of Europe and elsewhere. The extent to which 'skills' and 'employability' discourses throughout the European Union have permeated Ireland's FET landscape is also discussed by Shannon (2019), when she compares how far these are emphasised in SOLAS's 2014 FET strategy document with the Learning for Life White Paper a decade and a half earlier (DES, 2000).

Much as it is important to highlight the influence of neoliberalist and managerialist discourses, I am struck by how these still seem less 'full-throated' and more contested within FET in Ireland compared with my own recent experiences of working in England. Whilst the current Future FET strategy document emphasises 'building skills' as its first objective, there are substantial sections devoted to fostering inclusion and facilitating learning pathways (SOLAS, 2020). Indeed it would be extraordinary to see similar rhetoric feature so prominently in a further education or skills policy document produced by the current British government or any of its predecessors in recent decades. Similarly, whilst the use of accreditation has grown considerably since the introduction of Ireland's National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ) (Coolahan, 2017) and funding has increasingly become linked to measurable outputs (Magrath & Fitzsimons, 2019), funding for FET is not directly contingent on the achievement of externally awarded qualifications as is largely the case for adults in England (ESFA, 2022). Likewise, FET tutors and institutions are not subject to an external system of inspection comparable with that of the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) in England, or by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) in Northern Ireland.

2.2.2 Community education: emancipation and advocacy

Another contrast with my experiences from elsewhere is the relative vibrancy of community education in Ireland and the extent to which this has been able to focus on emancipation and advocacy. That ethos has undoubtedly waned since the early 2000s, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and 2013 structural reforms, as community-based organisations have either been edged out by statutory provision or forced to refocus on labour market activation in order to attract or retain funding (Connolly, 2014; Fitzsimons, 2017; Murtagh, 2014b; Magrath & Fitzsimons, 2019). Nevertheless, the presence of the AONTAS

(National Adult Learning Organisation) Community Education Network (CEN), and especially the launch of the Community Education Charter (AONTAS, 2021), suggests many of the organisations and individuals working in the sector remain committed to an emancipatory purpose and ethos.

Both Connolly (2014) and Fitzsimons (2017) track the growth of the community education sector during the twentieth century, involving organisations such as the Irish Country Women's Association (ICA), the Catholic Church, the trade union movement and some outreach activity by universities. Each of these would have brought their own world view perspectives, yet it is easy to appreciate how they would have shared an interest in self-help and mutuality. Murtagh further highlights the different ways these traditions were espoused by Horace Plunkett and Alfred O'Rahilly (2014a, p.25).

Involvement of the VECs in community education appears to date from the 1970s, with the Murphy report especially prompting a focus on literacy classes and the emergence of formal positions such as Adult Literacy Organisers (ALOs). I will return to the presence and profile of adult literacy within Ireland's FET landscape later, although it is worth acknowledging Connolly's observation about community-based adult literacy initially having been addressed through emancipatory practices, and for the ALOs to have supported participatory methods (2014, p. 58). More recently, Grummell describes adult literacy as:

> An interesting case study of an education service that operates as a smaller part of a larger FET system to form strong webs of transformative learning between literacy learners and staff in individual and group learning contexts (2023, p. 151).

2.3 ESOL: within Ireland, and elsewhere

2.3.1 Background: from emigration to immigration

To set the relatively recent emergence of significant ESOL provision within Ireland into context, it is worth reflecting the island of Ireland's overall population is still more than a million less than it was before the Great Famine of the mid-nineteenth century (Ó Gráda and Fernihough, 2018), and that there was net emigration from Ireland for much of the twentieth century (CSO, 2022). Whilst there has recently been more substantial immigration, the first national policy pronouncements about English language provision for migrants were little more than two decades ago (DES, 2000). This contrasts with much of Great Britain, where the field of ESOL can be traced back at least as far as the mid-twentieth century and arrival of

migrants from former British colonies in the aftermath of the Second World War (Simpson & Hunter, 2023).

2.3.2 From boat people to REALT

Sheridan identifies the initial development of ESOL with the reception and integration of refugees to Ireland in the late 1970s, most notably from Vietnam. Touching upon a theme to which I will return later, she notes an initial response to adult new arrivals was to, "Confound or conflate language learning with literacy" (2015, p. 150). When ESOL provision was subsequently set up within a VEC outreach centre, funding came from the same budget allocation as that for adult literacy. Subsequent growth in the numbers of people seeking asylum in Ireland, especially during the 1990s, prompted an Interdepartmental Working Group on the Integration of Refugees and a commitment in the Learning for Life White Paper on Adult Education to free access to English language supports for people to people seeking asylum (DES, 2000).

Sheridan observes that both the 1999 Working Group and Learning for Life tended to frame language learning from a 'deficit' perspective; locating them alongside literacy and 'basic skills', but also positioning migrants as, "Beneficiaries of something bestowed upon them rather than being active agents involved in shaping their lives" (2015, p. 151). She alludes to a greater recognition of learner autonomy, at least in theory, within the Refugee Language Support Unit (RLSU) that had been established by the Refugee Agency within the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), yet even here there is a sense that interventions were 'done to' migrants (p. 152). This chimes with the more recent evaluation by Ćatibušić et al., (2019) of how the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) has sought to support language and intercultural needs of Syrian refugees; they too highlighted a lack of clear national guidelines and a tendency towards setting inappropriate goals and having unrealistic expectations about learners' likely rates of progress. Nagy's description of intercultural competence within Ireland as, "The ability to do, see and even feel things the way the Irish do" (2018, p. 649), is also instructive in its assimilationist framing, appearing to value learning to be 'like the Irish' over building upon learners' existing backgrounds and experiences.

The Russian invasion and war in Ukraine since February 2022 prompted further immigration, with nearly 75,000 Ukrainians having settled in Ireland by February 2023 (CSO, 2023). In contrast with its existing efforts to support people seeking international protection and asylum in Ireland, the government's response appears to have been more coordinated and visible to the general population, as well as appearing more openly welcoming. Regional Education and Language Teams (REALT) were set up across all sixteen ETBs (SOLAS, n.d.), each offering a range of support including assistance with school places, as well as access to English language and literacy support. Crucially, one key function of the REALT teams has been to support information flows between local and national support services; another noticeable difference has been the availability of multilingual information and guidance.

The presence of REALT and other specifically tailored support for people fleeing the war in Ukraine has prompted some uncomfortable comparisons with the treatment of people seeking asylum and protection in Ireland from other countries and areas of conflict (Wilson, 2023). Whilst this may reflect similar patterns in other European countries, it suggests a need to explore Irish attitudes towards identity and migration a little further.

2.3.3 Irish identity and attitudes towards immigration

> Ambivalence has created a vacuum in English language policy so that quite sudden changes in the social, cultural and communicative landscape have presented great challenges to the development of adult ESOL, which has until recently had no significant presence in Ireland (Sheridan, 2015, p. 149).

Ireland's relationships with migration and language are complicated. Both Sheridan and McCarthy (2019) describe a common characterisation of Ireland for much of the twentieth century as largely homogenous, Celtic, white, with a largely Catholic and overwhelmingly Christian demographic. The early period after the Free State gained independence could be characterised by economic insularity amidst assertions of cultural independence and a distinct Irish identity as the new state sought to distance itself from British colonialism.

Kitching meanwhile outlines how it can be problematic to apply transatlantic frameworks of Critical Race Theory within an Irish context, especially where 'Irishness' becomes recruited as a benign form of whiteness (2015, p. 166). He argues that this fuels a certain amount of complacency and denial within contemporary Irish society about the existence of racism. McCarthy similarly detects an exceptionalism and latent suspicion of the 'other' (2019,

pp.32-33). In particular, he cites a report compiled by McGinnity et al. (2018) for the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) which examined attitudes towards diversity in Ireland and found nearly half of respondents believed 'some cultures are superior to others'. Sheridan, similarly, describes a persistent 'them and us' perspective within public discourses and, including the use of the term 'non-nationals' in official parlance as well as the prevalence of narratives about 'welfare tourism' (p.155). She notes how the influence of some of these discourses, particularly tropes about pregnant African women, were influential in the successful 2004 referendum to remove the automatic right to citizenship for children born in Ireland.

More recent discourses from Ireland's (small, compared with other European countries, but increasingly noisy) far-right could be said to be continuing in a similar vein, although it should be acknowledged these are being met by increasingly strident counter voices such as the STOPFARRIGHT project (Cannon et al., 2021) as well as from umbrella organisations such as the Irish Network Against Racism (INAR) and Le Chéile. The recent Regularisation of Long Term Undocumented Migrant Scheme (DOJ, n.d.) would also suggest at least some official willingness to normalise immigration, in contrast with the Hostile Environment policy and increasingly shrill rhetoric from the British government (JCWI, 2021). Having personally been through an Irish citizenship ceremony, I would add that I found that experience an extremely positive, inclusive and uplifting occasion where attendees were welcomed as new citizens whilst also being encouraged to retain and cherish the heritage and traditions they bring. Nevertheless, the government has faced criticism for "pandering to", rather than directly confronting, racist tropes about 'single, unvetted, military-age men' (O'Connell, 2023).

The contrast in the range of support offered to Ukrainian people with those seeking international protection or asylum from elsewhere, also seems to reflect a hierarchising of European immigrants (Kitching, 2015, p. 176. The notion of the 'good immigant', along with that of the 'good language learner', is debunked by Norton & Toohey (2001), although McCarthy's (2019) observation that much of Ireland's immigration during the 1990s and 2000s came from within Europe might also be significant in this respect.

2.3.4 Language *is* political

> Within … the multi-million pound industry that is English Language Teaching (ELT), ESOL seems very much a struggling 'poor relation': young, cash-strapped, inexperienced and still seeking an identity. Its boundaries are indistinct; as well as its disputed identification with literacy, ESOL practitioners can be as much counsellors, psychologists, and, indeed, friends, as language teachers (Mishan, 2019, p.4).

As Mishan suggests here, ESOL has struggled for acceptance and status within a wider ELT arena that is more commercial and less comfortable with being seen as overtly political. A rare exception to this was Lesley Painter-Farrell's plenary address to the 2023 International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) conference, where she offered this summation of the ESOL context:

> Students have very often suffered great trauma leaving their countries and face multiple challenges in their new countries, including the very present and loud anti-immigrant rhetoric that is growing in momentum in the US and globally. In other words, the challenges that both students and teachers face reside not only in the classroom, but also reach far outside the classroom and relate to policy, politics and public opinion. This means ESOL teachers need to engage with the broader context in which their students live and work, they need to understand the very complicated issues which surround migration, which include issues with integration, membership, identity formation, equity, belonging and inclusion, all of which are deeply entrenched in the status of English as a dominant language and the legacy of colonialism (Painter-Farrell, 2023).

It would be too simplistic to frame a dichotomy between 'apolitical' English as a Foreign Language (EFL) accessed by self-funding learners through private language schools and 'politicised' ESOL accessed in community and other settings; for example, a common motivation for attending a language school and/or completing English language accreditation is to demonstrate a required level of language proficiency for immigration, employment or education purposes. Nevertheless, it is generally easier to position ESOL within a wider landscape of migrants' integration and belonging (Simpson, 2019 p. xvi) where what happens in the classroom is often about much more than language acquisition.

I will discuss more of what characterises ESOL practice and pedagogy in 2.5, but it would be fair to surmise ESOL is rarely seen as context or value-free, and that learners' situation is inherent to their language learning and intercultural competence.

2.3.5 Late to the emancipatory party?

On the face of it, the emancipatory ethos of Ireland's community education sector might seem a good fit with ESOL. However, support for migrants' language acquisition does not appear to feature prominently in the sector's advocacy activity. There are a number of possible reasons for this, including ESOL's relatively recent emergence as a significant area of activity within the FET landscape, as well as the relatively limited involvement of the independent community sector compared to statutory provision through the ETBs. Sheridan also notes the unfortunate timing of the beginnings of a realistic assessment of ESOL need by the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) being followed shortly afterwards by Ireland's period of austerity in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, when many existing programmes lost funding (2015, p. 150). This was compounded by the further disruption of Ireland's FET structures being reformed.

Whereas adult literacy was an important aspect of the community sector's work during its emancipatory 'heyday' of the 1980s and 1990s, significant demand for ESOL came later when there was more of a pattern of state provision through the VECs (and later the ETBs). Both Connolly (2014) and Grummell (2023) suggest an ethos of emancipation and participatory methods has persisted within adult literacy provision; might it be that ESOL was a little 'too late to the party' to have benefited fully when the community sector's advocacy was at its most effective?

The continued conflation of ESOL with adult literacy might, in itself, be a problem. Even where literacy practitioners are positively disposed towards dialogical and participatory approaches, the positioning of ESOL as a 'basic skill' arguably fuels a 'deficit model' perception of ESOL learners and a tendency towards emphasising assimilation and conformity (Sheridan, 2015), especially when the preferred form of accreditation for ESOL learners in some ETBs is Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) awards in Communications, rather than an accreditation designed specifically for ESOL learners.

Some of this might be mitigated by greater networking and practice-sharing between ESOL practitioners and advocates. For example, some ETBs have chosen to offer international English language qualifications such as those awarded by Cambridge Assessment to at least some of their ESOL learners, rather than QQI accreditation. One factor in their decision to do so has been the greater international recognition that these qualifications carry as a result of

being aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), as well as being perceived to carry greater 'brand' recognition with prospective employers and universities than a general 'communications' award. More active dialogue and praxis between ESOL practitioners and managers might enable initiatives such as this to be evaluated more extensively, and as well as potentially advocating for other changes such as aligning QQI's broad award standards for languages with the CEFR.

Another factor might be the high proportion of the current ESOL workforce in Ireland that has joined within the last decade and has therefore only known the current ETB-based structural arrangements. A significant number of these are likely to have either taught literacy previously or worked in EFL settings. Where they have a language teaching qualification, this is most likely to be Cambridge CELTA[1], which traditionally focused on the technical aspects of English language acquisition rather than the social and cultural aspects of working with migrant learners.

2.4 One paragraph for ESOL, versus a whole strategy for literacy

2.4.1 ALL bright and shiny

Ireland's current ten-year Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) strategy was launched in 2021 (SOLAS, 2021a). It is described as 'cross-government, cross society, cross-economy'. Key strands within the strategy include a high-profile national campaign, the appointment of a Regional Literacy Coordinator within each ETB tasked with building coalitions with other agencies, a distinct focus on health literacy and a €1 million Collaboration and Innovation Fund for new community-based projects. ALL is underpinned by a series of ambitious targets, such as halving the number of adults with 'unmet' literacy needs by the end of the decade.

As well as encompassing adult literacy, ALL has distinct plans for improving adults' numeracy and digital literacy. However, aside from briefly acknowledging the numbers of learners accessing provision within the ETBs (p. 70), there is no mention of ESOL. This is despite ESOL having no discrete overall budget allocation, and in many cases being delivered with or alongside literacy provision.

[1] 'Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages', although it was previously known as 'Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults'.

Having worked within the arena of adult literacy for over twenty years, I am excited by the ALL strategy. It reflects a strong commitment to transformative change; its emphases on literacy as a social practice and on both social and economic inclusion are all to be welcomed. However, my enthusiasm for ALL is tempered by the lack of a similarly ambitious cross-government strategy for ESOL. Just one paragraph within the SOLAS Future FET strategy for 2020-24 is dedicated to ESOL (SOLAS, 2020, p. 47), though it should be acknowledged SOLAS has produced a policy guidance document for English language provision (2018) and has commissioned research into initial and ongoing English language assessment for migrant learners (2021b). Nevertheless, when compared with how literacy has been profiled by policymakers, ESOL appears something of a Cinderella.

Literacy has a longer history of public policy attention in Ireland, with a need to improve adults' literacy levels acknowledged as far back as the 1973 Murphy Report (Connolly, 2014, p58). Its profile, along with that of numeracy, was undoubtedly enhanced by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) from 1980, whilst Ireland's performance in the 1997 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) was a further significant driver towards the development of a National Adult Literacy Strategy in the early 2000s. (Murtagh, 2014b, pp. 38-39).

Nevertheless, the ambition of ALL contrasts with the lack of a distinct national strategy for ESOL, particularly one which emphasises cross-government and cross-society coordination. This is arguably even more for important ESOL than for literacy, and there would seem to be a pressing need for much closer cooperation between SOLAS, DFHERIS and other relevant government departments.

2.4.2 Literacy practitioners' involvement in ESOL

Sheridan reflects on the extent to which deficit approaches and mindsets have dominated the development of ESOL provision in Ireland:

> Early ESOL efforts, which related to refugees and asylum seekers (and their school-going children), developed from a deficit model of language learning and teaching. Such a deficit approach focuses on an individual's lack of proficiency in a specific language despite the individual coming to learning with language(s). This model stands in contrast to the complexity of refugee and asylum seeker groups and to the high levels of social capital of skilled and educated migrants who came to Ireland during the Celtic Tiger

> years, a period of rapid economic growth and increasing affluence in Ireland (2015, p. 150).

In my own experience of working with policymakers, albeit primarily in England, I found ESOL was rarely understood well. It is unusual for civil servants, let alone ministers, to have had personal experience of learning a new language as a migrant. Their grasp of literacy, in terms being able to avoid deficit-framing, is often not much better, though in Ireland this might be said to have been countered more effectively through grassroots advocacy.

Whilst the conflation of ESOL with literacy is problematic in several respects, there are examples of ALOs and literacy practitioners becoming involved in ESOL provision and advocacy. For example, the 2022 Research Report commissioned by the Adult Literacy Organisers' Association (ALOA), highlighted the crossover between literacy and ESOL provision, and the challenges in balancing resources between the two (Grummell, 2022). Similarly, whilst ESOL is not formally part of NALA's remit, it organises an annual ESOL conference for practitioners, and has produced a range of materials to support ESOL literacy. It is plausible to assume that the Regional Literacy Coordinators appointed to support ALL may face a similar dilemma over whether or how they might be able to incorporate support for migrants' language acquisition within their remit.

2.5 Positioning ESOL: practice and pedagogy

2.5.1 ESOL as social practice

Norton (2016) emphasises the need to see language acquisition as a social practice, noting, "Identities and desires are negotiated in the context of complex and often unequal social relationships" (p. 476). She argues learners are more likely to commit fully to learning a language if they feel 'invested' (rather than just 'motivated'), and, "If they anticipate acquiring a wider range of symbolic and material resources that will increase the value of their cultural capital and social power" (p. 476). She goes on to suggest:

> A student may be highly motivated, but if the classroom practice are racist, sexist, or homophobic, the learner may have little investment in the language practices of the classroom, and demonstrate little progress in learning (Norton, 2016 pp. 476-477).

Through the lens of a policymaker lacking an appreciation of what might enable ESOL learners to feel invested, it might be tempting to be drawn towards concepts such as the 'good language learner' and distinguishing between 'good' and 'bad' immigrants. Much as these

concepts can be debunked (Norton & Toohey, 2001), it is nevertheless understandable how they might persist, especially bearing in mind some of the attitudes within Ireland towards immigrants and immigration highlighted by McGinnity et al. (2018).

With ESOL provision in Ireland having developed largely organically, Doyle (2015) describes the 'Getting to Grips with the English Language' project she was involved in developing locally within Portlaoise Adult Education Centre (AEC) from 2007. Whilst tailored specifically to the needs of ESOL learners, it was funded under the Adult Literacy Community Education (ALCE) budget. The ethos and emphases were strongly learner-centred, prioritising personal development and confidence building over labour market activation (p. 164). She adds that intercultural awareness and anti-racism were also incorporated into the programme, including strategies to help learners challenge back when they experience instances of racism (pp. 165-167).

Getting to Grips with the English Language might be considered an example of practitioners 'quietly getting on' despite, rather than because of, national policy. There are obvious downsides to relying solely on local initiatives, especially if the presence of these is not reflected in the budgeting process, though this project provides a refreshing example of what might be possible. The potential for alternatives to deficit modelling that emphasise learners' strengths and critically interrogate their prior experiences as a resource for learning, albeit in relation to literacy learning in Scotland, is discussed further by Crowther et al. (2010).

2.5.2 ESOL, Freire and critical pedagogy: lofty ambitions?

Given the extent to which ESOL practice is commonly felt to have a broader social purpose, and the inherent politicisation of language, it is not difficult to see how many of the collective emancipatory principles of learning advocated by Paulo Freire (1970) might be relevant to ESOL. How feasible might it be to practise these ideas within the ESOL classroom; might they be seen as merely 'aspirational' given the range of organisational and other constraints in which ESOL practitioners operate? Or indeed might ESOL practitioners regard this as peripheral or outside of their core responsibility of supporting learners' language acquisition?

Burawoy provides a synopsis of what could be termed 'Freirean' critical pedagogy:

> Freire sets out from the assumption that the dominated have internalized their oppression, and that this domination is reinforced through a 'banking' system of education in which

> teachers pour knowledge into the supposedly empty brains of their students. There is, however, an alternative pedagogy, Freire argues, based on dialogue between teacher and taught around problems originating with the student. This requires working with students outside of formal education, bringing education to their communities, neighborhoods, and villages (2012, p. 1).

Giroux expands upon this by suggesting that for Freire "Pedagogy is not a method or an *a priori* technique to be imposed on all students, but a political and moral practice" (2010, p. 716). The importance Freire attached to valuing and building upon learners' prior knowledge and experiences is described here:

> When the students come …they don't come here empty … there are levels of knowledge about the facts they already know, which unveil other ways of knowing … I call it the right to know better than they already know (Horton & Freire, 1990, pp. 156-157).

Freire argues education should ultimately lead to an awakening of learners' critical consciousness or conscientisation (described as *conscientização* in the original Portuguese text) (1970, p. 10), He further develops the point:

> Political events are educational and vice versa. Because education is politicity, it is never neutral. When we try to be neutral, like Pilate, we support the dominant ideology. Not being neutral, education must be either liberating or domesticating (Freire, 1985, p. 17).

Freire's articulation of the concepts of internalised oppression and dominated groups' "fear of freedom" (1970, p. 20) might also be relevant to the ESOL classroom. Shor provides an example of how this might manifest itself by drawing on his experience of teaching in New York City University during the 1970s:

> People from dominated groups speak several idioms, depending on their situation. When authorities are around, they use a defensive language full of artificial ploys and constructions to 'get by' … They are very clever in hiding from the teacher, to say what the teacher wants to hear, to confuse the teacher with defensive statements and copycat answering from the teacher's own words. This defensive language prevents teachers from finding out what the students really know and can do (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 22).

Shor goes on to observe students became much more animated when talking about their reality. Again, such behaviour is likely to be familiar to many ESOL practitioners, especially learners' reticence about engaging with the tutor as an 'authority figure'. In some cases this might be compounded by past experiences of trauma (Palanac, 2022). Nevertheless, as Simmons argues (albeit within the context of school-age ESOL in the United States), "ESOL teachers, are well-situated to understand the relationships between power, knowledge, and practice" (Simmons, 2019, p. x).

Looking more specifically at ESOL, albeit in the context of England in the 1980s, Fairclough observes the following about the potential contribution of critical language study to social emancipation:

> Teachers of [ESOL] are dealing with some of the most disadvantaged sections of the society, whose experiences of domination and racism are particularly sharp. Some of these teachers already see their role in terms of empowering their students, in the words of one practitioner, to 'deal with communicative situations outside the classroom in which institutional power is weighted against them, preparing them challenge, contradict, assert, in settings where the power dynamic would expect them to agree, acquiesce, be silent'. This educational process 'must be grounded in a dialogue about the meaning of power and its encoding in language' (Fairclough, 1989, p. 235).

When seeking out examples of what might be considered participatory ESOL, one more explicitly Freirean example is London-based English for Action (EFA) (Bryers, 2015). It should be acknowledged EFA operates within a limited range of settings, and initially came to prominence during 2012-13 when ESOL learners mobilised to protest about austerity-related cuts to ESOL provision.

Reflecting further on this example, Freirean approaches are sometimes criticised for being more interested in recruiting activists than addressing learners' immediate needs and wants. This argument tends be framed in terms of questioning how far learners are *really* engaged by conscientisation, when their immediate priorities might be more prosaic and when they might prefer to 'keep their heads down'. This is partly countered by Freire's arguments about internalised oppression and the fear of freedom (1970, p. 10), although this would in any event appear to be a false dichotomy based on a somewhat disingenuous suggestion that ESOL can exist in a vacuum without regard to social context.

Another cautionary counter argument is what Brown terms 'comfort radicalism' (2019). He notes that the Scottish government's 2016 National ESOL Strategy contained an explicit emphasis on critical pedagogy; yet when studying ESOL practitioners' actual perceptions, they appeared to value individual empowerment over social emancipation. (p. 183). He suggests some of this might be a consequence of ESOL's presence within the broader neoliberalist framework of the Scottish further education system, and that any limited attempts by practitioners to subvert neoliberalism can only in practice be at the level of empowering individual learners.

The principle of seeking to recognise, respond to and build upon learners' prior life experiences is likely to be generally understood by ESOL tutors, even where there might be conflicting pressures on their capacity to apply this in practice. The extent to which this is recognised specifically as critical pedagogy might vary, as might the organisational and other structural barriers to reflexive practice.

2.5.3 Linking Freirean practices within literacy provision

Notwithstanding a broader trend within FET towards labour market activation and performativity, Connolly (2014), Fitzsimons (2017) and Grummell (2023) all observe how adult literacy provision has tended to remain more emancipatory in its ethos and approach. The difficulties in conflating literacy and ESOL too closely are discussed in both 2.3.5 and 2.4.2, yet there does seem to be some common ground around practitioners of both perceiving their roles as having a wider social context, and for at least a tacit acceptance of Freirean principles.

That commonality might be reflected in a shared interest in advocacy and learner-centredness amongst literacy and ESOL practitioners, albeit with some important differences of emphasis which need to be acknowledged and articulated clearly.

2.6 Conclusions: positioning ESOL within Ireland

2.6.1 Limited research, and a fragmented policy landscape

The main purpose of this study is to hear the stories of ESOL practitioners in Ireland during and since the pandemic, although in order to make sense of these it is important to understand something of the contexts in which they work. It is important to appreciate how rapidly Ireland's ESOL provision has grown in recent years, whilst being subject to relatively little specific research. However, like many English language-dominant countries, ESOL operates within a public policy context that is neither entirely coherent nor consistent.

2.6.2 Quietly getting on?

Painter-Farrell (2023) describes the role of an ESOL practitioner that of an ally, advocate and activist. She emphasises the importance of practitioners engaging in the larger social,

institutional and political contexts in which they are working, and recognising how these are shaped by public opinion, policies, politics and power.

Whilst it might be an overgeneralisation to characterise all ESOL practitioners in these terms, it is reasonable to surmise that ESOL practitioners are quite prone to getting by and finding solutions. Doyle's (2015) example of the Getting to Grips With the English Language projects is an example of how an AEC might innovate to make up for inconsistencies in, or the absence of, policy direction, although the necessity for dialogue between individual practitioners and their ESOL learners might also be considered to 'go with the territory'.

3 Methodology, scope of research, ethical considerations

3.1 Key principles

As an experienced education professional who had worked within the arena of adults' literacy and language education for more than two decades, I was curious to understand more about the experiences of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) practitioners as they navigated the extraordinary challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. My previous work with ESOL practitioners had mostly taken place within England and Wales, though as an immigrant to the island of Ireland I was keen to focus this study on those working within Ireland's publicly funded ESOL programmes.

The emphasis was upon practitioners' personal and professional experiences of working in ESOL during the pandemic, so qualitative conversations allowed me to explore their recollections about what happened, how they felt at the time and since, how far they felt supported and who they might have collaborated or kept in touch with. I was also interested in any lasting changes to their practice, for example their use of technology within and outside of the classroom.

Rather than a neutral observer, I considered myself an 'ESOL ally' who was personally invested in the study and reflexive in my approach: drawing on my own insights and understanding of ESOL, as well as wanting to hear specifically about practitioners' lived experiences. I was conscious my own experience of working directly with ESOL practitioners, including during the pandemic, came mostly from outside Ireland and had tended to involve assessments and the achievement of qualifications, and it was important to consider how this might influence my thinking. Berger describes reflexivity thus:

> Reflexivity is commonly viewed as the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome (Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Pillow, 2003; Stronach et al., 2007) (2015, p.220).

Having lived on the island of Ireland for a decade, and especially having frequently supported others to develop their understanding of contextual differences between constituent parts of the United Kingdom and elsewhere, I continually reflect upon any latent Anglocentrism that might influence my thinking.

3.2 Theoretical positioning

Mishan describes ESOL as the most highly 'politicised' area of English Language Teaching (ELT) (2019, p. 5). I regard ESOL as an inherently social practice, requiring dialogical process. I strongly believe learning should always be done 'with' rather than 'to' people. I am drawn to Paulo Freire's ideas about critical and participative pedagogies (1970), and the need to be cognisant of wider political and social contexts in which learning takes place. Nevertheless, I recognise Freirean methods might be 'aspirational' for some ESOL practitioners, and I am realistic about the practical and structural constraints in which they typically operate. I am also wary about what Brown describes as 'performative radicalism' (2019), and I recognise not all ESOL practitioners will necessarily consider themselves activists or agents of social change.

Whilst I would support the position taken by Bélanger (2011) and others who suggest an overlap between each of the principal theories of learning and adult learning[1], my own standpoint amongst these would align most closely with Socio-Constructivism as articulated by Lave (1991). I believe people learn from each other, even if they do not always recognise this to be the case; indeed, collaboration does not necessarily come naturally to me, even if I almost always benefit when I engage in it.

Whilst I have not taught ESOL learners myself, I worked closely with many who do in the course of supporting them to prepare learners for accreditation. I believe I have a fair insight into, and empathy for, the pressures and challenges ESOL practitioners typically face. In the course of framing and conducting this study, I was determined to avoid any semblance of 'finger pointing' or casting judgement; the purpose was to provide ESOL practitioners with a safe space for them to share their stories. The disruptive effects of the pandemic provided a context for these conversations, although it was also an opportunity to shine a light on some of their instincts and motivations.

[1] Here I would include Behaviourism, Cognitivism, Constructivism, Socio-Constructivism, Humanism, Experiential Learning and Transformative Learning.

3.3 Methods deployed

3.3.1 Summary of approach

My overall approach would best be described as a form of qualitative interviewing followed by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013, pp. 174-180). Informal interviews were arranged with eight practitioners who had taught ESOL on the island of Ireland during or since the pandemic. The interviews were not heavily structured and designed primarily to provide a safe space for participants to reflect upon and describe their experiences. I then set out to 'code' these conversations (Braun & Clarke, 2022), distilling what each of the participants had said to me across four distinct themes.

3.3.2 Recruiting participants

Sampling was purposive, as I wanted to speak with ESOL practitioners with first-hand experience of working during and since the pandemic. I also wanted to ensure I had a spread of participants working across a range of ESOL settings in different Education and Training Boards (ETBs). I initially approached contacts in two ETBs I knew through my involvement in the National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA) Island of Ireland Branch about anyone they could potentially put me in touch with, with the hope that further participants could then be recruited through 'snowballing'.

The initial response to these approaches was quite slow, although in hindsight the time of year (January) might not have been an ideal time to be approaching busy practitioners! Further attempts to recruit via LinkedIn and Twitter were similarly unproductive, although I began to receive more responses when my supervisor forwarded a request to some general contacts in the ETB sector. Eventually I was able to arrange interviews with eight participants, seven working within ETBs and one who had worked within a further education college in Northern Ireland. I had not intended to look for participants outside of the ETBs, although it was interesting to be able to compare and contrast her experiences with those of the other seven participants.

3.3.3 Conducting interviews

Four of the eight interviews were conducted in-person, with the remaining four conducted online via Teams. I gave participants a free choice as to whether it suited them better to meet

face-to-face or online. All interviews were audio-recorded, with Otter.ai used to help transcribe the conversations.

Each participant was sent an information sheet in advance of their interview and asked to complete a consent form (see Appendix C – Information and consent forms). They were advised their responses would be anonymised and that I would ensure their organisation(s) and employer(s) was not identifiable from the study findings.

I had promised participants their interview would last no more than an hour, and in practice most lasted around 40 minutes. Whilst I used an outline 'open' and 'close' script to ensure the framing of each interview was consistent (see Appendix B – Interview structure and outline questions), the main body of the conversation was loosely structured around the following topics:

- events of March 2020, and the immediate period thereafter
- later periods, for example when restrictions were lifted and then reimposed
- collaboration and communication.

I had prepared a few optional prompt questions I could use if the conversation dried up or went substantially off-topic, although in practice they were rarely needed. I also advised participants I might need to approach them afterwards for further clarification after reviewing the interview transcript if I was unsure about whether I had correctly understood certain points they might have been making during the conversation, or if they had said anything that seemed particularly contentious, that on reflection they might not wish to see reflected in the findings. In neither case was it necessary for me to do this.

3.3.4 Reviewing and reflecting

Transcripts from the eight interviews were reviewed using MAXQDA qualitative analysis software, with participants' contributions assigned to a series of code labels and sub-codes using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). These were distilled into identifiable themes on which the quotations and commentary set out in Chapter 4 are based.

I had some reservations about 'coding', particularly as it could be said to have positivistic connotations, as Mayan (2009, p. 88) and others have suggested. Also, as Byrne (2022)

indicates, there can be some misconceptions about how far researchers need to take an active role when carrying out thematic analysis. My approach was consciously reflexive: I could not discount or disregard my own involvement and understanding of the ESOL context, yet I wanted to focus on what each of the eight participants had told me about their experiences. There were some obvious consistencies across each of the conversations: all had talked about the immediate impact of lockdown restrictions, how they had continued to try to engage with learners, issues around the use of technology and how they had felt at various times during this period. I began identifying responses from each of the transcripts that aligned with these broad areas, then gradually noticed other areas of commonality, or that were otherwise noteworthy, to which I could assign either a code or sub-code.

I initially tried using an Excel spreadsheet to group respondent comments into codes, although quickly realised this would become unwieldy. MAXQDA made the process considerably easier, as I was able to drag-and-drop passages to text into any of the codes or sub-codes they appeared to align with. After I had initially coded the eight transcripts, I went through each one again to double-check I had assigned codes consistently and had not missed any otherwise noteworthy points. I probably ended up with too many sub-codes, and in quite a few cases there were participant comments that overlapped across the themes. Nevertheless, the process of assigning codes enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the data, and to distil that information into an understandable set of findings.

3.4 Study limitations

This study could not claim to provide a definitive overview of the ESOL landscape in Ireland; with time and other constraints it was only possible to interview a limited number of individuals, and it is important not to overstate its generalisability.

Since ESOL in Ireland has been subject to relatively little specific research, and especially with provision having grown rapidly in recent years, the intention was to provide an 'initial flavour' of how ESOL practitioners in Ireland regard themselves. The backdrop of the pandemic provided a specific and extraordinary set of circumstances, although it is hoped that any insights gained from this study might inform further research.

3.5 Ethical considerations

3.5.1 Recruitment, power relationships and possible gatekeeping

With snowballing and other forms of purposive sampling, there can be a risk of unconscious biases and a tendency towards recruiting 'usual suspects' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, pp. 56-59). Given that one of my areas of enquiry was the extent to which ESOL practitioners network or collaborate with one another, I was also concerned about the potential for participants to be identifiable (especially if they had been recruited through word-of-mouth recommendation). I recognised the need for care when describing individuals, or the settings in which they worked, to avoid making these too obvious.

I was also conscious that my initial approaches (via NATECLA branch committee colleagues) to senior members of staff in two ETBs might also have carried a slight risk of gatekeeping or that individuals could have felt under pressure to participate. In practice, I was reassured those participants recruited via this route seemed to have responded to a generalised circular rather than a personalised approach, and the potential for any difficulties here was further mitigated by the recruitment of other participants through a different channel.

Another possible issue was the involvement of two participants who, as well as teaching, also had some coordination responsibilities in their role in their respective Adult Education Centres. Whilst in both cases I enquired about whether they knew of anyone else who might be willing to participate, I was uneasy about the prospect of individuals being 'volunteered' by their line manager. Again, I was satisfied nobody had been specifically asked to take part.

3.5.2 Data collection and integrity

All initial contact with participants was via email, although I also shared my phone number in case they had any last-minute difficulties with meeting, or subsequently wished to send any further information or questions via text or WhatsApp. I assured participants their contact details and any messages would be deleted once this study had been completed.

All interviews were audio recorded (using Otter.ai, and Teams where the interview took place online), with participants made aware of this verbally and via the information and consent form. I also offered to send each participant a copy of the transcript and recording if they so

wished, although in practice none of the participants requested this. Interview transcripts were subsequently analysed using MAXQDA. Aside from any information held on Otter.ai or MAXQDA servers, all electronic files were stored on the Maynooth University OneDrive (requiring two-factor authorisation to access).

3.5.3 Content/trigger warnings

I was conscious the pandemic had been a challenging time for many educators and others, and that there was a risk asking participants to revisit that period could in some cases be triggering. To mitigate this, the consent form included a reminder that participants were free to stop the interview at any time, and that they could subsequently ask for anything they might have said during the interview to be disregarded. At the end of each interview (after recording had been switched off), I made a point of 'checking in' with them to ask how they were feeling.

I also reassured participants the purpose of this study was not to be critical of anyone's resilience or professionalism. The intention was to provide a 'safe space' for ESOL practitioners to talk candidly, without fear of negative consequences or that they, anyone else or any context that they spoke about would be identifiable.

3.5.4 Right to withdraw

Participants were reminded they were free to withdraw their consent to be interviewed, and for any of their data to be excluded from the study at any time until its planned completion.

3.6 Writing up and presenting the research

Once I had completed the process of coding, I reviewed the range of participant comments under each code and sub-code, and set about interpreting and analysing these into a collective story of these ESOL practitioners' experiences, organised around four broad themes:

- equity and learner engagement
- practicalities of lockdown and using technology
- collaboration and communication
- enduring changes.

The themes were largely derived from the codes I had identified during my initial trawl of the participants' interview transcripts, although I made some adjustments to reflect the extent to which participants had talked about their learners and the apparent interplay between technology and other issues that might have caused difficulty during lockdown. The themes inevitably overlap to an extent, though are primarily intended to assist in the process of storytelling and analysing.

In the next two chapters I set out my findings from the participant interviews as well as discussing aspects of those conversations that I interpreted to be of particular significance when seeking to understand the experiences of ESOL practitioners the context of ESOL within the ETBs and the challenges of the pandemic for Further Education and Training (FET) in general.

4 Eight conversations

4.1 Introducing the participants

I conducted interviews with a total of eight practitioners who had taught and/or coordinated English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) during and/or since the COVID-19 pandemic. To protect these individuals' identities, each has been given a pseudonym.

The table below provides a description of their backgrounds and types of provision with which they have worked; it also indicates whether the setting in which they work(ed) might be considered 'suburban', 'urban' or 'rural'. I have also indicated whether our conversation took place in-person or online.

Name[1]	**Background**	**Location**	**Conversation took place**
Julia	Julie is the ESOL Coordinator within an Adult Education Centre. During the pandemic she managed a team of around eight ESOL tutors, although also taught some classes herself. As well as offering dedicated ESOL classes, the team also provides additional language support to students undertaking Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) programmes.	Suburban	in-person
Geraldine	Geraldine had previously taught English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in private language schools for many years, in Ireland and elsewhere across Europe. During the pandemic she opted to complete a Higher Diploma in Further Education, and began teaching ESOL within an adult education setting during 2021-22 (whilst some COVID-related restrictions were still in place).	Rural	in-person
Alicia	Alicia is an ESOL and literacy tutor, working in a remote part of western Ireland. She works mostly in outreach centres. During the pandemic she worked almost entirely with one family of Syrian refugees.	Rural	in-person

[1] Pseudonyms are used.

Name[1]	Background	Location	Conversation took place
Ciara	Ciara works as an ESOL tutor within an Adult Education Centre, working with what she termed "not quite beginners". During the pandemic she quickly learnt how to use online communication tools (partly with the assistance of her adult son) and continued to work with ESOL learners: initially posting out materials, then using WhatsApp and Teams. Ciara also teaches Irish.	Suburban	online
Zabel	Zabel is an ESOL Coordinator covering Adult Education Centres in two locations. ESOL classes are mostly offered to unemployed adults, although latterly (since the influx of migrants from Ukraine) the centres also offer some higher-level language provision. During the pandemic she restructured her team so all of the tutors were required to work in groups to develop and deliver online classes together.	Suburban	online
Marie	Marie is an ESOL tutor based within an Adult Education Centre, working with a range of learners. She has also taught Digital Technology. Her background is in psychotherapy. Frustrated by the numbers of ESOL learners who were unable to participate meaningfully in online learning, she left her role during the summer of 2020 to work in a secondary school as a guidance counsellor. She later returned to the adult education sector.	Suburban	online
Lauren	Lauren is an ESOL tutor working with a range of learners. At the time of the pandemic she was working mostly with Syrian refugees and Brazilian migrant workers, but has since gone on to work primarily with Ukrainians completing International English Language Testing System (IELTS). She had previously taught English and ESOL in a number of other countries, including in England.	Rural	online

Name[1]	Background	Location	Conversation took place
Edel	Edel taught ESOL within a further education college in Northern Ireland during the early stages of the pandemic, although left in the spring of 2021. She now teaches ESOL within an urban community setting, as well as providing some school-based English as an Additional Language (EAL) support. She also does some English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teaching within a university.	Suburban and urban	in-person

Whilst the main focus of this study is ESOL practitioners working within Ireland's Education and Training Boards (ETBs), I also spoke with Edel about her experiences of teaching ESOL in one of Northern Ireland's six further education colleges. It is important not to conflate her experiences too closely with the other seven participants, although there were some clear parallels as well as some interesting contrasts.

It should be noted all eight participants identify as women. That is perhaps reflective of the sector, although in the course of arranging these interviews I did approach a couple of male ESOL tutors; they initially responded positively but ultimately were not able to make themselves available. Whilst I was unable to ascertain their reasons for declining, I presume this to have been more a question of workload pressures than an unwillingness to participate.

4.2 What they told me: four themes

It was apparent from all eight conversations that the pandemic had been disorientating and challenging. Each of the participants talked about having to adapt to remote learning, how difficult it had been for many learners to engage successfully with this and the extent to which they had felt supported by colleagues and others during this time. However, it is also important to acknowledge how these practitioners' experiences varied, especially the apparent differences between those working in suburban areas compared to those in more rural settings.

I will focus on four broad themes that emerged from the conversations:

- equity and learner engagement
- practicalities of lockdown and using technology
- collaboration and communication
- enduring changes.

On the following pages I have interpreted and analysed my conversations with the eight participants to create this collective story of their experiences. The section covering each theme begins with a ‘wall’ of quotations, reflecting participants’ views and insights.

4.2.1 Equity and learner engagement

Well the parents couldn't have coped with it. Yeah. And the sons were kind of setting up this phone and saying *'Right, there you are now'.* **Alicia**	And that's kind of why I suppose I became very frustrated around that. I became, really I didn't want to kind of waste my time trying to undo social problems. **Marie**	Or a lot of families might have one computer but they had kids that needed it for their schoolwork. So they couldn't really use it during the day. **Julia**
I felt a lot more self-conscious than I would have done in the classroom, and you can't be as spontaneous, in that if somebody makes a grammatical error in the classroom it'd be so easy just to go through it on the board, whereas I had to click open a whiteboard and get a pen and, oh, it was just, you know. **Lauren**	And some classes did not come back into the system during lockdown and all of that time. They just weren't able to. They wouldn't have been running as long and maybe I didn't have the relationship with them in their working hours. **Ciara**	But I know for some of my other colleagues it was a lot harder because they had to get results. There were, you know, [learner achievement and progression] expectations as well that may be very difficult to meet. **Edel**

The good thing was that actually we got more people that we even imagined. We thought that we would have, especially in those lower levels, just a handful of people but it turned out we had to even break the groups into smaller ones because there were quite a few people engaging. **Zabel**	We're talking about a QQI course, and that was another element of distress. I would say distress for me as a tutor and distress for the students because everything had to be done remotely. **Geraldine**

Changes to planned learning

All eight participants described having to change or adapt what they had previously planned to teach. A number of them talked about focusing on consolidating existing language rather than trying to teach new vocabulary, as well as tendency to focus on receptive language[2]. Alicia described the amount of time she spent adapting materials for online use:

> I found because all of my materials were for face-to-face. I seemed to spend a lot of time just putting stuff on screens, you know, on the screen or in Word.

For the most part, any plans for ESOL learners to complete Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) awards or other forms of accreditation seem to have been curtailed during at least the early stages of the pandemic. Julia described how her team had offered all of their ESOL learners a generic course that drew on content from a local radio station. Zabel had been concerned that pressing ahead with planned QQI awards would have been unfair (even with adaptations to the assessment requirements) given the limited extent to which learners

[2] For example listening rather than speaking, reading rather than writing.

had been able to practise and prepare. Where accreditation did continue within her centres, learners were in some cases switched to accreditation at a lower level, for example from Level 4 ESOL to Level 3 in General Learning.

In Lauren's case there seemed to have been at least a nominal expectation that learners would complete their assessments as planned, although she took the decision not to proceed:

> I just wrote off that year as, yeah, I just wasn't able to. I was posting them out, but then they needed you to go through things with them. And yeah, it would have been a little bit of box-ticking rather than actual teaching.

Edel had been working with Pre-Entry[3] learners who were not expected to achieve qualifications, although she recalled the first year of the pandemic being difficult for colleagues who had been expected to press ahead with qualification assessments (albeit in an adapted form) and, as far as possible, maintain previous rates of learner achievement and progression.

Both Julia and Zabel talked about how their teams had prioritised keeping touch with learners by phone or email in the period before they were able to get online classes up and running. Zabel had ensured each learner received at least a weekly text message with links to an app or internet site with free content they could access. She estimated at least half of them would not have been able to engage with these, although she was pleasantly surprised by the level of learner engagement with the online lessons that teams of her tutors began offering via Zoom.

Learners' access to and uses of technology

Learners' access to digital devices, especially laptops that were not shared with other family members, was discussed to varying degrees by all eight participants. Most appeared to have access to at least a smartphone, although Marie pointed out that some learners would have been reluctant to use up their own data allowances and would not necessarily have access to Wi-Fi. She added:

> I suppose we're in a very privileged position where we don't have to unplug one thing to plug something else in and we don't have to go out and purchase these small devices that go into the side of the computer ... and a lot of the students if they were working, they were paid hourly contracts and that shut down.

[3] Below Entry level 1 of the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) for England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

Others raised the challenges of explaining to learners how they could access online platforms and resources. In some cases they could rely on peer support; for example, the sons within the Syrian family Alicia had been working with were able to show their parents (and explain in Arabic) how to log on to Zoom. However, there were still problems when family members in the same room attempted to use multiple devices to log on to the same session.

Learners' ability or willingness to use technology seems to have been a difficulty, with Ciara indicating how difficult it had been to move any of her learners away from communicating on WhatsApp, "You weren't going to try and get them up on Teams. You'd lose them".

Geraldine talked about the problems she encountered with online etiquette, especially where one or two dominant learners would monopolise the session and not allow other learners to speak. Lauren appeared to have had a similar experience:

> And it was so completely different to the classroom. People talking over each other or people not speaking at all, or one person, one confident person, would answer every question. So it was really awkward.

Whilst the ETBs had made laptops available to ESOL and other adult learners, it was apparent when speaking with Edel that there had been no equivalent to this for adult learners in Northern Ireland.

Lost learners

Whilst most of the participants had been keen to continue offering some form of ESOL provision, they expressed regret about the numbers of learners who were unable to participate. Whilst Julia and Zabel both ensured their teams at least attempted to maintain contact with all of their learners, they were realistic about how many messages and phone calls were likely to go unanswered. As Zabel explained:

> We sent them links in text messages to DuoLingo apps, to things like that. But we knew that a lot of them wouldn't even be able to do that. So it was actually quite stressful knowing that we were leaving people behind and not being able to even engage.

Marie described her frustrations at not being able to support her ESOL learners adequately and indicated her reluctance to "waste time trying to undo social problems" was a significant factor in her decision to take a job in a secondary school from the autumn of 2020. Whilst she and her colleagues were working incredibly hard to do what they could in the circumstances, she still felt the online lessons were leaving too many people behind.

4.2.2 Practicalities of lockdown and using technology

We assumed at the beginning it would just be a few weeks, so we thought, *'Well, so we cancel for two, four weeks, maybe five at max, and that will be that and then everybody will come back'*.
Zabel

I had asked several times over the years, *'Can I have a work phone?'*. I was told, *'No, you're a teacher, you're going to the classroom, there's no need for you to ever work from home'*.
Lauren

And then you would hear sometimes like someone had their camera off, and you could hear little sounds like when they're playing games.
Edel

I used to just spend maybe an hour and a half, and I used to feel absolutely exhausted after it. And I spoke to another tutor and she said, *'I'm exactly the same'*. Whereas an hour and a half in the classroom isn't an issue.
Alicia

Now we were all wearing masks and distancing and all that stuff. But the alternative in the centre I was in was electronic, and that was not possible for the people I was working with.
Marie

Myself and my boss, we wanted to make sure we kept the tutors employed … We wanted to keep our tutors getting paid, so needed to figure out a way they could teach.
Julia

I think in fairness the ETBs did get it together very, very quickly. And I remember speaking to my manager at the time, and he explained that, you know, if they'd ever thought about doing blended learning or doing online courses, it was always going to be a very difficult thing to implement. However, when COVID happened, suddenly they had to.
Geraldine

I probably was working much harder than I needed to be because I was doing all these courses in the evenings as well and my weekends and everything, because I felt *'I have to know, I have to understand how to do this!'*. And I was trying to do more than I needed to do.
Ciara

Preparedness

Zabel's quote, above, reflects widespread uncertainty in the early stages of the pandemic about how long it might last. She recalled speaking to colleagues from other centres within her ETB who had similarly felt the priority in the short term was keeping in touch with learners in the hope they would return as soon as lockdown restrictions were eased. Only once it became apparent this would not be for some time had they begun to look more seriously at online delivery. Julia, meanwhile, mentioned the Easter of 2020 as the point at which her attention turned towards finding a way of enabling her team's ESOL programmes to resume online in some form.

Lauren reflected on the speed with which lockdown measures had been introduced, although recalled some of her Syrian ESOL learners repeatedly telling her throughout January and February 2020 that "COVID is coming!":

> On the date lockdown was announced, I just remember going to the photocopier and photocopying a lot of lessons, getting lots of envelopes and stamps, getting students' addresses from the office before I went home that day.

In Edel's case, the decision to move towards online delivery appears to have been taken more quickly, although many of the practicalities seemed to have been largely left to Edel and her immediate colleagues.

Determination to make it work

Once it became apparent lockdown was going to last for some time, Julia turned her attention to finding a way of enabling her team's ESOL programmes to resume in some form. As well as seeking to protect her tutors' jobs, she also felt a sense of responsibility for their learners and was keen to keep as many of them engaged as possible. She described "doing a lot of scrambling", as the team put together a generic programme for all their ESOL learners that included podcast content from a local radio station. Julia also described getting to grips with online platforms and resources as a further challenge for the team:

> I feel like some people are good with IT, and some people aren't, and I happen to have a team that none of us are great, including myself!

Zabel decided to organise her tutors into groups of three that would each work as a team to support a group of learners. This was partly motivated by a general desire to see tutors cooperating and collaborating, although she also felt it would lessen the risk of online lessons being disrupted if one tutor experienced connectivity problems. She explained:

> Their task was to meet on Teams to … prepare a lesson plan – either three together, or everybody could have about 20 minutes, or in any other way they wanted to. But making sure that there was a lesson in which students could have a voice and that was the main idea. We didn't at that stage require, or I didn't require them to have, any kind of syllabus or any kind of continuity to whatever was done before. Because the groups were merged. We basically wanted people to engage and that was that.

Ciara remarked on the amount of time she had spent over successive evenings and weekends completing online Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses to try to improve her digital skills. Whilst clearly motivated by a determination to be as effective as possible in her practice when teaching online, in hindsight she feels she went too far:

> I drove myself to drink almost, worrying about not getting it right or not knowing enough, you know, to the pity. It's a pity I did that. And I put myself through that stress, but that's just personality.

Ciara's exclamation "I have to know, I have to understand how to do this!" provided me with the title for this study. I felt it captured an essence of determination, perseverance and empathy that all eight participants seemed to display.

Platform issues and suitability

Julia was one of several participants to highlight a conflict between using online platforms learners would be likely to find easy to access and engage with (e.g. FaceTime and WhatsApp), and those sanctioned and supported by the ETB (e.g. Teams). The latter required learners to have ETB login accounts, which in practice many of their ESOL learners were unaware of or unable to access on their own mobile devices.

Several participants remarked that they had been discouraged from using Zoom during the early stages of the pandemic, partly because of possible security concerns (Townsend, 2020). Zabel noted that it had generally been easier to engage learners via Zoom, as it could more easily be used on mobile devices.

Whilst most of her colleagues were using WhatsApp to keep in touch with their learners, Lauren made a conscious decision not to give out her personal phone number. She explained she had previously been phoned repeatedly by a former student wanting to convert her to Islam, and after this experience was keen to maintain a boundary between her work and personal life. She added:

> Other tutors who did give out their phone were saying that people were phoning them at 11 at night, midnight, because obviously everyone's in a bit of a panic.

This had made it harder for Lauren to keep in touch with learners, as she was relying on going into the office and using the phone there. I asked Lauren if there had been any possibility of her being given a work phone. She indicated that she had asked for one on several occasions but had always been told 'no'.

Julia had used her own laptop whilst working at home. She explained there had been the possibility of borrowing one from the ETB, but she felt there were other colleagues and learners in greater need.

Management support and resourcing

Overall, most of the participants seem to have felt well supported by their line managers and ETB management, especially given the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic. As Ciara put it:

> I've always had great respect for them but I would have even more respect for how they pulled and pushed and did stuff and, you know, made sure that we got any resources we needed, and were told about different resources from that level as well. Yeah, they were good and they listened to us.

Alicia mentioned feeling appreciated after her manager's manager had posted out chocolate bars and pens, "You know, it's just a bar of chocolate but … the sentiment was just meaningful".

Lauren recalled feeling grateful that she had been given an essential worker letter, which enabled her to go into the office to collect or drop-off materials and make phone calls whilst travel restrictions were in force. However, she also remarked, "The people in management are not ESOL experts, which is a great difficulty, so you're kind of trying to 'sell' them things all the time. And it's outside their knowledge base."

Julia also commented on the ease with which resources were made available:

> Honestly, I really have to tip my hat. And I'm not just saying that because my boss here is just so supportive and I don't know where she got money from. But somewhere in that, she said 'What do you need?'. And I said, 'Can we buy it? Can we get books for everybody?'.

However Edel was less positive about how far she had felt supported by her senior leaders:

> The college did not provide much help and support to me as a teacher and to the students. So in terms of resources, the students were pretty much left to their own devices. There was no training, there was no provision of resources to them, or to me as a teacher. So it was basically just between me and my learners.

4.2.3 Collaboration and communication

Yeah, we had loads of CPD. Loads! Some NALA ones, [some] with external trainers. A lot were optional, but I did [them] because I had lots of time.
Alicia

I suppose [also] friends and family who are teaching. I'd be asking them, *'How's it going?'*. And people who work in secondary schools, asking them, *'Are the students engaging with you?'*. Just to kind of get a feel of where you are.
Lauren

Because I love teaching, I love what I do. But I did question. Now I never thought like I'm gonna stop teaching, because I didn't want to stop teaching, but let's say, *'Okay, if this is how it's gonna be like forever then I'm not sure I want to continue this'*.
Edel

I think I was looking for more of a community of practice. I wanted to have a, you know, sort of camaraderie between colleagues but there's just there's nobody there.
Geraldine

We went for a walk most days together with a bit of space between us around the village or whatever. And that kept us sane too! You know, it's a great, you just walk and talk and walk and talk and, that was very good.
Ciara

I found that emotionally much harder, the winter lockdown. Because remember, the first lockdown was first of all a novelty and second of all was spring weather.
Julia

And that's why I switched into a secondary school setting because I was finding it was too big a gap. There were childcare issues. And thinking back, just the shock, everybody was in shock and trying to communicate with people who do not have English.
Marie

It's interesting you asked that question about tutor cooperation, and it would be worth noting that ESOL teachers are a very specific type of teacher – they do not specifically like to cooperate. They do not necessarily like to share materials. They like to have their own little chest of treasures and maybe every now and then they could talk to someone about it, but it was not a norm, especially in our service where tutors would not like to share.
Zabel

Wellbeing

When the conversations turned to participants' own wellbeing, it was apparent some had fared better than others during the pandemic. Several of them remarked on the good weather during the spring and summer of 2020, recalling being able to sit in the garden and going for walks. In Alicia's case, because she was used to working largely on her own, she felt lockdown had made little overall difference to her quality of life; whilst her hours had reduced, she no longer had to travel regularly for nearly an hour to team meetings. Ciara also described herself as fortunate in having paid work and being able to stay safe.

Zabel acknowledged the amount of hard work involved in setting up the online lessons her team had worked in groups to create, "Especially for those tutors who found it difficult, who weren't used to working on the computer each day. For them it was a lot of stress". She felt organising the team into groups had probably helped mitigate some of that stress:

> I think that idea of putting people together, as much as they were appalled by it at the beginning, I think it worked really, really well. Especially at the initial stages of 'Oh, I

> don't know how to do this, but he does'. And they shared a lot of positives. They shared a lot of negatives. I know there were some arguments in there as well as there would be among people.

Several of the participants who had worked in suburban areas discussed the range of wellbeing support that had been offered by their ETBs. They had participated in cookery, yoga and mindfulness sessions, although it appeared some had found the regular email invitations a little jarring when they were busy struggling to get online classes set up. Julia related an incident where a colleague had inadvertently hit 'reply all' to one of these emails:

> Basically [her response] was something to the effect of 'You know, I'm so stressed out and no amount of yoga, and meditation is gonna help me at the minute!'. She was mortified, but I think everybody was like, 'Amen, I feel your pain. I know exactly how you feel!'.

Marie suggested her decision to move from teaching ESOL to offering guidance counselling in a secondary school was at least partly about her own wellbeing:

> And I think if I was to sort of distil that down into something, it would be that the job changed, but I didn't change. I didn't change my values and my need to use the skills that I have, that didn't change.

Edel also moved away from teaching ESOL during the pandemic, instead choosing to focus on online EAP. She seemed to have found this work less problematic than working in the college as there were fewer issues with device access and learners tended to be more comfortable with technology.

Team collaboration

All of the participants who had taught ESOL during the pandemic indicated they had kept in regular contact with other tutors within their immediate team. Lauren described using WhatsApp and phone calls to contact colleagues (she had been happy to share her phone number with them, though not with learners), and felt the frequency of contact had increased as most of her colleagues normally worked in different outreach centres. Alicia had also been used to working largely alone, though had previously shared resource ideas and kept in regular contact with one colleague; they had continued doing so virtually during lockdown.

Despite moving away from teaching ESOL, Marie was complimentary about her centre manager and relationships with colleagues; she indicated this had been a factor in her later decision to return to teaching ESOL. Ciara described her fellow ESOL tutors as "a very

chatty group", adding, "We're here for the students and for each other". Julia described intra-team relationships as having become "a little more personal", as people shared news about getting a puppy or adult children moving away.

Zabel's decision to organise her team into groups was borne of a frustration that ESOL tutors are not always inclined to share materials or insights. She felt that being forced to cooperate over lesson plans and setting up online classes had brought them closer together and made some of them more willing to collaborate.

Geraldine had only begun working in an ETB during 2021-22, having previously worked largely in the private sector. She had been struck by how little active cooperation and collaboration there appeared to be between practitioners:

> There's no INSET. I know there's a thing through Teams and an ESOL section, but you don't know who they are. I mean, I don't know who anybody is unless I've met them myself. You know, I'm not meeting new people.

Wider collaboration and CPD

Whilst all of the participants had worked closely with other practitioners within their immediate team, there appeared to be fewer examples of them networking or collaborating with ESOL practitioners in other centres or settings. Julia and Zabel both mentioned they had been involved in contact with ESOL coordinators in other centres, but this appeared to have been mostly during the early stages of the pandemic.

Around half of the participants had taken part in online ESOL events and webinars organised by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). Some had also accessed a range of externally facilitated mini-courses and CPD sessions organised by or through their ETB. Ciara had focused particularly on improving her own digital skills and confidence with online learning platforms, whereas Alicia had taken advantage of her reduced hours during lockdown to attend a number of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) sessions with the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD).

Neither Ciara nor Lauren could recall coming into contact with any other ESOL practitioners outside of their immediate teams during the pandemic, although Lauren had chatted regularly with a number of educators working in other settings such as secondary schools:

I’d be asking them also, ‘How’s it going?’. And people who work in secondary schools, asking them, ‘Are the students engaging with you?’. Just to kind of get a feel of where you are … and, ‘What platforms are you using?’. And some were, ‘I’m using Google Classroom’, ‘I’m using Zoom’. Just, you know, doing a little bit of research that way and finding out what other people are doing and how successful it is.

4.2.4 Enduring changes

I was going to meet one of my bosses tomorrow, online. She suggested, '*Would I meet you on Teams?'*. And I said, *'Well look, could I meet you physically'*. I said, '*I'd prefer to meet physically, if you're there'* … I said I'd go into [the centre] because, even though it would take a bit of time out of my day, I would prefer to.
Ciara

And we were kind of gradually getting our act together, getting our lessons for Teams, becoming more structured ourselves and more used to less of an ad-hoc style of teaching, much more structured programme. So we were improving and becoming more disciplined as well.
Lauren

You know, the women were at home before, they had to be there to clean and cook for their husbands .... so the ones that I teach now are much happier in the classroom.
Edel

I don't feel like, '*Oh, we're closer because we went through this together and you're not'*. I do feel like we're all just so happy that it's over. It's funny, we don't really reminisce about it.
Julia

I think, well obviously, with lockdown we acquired a lot of new skills there probably wasn't the incentive or the motivation to do prior to that. That is helping us now, not just with teaching but just with general meetings and management and training stuff.
Alicia

I feel like the ESOL area that I'm working in now is a little bit more streamlined. It's a little bit more organised in terms of – not that it was disorganised! But that certain dates are in place now. And people are working towards that. There's more cohesion, I think that's what it is.
Marie

And we have also a SharePoint library where we upload our worksheets and things that work, something that didn't work but maybe a bit tweaked so that it does work. And that helps a lot as well. So we have tutors sit down together after-hours talking to each other about this, that and the other and helping each other at work. We have a WhatsApp group for ESOL tutors which helped immensely with the online teaching as you can imagine.
Zabel

And you know, because we're outside the urban area. I mean we're smaller, 'small fry' I suppose. But yeah, I feel the benefit of having so much experience before the ETB, but I think I was looking for that I was looking for more of community of practice. I wanted to have a sort of camaraderie between colleagues, but there's just nobody there.
Geraldine

Continuing use of technology

Whilst all eight participants had evidently been keen to return to in-person teaching once COVID-related restrictions had been lifted, they all mentioned ways in which their use of technology in the classroom and elsewhere had changed.

Lauren described how ESOL learners in her centre now had access to more materials and exercises, and that it was easier to share websites where they could practise things like grammar. She had also started recording lessons so anyone unable to attend could listen to the recording and access the PowerPoint slides afterwards. She added that being able to store materials centrally on Teams also made it easier to access them in different locations and share with colleagues. Marie also commented on the relative ease with which resources could

be pooled and shared, whilst Julia remarked that her centre's website had been completely redeveloped.

Zabel felt her team's digital skills and comfort with technology had improved markedly:

> Now, when tutors are joining, even new tutors are joining, the expectation is much higher because all the communication is done on [Microsoft] 365, all the daily emails, all the daily communications. There are no more phone calls, everything goes through 365. The meetings with tutors, online on Teams as well. So the expectation of IT skills, I suppose, has changed, has shifted.

She added:

> Also, which I have to say with joy, a lot of tutors now don't ignore the SmartBoards in their classrooms. And we have quite a few of them and they used to be forgotten and ignored, and standing sadly in the corner of the classroom while the teacher was still using the whiteboard! Now they engage with the internet and if the internet is down for some reason, there is a lot of uproar because the class wasn't prepared for that.

Geraldine mentioned that she had found it easier to conduct group discussions online than in the classroom, especially where learners were completing QQI Awards in Communications. She had asked about whether she could revert to doing them online but had been advised this was not possible. Whilst she was adamant she would not wish to see a return to fully online ESOL teaching, she expressed frustration that some of the positives about blended learning were at risk of being forgotten.

Alicia indicated that most of her team meetings and other interactions with colleagues had remained largely online. She explained that she was currently working on a project with two other colleagues that previously would have involved travelling for at least a couple of hours each time they met, but was now being completed almost entirely through online meetings.

Whilst she had been glad to see the return of in-person external conferences, Julia described how she had felt about attending her first event after lockdown:

> All of a sudden it's like, oh, the thoughts of getting out there again, putting on makeup and heels and actually making sure that, you know. There's a little bit of you almost get out of practice you know.

She also discussed some of the challenges with navigating online meetings and webinars:

> I don't know if the etiquette changed [for online meetings]; it used to be we all had our screens on and then it was rude to have them on so you were all to have your screens off.

> You know, to figure all that out, like if you weren't presenting or whatever you're not supposed to be on-camera.

Need for human contact and interaction

Whilst most of the participants felt they were now making greater use of technology than before the pandemic, several of them mentioned the importance of human interaction within language learning and with ESOL especially. Ciara remarked on the importance of learners and tutors being able to see each other's facial expressions, and that it would not be fair to return to online learning. She felt it was harder to react spontaneously to comments or events:

> If somebody says something or I'd say something, now while I'm in the classroom, I'd write it on the board, I'd say an expression so we 'this is how we say it', write it on the board and I break it down. And we have a bit of banter about it. Banter was lost!

Others related the importance of being able to offer learners a cup of tea, and for them to have the opportunity to converse with each other. As Zabel described it:

> Now, with that coming to class, they're talking to someone while walking to the class, in the class, during the break, while walking out of the class, the input and output is much bigger than just switching on the phone and saying a couple of sentences.

Edel described how the ESOL learners in the community setting where she now works had felt liberated when they were able to return to the classroom:

> I'm glad about this because my ESOL group, they didn't enjoy being online at all. That wasn't with me at the time, obviously, but we've talked about that and they didn't enjoy being online because they had the children at home. Because they didn't have that free time to themselves.

5 Further analysis and discussion

5.1 Interpreting these findings

The disruptive effects of the pandemic provided an opportunity to explore how English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) practitioners navigated their way through an extraordinarily difficult set of circumstances. The participant interviews took place almost exactly three years after the initial introduction of lockdown restrictions in Ireland, and just over a year after most pandemic-related restrictions had been lifted. It provided participants with a vantage point from which they could reflect upon their experiences throughout and since the pandemic.

This chapter delves further into what the participants told me, seeking to contextualise and apply meaning to their stories. I explore how these practitioners' experiences might be seen in the context of ESOL provision in Ireland having grown rapidly in recent years but without consistent policy direction or a coherent national strategy.

I consider how the participants, individually and collectively, view themselves as ESOL practitioners, the expectations placed upon them during the pandemic and different ways they responded. I will reflect upon some of their common challenges, such as adapting to online teaching and learning, device, platform accessibility and suitability issues, as well as the numbers of learners who were unable (or unwilling) to engage with online learning or other improvised alternatives (such as materials posted to them) during lockdown.

I also reflect upon how the participants' pandemic stories might be consistent or otherwise with my own perspectives of ESOL as an inherently social practice requiring dialogical process, and for practitioners to appreciate how the broader political and social context in which they are working.

5.2 Themes from the findings

5.2.1 The context of COVID-19

At the very end of my conversation with Julia, she remarked how useful she had found it to spend time reflecting upon what happened during the pandemic as there was a lot she had since forgotten about. I was initially concerned the discussion might have been

uncomfortable for her, although she quickly reassured me that was not the case and it was simply that she had since moved on to tackling other challenges such as responding to the demand for ESOL provision from people fleeing the war in Ukraine.

By choosing to focus on the pandemic, I was intentionally asking ESOL practitioners to recall an exceptional period when much of their reality had been turned on its head. The conversations were framed as a ‘safe space’ where it was hoped participants would feel able to speak candidly; indeed the particular circumstances of the pandemic might even have given them ‘permission’ to admit vulnerabilities and shortcomings in a way they might not feel comfortable doing when reflecting more generally on their practice. Conversely, it could also have been a context where they might feel expected to talk about resilience and how they had ‘overcome’ the challenges. I was conscious of a need to be reflexive about this, positioning myself as a sympathetic fellow professional and ‘ESOL ally’ who was keen to understand and was not looking to pass judgement. Before each interview, I made a point of explaining my own background so participants were aware I had an understanding of ESOL in general, but not necessarily a detailed knowledge of their particular setting.

Ciara’s admission that she spent significant amounts of time completing online Continuing Professional Development (CPD) digital skills courses is perhaps a case in point: she was open about how difficult she had found this, and how she probably would not have coped had it not been for her son’s assistance. The same might also be true, for different reasons, of Marie’s admission that she had found the experience of trying to teach ESOL learners online almost futile, and that this had prompted her to take a job within a secondary school once schools had begun returning to in-person classes in the autumn of 2020. Edel’s decision to leave her role within a further education college in Northern Ireland during the spring of 2021 similarly might be seen as an acknowledgement that she felt improvised online ESOL classes were not really working and leaving too many learners behind, although in her case it might be worth noting that she continued with her online English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes.

Geraldine only begun teaching ESOL within an ETB during 2021-22, and therefore was not in that role during the more extensive lockdown measures that were in place during earlier stages of the pandemic. Nevertheless, it was apparent the pandemic at least partly influenced

her decision to move away from teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) within the private sector.

My conversations with Julia and Zabel were slightly different from the other participants, as both had a coordinating role within their Adult Education Centres (AECs), so could speak from the perspective of a manager as well as reflecting on their own practice. I will look more closely at Zabel's decision to reorganise her team into groups of practitioners who worked together to plan and deliver online classes in 5.2.5, below.

Similarly, whilst I had only intended to interview practitioners working within the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), it was interesting to hear Edel's account of working in a further education college in Northern Ireland. She appeared to face similar challenges around learner engagement and the pressures of teaching online, although there were also some contrasts such as an apparent lack of additional support or resources from the college management.

5.2.2 Regret about lost learners

All eight participants expressed regret about the numbers of ESOL learners who had not been able to continue attending classes during the pandemic. Even during that initial period after March 2020, when there was uncertainty about how long restrictions would remain in place, there seemed to have been a general sense that it was important to at least try to stay in touch with as many learners as possible, with both Zabel and Julia indicating this was what their teams had prioritised. In Lauren's case this was limited to posting out materials to her learners, in the hope at least some of them might be able to engage with, and eventually return, these; others had attempted to send text or WhatsApp messages to learners, or emails where there was any possibility of these being accessed.

Practitioners' commitment to continue supporting their learners as far as possible is perhaps exemplified by Ciara's exclamation, "I have to know. I have to understand how to do this!". She admitted she had probably spent too much time attempting to complete online courses but had been determined to improve her own digital skills as quickly and as far as she could. Similarly, Marie's regret and frustration about not being able to support her learners as well as she would wish seems to have been a critical factor in her decision to leave her AEC in the summer of 2020 to work in a secondary school. In both cases it was clear they saw their role

as an ESOL practitioner as much more than 'just a job' with both displaying a strong sense of commitment to their learners.

5.2.3 Differences between ESOL settings, and locations

There was a noticeable contrast between the four participants who worked in suburban AECs (Julia, Ciara, Zabel and Marie), who were each part of a larger team of dedicated ESOL practitioners, and the experiences of Geraldine, Alicia and Lauren who either worked alone within an AEC or in outreach locations. The latter three generally seemed more accustomed to working alone, and whilst Geraldine expressed some frustrations about a lack of regular interaction with colleagues, the other two seemed more accepting of this.

With most of her other literacy classes cancelled, Alicia spent much of the pandemic working with one family of Syrian refugees. That level of personalised support is unlikely to have been replicated within a suburban context, and it is easy to understand why those ETBs and centres with greater demand for ESOL are likely to organise their provision differently. Nevertheless, there would seem to be a case for much greater national coordination, networking and sharing between practitioners and settings.

Another contrast between Edel's experiences and those of the other seven participants was her direct criticisms of her FE college's senior leadership for its lack of understanding of ESOL and the absence of any substantive additional resources. Whilst Lauren and Geraldine also expressed some frustrations about their respective ETBs, neither of these were anywhere near as strident; indeed all seven spoke positively about how far they had felt supported by their managers and the ETB during the pandemic.

5.2.4 Implications for accreditation

The four practitioners who work in suburban AECs all indicated that they had been able to be quite pragmatic about continuing planned curriculum content and accreditation once pandemic restrictions had been introduced. Julia described the online classes offered by her centre as generic across all levels, with an emphasis on 'everyday English' and much of the content drawn from a local radio station. Zabel's centre had likewise been reluctant to proceed with planned accreditation during the summer of 2020. Where accreditation did go

ahead, this tended to involve working towards more generic awards at a lower level than planned.

Within the more rural settings, there did seem to have been less of an explicit acceptance of the need to move away from planned teaching and forms of accreditation, though in Lauren's case it seemed she was sufficiently empowered to take that decision herself, at least for the first year of the pandemic. Alicia, likewise, seemed to have been able to do more or less what she felt appropriate to support the family she was working with. Geraldine's experience seemed to have been different, although of course she only began teaching in an ESOL setting during 2021-22. She described carrying out assessments for Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) awards as a "further element of distress". Whilst most of the restrictions on education settings had been lifted by that time, most of her ESOL classes were still online. She explained that she had actually found it easier to organise and oversee some of the assessment activities remotely (especially for speaking and listening) than it had been to complete them in a classroom once they returned to in-person teaching.

Several of the participants raised the suitability of accreditation for ESOL learners more generally, especially the use of QQI awards intended for literacy learners. This echoes a similar debate in England (into which I was frequently drawn in my previous role) about ESOL learners being directed to study for General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) and Functional Skills English qualifications rather than accreditation designed specifically for ESOL learners. The reasons for this are largely because GCSE and Functional Skills are funded more generously and reflect better in government performance tables (Roden & Osmaston, 2021), although they also have the advantage of being accepted more readily by employers and within Apprenticeships[1].

Edel also expressed concern about the pressure placed on ESOL practitioners within her FE college to maintain existing patterns of learner qualification achievement and progression. Having been on the other side of the table during that time, representing an awarding organisation as it developed and implemented its pandemic-related adaptations and mitigations to qualification assessments, I know this was something many ESOL practitioners

[1] Apprenticeships within England, Northern Ireland and Wales each have mandatory maths/numeracy and English/literacy qualification requirements that must either be achieved prior to starting or whilst on programme. ESOL qualifications are not included within the list of accepted English qualifications.

throughout England, Northern Ireland and Wales found extremely challenging. Whilst Zabel and others working within an ETB context were able to either abandon or change plans for learner accreditation, the funding model for Northern Ireland's colleges largely depends on learners being enrolled for, and achieving, externally awarded qualifications.

5.2.5 'Chatty group' or 'treasure chest': sharing and collaborating

Zabel's description of ESOL tutors as, "A very specific type of teacher [who] do not specifically like to cooperate", might be an extreme characterisation, although it could reflect something of a culture where ESOL provision has tended to be 'othered' or conflated with adult literacy, and where ESOL practitioners have become accustomed to 'quietly getting on' amidst a lack of coherent policy direction. Whilst Zabel oversaw two largely suburban AECs during the pandemic, that pattern of practitioners working alone and largely on their own initiative was even more apparent in the settings described by Lauren, Alicia and Geraldine.

Ensuring learners are appropriately prepared for accreditation assessments might also be a factor in some ESOL practitioners inclining towards curating their own resources and schemes of work. For example, Geraldine recalled that when she first began teaching ESOL she was given a large box of material by one colleague which mapped out almost every moment of every lesson to QQI Award module descriptors. On the one hand she felt she should be grateful that this "golden egg" had been entrusted to her, yet she also felt uncomfortable about how over-engineered these materials were, and how little room they seemed to leave for any spontaneity or reflexivity.

Zabel's decision to reorganise her team into groups that worked together to develop and deliver online classes was clearly significant. It was apparent she had encountered at least some initial resistance from the team, including discomfort that Zabel was able to observe recordings of the lessons they had put together. However, structuring online classes in this way did seem to have had a positive impact on learner engagement, and Zabel implied the team had eventually been won over to this approach. It would be interesting to explore the extent to which being 'forced' to collaborate has had a lasting impact on their practice, and whether they are still as willing to share and co-produce lessons now that they don't have to.

It was also notable that all seven ETB-based participants talked about undertaking lots of online CPD during the pandemic. For the most part this seemed to have been organised by or through the ETB and involved external presenters or trainers. A number of the participants had also participated in at least some of the online webinars and modules the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) had organised. Here I detected a difference between the perspectives of Julia and Zabel and those of the other participants, since as coordinators they might have felt more inclined and able to attend these sessions. This would seem unfortunate, but perhaps understandable in the absence of a greater variety of less formal networking opportunities.

The pandemic did seem to bring about more communication between immediate colleagues, especially amongst those based in suburban AECs, although Ciara remarked that her fellow practitioners had always been, "A very chatty group … [that are] here for the students and each other". Julia described conversations with colleagues during the pandemic having become more personal and focused on wellbeing, and a number of participants recalled taking part in wellbeing support, as well as yoga and cooking classes, organised by the ETB, implying that this might also have helped strengthen colleague relationships. I wondered whether this might have created a difference in colleague relationships between those practitioners who experienced the pandemic together and those who have joined since then, although Julia especially did not seem to think that was the case.

5.2.6 Status of ESOL within ETBs, and the wider FET landscape

One thing that was immediately apparent from the conversations with the seven ETB-based participants was the extent to which ETBs were able to make additional resources available during the pandemic. This included laptops being made available to learners, as well as funds being made available to buy books and other resources that could be distributed to learners though initiatives such as the Mitigating against Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF) (DFHERIS, 2020). This was in stark contrast with what Edel had experienced within her FE college in Northern Ireland, where even securing additional support for one visually-impaired learner had taken months of internal wrangling.

Whilst specific additional funds such as MAEDF were intended for learners, there did seem to be some issues with the availability of additional resources for practitioners, as well as

differences in attitude and approach between ETBs. Prior to the pandemic, Lauren had on several occasions requested a work mobile phone she could use to keep in touch with learners who lived and worked in remote areas, but this had always been refused. She was reluctant to give out her personal phone number, as in the past she had receive harassing messages from one former learner. Whilst most of her colleagues had used WhatsApp to communicate with learners during the pandemic, she had only been able to communicate by physically travelling to the centre and making calls from the office phone. Even in these changed circumstances, her managers remained unable or unwilling to give Lauren a work phone.

In contrast, Julia had used her personal laptop when she moved to working from home at the beginning of the pandemic; she was later offered a work laptop, although refused as she felt others were in greater need of it. Nevertheless, as I found during my time working remotely for City & Guilds, using the same device for both work and personal purposes makes it harder to draw a clear line between the two.

More generally, Lauren observed a general lack of ESOL expertise and understanding within the ETBs. As she said, “The management are not ESOL experts … you’re having to ‘sell’ them things all the time.

She also raised the issue of there not being a common, national ESOL curriculum and learning offer. It is perhaps unsurprising she would mention this having previously taught ESOL within England, although what this might involve in practice requires some unpacking. For example, the Skills for Life strategy introduced in England during the 2000s mandated the use of a standard Adult ESOL Core Curriculum and national standards (analogous to those for literacy). It has the advantages of driving greater consistency and comparability, especially when preparing learners for qualifications since these are also required to align with the same curriculum and standards; yet one of the criticisms levelled at the core curriculum is the extent to which it centralises control of what is taught (Simpson, 2015, pp. 208-209) and stifles dialogical and problematised learning.

Nevertheless, there would seem to be a case for greater consistency between and within ETBs. The use of accreditation is one aspect of this, especially where learners are encouraged to complete awards that are not widely recognised outside Ireland and have no alignment with international benchmarks such as the Common European Framework of Reference for

Languages (CEFR). QQI's recent development of draft qualification standards at levels 1-4 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (QQI, 2022) might have been an opportunity for a more extensive review of how the English language proficiency of migrants learners might be assessed and accredited more appropriately and consistently.

5.2.7 Participant demographics

A general pattern across most English language-dominant countries is for the ESOL practitioner workforce to be predominantly female, and the gender profile of this study's participants would appear to suggest that pattern is replicated in Ireland. Moreover, as Doyle suggests, ESOL practitioners tend to be women from Irish backgrounds (2015, p. 165).

This study set out to understand more about the existing ESOL practitioner workforce, rather than to make recommendations about how it should change, although it would nevertheless be worth acknowledging that relatively few ESOL practitioners have personal experience of migration (other than perhaps through having taught EFL outside of Ireland); it is even more uncommon for them to have experienced forced migration with all that might have involved.

5.2.8 Changes to pedagogy: during and since the pandemic

Amongst the participants, Geraldine was probably the most vocal in suggesting the clamour to get back into the classroom once lockdown restrictions had been lifted might have resulted in a missed opportunity to explore where some aspects of learning have a continuing role to play. Others remarked that their use of technology within the classroom had changed, for example Lauren indicated that she now routinely makes recordings and slides from her lessons available online so learners can access them again afterwards, or if they were unable to attend that class. Zabel also indicated how practice had changed within her centres by expressing joy that the SmartBoards in her centres are now being used rather than, "Standing sadly in the corner of the classroom".

Zabel also commented on the extent to which technology and online communication has become normalised in other aspects of ESOL practitioners' work, with meetings and routine interactions generally conducted via Teams or other Microsoft applications rather than through phone calls. She noted that prospective ESOL practitioners being recruited now were generally expected to have these capabilities as a matter of course.

Of the two participants who left their roles as ESOL practitioners during the pandemic, both remarked that they felt the role had changed beyond recognition when it moved online. However, Edel did feel comfortable with her EAP courses remaining predominantly online.

5.3 Pedagogical values and relations with learners

I did not discuss theoretical bases directly with the participants, and I was keen not to pre-suppose too much about their ontology and epistemology. Nevertheless, it was apparent in all cases that they cared deeply about their learners; for example, Ciara said of herself and her colleagues that they were, “Here for the students and for each other”.

Painter-Farrell (2023) described the role of the ESOL practitioner as one of, “Ally, advocate, activist and agent of change”. It is less clear whether Ireland’s ESOL practitioners typically see themselves in those terms, and here I am reminded of Brown’s concept of ‘comfort radicalism’ (2019). I am also mindful that one of my other observations is the limited extent to which there is informal networking and communication between ESOL practitioners in different settings, and potentially even less opportunity to engage critically with each other.

Nevertheless, however it is framed, supporting migrants to develop proficiency in the dominant language is an inherently political act.

All eight participants expressed at least some frustration that any interaction when teaching online felt more stilted and that there was less scope for spontaneous conversations; as Ciara observed, “Banter was lost”. They had all prioritised trying to maintain contact with learners in the initial period after lockdown measures were introduced. They might have felt obliged to send learners online and other materials to work through, yet they clearly saw this as suboptimal and appropriate only as a temporary emergency measure focused on helping to protect existing learning.

5.4 Continuing role for online learning: all about the blend?

Whilst this study has not sought to look in detail at e-learning pedagogies and theories around these, it is worth remarking that all eight participants expressed relief about being back to in-person teaching, and all felt it had been difficult to replicate online the level of interaction

and incidental conversation that would typically take place within (and around) an in-person ESOL classroom. It is also worth remarking that Edel felt more comfortable with teaching EAP online than she had with ESOL, so cohort and context would seem relevant here.

Geraldine was possibly the most vocal of the participants in wanting to maintain some form of online learning and interaction, although she was clear this should complement rather than replace the in-person classroom. Others, such as Lauren, talked about how they now routinely make lesson content available for learners to access online afterwards.

Looking beyond Ireland, Whitton has added some further insights about the complementary potential of online learning from the perspective of a curriculum manager working in an English further education college:

> As we came out of the lockdowns, the landscape of education in FE appears to have been transformed. I am confident it would be a mistake to go back to the way things were before; travelling for meetings, losing valuable work time, and students missing sessions because of inaccessibility. Significant online delivery skills have been developed during those lock down months and forgetting them all would be such a waste. Instead, utilising a combination of both old and new skills should surely be the way forward, but navigating how, will be the challenge (Whitton, 2023).

She goes on to advocate for what Beatty (2019) defines as hybrid-flexible or 'HyFlex' course design:

> Offering the opportunity to choose session by session on whether they attend in person or jump online, offers increased flexibility and more equity to our learners. Many of us can return to the workplace having upskilled our pedagogical and technological skills. Giving our students greater choices so far seems to have led to increased attendance for adult professional learners (Whitton, 2023).

Whilst Zabel might have expressed joy at smartboards no longer sitting in the corner of the room, Sharma discusses some of pros and cons of blending online and in-person language learning:

> For some people, the term 'blended learning' has a positive connotation: 1+1 is more than two. In other words, the best of the teacher plus the best of the technology could result in positive learning outcomes. For others, blended learning has a negative connotation: it is the worst of both worlds. On a blended course, the students who love the classroom do not contribute to the knowledge-building on the forums. The students who spend their time on-line hate crossing the busy city to attend the face-to-face lessons. The course ends up pleasing no-one! So, when someone mentions the 'virtual' classroom, what connotation does it have? For one person it's exciting; for the next, it's scary (Sharma, n.d.).

He suggests four key principles for implementing technology effectively:

1. Separate the role of the teacher. It is important to understand the respective roles played by the teacher and the technology in the learning process; the teacher could deal with the 'fuzzy' areas [such as 'I did it' versus 'I've done it'].
2. Teach in a principled way. Whenever a new technology emerges (such as, say, podcasting), it is important to go beyond the 'wow' factor and think about the pedagogical reasons for using it.
3. Use the technology to complement and enhance what the teacher does
4. 'It's not what it is, it's what you do with it.' (Jones 1986.). So it is not the interactive whiteboard per se which could improve the learning experience, but how it is used.

5.5 It's good to talk: informal and self-directed collaboration

One possible way of encouraging and facilitating greater communication and collaboration between ESOL practitioners is through informal online communities. Before embarking on this study, I had looked at two other pieces of research carried out in England by fellow National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA) members: Diana Tremayne's exploration of educators' informal and self-directed professional learning through interaction on Twitter (Tremayne, 2021), as well as Rachel Öner's (unpublished) examination of non-formal ESOL practitioner meets. Both were kind enough to spare the time for a chat whilst I was in the process of reviewing my interview transcripts; Diana was initially surprised I had not found more of an appetite amongst ESOL practitioners in Ireland for using social media channels to network with one another, although acknowledged ESOL provision had established and grown more recently in Ireland, and that there might have been fewer opportunities for informal practitioner networks to establish.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

6.1 Discussion points arising from the study

With English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) within Ireland having been subject to relatively little specific research, this study aimed to provide some qualitative insights into the position of ESOL and how practitioners regard themselves within that context. It could not claim to present a definitive picture, and indeed there will almost certainly be other ESOL practitioners working within the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) whose experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, and of their roles more generally, differ considerably from those described by the participants in this study.

The focus of this study on experiences during and since the pandemic means it would be very difficult to replicate, at least not without having to rely on participant reflections from longer after the event. Interviews in this case took place almost exactly three years after the first introduction of lockdown measures in Ireland, and a little over a year after most formal restrictions had been lifted.

It was apparent all eight participants had found this period disorientating and challenging, and in at least two cases they had opted to move temporarily away from teaching ESOL rather than continue to teach online; in both cases they later returned to teaching ESOL, albeit in one case within a different setting. Unsure how long pandemic restrictions were likely to last, their initial priority was attempting to maintain contact with learners by phone, or by sending them resources where this was feasible.

There were clear regrets about the numbers of learners who were unable or unwilling to remain engaged once in-person classes ceased, as well as a general sense that any improvised online provision was a case of 'something' being better than 'nothing'. None of the participants had any significant experience of teaching online prior to the pandemic, and most seemed to have initially struggled with platforms, sharing content and managing online etiquette. In one setting practitioners had worked in small groups to co-produce and co-deliver lessons, in an attempt to encourage them to collaborate and pool their digital knowledge.

Most practitioners seem to have felt able to adapt or deviate from what they might have planned to cover had in-person classes remained, with planned award accreditation either substituted or abandoned, and the availability of additional digital and other resources through initiatives such as the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF) was generally praised.

All eight participants had been glad to see the return of in-person ESOL provision, yet they each indicated they had become more comfortable with a selective use of technology to support their work within the classroom as well as to support other aspects of their role such as attending team meetings, sharing resources with colleagues and making materials available to learners outside of classes.

There were notable differences between ESOL practitioners who had worked in suburban settings where ESOL provision was more extensive, and those in rural areas where individual practitioners were accustomed to working alone and had fewer fellow ESOL practitioners they could share ideas with. All eight participants kept in touch with immediate colleagues during the pandemic, although only four participants (two of whom also had coordinating roles) described having contact with ESOL practitioners outside their immediate setting.

Uncertainty about ESOL's place within Ireland's wider landscape of Further Education and Training (FET) was not raised directly by the participants, and it should be noted that in the immediate context of the pandemic they were broadly complementary about how their managers, and the ETBs generally, had supported them and made additional resources available. Nevertheless, given the extent to which migrants' language acquisition is intrinsic to broader questions of integration and belonging, the lack of a distinct national strategy for ESOL and especially the absence of cross-government coordination, underlines a sense of ESOL being something of a Cinderella when compared to the public policy commitment to improving adult literacy exemplified through the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) strategy.

6.2 Recommendations

6.2.1 Who might be interested in what this study has to say?

The findings are likely to be of interest to a range of individuals, advocacy organisations and government bodies across the island of Ireland and beyond. It will include those with a direct

(and indirect) interest in ESOL and supporting the integration of migrants, as well as those with a broader interest in understanding more about educators' experiences of the pandemic and the challenges of an unplanned move to remote learning.

6.2.2 What should they take away from it?

ESOL provision within Ireland has grown both quickly and organically in recent years. There are undoubtedly many examples of good practice, and it was evident from the eight ESOL practitioners who participated in this study that they were all extremely committed to supporting and assisting their learners. However, it was also evident that ESOL provision varies considerably between ETBs and even between centres. Diversity might not in itself be a problem, since it can enable practitioners on the ground to be reflexive and innovative. Nevertheless, one consequence of the current absence of a coherent national strategy is the lack of more regular opportunities for ideas-sharing and replication.

Another crucial point for policymakers and others with an interest in facilitating migrants' English language acquisition to understand is the fundamental need to see ESOL as a social practice, rather than a matter of individuals overcoming deficiency. Language is intrinsic to broader questions of integration, inclusion and belonging; it empowers and disempowers people. Becoming more proficient in the dominant language can help individuals progress into work or study, but it also enables communities to gain agency and voice, as well as protecting vulnerable people from exploitation. In the same way that the ALL strategy describes adult literacy as a matter for the whole of government, society and the economy, ESOL should not be regarded as simply a FET concern. The example of the Regional Education and Language Teams (REALT) established in 2022 to support people settling in Ireland from Ukraine would seem to be good example of effective multi-agency cooperation, but should this not be 'business as usual' to support all migrants?

Another issue is ESOL's continued situation alongside, and conflation with, literacy for first language English speakers. A couple of this study's participants mentioned a lack of clarity about where their remit began and ended. For example, Adult Education Centres (AECs) generally do not offer courses above Level 5 of the National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ) and are not necessarily in a position to respond to demands for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programmes with more recognisable accreditation that might enable migrants

to seek employment in the profession in which they worked before migrating, or to gain entry to higher education. Some ETBs do appear to be addressing this, for example Dublin and Dún Laoghaire ETB is currently offering a free Intensive Intermediate English Language Course for Nurses and Healthcare Professionals that involves achievement of a Cambridge English Certificate at B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (DDLETB, n.d.). However, any such initiatives seem piecemeal and reactive, as well as being largely centred on urban and suburban population areas.

Greater collaboration, networking and praxis between ESOL practitioners is likely to improve flows of information and ideas between settings, as well as facilitating better advocacy by those directly involved in supporting ESOL learners. There are already examples of this happening, for example SOLAS is currently funding a project to review and develop initial and ongoing English language assessment for migrant learners (SOLAS, 2021b), whilst the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) facilitating an annual conference for ESOL practitioners. However, these tend to be isolated projects rather than part of a coherent and consistent over-arching strategy.

There might be a role for the National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA) and other practitioner-led organisations to facilitate dialogue between ESOL practitioners outside of the formal ETB structures. I should declare an interest here as one of the founding members of the NATECLA Island of Ireland branch; nevertheless, the branch is looking to expand its work and develop more of an all-island profile. One clear challenge here is geographical: attending in-person meetings and events involves a significant time (and cost) commitment, especially if they are organised on an island-wide basis where they are likely to be less inclusive for ESOL practitioners based in rural areas; online meets and chat spaces might have a role to play, although as I indicated in 5.5, it might be difficult for these to gain traction without promotion through existing practitioner networks.

6.3 Suggestions for further research

This study aimed to provide some insight into the experiences of ESOL practitioners during the pandemic, as well as to add to the relatively modest collection of specific research into the provision of ESOL within Ireland. Whilst the pandemic and its disruption to in-person

learning was an exceptional situation, there is the potential for further research into the experiences of ESOL practitioners and how they perceive themselves professionally and personally.

It would be interesting to look further into Zabel's reorganisation of her team so they worked together to develop and deliver online ESOL classes. Anecdotally, it seemed to have improved learner engagement and mitigated the extent to which learner participation dropped off during the pandemic; whilst there did seem to have been some initial resistance from staff, they eventually seemed to have come on board. Whilst the immediate impetus for online learning that existed during the pandemic has now dissipated, it might nevertheless be worth considering how it might be replicated.

Another area touched upon in this study which could be developed further was differences in ESOL provision between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. This might be especially pertinent as demographic and other changes within Northern Ireland are prompting more widespread conversations about the possibility of a border poll (referendum on Irish reunification) within the next few years, and as O'Leary (2021) and others have argued there is a need for detailed preparation ahead of any such constitutional change.

Whilst international comparisons of ESOL provision have historically tended to, for obvious reasons, focus on other English-dominant countries, there might be much to gained from comparing ESOL in Ireland with dominant language provision for migrants in other countries of similar size. Some comparative work has already been carried out by CEDEFOP as part of the 'multilingual' strand within its ongoing research into Key Competences in Vocational Education and Training (VET) (CEDEFOP, 2020), although this has focused quite narrowly on language within the context of the workplace and vocational education rather than the broader inclusion and integration of migrants.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Interview schedule

Interview with (pseudonym)	**Date**	**Conducted**
Julia	1 March 2023	in-person
Geraldine	6 March 2023	in-person
Alicia	9 March 2023	in-person
Ciara	14 March 2023	online
Zabel	14 March 2023	online
Marie	21 March 2023	online
Edel	22 March 2023	in-person
Lauren	5 April 2023	online

Appendix B – Interview structure and outline questions

This plan was used to keep me focused during participant interviews. The opening and closing sections were largely scripted so that I could ensure the conversations were framed consistently, although the themes were deliberately kept quite loose to allow discussion to flow naturally. The optional prompts were there to assist me if the conversation dried up, or if I felt we were getting off-topic, although in practice they were rarely needed.

Preamble Firstly, thanks so much for agreeing to take part in this study. The information and consent form I've sent/given you sets out in more detail what I'm trying to explore, and hopefully you've had a chance to read through it. Before we start the interview, I'd just like to outline a few ground rules, mostly so you're clear about what to expect but also to keep me focused. I don't intend to take up more than an hour of your time – less if possible – and you're free to call a halt to the session at any time. I will be recording the session from here on [check recording started]. I'd be happy to send you a copy of the recording and/or transcript afterwards if you'd like. I might also make a few brief notes whilst we're talking as a prompt for me, and again I'd be happy to share these with you. Anything you tell me will be anonymised when it comes to writing up my research, as I really don't want any individuals – or indeed the ETBs they work for – to be identifiable. If need be, I might check back with you afterwards to ensure how I reflect what you've told me doesn't give the game away about who and where you are. So – please consider this a safe space to 'tell it how it was and is'. That's not frame this as a moaning session, but I am looking for an honest reflection of your own experience. And *hopefully* without you having to worry about, or try to second guess, how your manager or anyone else might feel about what you tell me. In a moment I'll ask you to talk about your experience of being an ESOL practitioner during and since March 2020, as well as about how you might have collaborated with others during and since then. But for context, it would first be helpful for me to understand a bit more about the ESOL programmes that you're involved in – for example who are they for, roughly how many learners, what level of language do they tend to have? Also, are you personally involved in more than one type of provision? [follow up as appropriate]
March 2020 Now I'd like to start by asking you to talk about that initial period when lockdown was first announced. *[optional prompts]* *What immediate impact did the Covid restrictions have?* *What were you and your colleagues asked to do?* *What were the biggest challenges for you?* *What support were you able to draw upon?*

Later periods…
And what about the later period – e.g., from autumn 2020, and the differing levels of restrictions at various times after that?

Can you think of anything in what you do as a practitioner that's changed permanently as a result of the pandemic?

[optional prompts]
Are you involved in more online provision than would have been the case before 2020?
How did/do you find it?

Is anything else different?

Collaboration and communication
The other thing I'd like to discuss is how much communication and collaboration there was between yourself and other ESOL practitioners – be that with immediate colleagues within the same team and within the ETB, but also if there were others you kept in touch with?

[optional prompts]
What form did that take?
Who organised it?
Do you feel it helped? How?
Was there a formal structure to these sessions?
Were there other things you did on your own initiative?

And what about more recently? Is there anything in particular that has stopped/started/continued?

And why so?

Closing
Well thanks again for your time and for sharing your experiences and insights with me. It really is appreciated.

As I've said, I'll use the recording of our conversation to write up a transcript which I'll be happy to share with you if you'd like me to. Doing so will give me a chance to reflect on what you've told me, and if there's anything I think I might not have fully understood I may also check back in with you to ensure I haven't got the wrong end of the stick – as well as checking you're completely happy for me to include those comments in my analysis.

You've got my contact details if you need to ask me anything, or if anything else comes to mind that you think it might be useful to mention.

Appendix C – Information and consent forms

The information and consent forms shared with participants are reproduced on the following pages:

Maynooth University
National University of Ireland Maynooth

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
Information Sheet

Purpose of the Study
I am Paul Sceeny, a Masters student in the Department of Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University. As part of the requirements for the MEd in Adult and Community Education, I am undertaking a research study under the supervision of Dr Bernie Grummell.

The study is concerned with **ESOL provision in Ireland, exploring the impact of the enforced move to remote delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic, what ESOL practitioners might have learnt from that experience and the extent to which they were able to support each other.**

What will the study involve?
I'm planning to conduct some informal interviews with ESOL practitioners. Those taking part will be asked about their work experiences during and since the pandemic – for example any particular challenges they might have faced during lockdown, how learners responded to remote delivery, what support they were able to draw upon, and whether there have been any permanent changes to their teaching practice or types of ESOL programmes being offered.

Each interview will last a maximum of one hour, taking place either remotely or in-person.

Who has approved this study?
This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Department of Adult and Community Education. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

Why have you been asked to take part?
You have been asked because I understand you are involved in the teaching and/or management of ESOL within an Education and Training Board (ETB).

Do you have to take part?
No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. Nevertheless, I would really like to hear your thoughts and insights as someone with first-hand experience of ESOL provision during and since the pandemic. I'd be very grateful if you would be willing and able to spare the time for a conversation.

It is **entirely** up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. If you **do** decide to do so, you'll be asked to sign a consent form and given a copy and this information sheet for your own records. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and/or to withdraw your information up until such time as the research findings have been written up (I'm planning to complete this by 30 June 2023). A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your relationships with Maynooth University, your employer or anyone else.

1

What information will be collected?
I will be making an audio and/or video recording of each interview, a copy of which will be available on request afterwards to the participant, along with a transcript and copy of any notes I might have taken during the conversation. I might also ask participants to clarify things they might have said during the interview that I could have misunderstood or misinterpreted – or indeed confirm whether they are happy for me to consider these points when writing up this study.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?
Yes, all information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential. None of the individuals involved in these interviews will be identified, nor the ETB(s) they are associated with.

Any electronic information (eg interview recording and transcript, contact details, my notes) will be held securely on Maynooth University servers and will be accessed only by myself and my supervisor. Any other written communications (eg text/WhatsApp messages and emails) with yourself in the process of arranging this interview will likewise be kept securely and remain confidential.

No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party. If you so wish, the data that you provide can also be made available to you at your own discretion.

Important note: it must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.

What will happen to the information which you give?
All the information you provide during the interview will be held securely on Maynooth University servers. Naturally, I will want to draw upon the things you tell me when writing up my research, although I will do so in such a way that it will **not** be possible to identify you. If there's anything you say that you later decide you don't want me to use, please let me know and I will of course respect your wishes.

On completion of the research, your personal data will be retained whilst the study is undergoing final assessment. Once that process has been completed, all research files will be deleted. Any related text/WhatsApp messages and emails will likewise be deleted.

What will happen to the results?
The research will be written up and presented as a thesis that contributes towards the MEd. It's possible that I might also present summaries of the findings during meetings within Maynooth University, at external national/international conferences and relevant journals. Again, any organisations or individuals included within this study will remain anonymous.

A copy of the thesis (and other reports/presentations based on this study) will be made available to you upon request.

2

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?
I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part, and again please let me reassure you that your personal details will remain confidential.

However, since the COVID-19 pandemic was a difficult time for many of us, I do appreciate that it's possible talking about your experiences during that time could trigger some unpleasant or distressing memories. Much as I would like you to be honest and give a 'warts and all' account, if you are unhappy at any time and/or would like to stop the interview then please do let me know. Your wellbeing is far more important than this study!

What if there is a problem?
At the end of the interview, I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling. You may contact my supervisor, Dr Bernie Grummell (Bernie.Grummell@mu.ie) if you feel the research has not been carried out as described above.

Any further queries?
If you need any further information, you can contact me:
Mobile/WhatsApp: ████████
Email: paul.sceeny.2022@mumail.ie

If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the attached consent form.

Thank you for taking the time to read this

3

Consent Form

Please complete **as applicable** the **shaded** areas below.

Insert name here

I Click or tap here to enter text. agree to participate in Paul Sceeny's research study titled:
"Use of remote delivery within ESOL provision in Ireland in response to the COVID-19 pandemic".

Please tick each statement below, as applicable:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally and in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily.	☐
I am participating voluntarily.	☐
I give permission for my interview with Paul Sceeny to be audio/video recorded.	☐
I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating.	☐
I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data up to **30 June 2023**.	☐
It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request.	☐
I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet.	☐

I understand that my data, in an **anonymous** format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

I **agree** to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview.	☐
OR	
I **do not agree** to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview.	☐

I **agree** for my data to be used for further research projects.	☐
OR	
I **do not agree** for my data to be used for further research projects.	☐

I **agree** for my data, once anonymised, to be retained indefinitely in the IQDA archive.	☐

Signed: Click or tap here to enter text.

[Insert Date]

Participant Name: Click or tap here to enter text.

4

For completion by researcher

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed: Paul Sceeny

[Insert Date]

Paul Sceeny

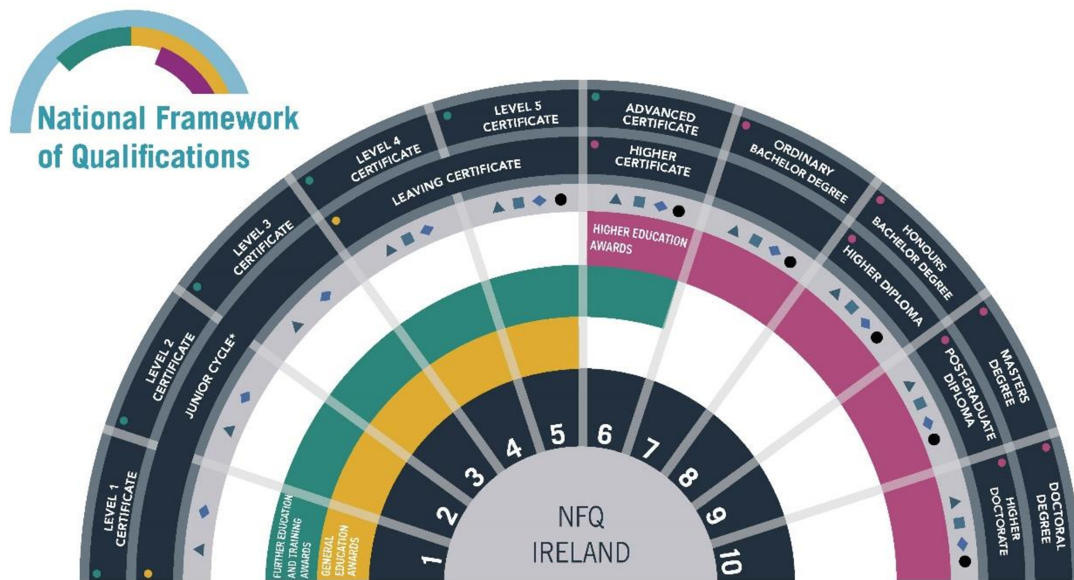
If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact Michael Murray (michael.j.murray@mu.ie) or Angela McGinn (angela.mcginn@mu.ie). Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

Two copies to be made: 1 for participant, 1 for yourself

5

Appendix D – National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is a 10-level system used to describe qualifications in the Irish education and training system. The NFQ shows how General Education Awards, Further Education and Training and Higher Education Awards are mapped against the ten levels of the framework.

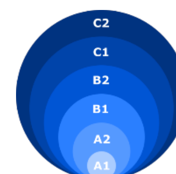


NFQ 'fan' image obtained from Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI, n.d.) Retrieved from https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/the-qualifications-system/national-framework-of-qualifications on 30 May 2023.

Appendix E – Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was developed by the Council of Europe and is widely used within English Language Teaching (ELT) as an international standard to describe levels of foreign language proficiency.

The CEFR consists of six levels: A1 and A2, B1 and B2, C1 and C2.



PROFICIENT USER	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
INDEPENDENT USER	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
BASIC USER	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Chart and image obtained from Council of Europe (CoE, n.d.)
Retrieved from https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages on 30 May 2023.

Appendix F – Timeline of COVID-19 public health measures in Ireland

Date	Action taken
12 March 2020	• Closure of museums, galleries and tourism sites. • Closure to students of schools, creches, other childcare facilities and higher education institutions. • Reduction of workplace contacts, and implementation of remote working practices and teleconferencing where possible and not to travel for meetings; work time and break times should be staggered, where possible. • Restriction of visiting at hospitals, long term care settings, mental health facilities, prisons, and spacing measures in homeless shelters. • No mass gatherings of more than 100 people indoors, or 500 people outdoors.
24 March 2020	• Theatres, clubs, gyms/leisure centres, hairdressers, betting shops, marts, markets, casinos, bingo halls, libraries and other similar outlets closed. • Hotel occupancy limited to essential non-social and non-tourist reasons; non-essential retail outlets closed to members of the public, all other retail outlets required to implement physical distancing; cafés and restaurants limited to takeaway food or deliver. • All sporting events cancelled, including those behind closed doors. • All playgrounds and holiday/caravan parks closed. • All places of worship required to restrict numbers entering at any one time; all organised social indoor and outdoor events of any size not permitted to take place.
1 May 2020	Roadmap for reopening society and business published; restrictions to be eased in five 'phases'.
7 August 2020	Local measures announced for counties Kildare, Laois and Offaly, following increase in cases.
18 August 2020	Further local and national restrictions introduced.
2 September 2020	Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19 published; included plan to manage COVID-19 using different 'levels'.
5 October 2020	Level 3 restrictions introduced, along with ban on indoor dining.
14 October 2020	Level 4 restrictions introduced in Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan.
21 October 2020	Level 5 (highest level) restrictions introduced throughout the state.
1 December 2020	Restrictions eased to Level 3 (with some restrictions remaining until 4 December).
24 December 2020	Level 5 restrictions reintroduced (with some dispensations over the Christmas period).
23 February 2021	Resilience and Recovery: The Path Ahead published.
12 April 2021	Some limited easing of Level 5 restrictions (e.g. 5km travel limit, full reopening of schools).
29 April 2021	Phased reopening plan for May and June announced.
28 May 2021	Further easing of restrictions announced.

31 August 2021	Reframing the challenge, continuing our recovery and reconnecting published.
3 December 2021	Restrictions reintroduced, including closure of nightclubs.
17 December 2021	8pm closing time introduced for bars, restaurants, live event, cinemas and theatres.
22 January 2022	Most mandatory restrictions lifted.
28 February 2022	Remaining protective measures in schools (e.g. pods, social distancing and mandatory face masks) lifted.
31 March 2022	Health (Preservation and Protection and Other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020 lapsed (giving Minister for Health powers to impose restrictions).

Information obtained from **Citizens Information** (n.d.). Retrieved 12 June 2023 from https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/health/covid19/public-health-measures-for-covid19/

"I have to know.
I have to understand how to do this!"

Exploring personal and professional experiences of ESOL practitioners in Ireland during and since the COVID-19 pandemic

Submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the MEd in Adult and Community Education

Paul Sceeny | 21251625