

Chapter 2.8

Educating English-Knowing Bilinguals in Singapore: Challenges and Opportunities

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Introduction

Ever since Singapore gained independence nearly 50 years ago, the teaching of the English Language (EL) as a school subject has seen many curricular innovations and pedagogical changes. These developments have been situated within a multiracial and multilingual society with its diverse societal expectations about the roles of English (and its varieties) and distinct sociolinguistic realities of language use. The motivation for these centrally-directed initiatives as explained by Pryke (this volume) is the country's "continuing quest for excellence, in ensuring that Singapore students read, write, and speak confidently and effectively in English" so as to succeed in the globalized world. Singaporean children's development of English is, however, not limited to EL lessons alone, as opportunities abound across the school curriculum in which English is the medium of instruction. The changing demographics and technological advances in the country have also greatly influenced the way English is acquired at home and in school.

Efforts at educating children for language and academic achievements rest mainly with teachers. They are the enactors of all official curricula, the agents entrusted with bringing about positive changes in the classroom and improving students' learning outcomes. As they balance personal, curricular, and social expectations, teachers have to negotiate their multiple roles in the context of the many centrally planned developments. This chapter discusses everyday realities of teaching English and how these realities interact with teachers' beliefs to influence the process of curriculum implementation. It begins first with an overview of the opportunities that school children have for learning English and ends by discussing what key stakeholders have been doing towards the educational goal for English language competence. Suggestions are also made on strengthening teacher capacity through pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development.

Children Learning English in Singapore

Of the developments in language policies that Pryke (this volume) has highlighted, the one that has a major and enduring impact on English language education in Singapore is the policy of bilingualism. Singapore adopts a form of bilingual education referred to as "English-knowing bilingualism" (Pakir 1991) where

English is the common language for all children. Under the English-knowing bilingual policy, every child has the opportunity to learn the language of his or her ethnicity, commonly referred to as the child's Mother Tongue Language (MTL). In Singapore's bilingual education system, Malay children, for example, will take the subject of Malay Language as MTL. Children in primary schools will also study the subject of Civic and Moral Education in their MTL. The languages for the three main ethnic groups, Chinese, Malay, and Indians, also have the status of official languages. The learning of MTLs is seen by policy makers as a means by which children can connect with their cultural roots. English though not originally a language native to the people of Singapore has become an important working language since its independence. With the key role it plays in the ever increasingly globalized world, all schools eventually adopted English as the medium of instruction while English as a subject was positioned as a first language for formal instruction in schools in 1991.

The distribution of curriculum time between EL and MTL subjects as well as the subjects taught in the two languages indicate the proportion of time that children receive for developing the two languages through formal education. Lower primary children (7 – 9 years old) get between seven to eight hours of English Language instruction a week, upper primary children (10 -12 years old) get five to six hours and secondary school children (13 – 16 years old) receive between three and five hours. About 75 percent of curriculum time in primary schools is in English and in secondary schools about 85 percent. In tertiary institutions such as universities and polytechnics, instruction is 100 percent in English unless the subject being studied is Chinese, Malay, or Tamil. English clearly receives great prominence in the Singapore education system.

Many parents too place a great deal of emphasis on their children's acquisition of the English language for practical reasons. They choose English as a home language even though they themselves have not acquired it as a first language. Parents who can speak English would use English with their children and some parents also code-mix, switching between an English variety to one of the MTLs in many situations. Even parents who are not fluent themselves will seek external assistance to help their children improve their English if they have the means to do so. It is commonly acknowledged that learning English from a young age will give their children a head start in school and more so later in life as they seek employment. The effects of this "invisible language planning" (Pakir 1997) can be seen in the home language profiles of children entering Primary Year One (P1). In recent years, more than 50 percent of each cohort of children are reported to have come from English-speaking homes.

It has been observed that "school-based learning is central to English acquisition and development, sometimes as the starting point for acquisition but also as both purpose and place for development. In Singapore, 'school-based' does not indicate only primary or secondary education; it also includes nursery school, kindergarten, and private lessons of all sorts for extensive and intensive learning" (Silver, Alsagoff, and Goh 2009, 8). Children as young as two or three years old are put in day care centers because it is quite common in Singapore for both parents to work. Depending on the quality of these centers, children are also exposed to the English language used by their caretakers and nursery teachers. Many school-going children will also attend private tuition or language enrichment courses to improve

their English for major examinations at the end of the primary and secondary schools. Singaporean children's English acquisition and development are not, however, restricted to English Language lessons. Because English is the medium of instruction, children also have many opportunities to use the language in most other curriculum subjects. Notably, they will acquire new vocabulary that is discipline-specific, as well as learning to comprehend and produce texts that are appropriate for the respective discipline genres such as science and social studies. They will also learn to develop new ways of thinking through these subjects as they interact with their teachers and peers in English. In short, Singaporean children in the main rely greatly on the school system for their English development. The policies and initiatives that have been put in place are all aimed at supporting the children's learning at every level of their education. Those who are successful develop a greater range and depth of English proficiency that enables them to participate well in many domains of language use such as family, friendship, education, and, eventually, employment. (For in-depth discussions about the acquisition and development of English in Singapore, see Gupta 1994; Silver, Goh, and Alsagoff 2009.)

Realities of English Teaching and Learning

Each English Language program introduced in Singapore is the result of careful planning, in-depth reviews, and extensive consultation and communication (see for example, the curriculum and pedagogy review of the EL 2001 Syllabus by the Ministry of Education 2006). In such centrally directed innovations, teachers have a collaborative share with policy makers and curriculum developers to provide feedback as well as support implementation. They shoulder the responsibility of translating national aspirations and curriculum specifications into the day-to-day activities for teaching and learning. To support teachers, the Ministry of Education (MOE) produces clear guidelines for teaching following each syllabus revision.

As the literature on educational change and teacher identity tells us, teachers' actions and decisions are influenced and justified by their knowledge and beliefs, personal theory of learning, work environments, and understanding of institutional policies (Day, Calderhead, and Denicolo 1993; Silver and Skuja-Steele 2005). Furthermore, teachers' perceptions of challenges to their work and sources of these challenges, as well as their understanding about learners' motivation and needs can also have a big impact on their classroom practices and willingness to embrace change (Kennedy, Doyle, and Goh 1999). Teachers in Singapore are in general receptive to centrally initiated changes. They seem to appreciate the need to renew the English Language program in light of Singapore's response to global changes so as to prepare its citizens better to succeed locally and internationally. There is little overt resistance because of a lack of ownership to centrally directed education innovations, unlike some countries (cf. Carless 1999).

Nevertheless, the teachers may indirectly or unconsciously subvert the change agenda because of incomplete or even inaccurate understanding of the change and the day-to-day challenges they face. It is in this light that a description of realities on the ground as experienced by teachers is pertinent to the present

discussion of how policies and initiatives are achieved on the ground. To understand the realities of English teaching and learning, it is also important to consider the results of studies that have been conducted on teachers' participation and roles in national curricular reforms, as well as teachers' language use since much of English acquisition and development for children takes place in school-based learning.

Challenges that Teachers Face

Anecdotally, it is not uncommon to hear English teachers talk about challenges they face in their daily professional lives. These can be attributed to workload and external expectations, students, teaching materials, and support, and can affect the implementation of national initiatives to various degrees.

Workload and Expectations

Teachers in general feel that their teaching workload is heavy. Many EL departments have fixed quotas on compositions and reading comprehension work and this translates into a heavy marking load, especially when class sizes for some upper primary and secondary schools may be around 40. Some teachers also find that they do not always have adequate knowledge to teach all aspects of the EL syllabus. Some feel that the training they receive have prepared them well for certain aspects of teaching but not others. When new features are introduced in revised syllabuses, some teachers are also concerned that they need time to develop new skills to meet with these new demands. They appreciate in-service professional development or training courses.

Pressure to prepare students well for national examinations is something familiar to teachers. Those who are teaching students with major year-end examinations, in particular, feel they may have no choice but to teach to exam objectives. Innovative pedagogies may have to be put aside as a result. Many teachers also feel the weight of expectations from parents and school management to produce good examination results. They often feel some tension between what they would like to do to teach English in an engaging meaning-driven way and the "drills" that they need for exam preparations. As many Singaporean parents are well-educated, teachers also find they have to be on their toes all the time in order to address expectations for high quality and professional work in the teaching and testing materials. It is not uncommon for schools and teachers to receive complaints about the way test questions and homework are set and marked.

Students

Students are a key source of challenge for many teachers. Two of the main problems teachers feel they have to handle all the time are mixed ability classes

because of different home language backgrounds and the pervasiveness of a colloquial form of spoken English in Singapore, also known as Singapore Colloquial English (SCE) or Singlish. Although the yearly Primary One survey over the past 20 years show a steady rise in English being the most frequently spoken home language, teachers find that Singlish is in effect the variety that is spoken in many of these homes (cf. Gupta 1994). Some teachers find that there is a great deal of “interference” from Singlish when they want to teach their students the standard variety of spoken and written English in school. Many children are unable to differentiate between standard and non-standard usage. Teachers also note that their students “write the way they speak,” meaning that they find a great deal of ungrammatical structures in the students’ written work. Some teachers also seem to think that there is negative influence from social media in the form of acronyms, poor spelling as well as incomplete and ungrammatical sentences.

Some teachers also find that their students lack motivation to learn and use English. They find this to be true of some children who come from non-English speaking home environments and who are naturally more fluent in their MTL. Perhaps a reason for a lack of motivation is to do with a lack of success in the children’s early experiences in English learning in school. Another problem observed by some teachers is the absence of a strong reading habit among many students. Although primary schools have a mandatory period each week where students read a book silently while sitting together, teachers feel that the students need to read more good texts beyond this. Teachers on the whole believe that unless the students read extensively their language development will be limited for lack of access to many good models of language usage and use.

Another factor that has added further demands to teacher preparation and classroom practice is the changing demographics of children in Singapore schools. The increase in international students from countries such as China, Thailand, and Indonesia has created an even greater variation in their students’ language abilities, particularly in the early years when these students join mainstream Singapore schools. Teachers have to consider differentiated instruction not just among Singapore children from diverse language and home backgrounds but also for these students who have come from English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts.

Materials and Support

Most teachers would welcome help with interesting and effective teaching materials. While there are many commercially available textbooks and supplementary materials, the quality of these materials is uneven. Teachers would therefore need to select as well as adapt the materials their schools have prescribed. As a response to some recent national policies on adopting a more learner-centered approach, a number of schools have also opted to develop their own language learning materials to meet their students’ unique needs. Students in Singapore today are immersed in the affordances of technology for social connectivity and on-line resources, such as videos and multi-modal texts, for out-of-class informal learning. These new styles of image-driven and connected learning, which have to be

addressed, invariably create some pressure on the limited time that many teachers already feel they have.

To relieve teachers of some of these demands, some English departments engage external vendors to help with developing teaching and learning materials. The result of such external engagements is difficult to assess across schools, but differences in the quality of such materials are to be expected. More critically, these externally produced materials rely on the material developers' interpretations of the requirements of new syllabuses and initiatives. Not being part of the Ministry of Education, they would not have direct access to important briefing sessions and training workshops on the implementation of new EL programs. It is therefore not unreasonable to question whether these material developers can translate syllabus requirements accurately and comprehensively in the materials they develop.

Challenges to Implementation of National Policies and Curricula

The above anecdotal reports from teachers indicate the complex interactions between national initiatives with school- and teacher-level factors, all of which play a part in influencing the outcomes of implementations of EL programs. Many of these teachers' concerns have also found empirical support from two local studies conducted on curriculum implementations in EL instruction.

EL Syllabus 2001

In 2001, the MOE introduced the English Language (EL) Syllabus 2001, which emphasized language use for information, literary purposes, and social interaction. It has evolved from the previous 1991 syllabus, which adopted communicative language teaching, to include a clearer focus on grammar in text and appropriateness specific to purpose, audience, and context. To study the implementation of the revised syllabus, Goh, Zhang, Ng, and Koh (2005) examined the influence of EL teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and self-confidence. The study consisted of a questionnaire survey that was administered to about 3,000 teachers from 150 schools, representing almost half of all the schools in the country. Individual semi-structured interviews were also conducted with experienced and beginning teachers to understand individual narratives in a more in-depth manner.

This study shows that one of the greatest challenges to effective implementation of centrally introduced curricular reforms is the degree to which teachers understand the purpose and the nature of the change. Despite MOE's efforts at showing both features of change and continuity in the new syllabus, teachers' understanding of the revised syllabus appeared to be narrow. It was affected by their perceptions of what was different, namely the teaching of grammar which was reported extensively in the press and for which they received additional training as part of the process of implementation. Teachers' re-interpretations of the syllabus might also have been inadvertently due to the efforts at decentralizing implementation of policies and education goals through key leaders in the school

(Goh and Tay 2008). The use of the cascade strategy as a means of dissemination could have resulted in some information being diluted or even misrepresented when passed on from senior teachers to the rest of the school.

Although the syllabus gave equal weighting to all four language skills, the national examinations which weighed heavily towards reading and writing have led to the privileging of traditional literacy skills over oracy (listening and speaking) skills in the day-to-day teaching of English (Goh 2005). Many teachers also felt less confident teaching oracy skills compared with reading and writing, which had been an important part of all previous syllabi. As one of the teachers remarked: “No, what I am saying is what drives people in schools is not so much the language syllabus, but what at the end of the day, the purpose it’s going to be assessed on . . . And the real document that most people will be looking at is no more the syllabus, no more the language syllabus, but the examination syllabus” (Goh 2005, 69). The wash back effects of major examinations on classroom practices in Singapore have also been previously observed by Cheah (2002), and Pelly and Alison (2000). Nevertheless, teachers are aware of the potential limitations of teaching to exams, and they struggle with this tension between curricular and exam requirements: “I am teaching the graduating classes, as a teacher, our school has to remember I have these kids . . . it’s not just the exams, I have to think of where they are heading to next . . . and they need the minimum pass for English to get to the next stage of their education, so that is a very big responsibility for me, so I try to do that, but I try to do, to do justice to the syllabus at the same time” (Goh 2005, 66). The teachers also highlighted that they would like to carry out some new pedagogies but these efforts were often hampered by students with low English proficiency in some classes and this forced them to focus once again on the important task of helping students pass their exams.

Lower primary teachers, on the other hand, reported that they were less concerned about examinations and appeared to place more emphasis on making their lessons interesting and building strong rapport with the students. They also reported doing a large number of oral activities. Overall, teachers’ decisions were largely influenced by their personal beliefs; “their teaching was influenced more by what they believed would motivate their pupils to learn and the pedagogical values that they held than any specific way of delivery that they thought the syllabus required” (Goh 2005, 91). The researchers noted that many teachers were willing to try to balance exam demands with national initiatives, which they were convinced would benefit their students.

STELLAR (Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading)

More recently, Silver, Curdt-Christiansen, Wright, and Stinson (2013) examined how national policies on holistic education, thinking, values, and active independent learning, as well as a new curriculum for primary schools known as STELLAR (Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading) had been interpreted and implemented at national, school, and classroom levels. This multi-method study comprised a case study of Primary Year Two (P2) instruction at two schools and individual lesson observations of P1 and P2 instruction using a pre-determined

coding scheme at ten schools. The case study also included interviews with school leaders and classroom teachers, and focus group discussions with parents. The researchers reported that school leaders were familiar with national education policies, found them to be relevant and translated them into tangible school policies on teaching and assessment.

Of particular interest to our discussion of challenges to curricular innovation is the way teachers had approached the STELLAR curriculum. Teachers showed substantial (more than 60 percent) uniformity in the way they used the recommended techniques, books, lesson plans, and other materials provided by the MOE. They not only followed the plans rigidly but also used the questions and prompts listed in them. Silver and colleagues remarked that “[w]hile a current concern is more differentiated learning, the structured approach to introducing STELLAR instead lead to an homogenized pedagogy. Uniformity is expected in a centralized system such as Singapore’s, but rote replication of lesson plans is not ideal.” They cautioned that teachers’ “tight interactional control” resulting from a strict adherence to packaged lesson plans contradicted the principles of learning and dynamic classroom engagement envisioned by national policies. In spite of the MOE’s call to improve the quality of interaction between teachers and children, lessons were mainly teacher-fronted possibly due to teacher beliefs and cultural values that were resistant to change (Curd-Christiansen and Silver 2011). The findings in this study also reinforced the enduring wash back effect of formal examinations that have affected the way class activities were sometimes managed. Nevertheless, the researchers also reported that some teachers did make adaptations to the packaged materials and used more alternative forms of assessment when they felt it was good for their students. This observation reinforces what was found in Goh’s (2005) earlier study about some teachers’ readiness to make independent decisions based on their beliefs of what their students needed.

Teachers’ Language Use

Although EL teachers are commonly seen to be the main agents of change for improving English development, in reality national initiatives on developing competent English-knowing bilinguals will need all teachers who teach in English to see their roles as such. In recognizing this, the MOE has introduced new initiatives to encourage subject teachers to harness the potential of talk in the subject classroom to promote effective subject-based thinking and communication, as well as providing a conducive school environment that lends itself for the acquisition of English through the school variety. In this regard, both EL teachers as well as all teachers who teach in English in every school is expected to be role models of accurate and effective language use. More importantly, they are to provide a linguistic environment in which children can experience, acquire, and develop the English language. The expectation of a “school variety” where teachers use and model good English in form and communication, however, may not be an easy one to fulfill.

Doyle’s (2009) study on teachers’ use of English in class showed that the “school variety” of English used in the Singapore classroom is not a homogeneous

standard variety. He examined 122 teachers' utterances and described selected linguistic features by means of quantitative analyses of 455 lesson transcripts in the Singapore Corpus of Research in Education (SCoRE), which amounted to over 2.3 million words and around 565 hours of teaching. What he found of this Singapore school variety was a mixture of standard English and non-standard forms, the liberal presence of Singlish pragmatic particles such as "lah" and "lor," non-standard usage of modal auxiliaries such as "can," as well as inaccurate question forms with words such as "what" and "how." Doyle suggests that the extensive presence of these linguistics features offered evidence for the widespread presence of non-standard English in the classroom across all subjects and both Primary Five and Secondary Three levels.

This led him to conclude that "the 'school variety' is not solely Standard English. It is a mixture of standard English and Singapore Colloquial English . . . teachers do not seem to select SCE only when the talk is 'audience centered,' to use Kwek's (2005) term, that is, focused on organizing pupils and disciplining them. They are also using SCE when the talk is 'topic or content-centered.' In other words, this data tends to undermine the hypothesis that SCE is used by teachers as a means of expressing solidarity and build rapport and familiarity with pupils" (Doyle 2009, 197). He further cautions that the presence of non-standard English features in teachers' speech would cause students to encounter conflicting patterns of language use, thus making the development of a standard spoken language in school-based learning environments problematic.

Quality in Teacher Education and Professional Development

Teachers need to be prepared and supported to enable them to deliver EL curricular requirements in the classroom. Both new and practicing teachers will need to understand national policies and instructional principles, and use pedagogies that can translate ideas into concrete classroom practices. In Singapore the task of preparing new teachers for schools is borne solely by the National Institute of Education Singapore (NIE) of the Nanyang Technological University. NIE enjoys a strong working relationship with the MOE and the schools. This tripartite relationship is probably the single most important factor that supports national aspirations, educational goals, and teaching approaches in EL teacher preparation and professional development (National Institute of Education 2009). NIE provides various programs in the form of non-graduate and postgraduate diplomas, as well as undergraduate bachelor's degrees for all curriculum subjects with English Language being one of the key disciplines. Apart from methodology and language courses, pre-service EL teachers also take special core courses for all student teachers to help them know about national educational policies, the rationale for these policies, and their implications for classroom teaching. Through a School Partnership Model, NIE also works closely with schools to provide mentoring, coaching, and guidance to pre-service teachers on school attachments.

EL teachers, like other education officers, have the opportunity to pursue higher degrees in related fields through masters and doctoral programs. These programs with their respective focuses help to develop pedagogical skills and

subject knowledge for EL teachers. To encourage more teachers to pursue graduate studies, the MOE subsidizes part of their fees. There are also many opportunities available to EL teachers to improve their knowledge and skills through professional development courses conducted by university professors. With the establishment of English Language Institute of Singapore (ELIS), MOE has also established an important platform for conducting in-service courses for teachers delivered by the Master Teachers who are directly in touch with the needs of teachers in schools. Teachers of other curriculum subjects, such as science, math, and social studies, also have many opportunities to deepen their understanding and skills about subject literacy through in-service forums, courses, and workshops.

Whenever new curricular reforms are introduced, the MOE also conducts in-service courses for practicing teachers to enable them to understand and translate policies and curricular specifications into classroom pedagogy. NIE also assists in offering consultants to these MOE training workshops as well as conducting some of these courses. In addition to providing teacher education at different levels, NIE also has several research centers that focus on educational research. Of relevance to our discussion here are research studies on English language, bilingual literacy and language development, and classroom-based teaching and learning. Results from these studies are an important source of input for MOE education leaders in their decision-making process. The results are also reported in research digests for teachers to help them keep abreast of local research, which speaks directly to their teaching contexts.

At the school level, MOE initiatives of regular professional sharing sessions among zonal school clusters (about 10 – 15 schools in some instance) and the formation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) among teachers in the same school have also greatly enhanced the professionalism and skills of teachers. EL teachers, for example, will gather once a week during school hours to share and discuss ideas related to the teaching of English or other aspects of their work. This is also an important time when they can collectively address some of the challenges they face such as those reported in the previous section. With MOE's initiative of a Whole-School Approach to Effective Communication, teachers of other subjects also get the opportunity to consider their roles and review strategies that their school can adopt to achieve the goal of effective communication across the curriculum.

Because of the physical size of the country, Singapore has benefited greatly from the affordances of this close tripartite relationship among the NIE that provides a university-based approach to teacher education, the MOE, which recruits and deploys teachers, and the schools where leaders and teachers manage day-to-day efforts of teaching and learning. Such a relationship has contributed to promulgation of policies, curriculum reviews and development, strong theory-practice links, evidence-based teacher preparation and professional development, and better support of student learning in schools. Although professional differences among partners are to be expected, this tripartite relationship has served the country well as all partners in this relationship share the common vision of educating Singaporean children to be future-ready through the development of important bilingual competence, thinking and learning skills, and values that can help them transit into the next phase of their growth and development.

Conclusion

The challenges to providing English-knowing bilingual education to Singapore children continue to exist in many forms. But Singapore has also been able to capitalize on many opportunities that present themselves through close collaborations among key stakeholders. As teachers are ultimately the ones at the forefront of bringing about change, they make a difference in the way national policies and curricula, and school leadership initiatives can make a positive impact on the children under their charge. In this regard, Singapore would need to continue to attend to the challenges and realities at the chalk face and provide the crucial support that is needed. Although a lot of decisions on teaching and learning now reside with individual schools, there may still be a need to encourage individual teachers to exercise greater professional judgment over their work and to develop greater capacity to address the demands of helping students acquire and develop greater competence in English language use.

In this regard, two areas deserve special efforts for the purpose of developing high quality English teachers at each level of schooling in the country. The first is in establishing even clearer objectives for EL teacher professional learning as they make their way through the continuum between pre-service education and in-service professional development. Policy makers and teacher educators need to engage one another closely in negotiating the ideal and the realistic outcomes for EL teacher preparation, as well as deep mutual understanding (even empathy) of each partner's goals, thinking, and constraints. Secondly, there could be stronger collaboration in developing quality professional learning courses that take into account teachers' needs and goals.

For both efforts, there should be recognition of the critical influence of teacher identities among English Language and English-medium subject teachers on their acceptance of initiatives on the teaching and use of English at the school level. Teacher identity is a teacher's sense of self and the roles they have. It is influenced by internal and external factors, constructed socially and situated contextually. A teacher's identity will influence their professional choices he or she makes which will directly influence students' learning experience and outcomes. An understanding of how teachers perceive themselves and their roles can enhance programmatic efforts to support teachers in their work (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009). The two studies on the implementation of new EL programs referred to earlier are aimed at a better understanding of how teachers saw themselves as in the context of national curricular reforms and why they did what they did in the classroom. Encouraging teachers to explore their identity will enable teacher educators and mentors as well as school leaders to take a holistic approach when conceptualizing teacher education and professional development programs. More importantly, it provides teachers with opportunities to reflect on their roles and encourage them to explore their attitudes to the everyday realities of teaching and take actions individually or collectively to address the challenges they face.

The national imperative of educating English-knowing bilinguals has no doubt benefitted greatly from careful centralized planning as well as support from teacher educators and school leaders. Though not without dissonance, this close partnership looks set to continue as an important avenue by which EL teachers are

developed and supported through the continual process of their professional learning.

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