

Raising Achievement of Pupils with English as an Additional Language in Schools

Research Project Brief

1. Introduction

The questions, ‘What does the empirical evidence tell us about the achievement of children with English as an Additional Language (EAL)?’ and ‘What are the factors affecting performance of EAL pupils?’ and ‘What are the success factors in raising the achievement of EAL pupils?’ are the subject of much discussion and interest (Demie 2020, 2019; Strand et al 2015) and yet there are relatively few studies that have examined EAL attainment, the proficiency in English of EAL pupils and good practice in schools to raise EAL achievement in English schools. This issue is increasingly important for EAL policy development, given the growth in the EAL population in England since 1997. EAL learners are an extremely diverse group, encompassing different ethnic and language groups, who demonstrate a full range of English language proficiency from new to English to fully fluent. There are currently over 1.5 million EAL pupils in England (DfE 2019) and the percentage of pupils recorded as speaking English as an additional language in state-maintained primary and secondary schools has more than trebled since 1997.

Another policy concern is that there is no assessment system in England that can be used to look at attainment by English proficiency at national level. However, stages of English have been widely used to describe the different stages of English throughout the 1990s and 2000s (see Hester 1993; Demie 2019, 2013) and there are different local EAL assessment systems. Some schools and local authorities use stages of descriptors based on the “Centre for Learning Primary Education” (CLPE) or the previous DfE stage of proficiency scale. Others use “The Northern Association of Support Services for Equality and Achievement” (NASSEA 2001) EAL assessment system descriptors and “The Bell Foundation (2017) Stages” descriptors. Although NASSEA and The Bell Foundation descriptors are linked to the five DfE stages, they tend to use different descriptors in addition to the descriptors used by the DfE. We would argue this could raise statistical noise and as far as we know, NASSEA and the Bell Foundation assessment systems have not yet produced baseline statistical information that may be used for research purpose at local authority and national level. Despite the growth of the EAL school population in England, little research has been done at national level in England to develop an EAL assessment system. However, a review of literature suggests that in the United States, particularly in New York State, California and Minnesota, schools use a well-developed assessment of English proficiency and standardised proficiency tests for the purposes of identifying children with EAL in need of additional support and monitoring their progress (Hutchison 2018; Demie and Strand 2006). In other English-speaking education systems in New Zealand, New South Wales and Alberta, assessment is also conducted by teachers using frameworks which describe stages or levels of language development, differentiated by year group or phases (Hutchison 2018; Cummins 1992). In these countries, EAL learners are assessed with their English language proficiency needs when they first arrive at school to identify student needs and inform planning for teaching and then periodically throughout the year to determine how their language proficiency is developing. We would argue that English language proficiency scales that are used by the other English-speaking countries, show that it is a key factor in predicting attainment. Other research in UK at local level has also consistently shown that proficiency in English can provide essential information about an EAL learner’s likelihood to succeed in school and potential need for support (Strand & Demie, 2005; Strand, Malmberg & Hall, 2015; Strand & Hessel, 2018).

Recent studies have also examined the effect of stages of English proficiency on attainment at Key Stage 2 tests (KS2) and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) at the local authority level using the previous DfE stages of English proficiency scale. For example, the analyses of the national KS2 test results and GCSE examination results for pupils in an inner London LA by levels of English proficiency show that EAL pupils at the early stages of developing fluency had significantly lower KS2 test scores in all subjects than their monolingual peers (see Demie 2020, 2019, 2017; Strand and Demie 2005; Demie and Strand 2006). However, EAL pupils who were fully fluent in English consistently achieved significantly higher scores in all KS2 tests and GCSE exams than their monolingual peers. The negative association with attainment at the early stages of English proficiency remained significant after controls for a range of other pupil characteristics, including age, gender, free school meal entitlement, stage of special educational need and ethnic group were considered, although these factors effectively explained differences with the higher attainment of the 'fully fluent' group. The two studies concluded that there is a strong relationship between stage of proficiency in English and educational attainment, with the performance of bilingual pupils increasing as measured stage of proficiency in English increases. Pupils at the early stages of fluency in English perform at very low levels, while bilingual pupils who are fully fluent in English perform better, on average, than English-only speakers (see Strand and Demie 2005; Demie and Strand 2006; Demie 2020).

There is also a wealth of research on how long it takes to acquire English fluency for pupils with English as an additional language, particularly in North America. For example, Collier (1989); Cummins (1992) research findings suggest that it takes five to seven years in education for bilingual pupils to become fully competent in a second language and to catch up with their native peers. These findings on 'how long does it take to acquire English proficiency' are also supported by Demie (2013) UK research in a London local authority which suggests that:

'It takes on average 'five to seven years to become fully competent in a second language. However, the speed of English language acquisition varies between stages of levels of English. On average, pupils are classified at Stage 1 (beginner) for about a year and a half, before moving to becoming familiar with English (Stage 2), where they typically remain for about two years. It takes about another two-and-a-half years at Stage 3 (becoming confident in English) before they can then be classified as fully fluent.' (Demie 2013:1).

Overall, the review of the literature available suggests that there is no national English proficiency assessment scale in England, unlike other English speaking countries (Demie 2015; Strand et al 2015) and there is also a lack of understanding of the factors which contribute to the educational success of EAL pupils (see Demie 2018, 2013).

2. The aim

The aim of the research is to study the achievement of pupils with EAL and to identify success factors for raising achievement in schools. Building on the past research on EAL attainment, this study looks to answer four research questions including:

1. What does English proficiency assessment data tell us on how long it takes for EAL pupils to be fully fluent in English?
2. What is the impact of Covid 19 and school closures on the English proficiency of EAL pupils?
3. What does English proficiency data tell us about the achievement of EAL pupils at the end of KS2 and GCSE?
4. What are the targeted intervention strategies used by schools to support EAL pupils in schools? What are the success factors to raise attainment?

3. Methodological framework of the study

A review of literature, extensive data analysis, a pupil attitudinal survey and focus group interviews form the methodological approach for this research.

Research methods

The methodological approach for this research comprises case studies of selected schools, extensive data analysis and focus group interviews. The empirical investigation is supported by an ethnographical study of the school and home experiences of EAL pupils. Details of the methodological framework are summarised below:

Data Analysis:

- KS2 and GCSE patterns of performance will be analysed by levels of proficiency in English to illustrate differences in attainment
- Analysis of stage of English proficiency using longitudinal data to establish how long each pupil was at a particular stage of English proficiency and how long it took overall to become fully fluent from the time they were first assessed when they started school in the LA.
- Analysis of stage of English proficiency to establish the impact of Covid 19 and school closures. This will be done by comparing English proficiency pupil level data of Jan 2020 with Jan 2021. EAL children have been affected in two ways compared to their peers. They have lost six months of learning the English language which is critical for accessing the curriculum and learning subjects.

Focus groups:

Parent, pupil, governor, teacher and headteacher focus groups will be carried out to ascertain their views and to identify whether their experiences mirror the views of those participants in the case study interviews.

Pupil survey:

The purpose of the pupil survey is to find out how pupils feel about school and education. The data will be used to help formulate strategies to improve achievement by finding out about pupils' aspirations, attitudes to school and learning, friendship, school experiences and support from home. All pupils in the case study schools will receive the questionnaire which will not take more than 15 minutes to complete.

Case studies:

Using an ethnographic approach, detailed case study research will be carried out to study the school experiences of EAL pupils including the reasons for underachievement. A structured questionnaire will be used to interview headteachers, teachers, parents and pupils to gather evidence on barriers to learning, how well EAL pupils are achieving, pupils' views about the school and its support systems and successful school and teaching strategies to raise achievement of EAL pupils. The aim is to triangulate the voices of the various stakeholders in their education. Ten schools (seven primary and three secondary) with a significant EAL population will be selected for case study. The case study

schools will cover a range of ethnic groups, community languages spoken, free school meals and SEN pupils with differing EAL needs. Key criteria for the selection of schools will be as follows:

- Exceptionally good results, high standards and a sustained KS2 and GCSE improvement over the last three years
- Good level of progress with high value added
- An above-average proportion of students who are EAL
- Good KS2 and KS4 achievement by EAL pupils
- A headteacher and/or senior managers who understand EAL issues and have a clear vision for the school in inclusion and EAL
- Types and sizes of schools, including federated schools
- Different roles of the EAL lead in schools

4. Project timetable

The research project life is one year running from September 2020 to September 2021.

5. The research project team

This type of research requires a multidisciplinary team with different skills and perspectives. The project team will include:

- Education researchers to lead and contribute to school case study research, school attitudinal survey, statistical data analysis and to write the research reports.
- Primary and secondary EAL leads/coordinators to undertake school led research to examine their practice and identify what works in their school in improving their impact on EAL student learning. The EAL lead researchers will be also expected, as part of the project, to work together teaching EAL pupils in their school, observing and refining specific EAL lessons across the LA.
- EAL consultants with long years' experience of working in the field of EAL in primary and secondary schools to carry out good practice research in the case study schools and write the lessons learned from the teacher led research in the classroom.
- Project administrator to support any day to day communication with all researchers and schools, organising meetings, editing and pooling the research reports.

6. Project team areas of responsibilities

- **Andrew Hau** (School Research and Data Manager) is the lead person for the research project and he is responsible for all the data related analysis, school surveys and case studies of seven primary schools with Amanda Bellsham-Revell and organising an EAL national conference in June 2021 to share the evidence on a trading basis. He is also the project administrator to support any day to day communication with all researchers and schools, organising meetings, editing and pooling the research reports.
- **Feyisa Demie** (Head of Research and Adviser for school self-evaluation) will take part in the literature review, secondary case study with Amanda Gay in three secondary schools and writing up of the whole research findings with Andrew Hau.

- **Amanda Bellsham-Revell** (Primary EAL consultant) is responsible for the research and case studies of seven primary schools with Andrew Hau.
- **Amanda Gay** (Secondary EAL consultant) is responsible for the research and case studies of three secondary schools with Feyisa Demie.

7. Research outcomes

It is expected to publish the following research reports that will be useful for policy and practice including:

1. The attainment of pupils with English as an additional language: The KS2 and GCSE evidence
2. How long does it take pupils with EAL to acquire English proficiency?
3. The impact of Covid 19 on English acquisition of pupils with EAL
4. Good practice in raising the achievement of pupils with EAL

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