

Pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) attract a great deal of interest among policymakers, school leaders and teachers, yet there are relatively few studies that have examined EAL attainment and the impact of Covid 19. This issue is increasingly important for EAL policy development, given that the data shows the percentage of pupils recorded as speaking English as an additional language has more than trebled since 1997 and is about 19% of the school population (DfE, 2019). There is also now research evidence that school closures have meant that EAL learners may not have had access to models of good English language and EAL pedagogy and sufficient opportunities to rehearse and practise speaking in English, particularly in the key language areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This directly impacts their access to curriculum learning and further delays their educational progress compared to their non-EAL peers.

The aim of the research is to study the impact of Covid-19 and school closures on EAL learners. The methodological approach for this research comprises a range of surveys including:

- School leadership survey
- Teaching staff survey
- Pupil survey
- Parent Survey

The survey was administered in March 2021, shortly after schools re-opened. The responses therefore draw on both observations from the autumn term (following the first school closure) and from the return of all pupils from March 2021 (following the second closure).

The main findings of the surveys confirm Covid has created a significant disruption to EAL learners' education and suggests that they are being increasingly left behind their peers not only in developing English proficiency, but also in closing the achievement gap. It suggests that the Covid pandemic has had a significant negative impact on EAL learners relative to their peers. There are a number of key messages from the survey of the **Impact of Covid on Pupils with English as an Additional Language**. The key findings of the surveys are summarised below:

1. School leadership survey

The evidence from the school leadership survey suggests the following:

- 85% of leadership respondents felt that the learning needs of non-fluent EAL learners in their school were greater than those for other pupils during school closures.
- 88% of leadership respondents said that the non-fluent EAL learners in their school required extra provision to access the curriculum during school closures.
- 64% of leadership respondents said that the non-fluent EAL learners in their school were able to access and engage with the curriculum learning the school provided during school closures, however 36% said that they did not.
- 59% of leadership respondents felt that their school had the resources to effectively support the learning needs of non-fluent EAL learners during school closures, however 41% felt that they did not.
- 69% of leadership respondents reported that upon returning to school, non-fluent EAL learners have shown a greater impact on their curriculum learning compared to their non-EAL peers

- 71% of leadership respondents reported that upon returning to school, their non-fluent EAL learners have shown no English development or progression since before lockdown
- 62% of leadership respondents said that upon returning to school, Covid-safe arrangements in the school are impacting the learning of non-fluent EAL learners more than their peers
- 92% of leadership respondents felt that it is important to put a plan into place and make additional provision for non-fluent EAL learners upon returning to school

Key comments from the school leadership survey describing concerns included:

“Some of the children in the earlier stages of English acquisition have found the virtual learning difficult to access which has led to misconceptions which are hard to address when not in the classroom. If children have struggled and also have limited or no support at home, then this will have impacted on their progress, especially if you compare them to their Non-EAL peers.” (Assistant Headteacher, Primary School)

“Teachers' ability to support children with EAL restricted. Other supportive learning opportunities restricted due to limits on staff cross over and lockdowns” (Headteacher/Principal, Primary School)

“Students who were learning English revert to the starting point of speaking home language as they were not in an environment to improve their English language” (Assistant Headteacher, Secondary School)

2. Teaching staff survey

The evidence from the teaching staff survey suggests the following:

- 88% of teaching respondents felt that it has been challenging to effectively support the EAL learners in their class(es) during school closures
- 55% of teaching respondents felt that the families of their EAL learners engaged effectively with home learning, however 45% felt that they did not.
- 49% of teaching respondents felt that the curriculum learning of the EAL learners in their class(es) has been negatively impacted during school closures
- 59% of teaching respondents felt that the English development of the EAL learners in their class(es) has been negatively impacted during school closures
- 11% of teaching respondents said that the motivation and engagement of EAL learners in their class(es) has been negatively impacted since lockdown, with 89% reporting that their EAL learners remain as or more motivated since returning.
- 66% of teaching respondents felt that Covid safe arrangements in their classroom (e.g. seating arrangements) have impacted EAL learners more than their non-EAL peers
- 75% of teaching respondents were concerned about a long-term educational impact for their EAL learners from the disruption caused by Covid

Since the period of school closures, respondents from schools that have assessed proficiency in English, reported overall, a negative impact across all of the English language skills of reading, writing, and speaking and listening for their EAL pupils who were not fluent in English (Stage A, B, C).

Most negatively affected were Stage A (New to English) pupils where 75-80% of respondents reported a negative or highly negative impact on their English skills across all three measures, although slightly

more in Reading and Writing, where approximately one in four respondents said that the impact on these English skills were highly negative.

As pupils' proficiency in English increased, although still negatively affected, the scale of impact began to diminish. 65-75% of respondents reported a negative impact on the English skills of Stage B (Early acquisition) pupils and again, Reading and Writing were slightly more affected.

Respondents reported a more mixed response for Stage C pupils (Developing Competence). Although, still perceived to be negatively impacted especially in Writing as reported by 61% of respondents, the impact on Speaking and Listening was less with slightly more respondents (52%) saying that they had not seen a negative impact.

This was corroborated by comments from respondents which highlighted:

- New to English and Early acquisition pupils (Stage A/B) have been most impacted
- Younger EAL learners, especially in the Early Years may be very negatively affected
- Writing skills may be more likely to be behind age-related expectations

Key comments from the teaching staff survey describing concerns included:

*"All children have regressed both in education and in their ability to speak English"
(Classroom Teacher, Early Years)*

*"Most of my pupils were engaging and participating but have found writing particularly challenging. It has been more challenging to provide them with support and guide them to the right places"
(Classroom Teacher – Primary School)*

*"I think we will need to carefully re-assess EYFS moving into Year 1 and 2 and will notice a much higher number of pupils who will stay at stage A and B for longer."
(SENDCo, Primary School)*

*"One Portuguese student burst into tears as he had forgotten all the English language he had been taught."
(HLTA, Primary School)*

*"Students were keen to learn, but had made little to no progress during lockdown 1 and over the Summer"
(EAL Coordinator, Secondary School)*

3. Pupil survey

The evidence from the pupil survey of non-fluent EAL learners suggests the following:

- 89% of primary pupil respondents said that they found the schoolwork harder to do when schools were closed, in contrast to 69% of secondary pupil respondents who said they found the schoolwork ok when home-schooling.
- 83% of primary pupil respondents said they needed help to understand the work during school closure, with 31% of secondary pupil respondents saying they needed help
- 48% of primary pupil respondents and 50% of secondary pupil respondents said they found school harder when they returned since before lockdown
- 37% of pupil respondents said their family could not help them to understand the schoolwork when schools were closed
- 20% of pupil respondents felt their school or teacher did not help them understand the schoolwork when schools were closed.

- 36% of pupil respondents said home-schooling helped their English, whereas 72% felt that it helped their home language
- 90% of primary pupil respondents did not like learning at home best

EAL learners who found home-schooling difficult, describing their experiences said:

“ ‘Most people speak Polish at home’. The pupil also complained that there was ‘not enough time to get all the information’, meaning that they couldn't complete all the work that they were given.” (EAL learner, Primary School)

"I had to do it all alone because <teacher> was checking who got help." When asked to expand, the pupil meant that she did not ask for help because she did not want to be identified as needing help in front of her peers during the online meeting. She also said, "I didn't know how to send my work. My mum didn't know how to send it."
(EAL Learner, Primary School)

"I don't like it at all because , I don't <see> anybody or talk. Was very sad."
(EAL learner, Secondary School)

4. Parent survey

The evidence from the parent survey of families of EAL learners included the following:

- 25% of parent respondents said they mainly speak English at home. 75% said they speak English at home only sometimes or never.
- 47% of parent respondents said that they read with their child in English most or all of the time. 15% of parents said that they never read with their child in English.
- 87% of parent respondents said that their child needed help understanding the work sent home during school closures including 45% saying help was needed most or all of the time
- 40% of parent respondents said that someone at home was able to help their child understand the work sent home most or all of the time. 24% of respondents said that no one at home was able to help their child understand the work.
- 52% of respondents said that the teachers from school helped their child to understand the work sent home most or all of the time. 15% of respondents said that their teachers never gave their child any help.
- 44% of respondents said that their child never received any extra help in English development during school closures

“The tasks were not according to the English level of the child with no continuity because they were excessive and leave it alone at the end, was very sad. The child was angry, sad, worried about not finishing some tasks.” (Parent of EAL learner)

“Very concerned about the academic development of my children for not having sufficient means to assist them in their learning, and the difficulty of communicating..... my English is not very good.” (Parent of EAL learner)

“Very bad because my child did not improve her learning. I can't help too much because my English is not good enough.” (Parent of EAL learner)

“My brother has felt more frustrated since he wants to learn English being locked up but I have not been able to teach quickly” (Sister of EAL learner)

The key evidence from the surveys are corroborated by the study of literature reviews which identified some of the main reasons for negative impact and the widening achievement gap between EAL pupils and their peers. These include:

- less support in improving English proficiency during lockdown
- missing access to small group lessons and one-to-one support in school
- less access to technology for online learning
- lack of parent English language skills to support learning at home
- lack of targeted government funding to support EAL pupils' (Demie, 2021:2)

The schools taking part in the surveys used a range of strategies to support EAL pupils including:

- Activity sheets/materials sent home
- Translation of materials into different languages
- Visual resources
- Small group and 1:1 intervention with EAL lead/coordinator
- Extra teaching support on a group basis
- Identifying new to English learners as vulnerable and attending school
- Use of EAL digital learning platforms/software
- Allocating home language speaking teaching staff to specific pupils
- Targeting pupils and issuing learning packs to supplement live lessons
- Phone calls home and telephone support with a staff member fluent in their language
- Online English language materials/activities
- Use of translators

Finally, the study also argues that there was a clear pattern of English language loss observed by teachers in both primary and secondary phases. Many pupils at the early stages of English language acquisition did not have opportunities to hear, speak or read in English during school closures. This is further supported by Department for Education (2020) research that found in reading, pupils with English as an additional language experienced a learning loss of approximately 2.3 months for secondary aged pupils, compared to an average learning loss in secondary reading of around 1.7 months, reinforcing the challenges that schools face in supporting our EAL learners during catch-up.

The findings suggest a lack of effective support and/or targeted intervention for EAL learners who are not fluent in English during the closures. The recommendations from this study are that there is a need for well-focussed catch up and recovery plans to take into consideration the English language learning loss, in addition to general learning loss for pupils. We suggest the national recovery and catch programme should go beyond disadvantaged pupils by including EAL pupils not fluent in English. Improving English proficiency that is lost during the school closure is key to raising achievement of EAL learners.

Notes for editors:

1. The research was carried out by Feyisa Demie, Andrew Hau, Amanda Bellesham, Amanda Gay
2. Details of the findings are published in a research report entitled '**The Impact of School Closure on pupils with English as an Additional Language**' and will be shared at EAL national conference in Spring term.
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