

# Essay on a review of the situation

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## **English as a Second Language in Great Britain:**

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### A Review of the Situation

English as a Second Language (EAL) has been realized in mainstream British educational system only after the Labour party came into governance in 1997. Previously, students with English as their second language had to wait to attain a certain level of English proficiency to get into mainstream British schools (Araújo, 2007, p241). The main concern that teachers address is not whether EAL students are academically competent or if their English is just not on par to accomplish goals; but rather the question of how to cater to both EAL and non-EAL students at the same time without compromising on the both of their quality of education. Should the attention be on EAL students to bring them on par with the rest or should they be left on their own while the teachers continuously assess them during the course of the lesson or unit of work? (Hult, 2010, p10)

Several teachers approach the EAL students through a common language consisting of simple words, pictures, gestures and signals. To aid the teachers and EAL students alike the British Department of Education (DfE) regularly publishes up to date material consisting of innovative ideas and techniques that teachers can implement on the EAL students to improve their English. A Language in Common: assessing English as an additional language (2000) is an example of one such material published which describes a range of methods to assess EAL. While it does not make any radical suggestions that differ much from the assessment of non-EAL students, the document does insist on implementation of assessment and

that it should be based on ways that are apt for the student's age and understanding. The main differing point that the document makes is that "be sensitive to the pupil's first or main other language(s) and heritage cultures" (DfE, 2000, p7-8). The suggestions made in this document produced in 2000 are put to use for assessing students of all ages and capabilities these days and hence does not seem have much novel value anymore.

According to the Ofsted website, a school is said to have performed well in terms of EAL when they are "raising the achievement of pupils for whom English is an additional language" as these students move on from Key Stage Two (junior school) to Key Stage Three (secondary school). These students would "have fulfilled their potential by exceeding the national expectations in attainment in English for their age" (Ofsted, 2011). This current perspective of the EAL students' performance is aligned with the expectations of modern British schools. It is essential to observe here that students in Key Stage Two receive more training to improve their basic English reading and writing skills such as in punctuation so that they have attained a good level of proficiency once they reach Key Stage Three. Thus the progress an average EAL student makes in terms of English is expected to be much higher in Key Stage Two than in Key Stage Three and beyond. With this in mind, secondary schools should play an important role by further improving the written and spoken English skills of EAL students at the basic stage. With rapid increase in the number of EAL students in schools, secondary schools are constantly working with students, laying stress on distinguishing students who can identify words and those who can grasp the

meaning of the words with the best situation being a student who can identify and also understand the meaning of a word (O'Connor, 2007, p39). This approach requires adult supervision which then undermines the method of independent learning advocated in other studies. Without supervision, students may begin to stray away into mispronunciation and bad language habits such as misunderstanding the meaning and context of words. In Michael Farrell's words (1999) " whole-school policies for teaching EAL should be founded on a sound knowledge of pupils' needs and attainment" (Farrell, 1999, p70). Such a statement immediately demands resolving of issues such as the cost involved in placing large volume of staff needed for providing personal attention to each student (EAL or not).

Despite the costs involved with placing large volume of staff, the proposal of personalized learning is gaining prominence in British schools where other than EAL aspects, students require a thrust to be pushed to higher levels of education. The idea of personalized learning depends majorly on Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory according to which students are currently only in their state of attainment instead of being at their best state. Just some additional support makes the difference between where they are and where they could be (Cavanaugh & Kail, 2008, p149). When this idea is put into action for EAL students, central stress is laid upon giving them achievable targets to move towards constantly and since there is already an increasing demand for personalized learning in British schools, it works well for all students. While EAL students do not feel pulled away from the rest of the class, the non-EAL students also do not feel that some students are getting special attention. Such a structured way of education

could help EAL students by providing them with lessons to improve on specific aspects of English such as grammar or spelling or the level of detail that a student needs to include in their work (DfE, 2008, p4).

A significant part of EAL stipulation in the UK seems to be over the induction of English specialists as EAL teachers or teaching assistants whose focus is the continuous improvement of EAL student's reading, writing and speaking skills in English. The Training and Development Agency for Schools released a document explaining how these specialists could be incorporated into the British school system (TDA, 2011). On one hand this is in contradiction with the research conducted by academic studies which lays strong emphasis on giving an EAL student ample space and time to develop his English skills independently through communication with peers (Brutt-Griffler & Varghese, 2004, p98). On the other hand, it seems straightforward that some students do require that extra push from the school's side if they are to go by the 'good' criteria mentioned by Ofsted, as discussed earlier. It is a difficult stance that the British teachers need to take when faced with such opposing viewpoints over how to approach EAL students. A big question mark lies at the end of – Exactly how much support do British schools need to give to EAL students for them to cultivate their English skills without being spoon fed and drawn away from their independent learning capabilities. Having this in mind, schools are for example regularly using 'scaffolding' tasks where help is given to students in sentence and paragraph writing. "That is, the emphasis is on the 'how' rather than the 'what' of learning" (Brutt-Griffler & Varghese, 2004, p98). This technique involves going back again to basics while continuing to learn new aspects. Such practices have been used to

teach students with lower ability which is where several EAL students are thought to be, rank wise. This leads to an interesting issue of whether EAL students are deficient academically or if they are unable to perform to their best because of the lack of proficiency in English.

The work towards incorporating EAL students in British schools is continuously evolving. While there is a strong indication that the majority of EAL students can progress at the rate set by national standards if given the right kind of support, the question once again boils down to how much support is good enough? The British government did take a big step in 1997 by providing equal access to the education system for all students but an equilibrium point needs to be reached. While continuing to support EAL students, the right amount of independence and learning must be provided to students who's English is already proficient. Teacher's goals must be seen realistically. It is hard for them to simultaneously involve EAL students and help them in their progress while not interrupting their natural interactions. In subjects that are not language based, EAL issues are even more complicated. There has not been much research done in teaching subjects like maths and science to EAL students and there is no established support system aiding teachers and students in these areas. In conclusion, teaching English as an additional language in Great Britain is still a widely open issue with several loose ends. While everyone involved is trying to do the best that they can, it is a challenging task at hand especially when there is no specific official guidance.