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## Educational implications of supporting children in secondary education.

This paper will examine the educational implications of supporting children in secondary education where English is an additional language (EAL). Research evidence on the merits and drawbacks of bilingualism in school education will be considered. Furthermore, this paper will explore the difficulties of identifying and intervening with EAL children who are struggling with their academic achievement as a consequence of specific learning difficulties, as opposed to poor language skills for other reasons. Until recently, there have been no specific Government-led initiatives to support the language learning needs of children with EAL. This is unfortunate since official statistics indicate that 686, 000 pupils are recorded as having a first language other than English in English schools. In London, more than 30% of children speak a different language at home, compared to school, according to one survey of 850, 000 school children. Over 300 different languages are spoken by London schoolchildren (Baker and Eversley, 2000). Recently, the Government has introduced the Primary National Strategy as a pilot project in 21 Local Education Authorities. The purpose of this initiative will be to improve standards of literacy, and improve teacher’s involvement with pupils that have advanced language skills (DFES, 2004).

EAL pupils maybe vulnerable to educational failure where one language is spoken at home, and home-based literacy is associated with that language due to cultural reasons, and their main exposure to English is through the school sector.  This is because in the pre-school age, it is hypothesised that there is a window of opportunity for easy language acquisition (Ingram, 1989). Given that Cummins (1984) has estimated that children need approximately 2 years to develop basic interpersonal language skills, and a further 5 to 7 years to achieve a cognitive academic level of language proficiency, then it is apparent that children not exposed to English at home in the preschool years may be at a disadvantage to their monolingual peers. However, recent research has contradicted the traditional pedagogical view that bilingualism inhibits learning, and can confuse the child. Sneddon (2000) examined the language experiences of 36 Muslim children up to 11 years, where English was spoken in addition to Gujerati. Children with access to cultural sources of support for their language through community services demonstrated a greater “ linguistic vitality” in Gujerati and were more effective story tellers in both languages, compared to bilingual children lacking community support.  Furthermore, by the age of 11 years, the bilingual children were performing above the norms for monolingual English children of the same age in terms of English language competence. Sneddon (2000) has also shown that by the age of 11 years, trilingual children perform better at school than their monolingual peers. The advantage is thought to be related to the transferable skills of language acquisition that appears to have beneficial effects on the rest of the curriculum.  The study also demonstrated that even where schools had positive attitudes towards bilingualism; there could be an underestimation of the children’s ability and a lack of knowledge of the cultural and religious background that is often associated with multiple language learning. Sneddon (2000) has argued that the school has an important function in identifying and ‘ valuing’ the multiple languages of school pupils. Parents and children internalise messages about the importance of their other language(s) based on school policy so minority languages may not be attributed with such high regard as European languages.  Furthermore, it is believed that children are only able to become fluent in their second language, when they are fluent in their first language, so bilingual development should be encouraged, as children will ‘ regress’ in their first language skills where they do not practice them regularly (Cummins, 1984).

Despite the ‘ added value’ of multiple languages to the educational experience of children with EAL, this does not apply uniformly and is subject to individual differences. One of the particular difficulties in teaching children with EAL is in the identification of special educational needs (SEN) that require specialist intervention. Fawcett and Lynch (2000) have examined difficulties associated with the diagnosis of dyslexia in children with EAL:

“ The identification of dyslexia in monolingual English speaking children is a complex issue, but the complexity increases when the difficulties of children learning EAL are considered” (p 180)

There is increasing concern about the under-identification of children with EAL, and secondary school may be the first time when pupils with EAL and SEN come to the attention of the school as demands on English language literacy to access the more advanced curriculum may present as a particular challenge for these children. In particular, it has been shown that reading comprehension, as opposed to word-recognition, are lower amongst 10 to 11 year old bilingual pupils, compared to monolingual pupils (Fredickson and Frith, 1998).  Fawcett and Lynch (2000) have argued that EAL children that are not diagnosed at primary school age with SEN, are at particular risk of prolonged failure in literacy throughout their educational careers. “ Problems are compounded when children enter the secondary school system with poor literacy skills and have to cope with a wide range of new subjects and teachers” (p 58).  EAL pupils can evade detection of specific learning difficulties because, as MacCloskey and Athanasiou (2000) suggest, “ One might expect verbal cognition and academic achievement to be commensurate, especially literacy, in a second language learner because both measures tend to reflect the children’s level of English language acquisition.  Without a discrepancy, learning disability is more difficult to detect” (p 210).  Therefore a careful assessment of verbal abilities, and performance measures of ability are required.

Once detected, phonological based interventions with EAL pupils with special educational needs can be effective. Over a ten week literacy training programme, all the children in a study by Fawcett and Lynch (2000) improved in reading ability. However, Fawcett and Lynch (2000) advocate the use of computer based tests and interventions for adolescents in order to maintain their interest. They highlight the difficulties of intervening with EAL adolescents who may be reading at a much younger age than expected:

“ GA is a bright, impatient boy…Although he needs to work on phonics and fluency, he is a fiercely competitive and proud boy, reluctant to tackle anything which seems babyish…GA immediately noticed that tasks ranged from level 1 to level 4 and insisted that he should be working at level 4. After some thought we were able to get round this issue by selecting a higher level of task which incorporated basic skills. It is understandable that these children are reluctant to fail at simple tasks designed for primary school children and are happier to struggle with more age appropriate work” (p 66/68).

In conclusion, research studies have shown that, in general, children from bilingual or trilingual backgrounds are afforded an educational advantage through their language abilities that transfers to a wide range of curriculum subjects.  Furthermore, there is little evidence to suggest that ESL pupils suffer from a significant deficit in English language and reading ability by the age of 10 or 11. With appropriate support at the primary school level, ESL pupils should have few additional difficulties in accessing the secondary school curriculum compared to monolingual peers. However, EAL pupils are particularly vulnerable to under-identification of learning difficulties such as dyslexia, that may inhibit their learning and achievement. This under-identification can be due to lack of assessment of the child using their first language, or educationalists lack of awareness about the implications of bilingualism (Hutchinson, Whiteley, Smith and Connors, 2004). However, research supports the view that learning difficulties can be detected in children with EAL through standard phonological processing and skills tests that are used with monolingual children. Therefore, secondary school teachers must remain vigilant to the possibility that EAL pupils with poor academic achievement may be suffering from specific learning difficulties, as opposed to general language difficulties associated with accessing the curriculum using a second language.

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