English as an additional language

Over the past decade, there has been much discussion and research into factors affecting the performance of pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL) in mainstream secondary schools in the United Kingdom. Recent studies in the UK have focused on the relationship between factors such as gender, ethnicity, pupil mobility, parental occupation, entitlement to free school meals and educational achievement. Nevertheless socio-economic status (SES) continues to be the most important single determinant of educational and social outcomes. The nature of the relationship between socioeconomic status and student achievement has been the point of argument for years, with the most influential arguments appearing in Equality of Educational Opportunity (Coleman, et al., 1968) and Inequality (Jencks, et al., 1973) in the United States of America, and a number of commissioned inquiries in Australia (Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, 1976; Karmel, 1973).

How SES influences student achievement is not clear, and there have been many theories to explain the relationship. In one scenario, school students from low-SES homes are at a disadvantage in schools because they lack an academic home environment, which influences their academic success at school. Another scenario argues that school and neighbourhood environments influence academic success, so that low-SES schools are generally lower-performing, and that only extremely resilient young people can escape the ' fate' of low academic achievement. How governments interpret the SES-achievement debate influences education policies designed to ameliorate educational disadvantage, so it is important to point out the contribution SES makes to achievement at both student and school level.

This study seeks to find out what level of performances EAL pupils have achieved in recent years and what are the overriding factors that determine their achievement in Modern Foreign Languages (MFL). A central characteristic of provision for EAL students in mainstream classrooms in the English context is that it can best be described as " patchy and varied" (Bourne, 2007; Leung, 2002; Leung & Franson, 2001: 155; McEachron & Bhatti, 2005).

Given the ever-increasing number of EAL pupils in schools, the outcomes of the study will permit me to evaluate their progress in MFL and will also aid my own professional development. The research will also aim to arm me with a wide variety of experiences outside my specialist subject area. As part of this element of the study I am required to carry out some research into any aspect of general school life, with the objective of learning through reflective practice.

This study has two elements. The first aspect includes studies of how EAL pupils perform in foreign languages. This section will seek to provide interesting points of comparison between their Home Language, their English Language Acquisition and the Target Language studied. In this context, the research should also shine some insight as to whether there are other external factors such as demographics, economical or social influences that can impact on the learning of EAL learners.

The second will examine the various ways in which EAL learners perform generally in English and what trends can be drawn from research over recent years. I will be looking at current concerns such as the barriers of language,

the effects of schooling on children from poor families, and the kind of interventions that would make a difference adapting to a different social and school environment.

The investigation will focus on the performance of pupils with EAL and I will situate this analysis within the context of a mainstream secondary school situated in London. The school in question which holds a Language College Status will be referred as School E for anonymous purposes. It is a mixed establishment which counts approximately 650 pupils between the ages of 11 -16, and where 15 % of pupils have English as an Additional Language.

Ten students aged eleven to fifteen years, who are currently learning French or Spanish, agreed to take part in the study: three monolingual English speakers and seven pupils with EAL. From this sample there was one girl who was originating from Ivory Coast, one boy from Cameroon, two girls from China, two boys from Portugal, and one girl from Spain. For the most part they can be described as being relatively recent arrivals to the UK as they have arrived within the previous six months to two years with a moderate level of English, little English or no English at all.

Students such as ours often have different language and social experiences than so-called mainstream or ' home' students, but as recently settled residents they do not fit the model of ' foreigners' learning English. " In UK cities there is a good deal of movement and settlement of people from diverse backgrounds. In London schools it is not unusual to find 40% (or more) of the students from ethno linguistic minority homes" (Baker & Eversley, 2000). At this time there is no nationally recognised policy or

strategy for EAL learners although there are individual schools and local education authorities that offer strategies, policies and expertise for these pupils. Hence the outcome of this research will decipher whether school E is adept, skilful and well resourced in EAL provision.

On the first week of conducting the study, my aim was mainly to build up a good professional relationship with the pupils who took take part of the study. I also ensured finding out the correct pronunciation of each child's name and made them aware of mine. In addition, I collected their background information and use EAL levels as well as English stages to contextualise their achievement data. There is evidence to suggest that background information will ensure clarity in determining how cultural factors and linguistic experience influence progress and will also inform teachers' planning. Government publications have strongly recommended the use of achievement data to ' target' EAL learners in schools and classrooms. For example, the Assessment of pupils learning English as an additional language recommends teachers gather and use data such as gender, age, ethnicity, prior education, years of UK education, first language details including literacy, key stage test results and cognitive ability test scores to decide on appropriate action for individual bilingual pupils. (DfES, 2003).

The research that was carried out with the EAL learners involved several weeks of informal induction that included a peer ' buddying' arrangement to help them adjust to school routines. The emphasis for these new arrivals was on supporting English language development and promoting awareness amongst their peers and understanding of their new environment. Circle

Time sessions were put in place after school to consult and involve pupils and for further developing peer support skills. As a result, students developed fantastic resources to promote a welcoming ethos around the school and classroom, by making presentations, displaying their multi-lingual posters, artwork, and booklets outlining the role of buddies. They have also consulted pupils, through written questionnaires and conducted a school assembly.

I investigated MFL learning techniques using active approaches such as role play, repetition and other strategies. Simple signs with language captions were displayed around my classroom and I found that EAL students made significantly more contributions to my lessons since I was breaking instructions down and providing important teaching resources such as visual stimuli. I have used some visual support and where possible used real objects such as examples, photographs and good illustrations to facilitate learning. The majority received language support with specialist teachers and classroom assistants that took place during normal class times within the framework of the National Curriculum.

I've also implemented a club for extra languages support which was given on a one-to-one basis or in small groups during lunchtimes where conversation was taught explicitly in relevant contexts, as was vocabulary. Outside the classroom, I have used very practical methods: taking children out to local shops, walking around school and taking photographs which became meaningful to them. Hence, I intended to broaden our monolingual pupils' knowledge and understanding of the wider world as I was looking for new challenges; I wanted the international dimension to become part of the

school ethos, to be integral to children's daily learning and not to be just a meaningless add-on, or a tick in the box. I strongly believe EAL pupils should be actively encouraged to value their native language. The greater the skill they possess in this, the greater the progress in the acquisition of the second.

As I observed my EAL pupils partaking in English lessons I noticed that some of them were often shying away from writing, while they may have been fluent in their spoken English; their formal written assessment was much more of a challenging obstacle to overcome. I became aware that pupils' ability to learn a completely new language is beneficial because it puts each student ' in the same boat'. It also came to my attention that through learning a new language, monolingual English speakers had more empathy for those who have come into the class not speaking English. In one interview, one of my monolingual pupils was quoted as saying " It's nice to have something that we can all learn together"

Nicola Davies, chair of the National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum, said: " Language learning can be helpful as English speaking pupils encounter the kinds of problems that new arrivals face as well as promoting intercultural understanding".

In addition to supporting pupils learning English as an Additional Language, School E also endeavoured to support parents. For the purpose of the study, families have been encouraged to attend normal school days with their offspring and this provided an opportunity to see parents and children engaged with others. These sessions allowed Parents who had little or no

understanding of English an ideal platform to understand how schooling in the UK works. Few parents were involved in translating signs for the school and were invited into school to work alongside children and other parent helpers in the classrooms. My students and their parents were very receptive to language learning, and their experiences included several languages.

For the purpose of this research I exchanged information on traditional food with a school in France and managed a live videoconference. Enthusiasm soon spread since the children were excited about learning a new language and the teaching staff motivated and inspired. This was extraordinarily motivating for our pupils and they voluntarily wrote thank you letters to the French teacher in the Target Language. Then we celebrated international events, and enriched the whole curriculum. We had themed weeks focusing on particular countries, inviting parents to lunches where pupils prepared typical dishes. One of our pupils even had a Chinese cake for his birthday! This study affirms that supporting and valuing EAL pupils' previous learning is important for their development. It was also useful for the study to discover their heritage country and languages spoken in their home in order to celebrate their faith and customs. Rather than separating it into home languages, Modern Foreign Languages and English, it was all under the umbrella of " languages".

Recent research has shown that there is a strong link between proficiency in the first language and the development of a second, or third. This is because the more competent EAL learners become in their home language the more competent they will become in MFL. The skills from the first language transfer across and allow the child's proficiency to grow. In accordance with

all these suggestions and following on from my observations and personal experiences, I would affirm that pupils who learn a foreign language will not be detracted from learning English, rather it will support it. From my view point it is also important to allow children to use the home language in the setting if he or she wants to because if they remark that their language is recognised and valued their self esteem and identity could further develop. Language and culture are inextricably entwined and an awareness of this could assist EAL children in developing a healthy self-perception.

During the study, I decided to focus on the progress of the seven EAL pupils from my sample, specifically investigating their ability in my own subject area. I had noticed that these pupils appeared to have an aptitude for learning languages, yet they were often placed in low-ability groups, so I set about gathering evidence to substantiate my theory. Furthermore, I became aware that 5 of my EAL pupils were at risk of underachieving, as they were placed in sets corresponding to their level of English rather than to their cognitive ability in MFL. I also detected that some of them were implementing knowledge of their mother tongue to facilitate the

target language learning, so they could potentially obtain higher grades than native English speakers and should be given every opportunity to demonstrate these abilities.

EAL is an under-researched area in the UK context, but much of the available research, including the EAL policies of School E presents similar findings. The research indicates that for EAL pupils to succeed, communication between EAL specialists and other school subject departments is vital. Researchers

are unanimous in their conclusions that EAL learners should be in a set corresponding to their intellectual capabilities, regardless of their level of English, as EAL pupils " make more progress and learn more quickly working alongside fluent users of English who are good language and learning role models" (DfES, 2005).

My two year 9 students, both from French-speaking Africa, came to the UK when they were 12 years of age and were taught French because of their background. It later transpired that French lessons were too easy for them and a decision was made to teach them Spanish instead. They were eager to learn and made incredibly good progress in Spanish, whilst also mastering English which equated to a good level of their home language.

On the other hand the two girls who were from China found learning Spanish harder to grasp, this was not helped as they formed their own inner circle speaking only in their home language. The fact they arrived at School E at the same time may have played an influence to them not interacting with other students and during MFL lessons it became apparent that they were becoming withdrawn. Although multilingual family and friendship networks played key roles in supporting their day-to-day school work and future ambitions, I remarked that silence and self-study emerge as key survival strategies for these EAL students.

The pupils who came from Spain and Portugal adjusted well to school life after just one year and this was reflected in their knowledge and comprehension of French. They actively participated in oral activities and

became fully engaged during lessons. However they underachieved when it came down to English.

A recent study at Goldsmiths College found that " Portuguese students who attended mother tongue classes were five times more likely to achieve five or more A* to C grades at GCSE than those who did not attend" (NALDIC, 2005), which supports the pro ' home' culture argument.

" The contentious role of the mother tongue makes assessment of EAL pupils another highly complex area, for example, there has been discussion of whether all pupils should be assessed in English to preclude prejudice" (Mills, 2002). " Many EAL studies focus on specific ethnic groups rather than on all learners, but all investigations that I have examined emphasize the importance of valuing the mother tongue and culture of the EAL learner" (Scarcella, 1990: 54).

Although conflicting opinions regarding treatment of EAL learners are not apparent, problems arise from attempting to put theory into practice. In 2008, OFSTED declared provision and support for EAL pupils " outstanding" in School E, yet I observed inconsistent adherence to the EAL policy, which appeared to place EAL learners at a disadvantage.

In order to analyse the current situation, I will use my personal experience in the MFL department within the context of School E to synthesis this research. To aid research preparations, Fischer (2001) solicits, " As you think about your teaching, how do you know when something really went well? What do you feel you are good at? How did you get good at it?" I believe that all of these questions can be answered through teacher-pupil interaction,

consideration of examination results and observance of ' best practice', along with learning from mistakes. For this reason, I have focused a large bulk of my research on one-to-one sessions with my EAL pupils. I carried out my research on their learning outcomes by discussing the MFL situation informally with pupils and teachers, but as this evidence will be subjective, it is not a reliable enough foundation on which to base my conclusions. My main source of evidence will be to set lists and examination results because these are totally unbiased and factual. The negative side of this sort of information is that it does not provide details on pupils' levels of ability nor on the motivation in the subject.

I will analyse the number of EAL pupils in different sets, and I predict that there will be a higher proportion of EAL pupils in low-ability sets. I will use original set lists from the beginning of the school year, before any set changes, to ensure there is no duplication of data. As this evidence is statistical, there is no potential for biased data manipulation, so I am certain that all information collected will be true and accurate. Although previous research concluded that EAL pupils should be placed in sets corresponding to their cognitive ability rather than to their level of English, prior to this I had not found any evidence that this was not happening in school E.

It was perhaps presumed that schools would follow advice from professionals and heed research into the field, but this investigation has proven that in School E this is certainly not the case. Although EAL pupils in School E appear to be achieving higher MFL GCSE grades than non-EAL pupils, they are consistently placed in low-ability sets in Key Stage 3, which could have negative consequences on them gaining better MFL results.

In addition to set lists, I will examine 2007 MFL GCSE results to evaluate the performance of EAL pupils. The downside is that as MFL is no longer compulsory at Key Stage 4, the GCSE group at School E was small, so I will also use 2008 mock GCSE examination results for this school. Again, this information is based on figures so there is no possibility for prejudiced conclusions. From an ethical viewpoint, it is imperative to remain objective throughout and guard the anonymity of any participants in the research.

In School E, more EAL pupils were present in low-ability than high-ability sets, but the difference between top and bottom sets is significantly reduced during Key Stage 3. In Year 7, 7. 4% of top set and 32. 4% of bottom set are speakers of EAL – a difference of 25%; in Year 8 the difference is reduced to 16. 2%; and in Year 9 to just 10%. This implies that School E places EAL pupils in the bottom set until they have proven that they are capable of more, rather than giving them the opportunity to demonstrate their ability from the outset.

As confirmed by the decrease in range of EAL pupils between top and bottom sets from Years 7 to 9, some EAL pupils must be proving themselves and being moved into higher-ability sets. However, previous findings that EAL pupils learn more quickly working with fluent native English speakers (DfES, 2005) are being disregarded, as in low-ability sets this is not always possible, due to the fact that non-EAL pupils are often stretching themselves to understand the work so do not have the time or ability to help EAL learners.

Foreign languages are new subjects which give pupils with learning difficulties the chance to make a fresh start. However, behavioural

difficulties, which are more common in lower-ability groups, also affect progress. In brief, the outcomes of previous research seem to be being overlooked, and EAL pupils are put in sets with no consideration of linguistic skills already acquired through learning English. Some manage to demonstrate a higher level of ability and move sets, but others never gain this opportunity. This further supports one of the issues highlighted by Mills (2002), that assessment of EAL pupils is extremely difficult.

This study has in fact uncovered more questions than answers. At School E, although an EAL policy exists and specialist advice is available, these are often overlooked, so further research into the practicalities of the philosophy may be beneficial here. Vis-à-vis GCSE results, having predicted that EAL pupils would outperform non-EAL pupils, the outcomes of this investigation show that EAL pupils may achieve higher grades in Spanish, but that French may not be affected. Further research, using a larger sample of pupils studying a variety of Modern Foreign Languages, perhaps at a language college, where all pupils must study a language to GCSE level, would be necessary to obtain a definitive conclusion.

Since EAL pupils appear to perform better than non-EAL pupils at GCSE level, at least in Spanish, it would be advantageous for them to be in a high-ability set from the beginning of Year 7. From this study, it is clear that current assessment criteria for setting pupils should be modified in some way for EAL pupils, and in case of doubt, they should be placed in a higher-ability set until a more accurate recommendation can be made.

What does this suggest about the experiences/expectations of EAL pupils studying MFL? This, alongside school catchment area, parental backing and degree of specialist support available in the area, is a major influencing factor that could be considered in future investigations.

To discover the true national picture, research would have to be completed in a wide variety of schools across the country, as this investigation has already shown two vastly different operational approaches.

The completion of this research greatly enhanced my understanding of the way in which pupils with EAL learn foreign languages, which has assisted me with developing new teaching strategies to accommodate these pupils and integrate them into lessons where they may at times be in the minority. It has also increased my awareness of the difficulties schools come up against when faced with placing EAL pupils into sets for modern languages, particularly if they arrive into the UK education system midway through their schooling, sometimes with little or no previous education in their country of origin.

I am aware of the situation, in future I will always keep careful track of the progress made by EAL pupils in my classes, and at the slightest sign of underachievement, I will do my best to move them into a different set, using this research to support the case. Hopefully, however, a suitable means of assessment will be devised in the near future to test the true capabilities of EAL pupils, thus eliminating the need for such action.

By making this research available to others, I hope to increase the awareness of other teachers and professionals of the actual situation of EAL

pupils learning modern languages in schools today, and in doing so enable them to enhance provision for the specific needs of EAL pupils learning in our education system.

In conclusion, the support setup in operation for EAL pupils at School E has been successful at identifying areas to meet the needs of EAL pupils, and it has also paved the way for further research into the domain. It has enhanced my professional development and influenced my future in teaching by making me aware of the situation and assisting me in providing evidence to substantiate what I suspected through observation of the system – that EAL pupils often have an aptitude for learning other foreign languages and that their needs are different to those of non-EAL pupils, so must be met by different means. One possible way to begin meeting the needs of EAL pupils more successfully is to ensure that research findings are more extensively published, and therefore reach a wider audience.