

## ***K & C EPCS***

***Working with teachers and schools, parents and children***

### ***Issues No. 2: Learning***

***(i) Pupils learning English as a second or additional language***

## **Pupils learning English as a second or additional language**

We, at the Educational Psychology Consultation Service, believe that a child's development and ability to learn and achieve is affected in the past and present by inherent factors *and* the course of the child's development. That course of development is, in turn, affected by factors such as: health, developmental opportunities and experiences, educational opportunities and experiences, the expectations of others, the child's view of himself and his feelings of confidence and competence in relation to aspects of his own development and learning. The child's cultural and language experiences are also linked to their learning and their attainments and are important factors to consider.

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea has a very diverse population and this is reflected in our school population. The proportion of pupils who are learning English as a second or additional language is significantly higher than the average for England. 50% of primary aged pupils and 44% of pupils in secondary schools are learners of English as a second or additional language in the borough (Facts and Figures, K&C 2005). In the figures for 2008, this appears to have risen to 52% (LDS conference 2008). There is also a wide range of languages used in this multicultural borough, with 25% of those pupils being Arabic speakers, making that the most widely spoken language in the borough's schools after English. This is followed by Portuguese and Spanish (K&C partnership, 2005).

As a service, we value the learning of additional languages as an asset. Our role is to make sense of the learning situation for all pupils, including those learning English as a second or additional language and to support the school in understanding and addressing their needs so that they can continue to make progress with their learning and their development and to achieve in the broadest sense. Research shows that children who become proficient in speaking and writing more than one language tend to do well with their learning and attainments at school (Cummins, 1984) and that having more than one language is, therefore, intellectually stimulating.

### **The distinctive learning situation for pupils learning English as a second or additional language**

Developing bilinguals may have different starting points in the learning of English, for example:

- New arrivals to the UK with little or no previous educational experience
- Those acquiring English with limited exposure to first language (oral or written) either at home or through school
- Those who may have acquired everyday communication fluency in English, but have not yet developed skills in speaking, reading and writing which will enable them to cope adequately with the language demands of curriculum
- Advanced bilingual learners who have been learning English for between 7-10 years

Pupils learning English as a second or additional language are not, therefore, a homogenous group.

Pupils become multilingual in a wide variety of circumstances:

Some may be acquiring 2 or more languages from birth, or sequentially, with one or more languages spoken at

home and another used at school. The social & learning contexts in which each language is used will therefore vary and the language development needs will vary accordingly.

Bilingual learners benefit from developing fluency in their first language, however, attitudes to the language, for example, whether it is perceived to be a high or low status language can

also affect the way it develops and the way it is supported and maintained by siblings and parents in the home setting and by peers in the school context. Some parents may, therefore, feel under pressure to say that they use English with their child at home, or that the child chooses to use English, even when this is not the case.

We consider it is important, therefore, to emphasise the positive messages about the values of being bilingual and the value of bilingualism to cognitive development, social development and achievements from the outset. We need to recognise that families can have their own views and goals for language development. For example, the home language may be used with the older generation, such as grandparents or for telephone conversations with family members in other countries. There may also be sensitivities about the use of languages from war torn countries.

Bilingual learners may be learning English as a new language. At the same time they are also learning to use English as a means of learning and making progress in school, both socially and academically, and negotiating social relationships in an unfamiliar cultural environment. Therefore, in addition to sharing many similar needs to those of other children, they also have distinct and different needs as a result of this situation. For example, they are having to develop 'new' concepts in the new language and having to use this new language to develop literacy skills.

### **How does learning English as a second or additional language affect learning and achievement?**

Research strongly suggests that bilingualism can be very supportive to children's learning and their attainment at school (Cummins, 1984). Research also suggests that the level of fluency and the proficiency in the main language has an impact on their acquisition of a second language. The deeper the level of cognitive and academic development in the first language, the faster students are likely to progress in their acquisition of a second language. (Cummins 1984; Thomas & Collier, 1997)

Children can take anything up to three years to acquire basic language skills in English – i.e. the language needed for everyday communication. Cummins described this as Basic Interpersonal and Communication Skills (BICS). It can then take up to 7 years for children to learn the level of language needed for more academic learning. This relates to the progressively more abstract concepts of the school curriculum. Cummins described this as Cognitive and Academic language Proficiency (CALP). These time scales will obviously vary depending on the individual's starting point in learning English, for example, it can take up to 10 years for some pupils to learn the academic language needed for learning at school, particularly if they are not yet proficient in their first language. Therefore pupils' levels of proficiency in their first language and the richness of their language experiences are all important factors to consider (Cummins, 1981).

### **Assessing the development of English as a second or additional language: good practice in schools**

"The identification and assessment of the special educational needs of children whose first language is not English requires particular care. It is necessary to consider the child within the context of their home, culture and community" (SEN Code of Practice 5.15, 2001)

Assessments need to be developmentally and culturally appropriate, taking into account the social and cognitive aspects of the child's development as well as taking into consideration

the child's bilingual linguistic background and the entire context in which the child is learning and developing (NCELA, 1995)

It is important to be very cautious about carrying out any standardised assessments of children for whom English is an additional language, because of the obvious cultural and linguistic bias of the tests. Children follow different paths to become bilingual and the stages they pass through can be quite varied. Hence, in the RBK&C EPCS we avoid using standardised tests.

An initial assessment is best carried out in the pupil's first language, wherever possible. This achieves a more accurate understanding of the child's strengths and needs. Parents are a very helpful source of information about their children's linguistic development and can give a very rich picture about the child's language profile, and their development over all. This process may require the use of interpreters and this can be a sensitive area because of issues around confidentiality and the links with the community for example.

We know from research that pupils bring to their learning a range of experiences, skills, knowledge and understanding in their first language which will impact on their acquisition of English (NALDIC, 2006; DfES, 2005). For example, assessments of children's language in English should take account of the different entry points of learners, with respect to age and curriculum demands, and show progression in the context of the full curriculum and over time.

It is essential therefore to obtain good quality information about the *progression* of the child's learning and second language acquisition over time (continuous assessment), taking into account the starting point for any particular pupil, and their background learning, as well as their literacy skills in their first language.

**Factors to consider when a learner of English as a second or additional language is not making sufficient progress:**

Children who are learning English as an additional language and who have been attending schools in the UK for a period of time but are attaining at levels below what would be expected for children of their age can often be a cause for concern for schools. There is a high proportion of children who are raised for consultations with the EPCS where bilingualism is an important dimension in understanding their needs.

Three groups of pupils have been identified as being at a particular risk of underachievement at school (DfES, 2005):

1. New arrivals with little or no previous educational experiences
2. Those who are learning English with limited exposure to first language
3. More advanced bilingual learners whose specific needs may have been overlooked

Distinguishing between a language learning need and a special educational need can be a difficult task.

"A child must not be regarded as having a learning difficulty solely because the language, or form of the language at home, is different from the language he or she will be taught in" (1996 Education Act).

Deryn Hall (2001) warned about two possible errors when considering the learning needs of pupils where EAL is a factor:

1. A false positive, where a learning difficulty is felt to be a factor when it actually is not, possibly resulting in a pupil being wrongly 'labelled'
2. A false negative, where a learning difficulty is not correctly identified and the difficulties are attributed purely to the child's lack of proficiency in English.

Both these errors could have implications on the type of support that the child or young person receives at the school. It is helpful, therefore, to get as much information as possible about the child's language experiences so that we get a clearer understanding of their needs.

### **What information helps gain a clearer understanding of children's language needs?**

On arrival at school, it's helpful to find out about children's language experiences. For example: enquiring about the various languages a child has experience of in their home environment and what languages their parents prefer to use with them, what languages they prefer to use with various family members, their fluency in the various languages and their understanding in them, whether they can read or write in other languages and how long they have been learning English for. We have even been known to ask children what language they dream in! Conversations about a child's home language tend to go better when information is sought in a way that conveys that it is viewed as a strength. This is an important principle.

As school learning becomes progressively more complex/cognitively demanding, year on year, the need for these learners to develop academic language proficiency and the related conceptual development, increases. Lack of achievement often results from lack of recognition of their academic language learning needs. The Language Development Service handbook provides ideas and frameworks for differentiation of the curriculum in way that acknowledges the cognitive complexities whilst simplifying the language demands. (LDS handbook, RBK&C 2002)

### **What factors support the development of pupil's language skills and academic achievement?**

Research (Lutzeier, 1992) has shown that a number of factors affect the achievement of pupils learning English as a second or additional language. These include:

- *Whole school ethos:* having an inclusive culture, policies and practices and involving parents and pupils in decisions and encouraging community involvement. Schools that value cultural diversity are more likely to be effective at supporting learners of English as a second or additional language. For example: Inviting parents to run 'story time' in their own languages, having 'welcome' messages in different languages, and having posters and displays valuing bilingualism.
- *Classroom level:* Ensuring that appropriate resources are available, time and task management and classroom organisation and planning to enable all pupils' access to learning.

- Creating a supportive learning environment: where their language needs as well as their learning needs are met and one in which they are academically appropriately challenged and one which takes into account their specific language needs. For example: collaborative activities, 'jigsaw' activities (Watkins) and labelled areas in the room, use of visual information and technology such as 'Talking pens' which 'read out' stories in different languages. So in addition to addressing the language needs at the level of developing the basic interpersonal and communication skills (BICS), it is essential that strategies to develop the cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) continue over time as the higher order skills required for learning become more complex.
- *Individual level:* Pupil's level of language proficiency: this includes their proficiency in their main language. Research by Virginia Collier (1997) and Jim Cummins (1984) has shown that it can take 7 to 10 years for pupils to become fully competent in English as learners of a second or additional language. It can take even longer for a child to acquire a second language if they are not yet fluent in their first language. Also, if they have good literacy skills in their first language and have had opportunities to develop CALP skills in their first language at home, then this can be supportive to their acquisition of a second language (Thomas and Collier, 1997). It is important therefore, for staff who are concerned about a pupil's progress where EAL is a factor, to be aware of the pupil's language experiences and their current EAL levels and what these levels mean in terms of where the child is at in their acquisition of English as an additional language. Other factors include: continuity in a school versus many changes and moves, opportunities for social interactions with peers. It is important to think about child development in a holistic way and to support pupils' engagement with the context by involving pupils in the school and community experiences. For example: 'Getting to know your school' theme where pupils who are learners of English as a second or additional language are guided through the exploration of this new personal environment (Leung, 2008).

In conclusion, the learning of English as a second or additional language involves personalisation. This concept of "personalisation" is not new, but there is a new focus and we can see it as an opportunity to do what we know is best for pupils (Leung, 2008; Watkins, 2006). It requires organising teaching to respond to their learning experiences, needs and their ways of learning within a curriculum context. Flexibility is important, as is making best use of class talent, resources and context. It involves recognising the differences in the experiences and opportunities for learners of English as a second or additional language.

## Bibliography and useful links

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DfES website: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk>

[www.mantralingua.com](http://www.mantralingua.com) (Talking pen)