

Identification and assessment

Language needs or special needs: does it matter?

When a child who is learning English as an additional language makes slow progress in school, it is difficult to tell whether the delay is caused because they are not confident using the language of the school or because they have “real” learning difficulties independently of the language difference.

It is important to understand the causes of their problems. If they have special educational needs (SEN), an analysis of these will help to decide the best way of teaching them. If they simply need to develop their proficiency in English, they will require a different emphasis in their teaching.

Extract from Ofsted Report (2003), *The education of asylum-seeker pupils*:

There were a few examples of teachers placing asylum-seeker pupils in inappropriate ability groups or sets. Where this occurred, it resulted in a poor match between pupils’ ability and the demands of the learning task. For example, one school was misguided in placing the newly arrived pupils on the special educational needs (SEN) register and the subsequent teaching strategies and resources were predominantly modelled on the teaching of pupils with SEN. This resulted in teaching that did not provide well-matched cognitive challenge, and the asylum-seeker pupils made slow progress.

(HMI 453, para. 49)

Language needs or special needs: how can you tell?

Language difference and SEN are not the only alternative explanations when a child who is learning EAL appears to be making slow progress in school. But this rather simplistic question is a good starting point for teachers. At least it reminds us to check on a child’s ability to deal with the language demands at school before making assumptions about the nature of their learning difficulties.

Susan Shaw of Islington LEA developed a set of filter questions that a teacher can use to guide observation and assessment of a pupil in this position. Her materials have been adapted by the Portsmouth EMAS who have published their version on their website. These are the headings they use to decide the most appropriate first point of assessment for a particular bilingual pupil - assessment of SEN or EAL assessment. They emphasise that these questions are for initial assessment only. “As a pupil has further exposure to English, special educational needs may become apparent. It may be appropriate to follow both courses of action for some bilingual pupils. All answers should be based on good evidence collected in a variety of circumstances over a period of time. All evidence should be accurately recorded and dated.”

The questions concern:

1. Lack of Response
2. Problems with listening
3. Lack of oral expression over a range of subjects
4. Difficulty in progressing in areas of the curriculum other than English
5. Slow or little progress with reading
6. Difficulties with writing for a variety of purposes
7. Difficulties with handwriting
8. Behavioural, emotional or social difficulties

The full set of questions may be found at:

<http://www.blss.portsmouth.sch.uk/sen/filterq.shtml>

It is usually important to undertake an EAL assessment before anything else. When teachers wish to take their exploration of possible reasons for a child’s lack of progress further, one possible way forward is to adopt a *hypothesis testing approach*. This will generate more complex investigations than the either/or question with which this section began. The best known example of a hypothesis testing approach in this country was developed by a team of psychologists and teachers in Surrey (Wright, 1991). They proposed the following list of hypotheses,

outlining different reasons why a bilingual child might be underperforming. Then they examined the implications of each explanation for how teachers might aim to help. The list of possible explanations that is worth exploring will vary from area to area depending on the composition of local communities. So this list should be treated as a foundation on which to build rather than a universally valid checklist.

Hypothesis	
1.	The child is learning more slowly than others because the ethos and curriculum of the school are experienced as challenging and alien, rather than welcoming and accommodating.
2.	The child is not learning because the child's good level of conversational English has misled the teacher into setting tasks that are too abstract for the child's current language level.
3.	The child is learning at an appropriate rate, and just needs more time to get used to the demands of working in their second language.
4.	The child has not attained a basic language proficiency in any language, because neither language has been given adequate opportunities to develop.
5.	The child is failing because of a preoccupation with stress that is affecting their family or their community.
6.	The child has a general difficulty in learning compared to other children of the same age.
7.	The child is failing because of a specific language disorder.

In order to work through some of those questions or hypotheses a teacher may need external support. Various procedures may be involved that would not be necessary with a pupil who is a monolingual speaker of English:

- Involving EAL and bilingual support teachers actively at every stage.
- Recording and reviewing information on the child's knowledge and use of their home language *and* of English.
- Setting specific educational aims covering language and cultural needs and reviewing progress towards achieving them.
- Ensuring that the child has appropriate language provision.
- Investigating social, cultural and language isolation and peer harassment as possible factors in the child's difficulties.
- If needed, making use of an interpreter/adviser from the parent's own community.
- Where the child attends a religious or community school, consulting teachers at that school about the progress he or she is making there and the teaching methods and materials used to achieve that progress.

(Adapted from Cline, 1995)

In order to plan the assessment of a child who may have SEN, whether they are learning EAL or not, it is necessary to work within the framework of a code of practice which is the subject of the next section.

Understanding the context

Background information is needed in order to understand the context in which any child may face barriers to learning at school. In the case of children who are learning EAL this is even more important. First of all, it is essential to have full and accurate background information about the child him/herself. This might cover:

- Language(s) spoken at home
 - between adults
 - between adults and children
 - between children
- Religion and diet
- Any periods of residence or schooling outside UK
- Changes of school within UK
- Experience of classroom work in first language
- Experience of teaching outside school in first language
- Experience of a bilingual teaching approach
- Arrangements for learning English

For an analysis of the slightly different coverage given in such lists by different authors see Appendix 1 of Cline and Shamsi (2000):

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR184.doc>

The most important information concerns the child's experience and use of the languages in their repertoire. See other sections of this site for a more detailed discussion of strategies for assessing a child's developing mastery of English.

But the personal and family background information is not enough in itself. In order to fully understand the educational needs of children learning EAL who are struggling in school it is essential to have background information about the school as well as background information about the child and family. The child's educational

needs cannot be judged without understanding the educational context. To what degree are the child's difficulties in learning a reflection of a problem in the school's ethos or provision for all children learning EAL rather than an unavoidable problem relating to this child alone?

The list of questions that is given below will be relevant in this situation. Others may be added if they seem likely to illuminate the barriers to be overcome if the child is to progress:

1. Is the child's first language widely shared by other pupils at the school?
2. Are there adults in the school who share her first language?
3. Is there a whole school languages policy that covers bilingual pupils?
4. What resources and teachers are available to meet the unique needs of bilingual pupils?
5. Are there books, tapes, posters and displays in her first language?
6. What flexibility of provision is there beyond what she now receives?
7. Is a multicultural approach to teaching emphasised and valued by the staff?
8. Is there an explicit and effective school policy on racism and on racial harassment?
9. Is there effective liaison with parents from her community?
10. Is spoken and written information available to her parents in their first language if needed?
11. What efforts are made to ensure that they understand what the school is aiming to do for their children and to learn their views of what it ought to do?

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References and Further Reading

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