

Pupil Portraits

Samiya

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Samyia, who is now 17, is at college studying three AS levels (Business Studies, English Language, and French). She was born in Afghanistan but came to England in autumn 1999, due to civil unrest in her country. She arrived with her parents and her two brothers. Her mother was a teacher in Afghanistan and her father had a high position in the army. Her first language is Dari, in which she is literate. Samiya was unable to attend school due to the war and was taught at home by her mother, a teacher in Afghanistan.

Samyia joined a secondary school in an outer London borough on 7th February 2000. She was placed in year 7 as she did not know any English but she should have been in year 8. Her elder brother, Ashraf, who knew a little English was placed in year 8 but should have been in year 9. At the same time, Pari, an Iranian girl, with a little English, was also admitted to year 7. Samyia and Pari were put in the same class. As they were beginners in English, Samyia, Ashraf and Pari were placed in the lowest ability groups.

The school has 700 children on roll of whom only 9.6% speak English as an additional language. Many of these learners were born in the UK and come from a variety of cultural backgrounds. The school had never had beginner learners of English before and contacted the peripatetic Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS) for EAL support. The teachers were worried and required advice about how the pupils were going to cope with the demands of the secondary curriculum. An EAL teacher was assigned to the school for one day per week.

The three pupils were withdrawn by the EAL teacher. They were very keen and their basic oral skills developed steadily but they required more support to participate fully in all their subjects and progress beyond the initial stage. This was discussed with the Head of EMAS, who then sent in two teachers for two and a half days in the summer term of 2000.

One of the EAL teachers assessed Samyia in May 2000 for her independent writing in Dari and English. At the assessment Samyia was a very quiet, shy and frightened girl but was delighted when asked to write in Dari too. She had acquired enough vocabulary to understand basic classroom instructions and gave “yes” and “no” answers to questions about herself. This is what she wrote independently for this assessment:

'My neme Samyia H _____. I am 12 years old I come from Afghenisten I speak Dary I like Englan I am 5 persons in my family I am got 2 brother one is n Imran one Ashraf I do not sector. I like lesson Maths in Science in English in PE.'

The independent writing showed how hard Samyia had worked in three months to develop her writing in English in a new educational system and culture. It was apparent at the assessment that Samyia and Pari were very dependent on each other as they spoke a common dialect. They were both shy at that time but together they asked the teachers for assistance and used Pari's Persian dictionary to make themselves understood when EAL support was not available. They complemented each other's learning. As for Ashraf, being keen on football enabled him to make some friends.

This was the most difficult time for all three pupils but it was even more so for Samyia, who felt intimidated by Ashraf's basic command of English and Pari's better understanding of new concepts. Everything was new and strange for them. Samyia and Pari were often exasperated if they did not comprehend something. A few of their peers upset them by calling them “refugees” and asking them to “go home”. Their form tutors were very supportive and took appropriate action to deal with this problem.

In the later part of the summer 2000, along with withdrawal classes with the EAL teachers, Samyia also had one lesson a week of specialist EAL support in Mathematics. She listened attentively. Her comprehension of topics like symmetry, shapes, angles and solving simple equations illustrated her potential as she occasionally started answering questions in class. This was the lowest ability class. After the end of year test she was moved up a set in Mathematics. She was elated that she was better than some of her peers in something.

Her happiness about her progress was marred by a family disaster just before the end of the summer term. Samyia's mother was a victim of a hit and run driver and as a result had three operations on her right arm. Samyia, who had just settled into her new life, had to help her father look after the household.

When she started the autumn term, it was apparent that in spite of her extra responsibility, Samyia had completed all the language work set by her EAL teacher during the summer holidays to develop her vocabulary. EAL in-class support was given in Mathematics and Science (one lesson per week). Samyia and Pari continued supporting each other by using their first language to comprehend complex concepts and compare language structures. In the beginning they also translated some of the key vocabulary in all their subjects. When Samyia, Pari and Ashraf observed Ramadan, they discussed differences between Persian and Afghanistan customs. Then Samyia wrote this piece independently, at the end of November 2000:

“My religion

I am from Afghnistna and my religion is molem. we have for one months ramadan which now and I want to finish whole the months and is not so hart to not eat and also the days short. After that we have Eid and that is very special to my country people and the small of the age should gone to see elders porson and say to them happy ramadan and good luck for namaz and happy Eid and children should get for Eid maney of uncle, gerandad and very one to came to see.”

This writing shows that she was beginning to write as she spoke, was aware of basic punctuation and knew enough spellings to express basic ideas about herself. She knew that she needed to develop her independent writing quickly in order to achieve as well as her peers in the Key Stage 3 examinations in 2002. She frequently asked, ‘Am I going to write like them miss?’ and was reassured that this was possible.

Her teachers were also concerned and requested that EAL support was increased. This was impossible due to the timetabling constraints on the EMAS service. So the EAL teachers discussed strategies like using key visuals, first language dictionaries, glossaries of subject specific vocabulary and writing frames with the three pupils’ teachers for whom teaching beginner bilingual pupils was a novel experience. Jim Cummins’ framework (Cummins, 1981a, 1984) which suggests that, initially at least, second language learners need to experience a learning environment in which tasks are both ‘context embedded’ and ‘cognitively demanding’ and the time required to gain academic language proficiency were discussed with the teachers. Some of the teachers were not convinced as they preferred pupils to be withdrawn from their lessons. However Samiya and Pari’s end of year summer 2001 results and the levels that Ashraf attained at Key Stage 3 demonstrated to the teachers that this approach had enabled the pupils to achieve their potential. During Refugee Week, Samiya and Ashraf also went to a primary school to give a talk about their life in Afghanistan.

In year 9, Samiya’s growing English vocabulary made her more confident and outgoing in school and this helped her make other friends besides Pari. In class support and withdrawal lessons were provided as before. Her developing oracy enabled her to hypothesise, classify, describe, explain and evaluate across the curriculum. She even took Shakespearean language in her stride and the themes in Macbeth through the support materials, in time for the examinations. She always wrote down her ideas or drew when really stuck! In November 2001 after practising how to describe people in her withdrawal session, Samiya wrote about a famous person for homework. Here are two paragraphs from this unaided piece, which indicated what was required to advance her developing independent writing to attain at least a level 4 in English in summer 2004.

A famous person Ahmed Zahr

He was a famous person in my country. People loved him because he was a singer. People still remember him

and as always they loved him. His songs were true the word he were saying about everything what were happened in the world.

The one thing about him were that he didn’t liked to sing in the television. His song always were in ridoe and he often want him to come on them wieeding he wouldn’t go...”

In the months leading up to the Key Stage 3 examinations, besides revising, Samiya consistently continued drafting and redrafting her independent writing, along with practising various grammar exercises. Her hard work was rewarded by her brilliant results: Mathematics- Level 4, Science -Level 5, English - Level 4. Pari also achieved the same but had a Level 5 in Mathematics and an A* in GCSE Persian.

In June 2002, boosted by her results, Samiya finally expressed her feelings about leaving Afghanistan. Here are some excerpts:

We had a big house with 6 bedrooms, three living room, one dining, two kitchens ...It was in East of Afghanistan. Our area was a beautiful place to live because of the conditions in or area. ...When I was a child I was happy in my own country. ...

I was really sad and unhappy abut war started in Afghanistan and people couldn’t continue their jobs, school, colleges, universities and their life. Everythings got disturoyed houses, roads, ... nothing left for people to have better lifes that they had. ...

I did not wanted to see my own people of my country suffering ... People were left homeless because of the war. ... The war made my country sad and useless. ... It took the happiness from it and left the country completely unhappy, homeless and no human ringhts. ...”

She was moving on in her journey towards becoming an independent writer but would still needed ‘scaffolding’ support across the curriculum to achieve her potential in her GCSEs. To promote their academic success EAL support was continued in year 10 and 11, but only one day a week. Samiya read widely, consistently used the thesaurus and dictionary and always followed her teachers’ advice. She never gave up. Her teachers admired her sheer determination to participate fully and not let anything stand in her way.

Samiya’s admirable achievement of 11 GCSEs with Grades C in both English Language and English Literature and Grades B in Mathematics, Art and Science has set a precedent for future bilingual pupils at the school. Now Samiya, a confident, articulate and ambitious young woman, intends to go to University. Her success is remarkable given her childhood experiences.

References

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