English as an Additional Language: An empirical study of stages of English proficiency

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper aims to examine EAL pupils' English proficiency and its impact on attainment. Key questions raised in the research include how long does it take to acquire English fluency for bilingual EAL pupils? What is the relationship between stage of English language acquisition and attainment?

Sample: The main empirical basis for this research is the data collected annually in January on language spoken by EAL pupils and the information on stage of fluency in English in the case study Local authority over twenty years. The sample for performance analysis consisted of 2,409 pupils who had completed KS2 and 1563 students who completed GCSE and 14,103 EAL pupils in the LA. Each pupil in the sample has a unique pupil number, and this is used to match socio-economic information with KS2 and GCSE results.

Research Methods: The analysis proceeds in three steps, using a four point levels of fluency in English assessment scale from beginner to fully fluent. First, using longitudinal matched data of all year 10 EAL pupils in the LA who are fully fluent in English, we tracked backward, year by year, to establish how long it took in each of the stages of fluency in English and to reach the fully fluent stage from the time they were first assessed as a beginner when they started school in the LA. Second, KS2 and GCSE statistical patterns of performance of EAL pupils are analysed by levels of fluency in English to illustrate differences in attainment. Third, detailed statistical analysis of students who completed GCSE were carried out to analyse the association between stage of fluency in English and attainment using multiple regression methods.

Conclusion and policy implications: The main finding of this study suggests that Language barriers remain the key factor affecting the performance of English as an Additional Language (EAL) pupils in British schools. The study shows that it takes about 6-8 years on average to acquire academic English proficiency. However, the speed of English language acquisition varies between stages of levels of English. On average pupils are classified at stage 1 (beginner) about a year and a half, before moving to becoming familiar with English (stage 2) where they typically remain for about three years. It takes about another three years at stage 3 (becoming confident in English) before they can then be classified as fully fluent. This paper also confirms that there is a strong relationship between stage of fluency in English and educational attainment. The results suggests that the percentage of pupils attaining level 4 or above at KS2 and 5+A*-C at GCSE increased as stage of proficiency in English increased. Pupils in the early stages of fluency performed at low levels, while EAL pupils who were fully fluent in English far outstripped those of pupils for whom English was their only language. This finding offers much encouragement for policy makers and demonstrates that once the disadvantage of language is overcome, it is possible to attain high levels of achievement. This also underlines the importance of additional targeted support for EAL pupils to improve their levels of fluency in English.

Introduction

Language barriers remain the key factor affecting the performance of English as An Additional Language (EAL) pupils in British schools but there are relatively few studies that have examined the way we assess EAL pupils, English proficiency and the relationship between stages of English fluency and attainment. This issue is increasingly important given the growth in the EAL population in England over the last decade. About 14% of the school population in England and Wales, or 905620 children now use English as an additional

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language (see figure 1). Most of these children belong to well-established ethnic minority communities, and have been born and educated in the UK.

Figure 1 EAL population in primary, secondary and special schools in England, 1997-2010


Recent studies have examined the effect of stages of English fluency on attainment at Key Stage 2 tests (KS2) and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). For example, the analyses of the national KS2 test results and GSCE examination results for pupils in an inner London LA by levels of English language acquisition show that EAL pupils at the early stages of developing fluency had significantly lower KS2 test scores in all subjects than their monolingual peers (see Strand and Demie 2005; Demie and Strand 2006; Demie et al 2003; Hayes et al 2001). However, EAL pupils who were fully fluent in English achieved significantly higher scores in all KS2 tests and GCSE than their monolingual peers. The negative association with attainment for the early stages of fluency remained significant after controls for a range of other pupil characteristics, including age, gender, free school meal entitlement, stage of special educational need and ethnic group, although these factors effectively explained the higher attainment of the ‘fully fluent’ group. The two studies conclude that there is a strong relationship between stage of fluency in English and educational attainment, with the performance of bilingual pupils increasing as measured stage of fluency in English increases. Pupils in the early stages of fluency perform at very low levels, while bilingual pupils who are fully fluent in English perform better, on average, than English-only speakers (see Strand and Demie 2005; Demie and Strand 2006).
There is also a wealth of research on how long it takes to acquire English fluency for pupils with English as an additional language, particularly in North America. For example, Cummins (1992 and Cummins and Nakajima 1987) carried out pioneering research into how long it takes to acquire a second language and bilingualism. He argued that the speed of acquisition of the English language varies and it takes up to two years to acquire fluency in ‘superficial’ spoken English and up to seven years to acquire academic English or full fluency. This study also pointed out that for some pupils a longer period of time may be needed to acquire the ‘academic’ English required by the school curriculum.

Collier (1987, 1989, 1992, and 1995) has also carried out research into how long it takes to acquire a second or additional language over a long period which supports Cummins’ findings and confirms that a longer period of time may be needed to acquire academic English that may be necessary to fully access the national curriculum. Both Cummins’ and Collier’s research findings suggest that it takes five to seven years in education for bilingual pupils to become fully competent in a second language and to catch up with their native peers. Recent research in USA in two California districts that are considered the most successful in teaching English to EAL students also suggest that it takes three to five years to develop oral proficiency and about four to seven years to acquire academic English proficiency (Hakuta et al 2000). This study in California also revealed a continuing and widening gap between EAL students and monolingual English speakers. The study argue this gap illustrates the daunting task facing those students, who not only have to acquire oral and academic English, but also have to keep pace with mother tongue English speakers, who continue to develop their language skills.

The above finding on ‘how long does it take to acquire English proficiency?’ is recognised by OFSTED and suggest that:

“It takes on average five to seven years to become fully competent in a second language, although individuals will vary in the speed with which they acquire this competence. Fluency in spoken English is usually achieved with two years, but the ability to read and understand more complex texts containing unfamiliar cultural references and to write the academic English needed for success in examinations takes much longer.” (OFSTED, Inspecting English as an additional language, 2001, p.5)

However, a review of the literature suggests that there are relatively few studies that have examined the way we assess the English proficiency of EAL pupils and how long it takes to acquire English proficiency in a UK context (see Strand and Demie 2005; Demie and Strand
There is a need for more research on the way we assess EAL pupils and on the relationship between stages of fluency in English and attainment to improve our knowledge about EAL pupils and how they might be supported in the classroom. Stage of fluency in English is therefore potentially a powerful predictor of differential attainment among EAL pupils at all key stages and an important factor in pupil achievement.

**Research Questions**

This paper aims to examine EAL pupils’ English proficiency and its impact on attainment to improve our knowledge about EAL pupils and how they might be supported in classroom. Two overarching research questions for the study include: How long does it take to acquire English fluency for bilingual EAL pupils? What is the relationship between stage of English language acquisition and attainment?

The study considers empirical evidence from an inner London LA. Given the few studies that have explored EAL pupils’ English proficiency and attainment, the study of the relationship between stages of English acquisition and attainment in inner city schools seems worthy of further investigation.

2. **Methods**

**The Data**

Current statistics in study LA indicate that almost 48% of pupils in primary schools and 43% in secondary schools were classed as EAL pupils (for details of languages spoken see Demie et al 2010). The main empirical basis for this research was the data collected annually in January on stage of fluency in English and language spoken by 14,103 EAL pupils all LA schools. The sample for performance analysis consisted of 2,409 pupils who had completed KS2 and 1563 students who completed GCSE. In addition a range of background information including details of pupil ethnic background was also collected for all nursery, primary, secondary, special schools and the pupil referral units. Each pupil in the sample had a unique pupil number, and this was used to match socio-economic information with KS2 and GCSE results.

Schools were free to organise the completion of the survey in any way they wished. In most cases language data and levels of fluency in English forms were completed by EAL teachers from information supplied to them by parents. This was also carried out, occasionally by
class teachers with guidance provided by EAL teachers employed on the English Language Support project and Ethnic Minority Achievement (EMA) where additional language(s) were spoken by pupils. There is an issue regarding whether or not a classroom teacher should assess a pupil’s fluency. Hayes et al (2001) argued that use of classroom teachers for assessment could introduce an element of statistical noise into the data. However, this issue is very minimal in the case study schools as the assessment is mainly done by qualified EAL teachers. This is also followed by careful moderation of the whole assessment process across the authority’s schools using EAL and EMA specialists to ensure the consistency and accuracy of the levels of assessment. This procedure is designed to promote consistent and accurate assessment judgements. It was argued in previous studies in the authority that EAL stages are sufficiently moderated across the LA backed by good training of EAL specialists and classroom teachers (Demie and Strand 2006) and ‘have been found to be wholly accurate in all secondary schools’ (Gay, 2011,p3). As a result of good moderation it was possible to minimise the margin of error and improve the quality of assessment data and the way the stages of levels of fluency may be used to assess bilingual pupils in schools.

**Measures for Assessing Stages of English Fluency for EAL pupils**

The EAL learning needs of pupils vary greatly from beginners to advanced learners (see Demie et al 2010). Stages of English have been widely used to describe the different stages of English through which pupils commonly progress; for an example widely used throughout the 1990s and 2000s, (see Hester 1993; Demie et al 2010).

There are many local variations in the way EAL pupils are assessed in UK. While some Local Authorities (LAs) use a four stage systems with local descriptors based on Hilary Hester scale (1993), others use “The Northern Association of Support Services for Equality and Achievement system” (NASSEA 2001; Milton Keynes Council 2001 and 2004) or the national curriculum English descriptors set out by the Qualification Curriculum Authority (QCA 2000) in ‘A Language in Common.’ The measure of stage of fluency used in the case study LA is a four point scale and is largely derived from the work of Hilary Hester and Inner London colleagues at the Centre for Language in Primary Education (CLPE) in the 1980s (Hester et al, 1988). These four stages range from beginner to fluent and are described below:

**Stage 1**  **New to English** - Bilingual English learners who might be able to engage in classroom learning activities using their own mother tongue, but need support to operate in English.

**Stage 2**  **Becoming familiar with English** - Bilingual English learners who can engage in all learning activities but whose spoken and/or written English
clearly shows that English is not their first language. Their oral English is well developed but their literacy development in English is such that they need considerable support to operate successfully in written activities in the classroom.

**Stage 3**  **Becoming confident as user of English** - Bilingual pupils whose oral and written English is progressing well and who can engage successfully in both oral and written activities, but need further support for a variety of possible reasons, for example pupils who are achieving considerable success in subjects such as mathematics and science but much less in others such as English or in Humanities, which are more dependent upon a greater command of English.

**Stage 4**  **Fully fluent in English** - Bilingual pupils whose use of English and engagement with the curriculum are considered successful and who do not require additional language support. (see for details Demie et al 2010)

These four stages are also widely used in LAs across London and in other urban areas ‘as a diagnostic tool to analyse needs for future teaching focus and…to provide baseline information for statistical purposes’ (Hall, 1996:31). In general it is a very popular assessment with local schools and has been used in the LA since 1988.

**Analytical Framework**

We employ a broad range of conceptual tools, including the work of Cummins (1992), Collier (1995), Hester (1993) and Strand and Demie (2005) to make sense of and analyse the data. As outlined above, the study uses a four point levels of fluency in English assessment scale to indicate proficiency in English, ranging from beginner to fully fluent in English to enable teachers to assess and monitor the progress of bilingual pupils learning English. The analysis proceeds in three steps, each associated with a particular research question.

First, the EAL pupil level assessment data was used to analyse various forms of English proficiency as a function of length of exposure to English and attainment. Using longitudinal matched data of all year 10 EAL pupils in the LA who were fully fluent in English, we tracked backward, year by year, to establish how long each pupil was at a particular stage of English fluency and how long it took overall to become fully fluent from the time they were first assessed when they started school in the LA. Second, KS2 and GCSE statistical patterns of performance of EAL pupils were analysed by levels of fluency in English to illustrate differences in attainment. Third, detailed statistical analysis of students who completed KS2
and GCSE were carried out to analyse the association between stage of fluency in English and attainment using multiple regression methods.

3. How long does it take to acquire English proficiency?

One of the most commonly asked questions about the education of bilingual students not fluent in English is how long they need special language services, such as English as an additional language support. For pupils to have full access to curriculum, they need to be fluent in English. Local authorities and schools have an obligation to provide appropriate services to EAL students, but policymakers have long debated setting time limits for students to receive such services. For example, the question of ensuring the time limits on services funded through the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant (EMAG) has been a recurring and passionately debated issue in schools to ensure all pupils access the national curriculum.

The purpose of this section is therefore to bring together some analyses and present new data that directly address the length of time it takes for English learners to attain proficiency in English.

*Table 2 - EAL pupils’ English language acquisition and the number of years at each stage of English fluency*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Languages spoken by Year 10 EAL students in 2009</th>
<th>Number of Years by Levels of Fluency in English</th>
<th>Total Years in Stage 1 - 3</th>
<th>Number of speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stage 1- Beginners and New to English</td>
<td>Stage 2 - Becoming familiar with English</td>
<td>Stage 3- Becoming confident as user of English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akan Twi- Fante</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albanian</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gujarati</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lingala</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somali</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tigrinya</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urdu</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoruba</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other *</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALL</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Other includes languages for which there is only one speaker in this pupil cohort: Ga, Guarani, Italian, Kurdish, Luganda, Polish and Shona.

Table 2 shows the number of years needed to complete each stage of level of fluency in English. The data was used to analyse various forms of English proficiency as a function of
length of exposure to English. Using our matched data of 124 year 10 EAL pupils who were fully fluent in English, we looked backward, year by year, how long it took to reach this stage from the time they were first assessed as a beginner when they started school in the LA. The clear conclusion emerging from the data is that even in the LA that is considered very successful in teaching English to EAL pupils, it takes 6-8 years to become fully fluent in English and to catch up with their peers who only speak English as a mother tongue. However there is a variation in how long it takes at each stage of fluency. Table 2 data shows that it takes about 1.5 years to complete beginner stage 1 level of fluency, about 3 years to complete stage 2 in becoming familiar with English and another 3 years to complete stage 3-becoming a confident user of English.

As noted by Collier (1989) the amount of time it takes EAL pupils to learn English varies from person to person and depends on such factors as the individual’s age, educational background, level of literacy in the native language, and opportunities to interact with native English speakers. However, it is generally accepted that, in North America, it takes from 5-7 years to go from not knowing any English at all to being able to accomplish most communication tasks including academic tasks (Collier 1989; Cummins 1992). Our findings are similar to that of North America and show that it makes more sense to set aside the eight years of primary and secondary schooling as a reasonable time frame for students to gain English proficiency. Overall this study suggest to policy makers and schools leaders they need a long-term view and a long-term set of expectations about learning and support of EAL pupils.

4. Stages of English acquisition and educational attainment

An important factor in pupil achievement is English fluency. For EAL pupils to have full access to the curriculum, they need to be fluent in English. Previous studies has shown Somali, Bangladeshi, and Portuguese pupils who achieved poor results were more likely to be relatively new to English compared with more fluent high performing African pupils such as Ibo, Yoruba, Ga, Twi-Fanti and Indian students (Demie 2001).

Table 3– Average Key Stage 2 results at end of primary and GCSE results at end of secondary education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages of English acquisition</th>
<th>KS2 Level 4+ Primary 2009</th>
<th>GCSE (5+A*- C) Secondary 2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EAL Stage 1 (Beginners-New to English)</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAL Stage 2 (Becoming familiar with English)</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAL Stage 3 (Becoming confident as user of English)</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAL Stage 4 (Fully Fluent in English)</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 gives the average performance of EAL pupils at the end of primary and secondary education. The results of the KS2 analysis show that percentage of pupils attaining level 4 and above in each subject at the end of primary education increased as the stage of proficiency in English increased. Overall, bilingual pupils who were fully fluent in English were much more likely to get level 4 or above in KS2 when compared with English-only speakers.

Analysis of GCSE results at the end of secondary education also shows that fluency in English continues to have a strong influence on the performance of pupils with English as additional language (EAL). The results suggests that the percentage of pupils attaining 5+A*-C at GCSE increased as stage of proficiency in English increased. The findings also confirm that achievement of bilingual pupils who were fully fluent in English far outstripped those of pupils for whom English was their only language.

Figure 1. Standardised GCSE total point score 2009 for GCSE, by stage of English fluency

We now turn to the detailed statistical analysis using a regression method. The sample for performance analysis is 1,563 students who completed GCSE in 2009. Of these, 1% of the EAL pupils are on stage 1 (Beginner) level of fluency in English, 3% on stage 2 (considerable support), 9% on stage 3 (some support), 31% on stage 4 (full fluent) and 56%
monolingual English only. Figure 1 show the simple association between stage of English fluency and performance, with the outcomes expressed as normal scores (mean of zero and standard deviation of 1). Data for beginners are unreliable as there are only small cases. However, around 4% of the population are stages 1 and 2 when combined, giving more robust estimates. Stages 1, Stage 2 and 3 have a strong negative association with attainment in GCSE. Fully fluent (stage 4) bilingual pupils have a positive boost to their attainment. Overall, the results show a strong association between stage of fluency and GCSE examination results.

5. Conclusions
The study revealed that:

- 48% of pupils in primary schools and 43% in secondary schools were classed as EAL pupils.

- It takes about 6 to 8 years on average for EAL pupils to acquire academic English proficiency. However, the speed of English language acquisition varies between stages of levels of English. On average pupils are classified at stage 1 (beginner) about a year and a half, before moving to becoming familiar with English (stage 2) where they typically remain for about three years. It takes about another three years at stage 3 (becoming confident in English) before they can then be classified as fully fluent.

- There is a strong relationship between stage of fluency in English and educational attainment. The results suggests that the percentage of pupils attaining level 4 or above at KS2 and 5+ A*-C at GCSE increased as stage of proficiency in English increased. Pupils in the early stages of fluency performed at low levels, while EAL pupils who were fully fluent in English far outstripped those of pupils for whom English was their only language. This finding offers much encouragement for policy makers and school improvement practitioners. They demonstrate that once the disadvantage of language is overcome, it is possible to attain high levels of achievement.

Policy and Research Implications
The results of this study have far reaching implications for policy and practice as the EAL population in England has increased yearly since 1997. The study argues that language barriers remain the key factor affecting the performance of EAL pupils in English schools. The EAL children perform poorly in school because the pupils who are not fluent in English
do not fully comprehend lesson taught in the English speaking classroom. This underlines the importance of additional targeted support for EAL pupils to improve their levels of fluency in English, which will then impact on overall levels of attainment. More need be done to help English learners to achieve education equality with native English speakers in classroom. This requires additional funding and EAL teachers to enable pupils to achieve a level of fluency in English necessary to access the national curriculum.

Finally we need to enter some caution about the present research. The data comes from one local authority with a long years history of collecting language fluency data. The socio-economic composition of the EAL population is not representative of the whole country as a whole, for example the proportion of EAL in our sample is about 47% compared to the England average of 14%. Such difference may mean that similar analyses carried out in a different LA’s schools would show somewhat different patterns. Nevertheless the broad findings of our research are in line with other studies (see Collier 1989; Cummins 1987, 1992; Hakuta et al 2000; Demie and Strand 2006; Strand and Demie 2005) and there are no reasons to think that future studies would differ in anything other than some details.

However, an important consideration that needs to be noted in future research is that although stages of EAL assessment used in this study have been useful as a diagnostic tool to analyse needs for future teaching focus and to provide baseline information for statistical purposes, these assessment scales are not universal. Our study is based on one LA which uses a four stage system and has not looked at the many local variations in Britain. We would argue one of the difficulties about relating progression in EAL to attainment in the national curriculum is that there is no nationally agreed framework for describing the progression which teachers can use to locate EAL learners. There is a need for further research to have a fuller picture on how long does it takes to acquire English proficiency at the national level and its impact on attainment.

Despite these limitations, the paper contains a wealth of empirical data relating to the EAL pupils’ levels of fluency in English and attainment that may be used as baseline for subsequent studies.

References


QCA. (2005). Key Stage 1 Assessment, Qualification and Curriculum Authority, London.
