

English as an Additional Language: Proficiency in English, educational achievement and rate of progress in English language learning

Introduction and background

This report is the third in a series exploring the relationship between English as an Additional Language (EAL), Proficiency in English (PIE) and educational achievement. The research was funded by the Bell Foundation and Unbound Philanthropy and carried out by Steve Strand and Ariel Lindorff at the University of Oxford Department of Education.

The first report in the series (Strand, Malmberg and Hall, 2015) used the National Pupil Database (NPD) to explore EAL numbers and achievement. Among other things, the report highlighted a doubling of the numbers of EAL pupils in English schools between 1997 and 2013 and the fact that EAL learners catch up with their peers by age 16. It concluded that the definition of EAL used in the NPD is limited, as it gives no indication of the pupil's proficiency in English – something which may vary widely. The report therefore recommended that the Department for Education (DfE) should introduce a measure of Proficiency in English (PIE) which schools can use as a framework.

A second report (Strand and Hessel, 2018) confirmed that EAL pupils varied widely in their Proficiency in English. It found that age was the most important factor involved in acquiring proficiency and therefore concluded that language support is particularly important in the early years of primary education. The research also found that up to 22 per cent of the variation in EAL pupils' achievement could be explained by PIE, compared to the 3-4 per cent which can be attributed to gender, FSM status and ethnicity. Using Welsh national pupil data, this latest report presents cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses of pupils' PIE and of the time which it takes to progress through 5 proficiency levels which are used in Wales, namely A (new to English), B (Early Acquisition), C (Developing Competence), D (Competent), and E (Fluent). For the cross-sectional analysis, researchers analysed data for 389,775 pupils in Reception through to Year 11. For the longitudinal analysis, 3 cohorts of pupils were tracked from reception to the end of Year 6.

Key findings

Proficiency in English and pupil characteristics/achievement In 2016

- The proportion of EAL pupils was consistent across years, at between around 6 and 8 per cent of a year group; the proportions were slightly higher at primary than secondary level. The proportion of pupils at level A decreased from 56 per cent in Reception to just 2 per cent in Year 11. Similarly, the proportion of those rated at level D (competent) or level E (fluent) increased from 7.5 per cent in Reception to 65 per cent in Year 11.
- There were few relationships between PIE and other demographic factors, although White Roma and White Other had very high proportions of pupils (over 50%) at the New to English or Early Acquisition phases.
- The relationship between PIE and achievement varied by key stage. EAL pupils rated at level C (developing competence) outperformed English/Welsh speaking pupils at age 7, including in English. They also outperformed English/Welsh speaking pupils at the end of Key Stage 2 in maths and science.
- EAL pupils rated Fluent or Competent consistently outperformed English/Welsh speakers at all key stages.

School and local authority variation in PIE

- There was substantial regional variation in the proportions of EAL pupils. In Anglesey, only 0.8 per cent of pupils were EAL and the proportion was under 5 per cent in 17 of the 22 Welsh local authorities. At the other upper end of the spectrum were Swansea (10%), Newport (17%) and Cardiff (23%).
- There was also variation between schools. Voluntary schools had considerably higher proportions of EAL pupils and pupils at levels A-C than foundation and community schools.
- English medium primary schools had a much higher proportion of EAL pupils (7.6%) and pupils at PIE levels A-C (6%) than Welsh medium schools (0.8% and 0.5% respectively). The same pattern was evident in secondary schools. These figures may indicate that parents of EAL pupils tend to choose English medium schools.



Time to progression in Proficiency in English

- There was substantial variation in the time which pupils took to make transitions between one fluency level and the next. The analysis reports the year at which a majority of pupils who started at one level in Reception made the transition to the next level. It also reports the average number of years taken to make the transition.
- For pupils who started Reception at level A (New to English), 59 per cent had transitioned to level B (Early Acquisition) by Year 2, taking on average 2.4 years. Fifty-one per cent had transitioned to level C (Developing Competence) by Year 4, taking an average of 3.7 years. However, just 31 per cent had further transitioned to level D (Competent) by the end of Year 6, taking on average 4.6 years for those who made this transition during primary school.
- The fact that even 6 years after starting school two-thirds of pupils have not transitioned to Competent has important implications for the national pupil funding formula in England which only provides targeted funding to EAL pupils for 3 years after they join school.

Time to progression and other factors

- There were no significant differences in transition times for pupils who joined a school in Reception or later. The only exception was for pupils who joined the school in year 5; these pupils were slightly more likely to skip levels (e.g. transitioning from New to English to Developing Competence in one year).
- Pupil demographics did not appear to be related to PIE progression. However, there were 2 exceptions to this. Pakistani pupils took longer to progress to Early Acquisition and to Developing Competence than most other ethnic groups. Pupils with SEN transitioned more quickly from level A (New to English) to level B (Early Acquisition) than other EAL pupils. This may be due to the additional support which is given to SEN pupils.
- There are clear links between time to progression and pupil achievement. Those pupils who progressed more quickly from level A to B and C tended to perform better in English at the end of Key Stage 2. This provides good validation of the progression measure, as it would be expected that pupils who acquire PIE more rapidly have higher attainment.
- There was considerable variation between schools and local authorities in terms of transition times.
- Pupils in larger schools and schools with higher levels of pupils at PIE levels A-C took longer to progress on average. Interestingly, average progression was also lower in schools which had higher proportions of EAL pupils. This may be due to other demographic differences, but it is a finding which should be explored further.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/research-report/english-as-an-additional-language-proficiency-in-english-educational-achievement-and-rate-of-progression-in-english-language-learning/>