

English as an Additional Language, Proficiency in English, and Rates of Progression

Introduction and background

This is the 4th report in a series investigating the relationships between English as an Additional Language (EAL), Proficiency in English (PIE) and educational achievement at school. This research has been funded by The Bell Foundation and Unbound Philanthropy. The Bell Foundation is a charity which aims to overcome exclusion through language education by working with partners on innovation, research, training, and practical interventions. Unbound Philanthropy is an independent private grant-making foundation which aims to ensure that migrants and refugees are treated with respect and engage with their new communities.

This report summarises the previous reports, before presenting the key findings of the current report.

Key findings from previous reports

Report from Strand, Malmberg and Hall (2015)

- This report drew on 2013 data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) in England to explore trends in the number and distribution of pupils with EAL, and the relationship between EAL and educational achievement at age 5, 7, 11 and 16 years of age. Key findings are outlined below.
- The EAL population in English schools more than doubled from 7.6 per cent in 1997 to 16.2 per cent in 2013, totalling just over one million pupils. Need for language support was concentrated in the one in 11 schools in which EAL pupils made up over half of the total roll.
- EAL pupils catch up with their First Language English (FLE) peers in terms of educational achievement by age 16. At age 5, only 44 per cent of EAL pupils had achieved a good level of development, compared with 54 per cent of other pupils. By age 16, this gap had narrowed significantly, with 58.3 per cent of EAL pupils achieving 5 A*- C GCSEs including English and maths, compared with 60.9 per cent of other pupils.
- There was huge variation in the educational results achieved by EAL pupils. Some strong risk factors for low achievement were certain first languages, absence of a prior attainment score from the beginning of the key stage, and pupil mobility between schools.
- The report concluded that the definition of EAL used in the NPD was limited because it gave no indication of a student's Proficiency in the English language. It found that proficiency in the English language was the major factor

influencing the educational achievement and the degree of support an EAL student will require. The report's recommendation that the DfE should introduce a measure of pupils' Proficiency in English (PIE) against which progress could be benchmarked was adopted in January 2017. The PIE places EAL pupils on a scale, ranging from A (New to English) through B (Early Acquisition), C (Developing Competence) to D (Competent) and E (Fluent).

Report from Strand and Hessel (2018)

- This research collected anonymised pupil data from the January 2017 school census data for more than 140,000 pupils attending 1,569 schools in 6 local authorities in England. It matched these data to the pupils' national assessment results at age 5, 7, 11 and 16.
- What mattered most for EAL pupils' degree of English proficiency was their age. By KS4, 85 per cent of EAL pupils are Competent or Fluent in English, compared with 29 per cent of EAL pupils at Reception. This means that language support is particularly important in the early years of primary education so that pupils can access the curriculum from the earliest stage. Language support is, however, also necessary for the 15 per cent of KS4 pupils who were judged less than 'Competent' in regard to their proficiency.



- Proficiency in English could explain 22 per cent of the variation in EAL pupils' achievement, compared with the typical 3-4 per cent that could be statistically explained using gender, free school meal status, and ethnicity. The report therefore concluded that low proficiency in the language of instruction at school is a significant barrier to achievement.
- The report recommended that the DfE should reinstate the collection of Proficiency in English (PIE) in the school census and include the data on PIE in the NPD (the DfE had announced just before the publication of the report that PIE would no longer be required).
- There is also substantial and highly statistically significant variation between schools, ranging from 23-65 per cent depending on the specific PIE transition. There was also considerable school variation (21%) in the proportion of pupils who ever progress to Competent or above by the end of Y6.
- It appears that variation in time to progression is strongly influenced by the individual making the assessment of PIE. This highlights a need for agreed criteria and definitions for proficiency and clarity in how PIE it should be assessed and moderated.

Report by Strand and Lindorff (2020)

- This research looked into the length of time it takes for pupils New to English to acquire Proficiency, and the amount of time for which they need special language support. It took 5,453 EAL pupils who entered Reception class at age 4-5 in Wales between 2009 and 2011 and tracked them over 6 years. By the end of Y6, 96 per cent of the pupils had transitioned to B (Early Acquisition), and 78 per cent transitioned to C (Developing Competence), but only around 31 per cent transitioned to D/E (Competent/Fluent).
- These results have significant implications for national pupil funding formulae. In England, the national formula currently provides targeted funding to EAL pupils for a 3-year period after they join school. This might be appropriate for gaining proficiency in social contexts, but it is less than half the minimum time suggested by the current data for gaining academic proficiency.

Key findings from the current report

Research questions

- This research used the same dataset as the above report (Strand and Lindorff 2020). It carried out further examination of the data to answer these 4 research questions. How much variation is there between schools and local authorities (LAs) in the time it takes pupils to progress between levels of PIE? To what extent do pupil background characteristics predict the time it takes EAL pupils to progress through levels of PIE? How is KS1 and KS2 attainment related to pupils' EAL status and levels of PIE? What happens to pupils' levels of PIE in the transition from primary to secondary school?

School and LA variation

- There was highly significant variation between LAs (13%) in the proportion of pupils at PIE levels A-C on joining Reception class who made the transition to Competent by the end of Y6. The results suggest there are significant differences between LAs in the approach to assessment of PIE. In Newport only 7 per cent of EAL pupils in Reception classes are rated as Fluent, compared with 37 per cent in Cardiff. These variations are too large to be random. It is likely they reflect policy differences in approaches to recording PIE.

Pupil background characteristics

- Boys, pupils entitled to FSM, and pupils identified as having SEN tended to take significantly longer to progress through levels of PIE, by anything between 3-6 months depending on the particular transition.
- After accounting for the clustering of pupils in schools using multilevel regression modelling, boys still had longer progression times than girls, by 2-5 months, and the associations between SEN and time to progression remained similar. However, the effect of entitlement to FSM was no longer statistically significant. These results reflect the fact that some ethnic minority groups and pupils entitled to FSM tend to be clustered within schools and LAs with somewhat longer progression times for all pupils.

Links between pupil PIE and achievement

- Individual pupils' PIE was significantly associated with KS1 and KS2 English and mathematics achievement. EAL pupils acquiring proficiency (levels A-C) on average had significantly lower achievement than pupils whose first language was English/Welsh, while EAL pupils who were Competent/Fluent (levels D-E) on average had significantly higher achievement than those with first language English/Welsh.
- The study found no evidence that being in a school with a high proportion of pupils acquiring Proficiency in English had any negative association with achievement for other pupils in the school.

PIE and the transition from primary to secondary school

- Descriptive analysis of pupils' levels of PIE in the transition from primary to secondary school showed that secondary schools were reassessing pupils on entry. Seventy per cent of secondary schools reclassified at least 5 per cent of the EAL pupils in their intakes. Most pupils remained at the same level of PIE, with a smaller proportion shifting to one level of PIE higher in Y7 than they had in Y6.
- Pupils assessed as Fluent in Y6 were much more likely than others not to be assessed as having EAL in Y7, with 24 per cent of Fluent EAL pupils reclassified as first language English/Welsh. Technically, EAL status is defined by exposure to a language other than (or in addition to) English in the early years of life, and so should not change over time. The results suggest that a conflation of "EAL" with "needing language support" is not uncommon. This highlights the need for a record of Proficiency in English in addition to an EAL flag, as the two are independent dimensions.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://mk0bellfoundatiw1chu.kinstacdn.com/app/uploads/2021/03/University-of-Oxford-Report-March-2021.pdf>