

Comment

Professor Steve Strand on **proficiency in English**

EAL and proficiency in English: What should we be assessing and how?

Professor Steve Strand responds to Jonathan Brentnall's review of the report "EAL, proficiency in English and rate of progression in English language learning" in issue 12 (summer 2020)



The Comment section of the Summer 2020 issue of the *EAL Journal* carried a four-page review of

our report on "EAL, proficiency in English and rate of progression in English language learning", as well as comments on some of our dissemination work with the Bell Foundation. It was good to see this research highlighted, though there were a number of misinterpretations that require clarification.

It is helpful to recap the key findings from the four studies in the programme of work we have completed at Oxford between 2015-2020. We know that in England almost one-in-five (19.6%) pupils aged 5-16 are recorded as having English as an Additional Language (EAL). However, our first report (Strand et al., 2015) analysed the complete National Pupil Database (NPD) in England and established that EAL status, in itself, was only weakly related to educational achievement. There were factors in pupils' backgrounds that increased the risk of low educational achievement (we make no apology for use of the term risk). Some factors were found to be an equal risk for both EAL and monolingual pupils (e.g. being a boy, being entitled to a free school meal, being summer born, having an identified special educational need), but some were far stronger for EAL pupils e.g. recent arrival in a school in England from

abroad. However even this is only a proxy, since this could be a newly arrived child who speaks, reads or writes little or no English, but it could also be a young person who has been educated in an English-medium or bilingual school abroad and is able to read and write fluently in two or more languages, or indeed a pupil moving into England from other countries of the UK, or a pupil moving from an independent school to the state sector.

Proficiency in English is the key

Many pupils in England who are recorded as EAL are second or third generation ethnic minority students, exposed to a language other than English as part of their cultural heritage, but using English as their everyday language and fully fluent in it. We have known for some time that it is this factor - Proficiency in English - that is the key to understanding the educational achievement of pupils with EAL (Strand & Demie, 2005). Yet in England this key data item was not collected.

We presented our research in briefings to the Department for Education (DFE), arguing for the need for national collection of a measure of EAL pupils' fluency or proficiency in English. We are proud that the study directly influenced the Department's consultation and subsequent announcement, on 4 May 2016, that all schools in England would be required to assess EAL pupils' proficiency in

English. The chosen measure was the five-point scale used in Wales since 2009, with the first data collection in England undertaken in the Autumn 2016 School Census. However, the DFE did not place the data collected into the NPD and therefore no researchers were able to undertake an analysis of the results, nor did they publish any analysis of their own.

Frustrated with this situation, with the help of six partner Local Authorities (LAs) we were able to collate data on a nationally representative sample of over 140,000 pupils from 1,569 schools, and our second report (Strand & Hessel, 2018) was able to show conclusively that in national assessments at ages 5, 7, 11 and 16, proficiency in English was decisive in making sense of the variation in educational achievement of EAL pupils. Figure 1 shows some headline indicators of achievement at the end of each key stage.

For example, at age 7 just under half (48%) of EAL pupils were at one of the first three stages of acquiring proficiency, and their achievement was below the national average. However, over half (52%) of EAL pupils were recorded as either competent or fluent, and a higher proportion of these pupils were reading at the expected level or above than was the case for monolingual English pupils. By age 11, over three-quarters (77%) of EAL pupils were recorded as either competent or

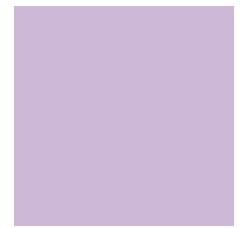
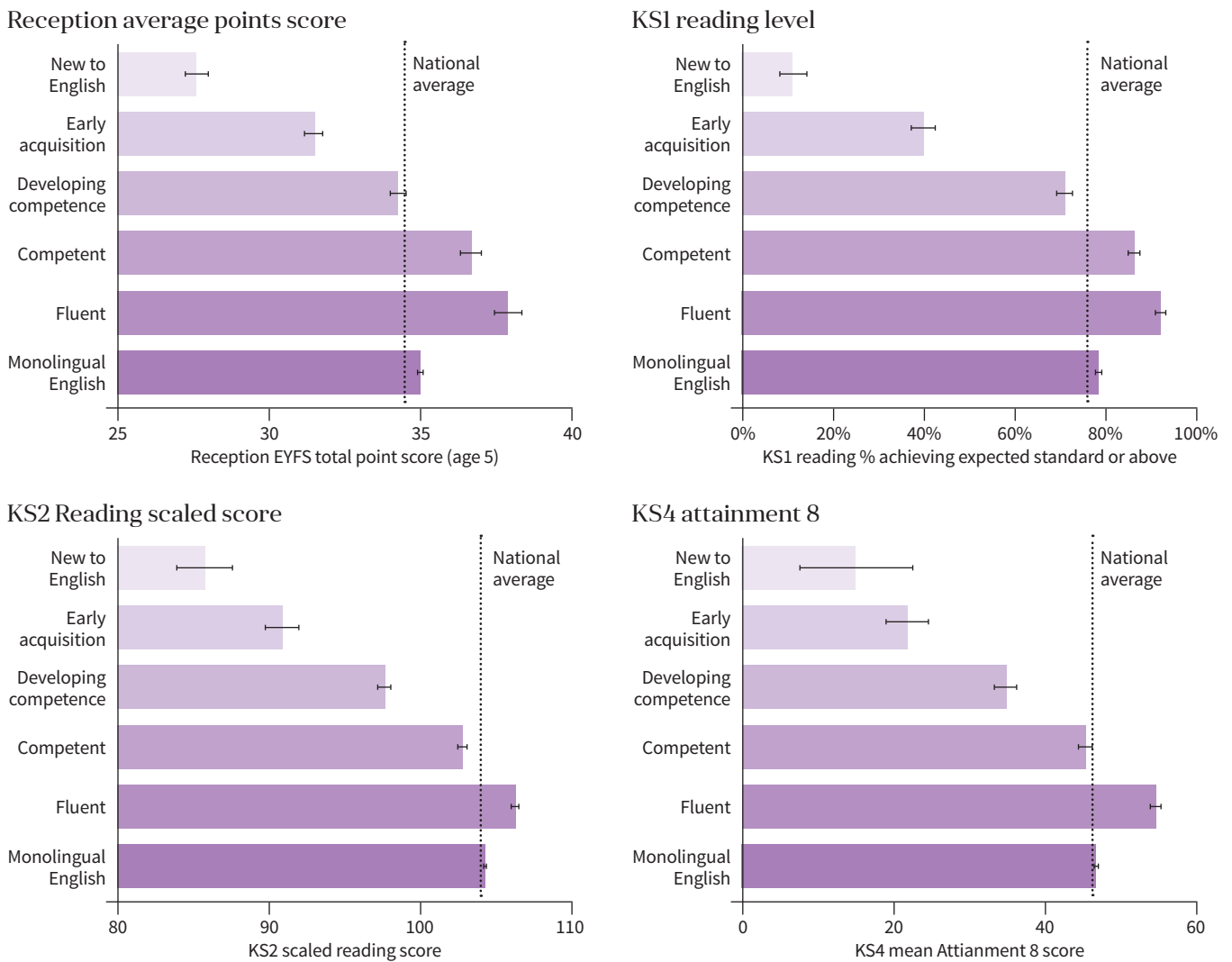


Figure 1: EAL students' achievement at age 5, 7, 11 and 16 by proficiency in English.



Source: Strand & Hessel, 2018, p22-32.

fluent, and again their mean reading scores were around or above the mean for monolingual English speakers; it was the 23% of EAL pupils who were acquiring proficiency in English, particularly those new to English or at the early stages of acquisition, who scored well below the national average.

We can also express this relationship by describing how well different factors can predict achievement. We found, at all key stages, that about 3%-4% of the variation in achievement could be explained by a combination of ethnicity, gender and socio-economic

disadvantage, but that including proficiency in English raised this to around 22%, or sevenfold. The point here is not about predicting what a Y7 EAL pupil may achieve by Y11 (Brentnall, 2020: 51) but about the power of proficiency in English in accounting for pupils' concurrent achievement.

You may think these findings are obvious, but remember in England (as opposed to Scotland or Wales), this data is no longer collected since the DFE dropped the requirement after the January 2018 school census. We have to keep repeating the message: *whether or not a pupil was exposed*

to a language other than English during their early development (the definition of EAL) is a poor indicator of pupils' educational achievement; an assessment of a pupil's proficiency in English (where it is the language of school instruction) is the essential requirement for identifying needs and targeting support.

How long does it take to acquire proficiency

What we know less about, and the main objective of our third study (Strand & Lindorff, 2020), was how long it takes for pupils' who are new to English to acquire proficiency, and

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how long such pupils need additional language support? In looking at previous research, Collier (1987) and Cummins (1981) were central because these two studies are the most frequently cited of any research in relation to the question. Yet I wonder how many practitioners/researchers have read the original research papers? If you do then, like me, I suspect you may be surprised. Do read our review (Strand & Hessel, 2020: 40-42), but be reassured that the point of the review is not “to undermine some of the most eminent and well-respected researchers in the field of English language development” (Brentnall, 2020: 50), but to make the point that we need a prospective, longitudinal, contemporary analysis of UK data to get a full answer to the question.

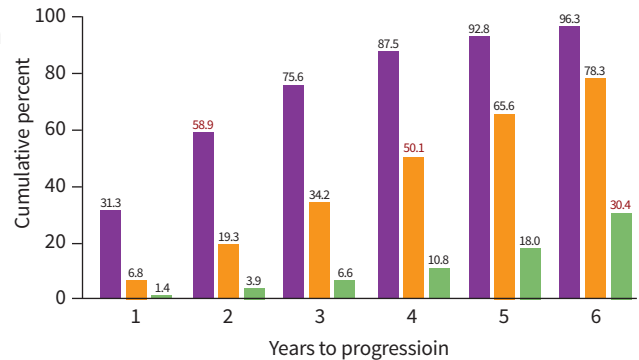
We are very grateful to the Welsh Government for giving us access to their national pupil data to allow just such an analysis. At the heart of our study is an analysis of 5,453 EAL pupils who entered Reception class in mainstream schools at age 4/5 in Wales between 2009 and 2011. The sample is comparable to England as speakers of Welsh are not recorded as having EAL, and our results were robust to excluding the small number of EAL pupils in Welsh Medium schools. We tracked these pupils over their subsequent six years in primary school collecting the five stage Proficiency in English rating of the pupils each January, and our key question was: How long does it take for a majority (at least 50%) of pupils to make the transition from each level to the next?

■ For pupils who entered Reception at level A (New to English) over half (59%) had transitioned to level B (Early Acquisition) by Y2, and over half (51%) had transitioned to level C (Developing Competence) by Y4. However only one-third (30%) had transitioned to level D/E (Competent/Fluent) by the end of Y6. These results are shown in Figure 2.

■ Overall therefore, by January of Y6, nearly all (96%) transitioned to B

Figure 2:
time to transition
from New
to English in
Reception to
higher levels
and above.

■ Time A->B
■ Time A->C
■ Time A->D



(Early Acquisition), and over three-quarters (78%) transitioned to C (Developing Competence) but only around one-third (30%) transitioned to D/E (Competent or above). This indicates that the majority of pupils starting Reception class New to English will take **more than 6 years** to be rated as Competent/Fluent.

■ Rates of progression between levels for a further 1,839 pupils recorded as New to English who joined their school in Y1 to Y5, were substantially the same as those reported above for pupils starting in Reception. This is not a ‘generalisation’ but an empirical finding. We should not therefore have lower expectations for the *rate of progress* in acquiring English of late arrivals.

The results therefore support the general conclusion that up to six years is needed to gain fluency for academic purposes. This has significant implications for national funding formulae. For example, in England the national formula currently provides funding to EAL pupils for a three-year period after they join school, only half the time our data suggests pupils who were new to English required to gain academic proficiency. However, it is also true that this funding is currently allocated to all pupils identified as EAL, even though in England just over one-quarter (26%) of EAL pupils in Reception class are already rated as competent/fluently, rising to nearly one-half (46%) of EAL pupils by Year 2 (DFE, 2020: 8). This does raise the question of whether the funding is

used efficiently, as the same funding could be offered over a longer time period if deployed in a more targeted way.

Conflating EAL with needing language support

Part of the issue here relates to a continuing conflation of “EAL” with “needing language support”. Our final report in the series (Strand & Lindorff, to be published in March 2021) suggests there is significant variation between schools and LAs in how proficiency in English (PIE) is assessed. For example, the data suggests the distinction between competent and fluent is not consistently applied, since the mean achievement at ages 7 and 11 of pupils rated as competent is the same, or sometimes even higher, than the mean for pupils recorded as fluent (Strand & Lindorff, 2020:26-31). This may partly reflect significant differences between LAs in their approach to the assessment of proficiency. For example, Cardiff and Newport contain 60% of all the EAL pupils in Wales, and are geographically adjacent sharing a border, yet they record very different levels of proficiency. In Cardiff, 37% of EAL pupils in Reception classes are rated as fluent, whereas in Newport the figure is only 7%. Given the average across all LAs in Wales was 29%, this suggests the figure in Newport is exceptionally low. The variation is too large to be random, and it is likely to reflect policy differences in approaches to recording proficiency in different LAs

The framework for assessment

employed can lead to very different assessment outcomes. The formal guidance on assessment in Wales (which was also adopted in England 2017-2018), suggests an EAL pupil is recorded as fluent when they “can operate across the curriculum to a level of competence equivalent to that of a pupil who uses English as his/her first language” (Education Directorate, 2016). However, the Northern Association of Support Services for Equality and Achievement (NASSEA) has a different recording system. In their guidance on the equivalence of their nine-step recording system to the A-E proficiency levels (NASSEA, 2016), they state that EAL pupils cannot be recorded any higher than level C (Developing Competence) in Reception, and cannot be recorded as fluent until at least KS3/KS4, *i.e. their system precludes an EAL pupil being recorded as fluent until age 11 at the absolute earliest*. With such different starting points, it is no surprise that different outcomes emerge.

The issue is magnified when we look at the amount of variability there is between individual schools in their judgments of proficiency in English. We find highly significant differences between schools, with the school attended accounting for around 15%-18% of the variation in assessed proficiency. This was considerably greater than the variation between schools in other assessments. For example, only 6%-8% of the variation

in KS1 and KS2 teacher assessment levels was between schools. It appears that the judgment of proficiency in English, and time to progression to fluency, is relatively strongly influenced by the professional making the assessment of proficiency.

The implication for policy is that agreed criteria and definitions for proficiency, clarity in how proficiency should be assessed, high quality training in the assessment process, and the existence of robust moderation procedures, are key to securing a consistent and reliable teacher assessment of pupils' proficiency in English. Where such criteria and procedures are robust, as in end of KS1 and KS2 teacher assessment of achievement, variation between LAs and schools is substantially lower. In moving towards this situation, we believe the Bell Foundation's tool offers a particularly strong framework for assessment, with the option to anchor judgments against 200 detailed statements of what pupils know and can do in different domains of language and at different ages.

Conclusion

The conclusion we draw from our analysis is simple. Whether or not a pupil was exposed to a language other than English during their early development (the definition of EAL), is a poor indicator of pupils' educational achievement at school; an assessment of a pupil's proficiency

in English (where it is the language of school instruction) is the essential requirement for identifying needs and for targeting support. Many pupils in the UK are exposed to a language other than English as part of their cultural heritage, but use English as their everyday language and are fully fluent in it.

The average educational achievement of these fluent EAL pupils at age 5, 7, 11 and 16 is higher than monolingual English speakers, indicating how bilingualism can be a huge asset in pupils' learning. Any assumption that EAL pupils cannot be fluent in English until age 11 locks-in low expectations for EAL pupils. The significant challenge lies in meeting the needs of pupils who arrive at their schools new to English or at the early stages of acquisition. We have found that it takes at least six years for the majority of those new to English to acquire academic fluency. If we want to target funding to these pupils for an extended period, then we need to be able to reliably identify them. The current teacher assessed proficiency levels may not be the best tool, given the relatively high variability between schools that we find in the data. In this context, we should not be afraid to look at how other countries assess need and organize their language support (Hutchinson, 2018). However, the question of how schools should be funded is a much wider debate, and one for another article. ■

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