

Deanery Digests are short, plain language summaries of the Department of Education's research outputs. This Deanery Digest is based on the following published research article: Booton, S. A., Menon, P., Kyriacou, M., & Murphy, V. (2024) *Exploring the writing attainment gap: profiling writing challenges and predictors for children with English as an Additional Language*. Reading & Writing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-024-10540-9>

Writing Challenges and Strengths for Children with English as an Additional Language

What is this research about and why is it important?

In writing achievement in English, children with English as an additional language (EAL) are at a disadvantage compared to their monolingual English-speaking (EL1) peers. But it is unclear whether this difference is due to a specific challenge with writing, or simply explained by other language skills (for example, oral language or reading skills) for this group. This study examines this issue using a brief longitudinal design (meaning children were assessed at 2 points across time).

What did we do?

We worked with 100 children aged 9 to 10 years (Year 5) from 5 state primary schools in the South of England. Roughly half of the sample (48 children) had EAL according to school records, whilst the other half were monolingual English speakers, and all had been educated within the English primary school system since Year 1 at the latest. Children with EAL spoke 20 different languages in total, with Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi and Arabic being the most common. All children completed a narrative fiction writing task and single-word spelling task twice over a school year, once in autumn term and once ~7 months later in summer term. The children also completed a non-fiction (expository letter) writing task, and measures of nonverbal intelligence, receptive vocabulary, expressive and receptive oral language (such as recalling sentences and following instructions), single word reading, and reading comprehension.

What did we find?

- Children with EAL demonstrated 6% lower general writing performance than monolingual children.
- This difference disappeared after taking into account their other language and reading skills (receptive and expressive language, receptive vocabulary, single word reading and reading comprehension).
- Children with EAL showed comparable single-word spelling to monolingual children and better performance after considering their other language and reading skills: thus, they showed relative strength in single-word spelling.
- Progress within a school year in writing did not differ between EAL and monolingual students, so the gap did not change between these students.

- Other language skills which predicted writing were similar for children with EAL and monolingual children: single word reading skill was strongly related to both spelling and writing, and expressive oral language was also strongly related to writing.
- Children from both language groups performed better in the narrative than the letter-writing task and overall found handwriting, punctuation and spelling easiest; followed by sentence structure and grammar, organisation/presentation and composition/creative ideas; with integrating varied and effective vocabulary hardest.

What does it all mean anyway?

The results suggest that students with EAL do not struggle with writing *specifically*, but that instead their other English language and reading skills can explain their poorer writing relative to English monolingual students. Therefore, building all language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) together is likely to be most supportive of EAL children's English learning and attainment, including their writing. We also found that EAL students have a relative strength in single-word spelling, but interestingly they did not transfer this strength to spelling within a writing task: thus, these students may need practice juggling the different skills of writing during a task and managing the working memory load this entails.

In our study, students struggled more with writing a non-fiction text and effective use of vocabulary in their writing regardless of their language background, implying that these could be targets for improving writing skill. Furthermore, for all students, single word reading skill was related to spelling and writing, and expressive oral language (for example, formulating, manipulating, and recalling accurate sentences) was also related to writing. Whilst this work was only correlational (and so we cannot be sure if developing one skill causes another to grow), it raises the possibility that supporting word reading and constructing sentences within oral language (e.g., oral or multimedia storytelling) may lead to benefits for writing.

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