

ELT Research Papers 18.03

The experiences of secondary school students with English as an additional language: perceptions, priorities and pedagogy

Graham Hall



ELT Research Papers 18.03

The experiences of secondary school students with English as an additional language: perceptions, priorities and pedagogy

Graham Hall

ISBN 978-0-86355-926-6

© **British Council 2018** Design/J154

10 Spring Gardens
London SW1A 2BN, UK

www.britishcouncil.org

About the author

Graham Hall is Associate Professor in Applied Linguistics/TESOL at Northumbria University, UK, where he teaches on the university's MA Applied Linguistics for TESOL and MA TESOL programmes. He is the author of *Exploring English Language Teaching: language in action* (Routledge, 2011; second edition, 2017), which was the winner of the 2012 British Association for Applied Linguistics book prize. He also edited the *Routledge Handbook of English Language Teaching* (2016), and was editor of *ELT Journal* from 2013 to 2017. His research interests range from classroom discourse and language teaching methodology to the relationship between migration and ELT, including English as an additional language (EAL).

g.hall@northumbria.ac.uk

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the help and support of staff and students at the two participating case-study institutions, 'Westway' and 'Eastpark' schools. Many thanks are due to the school leadership teams for their assistance throughout, and, of course, to the participating EAL students and teachers who gave up time to share their experiences and perspectives with me. I am very grateful to them. Thanks also to my colleagues Dr Rola Naeb and Amina Al-Dhaif for their assistance and advice throughout.

Contents

Abstract.....	3
A note on terminology.....	5
1 Introduction.....	7
2 Experiencing school as a student with EAL: contexts and issues.....	9
2.1 Student backgrounds and prior learning experiences.....	9
2.2 Managing in school: transitions, language and languages.....	10
2.3 School practices and possibilities.....	11
2.4 Justification for the study.....	11
3 Research methodology.....	13
3.1 Aims and research questions.....	13
3.2 Research design.....	13
3.2.1 The school contexts.....	13
3.2.2 Participants.....	14
3.2.3 Collecting the data.....	15
3.2.4 Analysing and reflecting on the data.....	16
3.2.5 Research ethics.....	16
4 Findings: perspectives on the school experiences of secondary-level EAL students.....	17
4.2 Arriving at a new school.....	18
4.3 ‘Fitting in’: attitudes and challenges.....	19
4.4 In the classroom.....	20
4.4.1 Language challenges.....	20
4.4.2 Managing in the classroom: place and peers.....	22
4.4.3 Own-language use in the classroom.....	23
4.5 Language and students’ identities.....	24
4.6 Student and teacher strategies, and institutional activities.....	25
4.6.1 Student strategies.....	25
4.6.2 Teacher strategies.....	26
4.6.3 Further institutional activities.....	26
5 Summary.....	27
5.1 Recognising diversity: EAL students’ backgrounds and experiences.....	27
5.2 Settling in and fitting in at school: issues and dilemmas.....	27
5.3 In the classroom: challenges and strategies.....	27
5.4 Changing priorities? Language, proficiency and identity.....	28
References.....	29

Abstract

In an increasingly globalised and multilingual world, contemporary trends in migration have created challenges for the educational systems in destination countries, as children from a variety of linguistic and educational backgrounds join mainstream schools. In the UK, for example, over 1.17 million (one in six) current school students study through the medium of English as an additional language (EAL), a figure that has increased significantly in recent years.

Although the needs of EAL students are an increasing focus of research and practice, attention in the UK has until now been more directed towards primary- rather than secondary-level pupils and schools. This paper therefore reports on the project *The experiences of secondary school students with English as an additional language: perceptions, priorities and pedagogy*, contributing to our knowledge of the less explored teenage age group. The project uncovered the experiences of students living and studying in a reasonably typical urban setting in Britain – Tyneside, that is, the city of Newcastle and its neighbouring urban environment in the North East of England. Tyneside is becoming an increasingly important centre for immigration and for the teaching of children with EAL, partly as a consequence of the UK government's policy of dispersing asylum seekers around the country, and the challenges surrounding EAL, if not 'new', are often new in scale, while local experiences, perspectives and expertise remain under-researched and shared.

Taking a case-study approach, therefore, this project brought together the perspectives of secondary-level EAL students and their teachers in two Tyneside schools, by collecting qualitative focus group and interview data alongside classroom observation field notes. It sought to answer the key research question '*How do secondary-level school students with English as an additional language experience school in the UK?*', while additionally exploring whether the perspectives and school experiences of EAL students from differing geographical backgrounds, with differing migration and educational histories, and with differing skills and abilities varied. Consequently, the study aimed to consider the implications of these student experiences for pedagogic practice, practitioners

and other stakeholders in the field, not only for those working in this project's particular setting, but for those working with secondary-level EAL students elsewhere in the UK and also internationally, in English medium of instruction (EMI) environments.

The findings offer clear evidence that, while students who speak EAL may to some extent face 'a commonality of issues', they are individuals who experience school in differing ways. Coming from a diverse range of backgrounds, EAL students bring with them to school a range of prior experiences and abilities which overlap, inter-relate and combine in complex ways that underpin an individual pupil's school life. Teacher (and institutional) awareness of individuals' backgrounds, prior experiences, skills and repertoires is central to developing a fuller understanding of, and offering support for, any challenges particular students might face both in the classroom and in school more generally.

The study demonstrates that the relationship between language, access to the curriculum and identity is a central issue for EAL students. However, it also suggests that for many, perceived needs and priorities change over time. Students with less English proficiency, who in this study were often immediate new arrivals in school, are unsurprisingly very concerned with developing their immediate language and communication skills, in order to access the curriculum, participate more fully in class, and develop social networks in the classroom and beyond. Although their own language and home culture is a central part of their lives and identities, their key focus is the development of the English skills necessary to succeed at school. However, for students who are more proficient in English, perhaps those who have been in the UK for a longer period and who are more familiar with UK school culture(s), the need to maintain their own (i.e. home) identity is prioritised in contexts where differences between their home and the school environment are not widely recognised. From this perspective, therefore, it is possible to conceptualise EAL speakers not only as students who need supporting and resourcing, but also as students who are themselves a multilingual and multicultural resource from whom others can learn and through which schools might celebrate diversity.

A note on terminology

Across the field, a variety of terms is used to refer to students who use English as an additional language in schools, including ‘bilingual students’, ‘English language learners’, ‘English as a Second Language’ speakers, and speakers with ‘limited English proficiency’, each carrying a particular worldview and originating in a particular context (Creese and Leung, 2010: xviii). This study, located in the UK, follows the British tendency to refer to ‘EAL’ and ‘EAL speakers’, terminology which recognises that English may be some students’ third or fourth language.¹ Consequently, students who speak EAL ‘use two or more languages in their everyday lives’, but ‘opportunities to fully develop English language literacy have not yet been fully realized’ (Anderson et al., 2016: 16, citing Meltzer and Hamann, 2005: 5).

We should recognise, however, that students without ‘full English language literacy’ can still appear fluent in some or most aspects of their English language use (Bell Foundation, 2016: 7). Thus while the term ‘EAL’ provides a shared understanding, care is needed not to stereotype or overly simplify the individual EAL speaker’s linguistic repertoires, skills, experiences, educational background or migration

history, nor obscure differences between students (Bracken et al., 2017; Sharples, 2016). Thus, following Anderson et al. (2016: 2), reference to EAL students in this project suggests ‘a commonality of issues that are linked to such a diverse group of pupils’.

Additionally, the term ‘own language’ is in this research preferred to ‘first language’ (L1), ‘home language’, ‘mother tongue’ or ‘native language’, all of which are, in various ways, unsatisfactory. The term ‘native language’, for example, conflates several criteria such as the order in which languages are learned, the language with which a speaker identifies, or the language they speak best (see Rampton, 1990 for further discussion; also Hall and Cook, 2013). And while the term ‘home language’ is commonly found within the literature surrounding EAL, students might use in school a variety of languages, which may or may not be the language they use at home; for example, during this study, students whose parents’ country of origin was Côte d’Ivoire occasionally used French with teachers, the official language and lingua franca of that country, but not the language they spoke at home.

1 National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum (NALDIC) website: www.naldic.org.uk

1

Introduction

Approximately one in 30 (3.4 per cent) of the world's population are migrants (United Nations, 2017). Reasons for their migration to a new country vary, and include a shortage of labour in certain sectors, the desire to join family members living elsewhere, or, as refugees, to escape war, civil unrest and/or poverty. While most refugees remain close to their home country – according to UNHCR (2017), Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran and Uganda are the top four hosts for refugees – migration to more prosperous and peaceful countries continues to grow (Simpson, 2016). Consequently, the proportion of 'students with an immigrant background' now constitutes over 12 per cent of the world's school population (OECD, 2015: 1).

These trends in migration have created challenges for the educational systems of all destination countries, as children with a variety of educational and linguistic backgrounds join mainstream schools. In the UK, over 1.17 million (one in six) children are studying through the medium of EAL, a figure that has risen by 20 per cent since 2006 (Department for Education, 2016). Consequently, EAL students studying in the same institution may vary not only in terms of their geographical origin and language background, but also in terms of their educational history and experience, levels of literacy in their own or main language(s), and immigration status and reasons for migration.

This project therefore aimed to explore how teenage EAL students experience their schooling through English in UK schools. Taking a case-study approach, it examined the challenges and issues they face, and the solutions they and their teachers and institutions find to support their learning and the development of their identity/ies, both in English and in their own languages. Acknowledging diversity within migrant populations, the study aimed to investigate the experiences of, and provision for, EAL students with

broadly differing migration histories, including differences in their reasons for migration, time spent in the UK, educational histories and linguistic repertoires, in effect exploring how students with EAL who have been in the UK for longer – or who are part of more established minority communities – and those who have more recently arrived experience their schooling.

Although the needs of children who speak EAL are an increasing focus of research and practice, attention has until now been more directed towards primary- rather than secondary-level students and schools (Andrews, 2009; Bracken et al., 2017); this study contributes to our knowledge of the less explored teenage age group. Furthermore, the project uncovers the experiences of students living and studying in a reasonably typical urban setting in the UK – Newcastle in the North East of England. Historically, while London has been a centre of EAL research and practice in the UK, cities such as Newcastle are becoming increasingly important centres for immigration and for the teaching of children with EAL, partly as a consequence of the UK government's policy of dispersing asylum seekers around the country. Consequently, in Newcastle and similar contexts, the challenges surrounding EAL, if not 'new', are often new in scale, while local experiences, perspectives and expertise remain under-researched and less frequently shared.

Central to the project, therefore, are the implications of the perspectives and experiences of secondary-level students with EAL for teachers not only working in the specific context of the study, a British urban environment, but for those working with EAL students in other English-dominant environments and in EMI contexts, teaching teenagers from a variety of EAL backgrounds and with a diverse range of life and learning experiences.

2

Experiencing school as a student with EAL: contexts and issues

Current UK policy entitles all students in state-funded education to experience the same processes and curriculum ‘irrespective of ethnicity, language background, culture, gender, ability, social background, sexuality, or religion’ (Department for Education and Employment, and Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1999: 12). Consequently, students with EAL are taught in ‘mainstream’ classrooms alongside their non-EAL peers, in an effort to ensure equality of provision. Yet, as Bracken et al. (2017: 39) note, ‘by not focusing on learning outcomes and by avoiding engagement with specific pedagogies required for the acquisition of English’, this ‘mainstreaming’ approach ‘has led to challenges for bilingual students and their teachers alike’. From a policy perspective, language is not seen as a barrier to achievement. EAL is thus not a recognised ‘subject’ within the curriculum (Leung, 2001), and is consequently characterised by Leung (*ibid.*: 33) as having ‘a very marginal and Cinderella-like status within the school system’. In effect, while national policy guides schools to promote a culture of inclusion and respect within the curriculum, schools (and the local authorities which support them) have to interpret and implement national guidelines regarding EAL for themselves. It is within this context that students with EAL experience school.

2.1 Student backgrounds and prior learning experiences

The extent to which global migration, and migration to the UK, has increased in recent years has already been documented (see Section 1), with many schools consequently teaching EAL students with a diverse range of backgrounds, experiences, skills and attributes, and expectations. While children from migrant backgrounds are likely to experience school differently to non-migrant students (Gillborn, 1995), ‘often in ways which disadvantage them’ (page 2), Anderson et al. (2016) suggest that recognition of ‘difference’ and the complexities of EAL speakers’ experiences and backgrounds should be a vital part of school life.

Anderson et al. (2016), for example, highlight the differences between students in terms of their *migration experiences*: for instance, some coming to the UK as permanent migrants with extended family networks (although some permanent migrants do not have these networks); some coming to the UK for long periods but being unclear as to whether they are ‘permanent’ migrants or not (for example, children whose families are from countries which have recently joined the EU); and some who have arrived as a result of forced migration or displacement, as refugees, asylum seekers, and whose status within the UK may as yet be unresolved. Furthermore, the age at which children arrived in the UK (perhaps as young children some time ago, perhaps as teenagers more recently) also shapes their experiences and memories of migration, and their language development and experiences.

Clearly, therefore, EAL students’ experiences of migration and of subsequently living in the UK also influence the *languages* they speak. While EAL speakers, by their very nature, speak at least one other language at home (usually the language of their parents’ country of origin), some may speak only one other language and English, others may be proficient in more than one language other than English, some may have learned the language of a previous host country before arriving in the UK, and so forth. Furthermore, growing up in a multilingual home or community tends to develop children’s ability and willingness to switch between languages, a further attribute that they bring into the school environment (Anderson et al., 2016), although one which is often not readily recognised in UK schools.

EAL students’ *proficiency in English* also varies, which affects not only their ability to access the curriculum and fulfil their academic potential, but can also limit the social skills they need to operate in the school setting. Furthermore, students can differ in their *own-language literacy*, with implications for their development of English language literacy, their use of their own language in school, their own

identity (i.e., the ‘danger’ of their own language ‘slipping away’ within English-dominant contexts – see Section 4.5) and for the possibility of obtaining a qualification in their own language (see Section 4.6.3). Meanwhile, differing *parental proficiency in and attitudes towards English* may affect EAL students’ experiences of using English outside school and their attitudes to English and their own language(s).

Furthermore, EAL students also differ with regard to the complex issues of *motivation, attitudes to institutional learning* (which are, in turn, often influenced in turn by students’ own learning histories), *self-esteem, anxiety, inclusion, identity and cultural heritage* (Baker, 2006). Such factors may be particularly significant for teenage students who, as adolescents, are typically engaged in complex processes of social development and identity growth (Ushioda, 2013; Lamb and Budiyo, 2013).

2.2 Managing in school: transitions, language and languages

For EAL students, both those who are international new arrivals or relatively recent migrants, and those who have been in the UK (or any host country) for longer periods, school is a socially, culturally and linguistically complex setting which can affect students’ well-being and sense of identity (Ward et al., 2001). EAL speakers face the challenge of balancing their home background and experiences with their school lives – both the challenges of academic study and the conventions which surround it, and their relationships with their non-EAL school peers who may perceive linguistic and cultural difference negatively. Overlapping with issues concerning student identities, Anderson et al. (2016) therefore highlight these *transitions* – between countries and education systems, or between home and school – and the adjustment EAL students might make when trying to fit in at school and with their student peers. Many schools, of course, recognise these challenges and establish systems to try to bridge some of these issues (see sections 2.3 and 4.2).

While students with EAL will need to draw on and, depending on their English proficiency, develop their *everyday communication skills* to navigate elements of school life, most notably relationships with peers who do not share their own language and with teachers and school administrators outside the

classroom, they also experience *English as the medium of instruction*. Individual school subjects deploy particular language and require specific literacies – for example, the interpretation and discussion of texts in an English Literature class requires a significantly different set of linguistic knowledge and skills to those required in a Science or Maths classroom. However, while EAL students need to understand, learn and be able to use the often dense and abstract academic language and the registers and genres of individual subjects, what and how language should be used within particular school subjects is rarely made explicit (Schleppegrell, 2004); indeed, Christie (1985) describes language at school as a ‘hidden curriculum’.

Cummins (1979) distinguishes between these different ‘dimensions’ of language for immigrant children, suggesting that they can develop the basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) needed for everyday communication relatively rapidly, that is, within six months to two years of arriving in a new context, as long as there is contextual support (e.g. face-to-face communication, gestures and other non-verbal support). However, the cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) needed for academic study can take five to 11 years to develop due to, for example, the more abstract nature of the language, the higher literacy demands of texts and textbooks, and the cultural knowledge which is often needed to understand academic concepts and content. Conteh and Meier (2014) suggest that moving along the continuum between BICS and CALP during the various stages of the school day is possible for EAL students, but needs to be learned and, therefore, supported by schools and within pedagogy. Meanwhile, difficulties can arise if any disparities between EAL students’ everyday communication skills (BICS) and their academic language proficiency (CALP) are not recognised, and if conversational fluency is assumed to mean that students can cope equally well with the linguistic demands of academic study.

Of course, EAL students might also *use their own language(s) in school*, either in everyday communication with peers who share their language (or, as seen in Section 4, to ‘show’ or ‘teach’ their own language to others), or in support of their studies. There is variation in the extent to which institutions and teachers acknowledge, accept and encourage

own-language use in and out of class, while EAL students' attitudes can also be complex. Own-language use can provide a useful scaffold for learning and is also a vehicle for the expression of identity, but might also be seen as interfering with opportunities to develop proficiency in English and hindering students' ability to 'fit in' by marking them as 'different' (Anderson et al., 2016). Thus while a wide range of possible approaches and activities which utilise EAL students' own languages have been documented, including the use of dual-language books, the use of bilingual dictionaries and key word lists, task preparation time in the students' own languages alongside peer-to-peer scaffolding and support, the recognition of languages through posters and displays, and the deployment of bilingual classroom assistants (see, for example, de Jong and Freeman Field, 2010, and García et al., 2017), Anderson et al. (2016: 8) note that 'not all language resources are equally available to all speakers at all times', and caution that classroom approaches that truly make space for multilingual students and language use are 'currently underdeveloped'. Thus while own-language use is an ever-present possibility for EAL students, it raises complex issues concerning access to the curriculum, pedagogy and student identity.

2.3 School practices and possibilities

Although, as noted above, UK educational policy is committed to enabling EAL students to access the curriculum, the specifics of how to support students within a 'mainstreaming' approach are largely devolved to schools. This inevitably leads to a range of possible approaches and practices within individual schools, based on contextual factors such as size and diversity of its EAL cohort, the EAL students' perceived needs, institutional budget constraints, and more general beliefs about the ways in which pedagogy and the curriculum should be organised and delivered.

For example, schools may vary in the extent to which specific and additional resources are provided for EAL students. Some, for instance, may employ bilingual teachers and classroom assistants who can provide in-class support for students with limited English proficiency, or develop a bank of bilingual dictionaries, other supportive reading materials, or technology-enhanced and online learning materials;

others may not. Similarly, some institutions might organise specific clubs or physical spaces for EAL students, or be able to support teachers in the preparation of differentiated learning materials. Indeed, some schools manage to resource the partial and temporary withdrawal of limited English proficiency students (often international new arrivals) from mainstream classes. Clearly, in such situations, context, and resource availability and priorities, play a central role in decision-making. Institutional approaches towards 'setting' can also have an impact on EAL students. Does a school deliver any or all subjects through level-based sets and groupings? If so, while 'best practice' suggests that students with EAL should be placed in the highest possible appropriate class in order to best reflect their academic abilities, how might this approach also recognise any language issues arising in higher-level classes, the pressures of maintaining appropriate class sizes, and the needs of non-EAL students within an ability-based setting system? And how able are teachers to differentiate between students with differing needs and abilities within classes?

2.4 Justification for the study

As this review illustrates, an array of issues affect how secondary-level students with EAL might experience their schooling. Yet there remain substantial gaps in our knowledge as to how EAL students manage in school, particularly how groups with differing experiences and linguistic repertoires, learning in different contexts and institutions, may cope with the challenges they face. Gaining and sharing an understanding of students' own experiences can provide an empirical base for further discussion, development and the sharing of good practice.

3

Research methodology

3.1 Aims and research questions

The project explored the school experiences of secondary-level students who speak EAL. Taking a case-study approach, it focused on EAL speakers studying in two secondary schools within the Tyneside conurbation in the North East of England. Recognising the differences that exist between EAL speakers, it investigated the experiences of students with broadly differing migration histories, including differences in their reasons for migration, time spent in the UK and, consequently, their educational histories; and differences in their linguistic repertoires, particularly with regard to their English proficiency. In essence, therefore, the project focused on the experiences of students who had recently arrived in the UK, often as international new arrivals from ‘forced migration’ contexts such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, and students from more established communities within the UK, albeit still relatively recently arrived, migrating for primarily economic or work-related reasons from contexts such as recent EU-accession countries (e.g. Poland or Romania) or other specific environments around the world (e.g. health workers and their families from the Philippines).

Consequently, the following research questions informed the project:

1. How do secondary-level school students with EAL experience school in the UK, particularly in relation to:
 - a) in-class understanding, interaction, support and inclusion?
 - b) opportunities to develop and express their home/heritage culture and identity?
2. What are the EAL students’ perceived needs and priorities in classes, and in school more generally?
3. In what ways do the experiences, perceived needs and priorities of EAL students with different backgrounds and experiences, particularly in terms of migration, linguistic repertoire and educational history, vary?
4. What are the implications of questions 1–3 for practice and practitioners who teach students with EAL, and for other stakeholders in the field?

3.2 Research design

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design which explored students’ daily school lives, both within and outside class; uncovered the students’ own perceptions of their school experiences, and their perceived English language needs and priorities (and, where appropriate, their own-language(s) needs and priorities); and explored their teachers’ perceptions of the students’ experiences, needs and priorities.

Qualitative data was therefore collected through focus groups (with EAL students), semi-structured interviews (with teachers) and classroom observation field notes. The generation of these three kinds of data enabled an iterative analysis, and alleviated the impact of the limitations of interviews, focus groups and the ‘observer’s paradox’ during observation when any of these are conducted in isolation. The aim of the data collection was thus to focus on participant meanings and interpretations of school life and learning, where understandings and priorities in terms of EAL needs and provision emerged in situ from the fieldwork and data (Dörnyei, 2007: 131).

3.2.1 The school contexts

The two case-study schools, both in the UK state-funded sector, were selected because of their differing profiles in terms of their EAL speaking student populations.

The first, here called Westway School, has over 2,000 students (aged 11–19), making it one of the largest schools in the UK. Between 2014 and 2017, the number of students with EAL in the school rose from 100 to 260, with EAL speakers currently comprising around 13 per cent of the total student cohort. While this reflects the increasing importance of Newcastle as a centre for immigration, not all Tyneside schools have experienced similar increases in students with EAL, reflecting the uneven distribution of migrant

communities. The EAL student cohort at Westway School is very mixed. Although there are significant numbers of students whose parents' countries of origin include, for example, Poland and Romania, and India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, the very rapid recent growth in EAL speakers is composed largely of young people from, for instance, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria (for some via refugee camps in Jordan), and Cote D'Ivoire (via Italy) and Nigeria. Students from these latter backgrounds very often arrive at school during the academic year and with limited English proficiency, often in 'forced migration' circumstances.

The second institution, here called Eastpark School, has 1,700 students (aged 11–18), of which 75 are speakers of EAL (4.5 per cent of the overall student cohort). EAL-speaking student numbers are relatively stable, with limited growth in recent years. Although

the current EAL cohort has mixed backgrounds and experiences, none arrived in 'forced migration' circumstances, and the vast majority have families who have resided in the UK for a number of years (meaning that many of the students experienced primary education in Britain). The students' parents' countries of origin are typically, for example, the Philippines, Poland and Russia, as well as India and Bangladesh.

3.2.2 Participants

Student participants were identified via purposive sampling (Dörnyei, 2007), in other words, to match the aims and purposes of the study, 11 and 13 EAL speakers participating at Westway and Eastpark Schools respectively, with further details summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of student participants' backgrounds

		Westway School (11 participants)	Eastpark School (13 participants)
Gender		6 female, 5 male	7 female, 6 male
Parents' countries of origin		Algeria, El Salvador, Iraq, Nigeria, Romania, Poland (2), Sierra Leone, Syria (3)	India, Philippines (3), Nigeria, Poland (7), Russia
Year of study	Year 7 (ages 11–12)	1	–
	Year 8 (ages 12–13)	2	3
	Year 9 (ages 13–14)	1	6
	Year 10 (ages 14–15)	4	4
	Year 11 (ages 15–16)	3	–
Educational history	Arrival in UK before/ during primary-level education	3	12
	Arrival in UK during secondary-level education	8	1

Approximately equal numbers of boys and girls participated at each school, with students drawn from a range of year groups (Years 7–11 at Westway and Years 8–10 at Eastpark). Efforts were made to work with students drawn from a range of countries in each school which seemed to typify that particular institution's EAL student cohort, although the small sample sizes and the students' own diverse experiences mean that the study's participants are illustrative, rather than fully representative, of the two schools' EAL speakers.

Similarly, most students selected for the Westway School sample had arrived in the UK relatively recently (generally at secondary-level age, often as international new arrivals), while most Eastpark participants had arrived in the UK before or during primary-level education. Consequently, there was a general (but not absolute) tendency for the English language proficiencies of Westway students to differ from those at Eastpark. Several Westway participants had arrived in school with little or no English language (although, by the time of their participation in this

project, they could express themselves adequately, without the need for an interpreter), while the vast majority of Eastpark students were apparently ‘fluent’ or ‘near-fluent’ in English, at least in terms of their everyday communication skills (although, as Section 4 shows, perhaps slightly less so in terms of their academic language proficiency).

Finally, while those teachers who taught lessons in which the students were shadowed and observed were of course involved in the study, five teachers from Westway School and four teachers from Eastpark School were interviewed as part of the project, including the ‘EAL lead’ for each school, and teachers of English, Maths, and Science. Again, this was a purposeful and illustrative sample.

3.2.3 Collecting the data

Each school was visited for a period of two weeks. The first week focused on building trust and facilitative relationships between the researcher and participants (both students and teachers), piloting and fine-tuning the data collection instruments, and, more generally, researcher orientation to the specific complexities of school life (e.g. the rhythms of the school day and navigating the campuses). The second week in each school involved gathering the data; Table 2 summarises the three research tools and data sources in each context.

Table 2: Summary of research tools and data sources

	Westway School	Eastpark School
Classroom observation and field notes	16 lessons <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English (7) • Science (5) • Maths (2) • Humanities (1) • Non-mainstream EAL-specific (1) 	17 lessons <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English (4) • Science (6) • Maths (4) • Humanities (3)
Student focus groups	4 groups (3–6 students per group)	2 groups (8–9 students per group)
Teacher interviews	5	4

As Table 2 shows, *classroom observations* focused on a range of subject areas, including those which might be superficially considered to be more and less language-oriented, i.e. English and Humanities contrasted with Maths and Science (as Section 4 indicates, however, this dichotomy is not so straightforward). Both schools organised subject classes according to students’ abilities (i.e. through setting), the observation schedule taking in lessons at all levels in which EAL students were present (from the highest levels through to the lower-banded groups). Observational field notes focused in particular on issues surrounding student understanding, participation and interaction (with teachers, peers with EAL and non-EAL peers); EAL-related teaching and learning strategies; use (or not) of the learners’ own language; and the ways in which EAL students might have opportunities to express their identities.

Student focus groups in each school consisted of three to nine students (some students attending more than one focus group). Some focus groups were single-sex, some were mixed with roughly even numbers of girls and boys. Overall, however, the numbers of female and male focus group participants were similar. Focus group discussions explored both relevant themes and topics identified within the EAL-focused literature (see Section 2) and issues identified through the classroom observations. Focusing on the classroom, they thus investigated how students managed in class and the study strategies they deployed; their experiences with English and the role of their own language; and their perceptions of helpful teaching strategies. Examining their broader experiences, the focus groups discussed the students’ arrival or transition into their schools; issues around ‘fitting in’ and friendships; and the expression (or otherwise) of their cultural

and linguistic identity in school. Due to the pressures of the school day and timetable, there was some variability in the length of focus group discussions, but they lasted between 20 and 35 minutes, and were audio-recorded and subsequently fully transcribed.

The semi-structured *interviews with teachers* similarly followed the general themes and topics emerging from the review of EAL-focused literature, observational data and the perceptions of student participants. However, they were also flexible enough to allow for the detailed exploration of relevant issues and ideas emerging during the discussion. Again, due to time pressures within the school day, interview lengths varied from one at 15 minutes to the majority at 35 minutes, with audio-recording and full transcription taking place.

3.2.4 Analysing and reflecting on the data

The three sets of data were brought together and categorised thematically to find common concerns, shared understandings and any contrasts which existed between participants (i.e. student-to-student, teacher-to-teacher, and/or student-to-teacher). Overall, therefore, the data provides detailed 'insider' insights into the experiences of secondary-level education for EAL students with differing backgrounds, migration histories and experiences. However, we should recognise that the project investigated specific schools in a particular context, and caution is needed concerning how far any

finding or claim can be generalised. That said, by interrogating the two school contexts through the perspectives of EAL students and their teachers, and with both sets of participants demonstrating, through the data, an evident critical awareness of the issues and challenges they face, the themes which emerge in the findings seem likely to resonate with students and teachers in most contexts in which students with EAL are taught in mainstream schools.

3.2.5 Research ethics

Throughout the study, close attention was paid to ethical issues in order to recognise and accommodate the potential difficulties faced by secondary-level speakers of EAL. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Northumbria University's Institutional Ethics Committee prior to site entry and the collection of data.

The project's aims and processes were first outlined to senior managers at the two participating schools, and were similarly explained to teaching staff and possible student participants both in writing and, subsequently, in face-to-face meetings. Written teacher, student and parental consent was sought (in the students' own language and in English where appropriate), student (and teacher) participation in the project being voluntary. All student and teacher participant identities are anonymised to protect respondents' confidentiality.

4

Findings: perspectives on the school experiences of secondary-level EAL students

This study sought to answer the key research question ‘How do secondary-level school students with English as an additional language experience school in the UK?’, while additionally exploring whether the experiences and perspectives of project participants with differing backgrounds, skills and experiences varied.

Clearly, as a case study, the data provides a snapshot of school life in two specific institutional contexts in the North East of England, and the findings presented here are thus introductory and illustrative rather than fully generalisable. Yet a number of key themes emerge within the data that align with and add illuminating detail to key trends identified in the literature surrounding EAL (see Section 2). As the analysis which follows will show, there was a considerable degree of consensus between participants when discussing the school and classroom experiences of EAL students in general terms. Yet there was also a significant difference in the priorities of those students who were less proficient in English (and who had perhaps more recently arrived in school) compared to those who were more proficient in English (and/or who were often more settled in the UK and in school), the former highlighting the need to ‘fit in’ and to develop their English language and study skills, the latter prioritising issues of identity, the importance of their own or home culture and language in an English-dominant context, and the wish to be recognised as in some way ‘different’ to non-EAL (i.e., English-only) speakers in school.

In the discussion that follows, participants from Westway and Eastpark schools are coded WW and EP respectively, students further coded S and teachers T alongside the focus group (FG) or interview number; teachers’ school subjects are also indicated. Thus, a Westway student is referred to as ‘WWS’, an Eastpark maths teacher as ‘EPT Maths’ and so forth.

4.1 A diversity of backgrounds and previous experiences

Reflecting contemporary accounts of EAL (see Introduction and Section 2.1), student participants in this project had differing and diverse backgrounds, histories and experiences.

Taking as a starting point their *migration histories*, some students had been in the UK ‘since I was four’ (i.e. for 12 years; EPS FG1), arriving directly from their home countries with their parents, who had migrated for economic reasons (often from Eastern Europe) and were joining pre-existing family or wider social networks. Others had followed a more complex route to the UK involving leaving their home, staying in other contexts or countries (for one, a refugee camp in Jordan, for others, temporary accommodation in Italy or the Netherlands) before arriving in the UK with little or no immediate social network. One such participant had been ‘here for six months’ (WWS FG1). While more students attending Eastpark School had arrived in the UK during their primary years than those at Westway, the migration histories also differed between participants attending the same school (see also Section 3.2.2).

EAL students who participated in the study also had varying *English language proficiencies*, which ranged from ‘pre-intermediate’ to ‘advanced/fluent’, that is, from A2/B1 to C2 levels on the Common European Framework for Languages (Council of Europe, 2011). Students at A1 level or even below attended Westway School, but did not participate in this study due to difficulties of gathering their perspectives in English (a limitation of this project).

Students also differed in the ways in which they used English and their *own languages* with their families or communities outside school. Several echoed the comment of a student who had arrived in the UK at primary age and was, conversationally at least, fluent in English:

As soon as I leave school, I speak Polish (EPS FG2)

For some students, whose family members were proficient in English, this was due to personal and family choice, often ‘so we don’t forget the culture’ (EPS FG1, Nigerian heritage); we shall return to issues surrounding language, culture and identity in Section 4.5. For others, however, own-language use took place because their parents did ‘not speak English, so I understand my dad [when he speaks Hindi and] just repeat back in English’ (EPS FG1).

Some students, meanwhile, particularly several who had been in the UK for a number of years and whose families were apparently settled or permanent migrants, noted a lack or a loss of own-language proficiency, being able to speak, read, and write in their own language to varying degrees:

My writing is not great ... my spelling is not great but I can try it and people won't understand ... I can read pretty well but it's not as good as my English (EPS FG2, Polish heritage)

I came here I kind of just lost a lot of like how to speak but I still do kind of, but just a lot less (EPS FG1, Filipino heritage)

These differing levels of own-language literacy are clearly likely to affect the extent and ways in which the students’ own languages, and, consequently, English, are used outside school, with family and friends. Given that own-language literacy can inform learners’ second language literacy, this may also have implications for EAL students’ progress and achievements in school. Similarly, the EAL students participating in this study had varied *prior educational experiences*, in both the UK and in their home/heritage or other context. Some, for example, had been attending UK state-funded schools since the age of six, and were unable to recall ‘any proper education in my own language’ (EPS FG2) while others had entered school following their recent arrival in the UK, meaning that, according to one teacher, ‘they’re at completely different points and education’ (WWT1). Significantly, these differing prior educational experiences also meant that several students had prior models of teaching to compare their current experience to, bringing with them to the classroom differing beliefs about teaching, learning and the norms of schools and schooling more generally:

The way they teach [in the case-study school] is different to home (WWS FG2)

My [home context] school is different ... they push students harder (WWS FG1)

Such *student beliefs and expectations* can affect the ways in which individual learners engage with their teachers, peers and learning activities, and the extent to which student and school expectations are similar or different may thus affect motivation, progress and achievement.

To summarise, therefore, even within the relatively small case-study cohort of 24 student participants, there are notable differences in the EAL speakers’ backgrounds and experiences. As Anderson et al. (2016: 15) note, EAL students are not ‘blank slates’ – they are a diverse group of individuals whose histories and current lives beyond school are pertinent to the ways in which they might engage with both opportunities for learning and the chance to express their own identities at school. It is to these aspects of the study that we now turn.

4.2 Arriving at a new school

Given their varied backgrounds, experiences, linguistic repertoires and personalities, it was perhaps inevitable that the EAL students recalled a variety of reactions and emotions when discussing their arrival and first weeks at their secondary-level schools. Some described a positive experience, which satisfied their sense of curiosity:

I loved it ... like moving from another country or like when I can do something ... I love these kind of situations (WWS FG2)

However, the majority of students remembered feeling rather anxious and exposed:

I was scared (EPS FG2)

I was really confused ... I didn't know what I was doing ... I was panicking a bit and my anxiety is just playing up like ... you don't know where you're going ... but then I just slowly start learning English and it kind of all start making sense (EPS FG2)

Yet while some students ascribed their experiences to their language skills and, implicitly, their position as students with EAL (as with the speaker above), others were less inclined to identify language in particular as a reason for any discomfort:

You know like when you walk in and everyone is just staring at you. It's the same experience as you get in every new school (WWS FG4)

It is notable that recollections of both more and less anxious experiences emerged from both Eastpark students, who had generally been in the UK primary school system and had wide local family and social

networks, and from Westway students, who had entered school as international new arrivals, and had less local support and cultural knowledge. Thus, while it is evident that students with limited English proficiency were unsettled in the early stages of their secondary schooling, such experiences are common to EAL speakers of all backgrounds, one Eastpark student implicitly highlighting these challenges in her advice to all new EAL students starting at the school – ‘Go and speak to someone *who’s been through it*’ (EPS FG2, emphasis added).

Meanwhile, teachers at both schools recognised the challenges EAL students faced on arrival, the EAL lead at Westway School noting, for example:

I know that you don’t learn a language when you are scared and don’t feel welcome ... And that’s the starting point, you’re made welcome and you’re not the only one [in your position] (WWT2)

Consequently, the school leadership and EAL leads in each institution had implemented a range of actions and activities to support new entrants and the EAL community in each school more generally, including: buddy systems, which matched new entrants with longer-standing EAL students; lunch clubs for EAL students; own-language-oriented posters and displays around the schools; additional classes, focusing on both English (dependent on students’ needs and proficiencies) and ‘acclimatisation’; making available other physical resources, such as prayer rooms or reflective/quiet spaces; and, in the case of Westway School, employing two teachers who spoke some EAL students’ own languages (Arabic). Clearly, resource challenges existed in both contexts, and the balance between support which facilitated EAL students’ transition into mainstream school life and that which ‘othered’ them or kept them apart from their English-only peers required constant negotiation. Yet generally, students discussed these initiatives positively, although it was notable that, ultimately, the vast majority shared the sentiment of one student participant who argued that the key to settling in at school as an EAL speaker was:

Teachers who are interested in students with other languages (EPS FG1)

While a desire for interest and empathy is being clearly expressed, there also perhaps a wish for a degree of ‘recognition’ of the students’ contexts and, to some degree, their ‘difference’ to most other students in the schools; we shall return to issues surrounding student identities in Section 4.5.

4.3 ‘Fitting in’: attitudes and challenges

An ongoing issue for EAL speakers is ‘fitting in’ with their student peers and at school more generally; this involves students ‘reading’ the social setting and potentially making linguistic and social adjustments as they present themselves to others (Anderson et al., 2016; see also Section 2.2). Although both EAL and non-EAL teenagers encounter challenges in this regard, students with EAL can often face particular issues related to, for example, language and cultural knowledge, their own sense of identity, a perceived sense of ‘difference’ between themselves and non-EAL students (which they themselves or their non-EAL peers might hold), and the extent of the adjustment they might need to make in order to navigate their transition into the school community in a way which is comfortable and appropriate for them. Clearly, however, these concerns differ from student to student.

For some students in this study, even those who had been in the UK for a relatively long period, the identification with their parents’ country of origin remained strong, creating some distance between themselves and the institution and their non-EAL peers. For example, a student with a Polish background who had experienced primary-level education in the UK before joining her secondary school reported that:

Even though I’m in England ... I am from a different country and I don’t feel like I left (EPS FG2)

Consequently, many students (although not all) reported having few ‘English’ (i.e. non-EAL) friends, instead developing friendships either with those who shared their cultural/linguistic backgrounds or with the wider cohort of EAL speakers more generally:

Until now, I don’t have English friends, all my friends are from different countries (WWS FG2)

For many students, therefore, it seemed that a sense of solidarity and security could be found within and among the wider cohort of EAL speakers. In part, this was because of the commonalities of their school experiences (i.e. as students who ‘have been through it’ (EPS FG2)); it might also have been a consequence of the schools’ activities in support of EAL students (see Section 4.3) – EAL-oriented lunch clubs and buddy systems are likely to facilitate friendships.

A number of students at both schools suggested, however, that cultural differences between themselves and non-EAL students made fitting in and establishing friendships difficult:

They've got different ways of talking ... what they talk about or different humour. It's kind of different to what I'm used to to make friends (WWS FG3)

[non-EAL students] kind of know us, but not as much ... they connect with me, but in a different way (EPS FG1)

Although language was not explicitly highlighted as a cause of difficulties, it was clearly seen as a possible support or solution, one student noting that:

Once I started learning English, then I got friends (EPS FG2)

While it is clearly important not to stereotype or over-generalise, it is evident that many EAL students in this case study did perceive a difference between themselves and 'English students' (WWS FG1).

'Fitting in', therefore, clearly involves a range of complex processes. Individual EAL students have to navigate the delicate balance between their desire to fit in and to retain their home culture and identity, which may differ significantly from many of the cultural norms they encounter in school. And clearly, not all EAL students will necessarily wish to fit in at school to the same extent or in the same ways. Furthermore, fitting in is not just the responsibility of individual students. As several teachers noted, school leaders, staff and students all shape the institutional environment – for example, the sense of welcome, the acceptance and celebration of diversity, and the ways in which all students are made to feel comfortable (or otherwise) at school – with implications for EAL students' sense of belonging. Consequently, the issue of fitting in requires both individual and institutional change, summarised by one teacher as follows:

Yes, children want to fit in, of course they do, but I think school should be a place where you feel comfortable to be who you are ... at the moment, I think they hide such a large part of themselves and I don't think school should be like that (EPT1)

4.4 In the classroom

4.4.1 Language challenges

While language issues were discussed during student focus groups at both schools, the relationship between the language used in class and students' own English proficiency only emerged as a concern for EAL students at Westway School, where, as already noted, there was a higher number of international new arrivals and students with limited levels of English. In contrast, student participants at Eastpark School, the majority of whom had experienced primary-level education in the UK, felt proficient in English, and indeed generally appeared to be proficient in conversational English. They suggested that they encountered very few or even no language difficulties in their studies, a point we shall return to shortly.

With the exception of two students whose families were long-term residents in the UK and who perceived little difference in their English and Polish language proficiencies, all Westway students suggested that they experienced some difficulties coping with the spoken English of their teachers and their non-EAL peers:

We can't understand it because they speak fast ... the way how they're speaking ... English is more different (WWS FG4)

The accent is difficult (WWS FG4)

While the speed of classroom speech and the accents encountered affected the extent to which some students were able to access the curriculum during lessons (the city of Newcastle being notable for its 'Geordie' regional accent), many also found subject-specific vocabulary difficult, referring to 'long' or 'strong' words (WWSs). Similarly, the majority of Westway students also found speaking in class challenging, finding it difficult or lacking the confidence to express their ideas in a fast-moving classroom environment, or expressing doubt that they could convey their thinking in appropriate, classroom- or subject-oriented language:

I lack the confidence (WWS FG4)

Answering questions ... that's the hardest thing (WWS FG1)

It's hard to talk to teachers as I don't know the formal language and don't want to appear rude (WWS FG2)

Several thus indicated that the plenary discussion phase of classes was particularly challenging, in which language was rather unpredictable and only heard (i.e. not seen or read). Textbook or paper-based classroom activities were, according to many, more accessible, although, of course, in the development of students' linguistic skills and repertoire, as well as in terms of accessing the mainstream curriculum, both spoken and written texts and communication are essential. Meanwhile, students noted the challenges of writing in English, one typically stating that:

I know what to say, but I don't know how to write it (WWS FG2)

The teachers who participated in the project were aware of the challenges limited English proficiency students faced in the classroom. While all Westway teachers acknowledged that it would have been helpful at times to produce further language-level-oriented materials (e.g. vocabulary lists, and preliminary exercises for students with very limited proficiency), time pressures, the need to share perspectives in teacher and student-led discussions, and the diversity of their EAL students' linguistic (and academic) needs meant that such additional material was rarely prepared (to the teachers' regret; see also Section 4.6). More optimistically, however, teachers at Westway School noted the rapid linguistic progress many new arrival EAL students made after joining their mainstream classes:

In three months they move set because their language develops (WWT1)

Teachers at Westway also acknowledged the difficulties for students of writing and decoding subject-specific texts and vocabulary, offering additional insights into the challenges student participants identified:

[the curriculum] is moving to a more functional approach and a lot of the [maths] questions are worded problem-solving questions ... they're embedded and that's where the problems are starting to arise (WWT3)

Significantly, however, teachers at Eastpark School (where the more fluent students had generally suggested they had few or no language issues) also identified student difficulties in English language:

If a student has arrived in Year 6 you know they can sound like a Geordie by the time they come

to school in Year 7 but they might only have had a year or two of English, so they've got BICS but they haven't got CALP (EPT1 EAL lead)

As soon as you get to wordy questions, [student] has no idea what she is doing (EPT2 maths)

At Eastpark School, therefore, teachers seemed more aware than the students themselves of potential English language challenges high-proficiency EAL speakers might encounter, acknowledging the difference between being conversationally proficient and proficient in academically oriented language skills (see Section 2.2); such difficulties were identified across the curriculum. For example, during classroom observations, it became evident that differences existed between teachers' and some students' evaluation of the students' written assessments in subjects such as History and English. Meanwhile, as the teacher quoted above suggests, decoding maths questions presented through language was problematic for some students.

To summarise, therefore, while students who were less proficient in English tended to recognise and sometimes seemed overwhelmed by the language challenges they faced in the classroom, it is interesting to note that the students in this study who were more proficient in English tended to underestimate the linguistic challenges they faced, and seemed unaware of how their use of language might affect their classroom learning or their assessment marks. Equally, while different subjects within the school curriculum may appear to place heavier or lighter linguistic demands on students (e.g. English contrasted with Maths), it is evident that language is central to success across the curriculum, not only those subjects which might be thought to be particularly language-oriented. As a Westway student noted:

English is hard with strong [i.e. hard] words, but in science too (WWS FG1)

4.4.2 Managing in the classroom: place and peers

When discussing the challenges for EAL students of managing in the classroom, understanding classroom instructions, discussions, texts and activities, and more generally accessing the curriculum during lessons were central concerns, particularly for students at Westway School who had less proficiency in English. Most participants in this project from Westway highlighted the inter-related concerns of *where* students might sit during lessons (i.e., their place) and *who* they might sit with (i.e. the role of their peers) – ‘where you sit and who you sit next to really matters’ (WWS FG2).

In lessons where there was no teacher-designed seating plan for students, it was notable that those EAL students who appeared to be more successful during the lesson tended to place themselves as far forward and centrally in the classroom as possible, one student noting:

Sitting at the back is difficult – I can't hear with the brute [sic] people (WWS FG2)

Being close to the teacher seemed to facilitate understanding, either by simply enabling students to see and hear more clearly, or by providing easier opportunities to ask for clarification or have understandings checked. From this perspective, finding the ‘right’ place to sit can be seen as a key study strategy for the students in this project.

For the most part, however, Westway School teachers who participated in this study did plan where students would sit during lessons, a variety of strategies emerging, including: deliberately spreading EAL students out in the classroom – ‘I didn't want a bubble [or] a group sitting and speaking and isolated’ (WWT1); regular rotation of students and groupings; putting EAL students together – ‘I did separate them for a little bit but actually they work so much better and their results got so much better when they are together so I kind of put them together’ (WWT3); and no differentiation between EAL and non-EAL students – ‘In some classes where there's only a couple of EAL students and I don't need to differentiate at all because they are just so good’ (WWT4).

Central to both students' and teachers' perspectives, therefore, was the relationship between where an EAL student might sit and who they might sit next to. Students tended to emphasise the ways in which peers could help their understanding by explaining lesson content or modelling an activity, for example:

Sitting together is better – you can ask your friend (WWS FG3)

I have to see other people doing it and then I do it (WWS FG3)

While some students saw advantages in sitting within their EAL-based friendship group (see Section 4.3), others were less concerned, one simply stating that ‘working with other students in class depends on whether the other students are nice or not’ (WWS FG4). Similarly, focusing on the ways in which successful peer partnerships could scaffold student understanding, some teachers in the study also attended to the ways in which effective seating patterns and peer work facilitated social relationships within the classroom and could help new arrivals to classes fit in:

There was huge friction, but they seem more settled now (WWT1)

Generally, therefore, while most participants in the study noted the relevance of where EAL students sat and who they worked with in class, slightly differing perspectives emerged from different informants. Seating issues seemed far more salient to EAL students and teachers at Westway School, with its significant numbers of international new arrival students with limited English proficiency, than at Eastpark School, where students seemed to be managing more effectively during lessons. Furthermore, while students tended to focus almost entirely on the ways in which seating and peer work could support or hinder their learning, teachers additionally considered the ways in which students from differing backgrounds sitting and working together might bring social benefits to the classroom, to EAL and, indeed, to non-EAL students.

4.4.3 Own-language use in the classroom

The extent and ways in which EAL students' use their own languages at school, both in the classroom and more generally in non-lesson time, is an issue that is intrinsically linked to, for example, the ways in which EAL students might deal with English language challenges and access the school curriculum, speak to and work with their EAL or non-EAL peers in class, and demonstrate or 'hide' their cultural identity or identities, potentially affecting the ways they 'fit in' at school. This section focuses specifically on issues which surround own-language use in the classroom, examining support for learning, any perceived implications for classroom dynamics and management, and issues surrounding students' 'right' to speak their own language. The subsequent discussion, in Section 4.5, will address in more detail wider debates surrounding 'language and student identity'.

A minority of EAL students who participated in the study suggested that they did not, or tried not to use too frequently, their own language in class:

Because I'm trying to learn English so if I speak Italian [in lessons], it's worst (WWS FG1)

Interestingly, these students had relatively limited proficiency in English and clearly saw lessons as a key opportunity to improve their language skills. However, most students reported using their own language in class, albeit to differing degrees, their reports being confirmed during classroom observations and interviews with teachers. At Westway School, particularly with immediate new arrival students and limited English proficiency students, specific in-class own-language support was available via the deployment of bilingual dictionaries and apps, bilingual classroom assistants and teachers (although such support had limits and could support some, but not all, EAL students in need), and peer-to-peer direct translation and explanation. Although a few students made some use of bilingual vocabulary resources at Eastpark School, this was much more limited, in keeping with the students' English proficiency (both perceived and actual). For many students, therefore, own-language use was a deliberate strategy to support learning, although its extent varied according to individual need and context.

Beyond this, however, many students also spoke their own languages in class for other, more affective reasons, such as tiredness and with friends:

I speak Arabic with other Arabic girls (WWS FG2)

It's easier for me to speak to him in Polish (EPS FG2)

For these students, own-language use with friends seemed to be simply a matter of 'natural convenience'. For one or two others, however, own-language use in class carried an element of subversion, drawing on issues surrounding the students' own identities, and their perceptions of teachers' attitudes, two Polish students at Eastpark School reporting that:

I do speak Polish with a bunch of my friends if I want to talk with them privately, but people have told teachers about it because they don't know what I am saying so they don't really like it much... (EPS FG2)

[Teachers /English-speaking peers] should respect who you are and let us speak with our friends (EPS FG2)

We shall return to issues of student identity, including in- and out-group membership, in Section 4.5. However, it is interesting to note here that these perspectives emerged among Eastpark students who were proficient in English (albeit slightly more so in conversation than when dealing with academic language) but perhaps wanted to establish or clarify differences between themselves and non-EAL students at the school. Students at Westway School with limited English proficiency, meanwhile, tended to focus more on their immediate language and study needs.

Throughout the study, teachers at both schools also conveyed generally positive – or rather, perhaps, realistic – attitudes towards own-language use in the classroom, for example:

I'm happy for them to write in their own first language (WWT1)

I do catch them talking to each other in Chinese (WWT4)

It was evident, however, that individual teachers were developing their own beliefs and approaches, and that practices varied slightly from classroom to classroom. Furthermore, while teachers who participated in this study may have conveyed inclusive attitudes towards own-language use, students did not always perceive these outcomes in all classes:

We get told off if we speak Polish (EPS FG2)

Some teachers, they are OK with it, some teachers prefer it if I didn't (EPS FG2)

Overall, therefore, own-language use emerged as a key interest for both EAL students and teachers in this study, as it brought together issues concerning policy, pedagogy and support for learning, classroom management and, at times, discipline and student identity. Yet the use of the students' own languages in class is only part of the wider theme of the relationship between language and students' identities at school. It is to this that we now turn.

4.5 Language and students' identities

The ways in which the relationship between language and EAL students' identities played out within the two case-study schools has been touched upon on a number of occasions throughout this report, when discussing, for example, the extent to which students use their own language or English at home (Section 4.1), how EAL students might 'fit in' at school (Section 4.3), the language challenges students face in class (Section 4.4.1) and reasons for own-language use during lessons (Section 4.4.3). Yet during student focus group discussions, it became clear that the project's participants at both schools had more to say about how language intertwined with their sense of who they were and their identity at school.

Students at both schools, and with both higher and more limited English proficiency, reflected on the ways in which using either their own language or English affected their sense of self, their self-confidence, and their ability to express what they were feeling. It was notable, however, that while limited-proficiency students tended to focus on their own limitations in English and how this affected their ability to communicate and convey essential meanings, higher-proficiency students often focused on how their own language enabled them to express their own identities more fully and freely; for example:

When I speak Arabic I feel more confident and comfortable ... when I speak English my feelings change ... I'm not feeling confident (WWS FG2, former international new arrival with relatively limited English proficiency)

I feel myself when I speak my home language and I can expand like speaking many more words and when I speak with my friends it just feels you know – a good atmosphere (EPS FG1, Polish speaker with high English proficiency)

Thus for many EAL students at Eastpark School, whose families had resided in the UK for a number of years, maintaining their own-language proficiency was a key concern, as it strengthened links to their 'home' culture (i.e. that of their parents' country of origin) and to members of their extended families:

It's like a home language and I do want to make sure that since I'm living here I do know it very well as well, so I can communicate when I'm in Poland (EPS FG1)

I'm kind of scared of forgetting my home language (EPS FG1)

Many Eastpark students thus expressed a clear fear of losing or 'forgetting' their own language, a concern which was not reflected at Westway School, presumably due to students' very different backgrounds, immigration histories and current linguistic repertoires.

Consequently, many EAL speakers at Eastpark School outlined the ways in which they sometimes made a deliberate choice to use their own language in order to create or reinforce in-group and out-group membership at school:

Why [do] they speak in L1 at school – because they can say exactly what they mean; to stay private (EPS FG2)

not a secret language ... but it kind of keeps some people out as well as puts some in (EPS FG1)

Given that, when speaking English, many Eastpark EAL students appeared indistinguishable from most non-EAL students in terms of their English language variety and accent, ethnicity, indicators of religious affiliation and so forth, own-language use became a vehicle through which they could establish a sense of difference from the wider school community and demonstrate their specific home context identities. As a Polish speaker, referring to the wider school population, put it:

They know us, but at the same time they don't know us (EPS FG1)

Yet the students' own languages and cultures were not always used to exclude others, and students at both schools spoke positively of 'sharing' or 'teaching' their language and culture to others, either during school or teacher-facilitated activities, or during informal conversations with friends. This was widely seen as an enjoyable way of developing

friendships, and showing (and valuing) differing languages and cultures in the schools. Yet for some, such sharing was not straightforward, one student at Eastpark School somewhat ambiguously commenting that:

if I teach them Polish it's kind of like giving them a part of me ... like letting them know my culture and stuff (EPS FG1)

Typical of many students with higher levels of English proficiency who participated in the study, this student clearly values her own language and 'home' cultural identity, which she sees as setting her apart from many other students in school and which should thus not be 'given away' easily. For the student and others like her, preserving and demonstrating her own language and identity was a concern in an environment in which she felt her cultural background could be easily overlooked.

It is notable, however, that while EAL students in this study who were immediate new arrivals in schools or who had limited English proficiency also welcomed opportunities in school to convey a positive sense of their own language and culture, their more immediate priority was on developing communication skills in English. This might have been because the difference between themselves and their non-EAL peers were already so evident, in terms of linguistic repertoire, ethnicity, symbols of religious affiliation and so forth.

Therefore, the contrast between the two broad groupings of EAL students within the study, less proficient to more proficient in English and more immediate to less immediate arrivals in the UK, conveys a sense of the changing concerns of many EAL students over time, from 'fitting in' and 'getting by' to 'being recognised' and 'preserving difference'. We should note, however, that the recognition of difference sought by more proficient English language speakers emerged during group discussions, and most likely referred to recognition of the group (or groups) of EAL speakers within schools, rather than participants seeking to stand out as individuals.

4.6 Student and teacher strategies, and institutional activities

A final major theme which emerged during the study was the identification of those key student and teacher strategies and behaviours which seemed to support EAL student engagement in the classroom and with the curriculum. While many of the ideas might be familiar to teachers and other practitioners who work with EAL students, it is useful to hear students' and teachers' voices, as they provide points of immediate interest and recognition for the wider professional community to consider.

4.6.1 Student strategies

As noted in Section 4.4.2, the most successful EAL students appeared to be able to organise themselves and 'take control' of elements of their classroom experience, particularly where they sat and, to a lesser extent, who they sat next to. Many students noted their preference for *sitting near the front of the classroom or near the teacher*, and several expressed a preference for *sitting near or working with their own-language peers or with friends*. Consequently, both teachers and students at both schools suggested that, while most students struggle for understanding at some point during lessons, *judicious imitation of peers* was a useful way for students to keep pace during lessons. Ultimately, however, students emphasised the importance of *overcoming shyness, contributing during lessons, and asking the teacher*. Of course, for many students, these strategies are more easily said than done! Meanwhile, some EAL students suggested that they needed *'to be an organiser'* (WWS FG3) outside the classroom. From a teachers' perspective, the more successful students therefore *'practice at home ... and work through at their own pace'* (WWT3).

Of course, these strategies are good practice for *all* school students, not only EAL speakers. However, students with limited English proficiency also emphasised their need to 'learn English' (WWS FG1), utilising opportunities both in and out of school. Several commented on the usefulness of *the internet* and widely available *translation apps*, although it should be noted that some very recent international new arrivals had not yet developed digital literacy skills. Meanwhile, a number of teachers in the study reported encouraging students to use *bilingual dictionaries* in class and to *prepare for tasks in their own language*, in both speech and writing, if appropriate.

4.6.2 Teacher strategies

Students' ideas about how teachers might further support their learning broadly focused on what might happen *before* lessons, and what might take place *during* classes. Student participants at both schools, with differing migration histories, linguistic repertoires and English language proficiencies suggested that it would be helpful if teachers could '*tell us what the next lesson is going to be about*' (WWS FG3/ WWT5). Most students were keen to receive *vocabulary and key word lists in advance* of lessons, particularly for science subjects. Perhaps inevitably, however, a range of views were expressed about *homework*, with some students wanting more and some less in what seemed to be a matter of individual preference.

In class, many students who were less proficient in English suggested that it was helpful when teachers '*speak slowly*' (WWS FG4). In addition to highlighting key words, many also suggested that *use of images* helped illustrate meaning and, where appropriate, teachers might *demonstrate tasks*. As noted in sections 4.4.3 and 4.5, most students who participated in the study felt that being allowed to *use their own language in class* would facilitate learning.

For their own part, it was notable that all teachers who participated in the study reported deploying most of these approaches and activities in their classrooms. In addition to preparing *seating plans* to facilitate learning, the importance of key words, *unpacking and illustrating how to use complex subject-specific language* (through clear board or screen work), and, indeed, the possibility of *differentiating tasks and summarising or simplifying texts* within the classroom were evident concerns. Teachers in both schools emphasised the need to *repeat instructions*, maintain an *appropriate pace* in lessons, develop familiar *classroom routines* which were not language dependent, and to *model tasks*.

Again, however, it is evident that many of these ideas support not only the learning of EAL students but of all students – what is good practice for speakers of EAL is also 'good teaching' for non-EAL students. Thus, as one teacher put it, implicitly making reference to Christie's 'hidden curriculum' (1985; see Section 2.3) 'classes need to develop language and literacy skills for all students' and that 'part of

learning a subject is learning the language of that subject' (EPT1), although some students with limited English proficiency will require more support to achieve such subject literacy.

Yet it is also clear that teachers face a number of pressures, not least meeting the needs of all students in the classroom (e.g. how often and by how much should teachers slow down their speech; how much should they simplify concepts?), and time pressures (i.e. how reasonable is it to expect teachers to prepare additional materials in advance of lessons, given the demanding nature of their daily workload?). However, many of possibilities identified by the students and teachers in this case study are relatively straightforward to incorporate into pedagogic practice without placing additional demands on teachers or non-EAL students, although judgements as to when their deployment is appropriate of course needs to remain with individual teachers, with their superior local knowledge and understandings.

4.6.3 Further institutional activities

Given the project's focus on students' experiences of school and of classroom life, a full investigation of the two case study schools' EAL-oriented policies is beyond the scope of the current study. However, both schools implemented a number of school-wide activities which add to the picture of institutional support for EAL students and their learning. In addition to those noted earlier in the report (i.e. lunch clubs, posters and displays, prayer and quiet rooms, and some additional classes; see Section 4.2), both schools offered EAL students the opportunity to take a national qualification (the GCSE exam for 16-year-olds) in their own language. In addition to providing the students with the possibility of an additional qualification, this also aimed to:

make sure that they have a sense of belonging in the school ... It's us sort of recognising they speak a different language, they have that identity and [we] encourage them to feel welcome, to be that identity (EPT3)

Furthermore, Westway School also developed supportive links with the parents of international new arrival students, who themselves often spoke little English.

5

Summary

This project investigated how EAL students in two secondary-level institutions in an urban setting in the North East of England experienced their schooling. The study uncovered the perceptions of EAL students themselves, and their teachers, in a context in which local experiences and perspectives remain under-researched and shared relatively infrequently. Although the findings reported here emerged from a particular setting, they provide valuable ‘insider’ insights which are likely to resonate with EAL students, teachers and other stakeholders in most contexts where EAL speakers are taught in mainstream contexts, both in the UK and in other countries.

5.1 Recognising diversity: EAL students’ backgrounds and experiences

This case study illustrates that students who speak EAL come from a diverse range of backgrounds and bring with them to school a wide range of prior experiences which overlap, inter-relate and combine in complex ways. Teacher (and institutional) awareness of individual students’ backgrounds, prior experiences, skills and repertoires is central to developing a fuller understanding of, and offering support for, any challenges particular students might be facing both in the classroom and in school more generally.

5.2 Settling in and fitting in at school: issues and dilemmas

While both EAL and non-EAL students can find their first days in a new school testing, limited English proficiency, unfamiliarity with UK school norms (for some students) and a sense of being in some way ‘different’ to non-EAL students can provide an extended period of confusion and anxiety for some EAL students. In the longer term, the issue of how and how far to ‘fit in’ at school raises interesting dilemmas concerning student identities, EAL

students’ ability to navigate possible differences between their home culture and the dominant school culture(s), and institutions’ EAL-oriented policies and practices (many schools, of course, do implement specific actions and activities in support of EAL students (e.g. buddy systems), although the attendant risk is that these serve to ‘separate’ EAL students from their non-EAL peers). Many students in this study also suggested that it was easier to establish friendships with other EAL students, whether from the same linguistic background or not, than with non-EAL students.

5.3 In the classroom: challenges and strategies

Given EAL speakers’ range of backgrounds and proficiencies, it is unsurprising that students experience the mainstream classroom in different ways. Students with limited English proficiency in this study focused on the language difficulties they experienced in class, while students with higher English proficiency, who appeared fluent in conversation, reported few or no language concerns. Yet it was notable that some ‘fluent’ EAL students were reported by their teachers to be less successful when engaging with academic and subject-specific language, an issue that the students themselves did not quite recognise. Language, the ‘hidden curriculum’ at school (Christie, 1985; see Section 2.2), is thus a key challenge for many EAL students, albeit to differing degrees and in different ways. Meanwhile, students, particularly those with limited English proficiency, regard where they sit in class, and who they sit next to and work with, as central concerns (in this case study, higher-proficiency students expressed less interest in these issues). While many teachers reflect on EAL students’ needs when preparing classroom seating plans, more successful EAL students appear to sit in accordance with their preferences, ‘taking control’ of the classroom environment when this is not the case.

Equally, many, but not all, EAL students feel that they need to or should use their own language in the classroom. Again, however, while students with low English proficiency, particularly immediate new arrivals, tend to deploy their own language in explicit support of learning, via bilingual dictionaries, task preparation, peer-to-peer translation and so forth, higher-proficiency students in this case study seem to deploy their own language less to directly support learning and more from the desire to express their own specific identities as speakers of EAL which, they felt, were sometimes overlooked in their English-dominant context (see Section 5.4).

In this study, EAL students and their teachers therefore reported pursuing a range of strategies which supported classroom engagement and access to the curriculum. It is important to note, however, that these practices support not only EAL students, but also their non-EAL peers' learning. It is also interesting to note how many of the students' strategies and their perceptions of supportive teaching align with suggested best practice across the field (see for example, Bracken et al., 2017; García et al., 2017; Leung and Creese, 2010). However, we should also note the possibility that not all strategies and resources are available to all EAL students at all times.

5.4 Changing priorities? Language, proficiency and identity

As this study demonstrates, the relationship between language, access to the curriculum and identity is a central issue for EAL students, but, given the perspectives of students in this study, it seems probable that, for many, perceived needs and priorities change over time. Students with less English proficiency, who in this study were often immediate new arrivals in school, are unsurprisingly very concerned with developing their immediate language and communication skills, in order to access the curriculum, participate more fully in class, and develop social networks in the classroom and beyond. Their own language and home culture is of course a central part of their lives and identities, but the key focus reported in this project is the development of the English skills necessary to succeed at school.

However, for students who are more proficient in English, perhaps those who have been in the UK for longer, a widely expressed priority was, in this study, the need to maintain their own (i.e. home) identity in a context where differences between their home and the school environment were not widely recognised. To this end, many such students wanted a greater institutional acknowledgement that they had different backgrounds and experiences to non-EAL students in order that they could express more fully their varied and differing identities at school. From this perspective, therefore, it is possible to conceptualise EAL speakers not only as students who need supporting and resourcing, but also as students who are themselves a multilingual and multicultural resource from whom others can learn and through which schools might celebrate diversity.

Although the focus of this study was two schools in the North East of England, the issues raised in this research are likely to be relevant to most contexts around the UK and, indeed, internationally, where secondary-level students who speak EAL are taught. What challenges do EAL speakers face in the classroom and in school more generally? What strategies do EAL students and their teachers develop and deploy to support learning? And how do schools and teachers identify and support the differing requirements of students with very different backgrounds, experiences and proficiencies, accommodating both individual students' English language needs and their need and desire to express their own identities?

Further investigation into these key questions is necessary, which, alongside projects of the type outlined in this report, also requires finding time for teachers and school EAL leads to talk to EAL students in their own institutions, in order to uncover their varied experiences and perspectives, the challenges faced and the ways in which EAL students from all backgrounds and of all proficiencies might be most effectively supported.

References

- Anderson, C, Foley, Y, Sangster, P, Edwards, V and Rassool, N (2016) *Policy, Pedagogy and Pupil Perceptions: EAL in Scotland and England*. Cambridge: The Bell Foundation.
- Andrews, Richard (2009) *Review of Research in English as an Additional Language (EAL)*. London: TSO, Training and Development Agency for Schools.
- Baker, C (2006) *Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism* (4th edition). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Bell Foundation (2016) *EAL Assessment Framework for Schools*. Cambridge: Bell Educational Trust.
- Bracken, S, Driver, C, and Kadi-Hanifi, K (2017) *Teaching English as an Additional Language in Secondary Schools*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Christie, F (1985) 'Language and Schooling', in Tchudi, S (ed) *Language, Schooling and Society*. Upper Montclair: Boynton/Cook, 21–40.
- Conteh, J and Meier, G (eds) (2014) *The Multilingual Turn in Languages Education: Opportunities and Challenges*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Council of Europe (2011) *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. Available online at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>
- Creese, A and Leung, C (2010) 'Introduction', in Leung, C and Creese, A (eds) *English as an Additional Language: Approaches to teaching linguistic minority students*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Cummins, J (1979) Cognitive/academic language proficiency, linguistic interdependence, the optimum age question and other matters. *Working Papers on Bilingualism* 19: 121–129.
- De Jong, E and Freeman Field, R (2010) 'Bilingual Approaches', in Leung, C and Creese, A (eds) *English as an Additional Language: Approaches to Teaching Linguistic Minority Students*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Department for Education (2016) School pupils and their characteristics. Information collected in the January 2016 school census. Available online at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/552342/SFR20_2016_Main_Text.pdf
- Department for Education and Employment, and Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (1999) *The national curriculum: handbook for teachers in England*. London: Department for Education and Employment. Available online at: www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/1999-nc-primary-handbook.pdf
- Dörnyei, Z (2008) *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- García, O, Ibarra Johnson, S, and Seltzer, K (2017) *The Translanguaging Classroom: leveraging student bilingualism for learning*. Philadelphia: Caslon.
- Gillborn, D (1995) *Racism and Antiracism in Real Schools*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Hall, G and Cook, G (2013) *Own-language use in ELT: exploring global practices and attitudes*. British Council ELT Research Papers 13–01. London: British Council.
- Lamb, M and Budiyanoto (2013) 'Cultural challenges, identity and motivation in state school EFL', in Ushioda, E (ed) *International perspectives on motivation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 18–34.
- Leung, C (2001) English as an Additional Language: Distinctive Language Focus or Diffused Curriculum Concerns? *Language and Education* 15/1: 33–55.
- Leung, C and Creese, A (2010) (eds) *English as an Additional Language: Approaches to teaching linguistic minority students*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

- Meltzer, J and Hamann, E (2005) *Meeting the Literacy Development Needs of Adolescent English Language Learners Through Content-Area Learning – Part Two: Focus on Classroom Teaching and Learning Strategies*. Faculty Publications, Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education Paper 53. Available online at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/teachlearnfacpub/53>
- OECD (2015) *Can the performance gap between immigrant and non-immigrant students be closed?* PISA In Focus 53. OECD Publishing. Available online at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/can-the-performance-gap-between-immigrant-and-non-immigrant-students-be-closed_5jrxqs8mv327-en
- Rampton, B (1990) Displacing the 'Native Speaker': Expertise, Affiliation and Inheritance. *ELT Journal* 44/2: 107–101.
- Schleppegrell, M (2004) *The Language of Schooling*. New York: Routledge.
- Sharples, R (2016) *Rethinking 'English as an Additional Language': an ethnographic study of young migrants, language and schools*. Unpublished PhD, University of Leeds.
- Simpson, J (2016) 'English for Speakers of Other Languages: language education and migration', in Hall, G (ed) *Routledge Handbook of English Language Teaching*. London: Routledge, 191–205.
- United Nations (2017) *International Migration Report*. New York: United Nations. Available online at: www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationReport2017_Highlights.pdf
- UNHCR (2017) *UNHCR Global Trends 2017*. Available online at: <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2017/>
- Ushioda, E (ed) (2013) *International perspectives on motivation: language learning and professional challenges*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ward, C, Bochner, S and Furnham, A (2001) *The Psychology of Culture Shock*. London: Routledge.

ISBN 978-0-86355-926-6

© **British Council 2018 / J154**

The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities.