

Research for Teachers

Bilingualism

Overview

Bilingualism is an important yet under-researched field of study. Ofsted (2005) defined advanced bilingual learners as: 'pupils who have had all or most of their school education in the UK and whose oral proficiency in English is usually indistinguishable from that of pupils with English as a first language but whose writing may still show distinctive features related to their language background'.

A pilot project set up in January 2004 aimed to increase 'the confidence and expertise of mainstream primary teachers in meeting the needs of advanced bilingual learners and also raising the attainment of bilingual learners'. As the pilot developed it grew to include less advanced bilingual learners too. The pilot aimed to improve attainment of all these learners in literacy and numeracy, and to promote effective pedagogy and practice for pupils with English as an additional language. The pilot was set up by the Primary National Strategy (PNS) in partnership with the Ethnic Minority Achievement (EMA) Unit within the DfES in seven local authorities (LAs).

For this TLA research summary, we selected and summarised a study that reported on:

- how pupils and teachers benefited from the pilot
- the role of LA consultants in participating schools
- teaching and learning approaches
- how teachers and pupils were supported during the pilot
- the school factors that supported the programme, and
- interventions and practice that were influential in achieving the aims of the project.

The study is:

White, Kerensa, Karen Lewis and Felicity Fletcher-Campbell. *Raising the Achievement of Bilingual Learners in Primary Schools: Evaluation of the Pilot/Programme*. London: DfES (Research Report RR758), 2006.

Although the study refers to 'bilingual' and 'non-bilingual' as well as learners with English as a second language, in this summary we have opted for the terms EAL and non-EAL learners for simplicity. Because this programme involved individuals and organisations at different levels - LA, school, teachers - there is considerable detail about organisational and management issues connected with the programme. Nonetheless, the importance of the learning environment and whole school support is clear and we have highlighted how closely the two are interconnected in this summary. The summary is illustrated with examples from the study and is complemented by a number of case studies which provide extra detail about schools' practice in relation to EAL teaching and learning and about the key role of EAL specialist teachers.

Why is the issue important?

In many local authorities and schools there are significant numbers of children from ethnic minority backgrounds for whom English is an additional language (EAL). There is plenty of evidence that lack of fluency with English is a barrier to learning for many of these children.

What did the study find out?

The study found that the programme helped pupils with EAL:

- to be more confident and to have higher expectations of themselves
- to ask more questions and 'expect to understand'
- to be more prepared to use their home language in school; and
- to be more 'on task' and focused.

How was this achieved?

In this RfT, we look at the importance of creating effective action plans that included accessible targets, making appropriate resources available, effective targeting and monitoring, and appropriate and effective organisational and managerial structures for developing and supporting teaching and learning in the schools. Teaching approaches that made language development a priority were also critical to the success of the programme.

How was the research designed to be trustworthy?

Local authority personnel and practitioners were consulted in 21 schools within seven local authorities through interviews and visits. There were follow-up visits to 13 of the schools and visits to a further four schools.

What are the implications?

Teachers wishing to develop their own EAL practice might like to consider the following implications of the findings of this research:

- The study emphasised the importance of learning in pupils' home language. Could you encourage your children's parents in order to help them develop reading skills in their home language? Could you link up with institutions such as community centres or mosques to discuss how learning in school can be linked most effectively to first language learning?
- The study highlighted the value of interactions between pupils and parents. Could you give parents and carers more guidance on activities that they could do at home to support their children's learning such as reading books, listening to them read, experimenting with money?
- The study referred to a number of strategies that were effective in supporting speaking and listening among EAL learners such as guided reading, reading buddies, speaking frames, for example. Do you have any experience of these strategies? Would you find it helpful to work with - and possibly observe - your colleagues to refine your, and their, practice in these areas?

School leaders may wish to consider the following implications for whole-school EAL development:

- The research suggested that speaking and listening skills are important. Do you have a whole school strategy for developing your pupils' speaking and listening skills across different curriculum areas? Could the opportunities provided to the pupils at school be

complemented by work with their families? Are there any existing home-school or home-community links you could build on?

- The pilot programme was very structured and involved collaboration at a number of levels: between local authority leaders and school leaders, consultants and school leaders, consultants and school staff as well as between consultants and staff involved in other strategies like EMA support. Is it possible for you to access on-going support from your LA that would enable you to develop a programme for EAL learners in your school similar to that described in the study?

To read the full study, see <http://www.tla.ac.uk/site/SiteAssets/RfT1/06RE051%20Bilingualism.pdf>