

English as an Additional Language (EAL) or bilingual: which term is most commonly used in schools and why?

Malini Mistry is a Senior Lecturer in Early Years and Primary Education at the University of Bedfordshire.

The term English as an Additional Language is used to describe children who are learning English in addition to their home language(s) (Mistry and Sood, 2015) whereas, bilingual is used to describe those children who are fluent in speaking two languages. However, both terms do not mean the same and do not consider the level of children's language proficiency in any language. The arising debate is that sometimes both terms are used interchangeably in schools, implying the difference between them has not been understood, therefore, practice could also be the same for children who have EAL and children who are bilingual. Furthermore, there is a justification for the use of the term EAL over bilingual because in schools and government documentation this term is more widely understood and used.



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EAL or Bilingual?

Ofsted (2001:4) say that the term 'EAL is the most commonly used term to refer to bilingual children since 2001' suggesting schools use the term EAL more because there is a greater understanding that English is the additional language being learned regardless of other languages children could be familiar with. This is also supported by NALDIC (2015) who have further clarified that in comparison to bilingualism, EAL 'is a more neutral term' as it recognises that for some children English could even be their third or fourth language which overrides the use of bilingualism. Furthermore, Hawkins (2005) suggests the term EAL has been widely adopted in research as a key term over bilingualism because of its broader meaning. However, Carder (2008) implies that this is only applicable in the British context as other terms such as English as a Second Language (ESL) are more widely used in an international context. With rising immigration to England, children who are bilingual are increasing, therefore, Barker implies that the term bilingual can be perceived as 'a simplistic label for a complex phenomenon' (2006:213). This implies that sub variations within bilingualism are also not clearly understood, such as the degree of language fluency, in other languages, children may use. Hence, children who are bilingual or with EAL can be perceived as unable to understand, when in fact they may not fully understand instruction through the English language.



The debate

A key debate between the terms EAL and bilingual is that they do not indicate a child's level of language proficiency, which varies between and within languages and also contextually at different times in a child's life. Additionally, neither of these terms are clear about children's English language ability either, as sometimes children can take time to demonstrate their language understanding especially if they are new arrivals and in a strange environment. As language instruction in England takes place in English, children with EAL are trying to learn the English language as well as trying to access the curriculum at the same time, which can be a challenge. Therefore, if emphasis is always on

English, then proficiency in other languages could decline over time, implying that a child with EAL could lose their bilingual ability. This can be the case if the assimilation approach towards learning English in schools is applied. But, the concern here is that an assimilationist approach could devalue the cultural and social background of the child which is a crucial consideration when working with children who have EAL, as emphasised by Vygotsky (1978). This is because Vygotsky (1978) suggests that language learning cannot happen in isolation for children with EAL, because their cultural and background experiences are different to the majority. Hence, a one size approach for all children to learn English is not suitable. Children are all different, and on the one hand we



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celebrate their diversity, yet equally we try to squeeze them through a standard fit tunnel. Here it is essential firstly to know the child well, and then adapt practice and provision to suit the child's needs in order to help them make progress, thus illustrating Vygotsky's notion of interaction 'between the expert and novice' (1978).

Although, in England there can be greater use of the term EAL in comparison to bilingualism, it is important to be aware that when immersed in the English language, some children may lose their bilingual ability meaning that they change from bilingual to monolingual over time. Furthermore, some children with EAL may also chose to ignore their home language in an attempt to fit in more with their monolingual peers. Alternatively, as children progress through the primary education system, European languages are also introduced, implying that some of these children who have been termed bilingual may no longer be bilingual and instead could be termed multilingual instead. Perhaps a further debate is that learning and using languages other than English, is not as highly valued in the monolingual British context in comparison to the international forum. Here, the unwritten superior position of Standard English in comparison to other languages needs consideration because although all languages are deemed to be equal, they can be very different in structure and context compared to English. Bilingual children can be comparing two



languages, but children with EAL could be comparing more than two languages in their mind, which in turn influences their thinking and speech. Especially if languages have very little syntax and grammatical similarities between them like Arabic and English.

Justification of terms

According to Barker (2006) a range of other factors should be considered in relation to whether a child is labelled as bilingual such as proficiency of home language(s) and frequency of home language use. Bhatia (2006) argues that as there is no agreed definition of bilingualism accepted by all or how it can be

measured, this leads to confusion in practice and provision. Additionally there can also be a crossover in understanding between bilingualism and multilingualism as both refer to the use of more than one language. More recently, Bhatia (2017) has suggested that bilingualism is not simply how two languages are used, it is about how these languages shape children's identity as children will think in their strongest language.

Although the term EAL is used over bilingualism in English schools because Ofsted (2001) and NALDIC (2015) use it in their documentation, it is important to remember that children with EAL are not one 'heterogeneous group' because this group can 'include new arrivals' (with limited or no English), 'as well



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as advanced bilinguals' (Mistry and Sood, 2015). Another reason for the greater use of EAL over bilingualism is because staff recognise that children maybe learning English as a second, third or even fourth language depending on their cultural context and therefore regardless of whether they are initially labelled as bilingual or multilingual, these children are still learning English as the additional language here in England. Therefore, perhaps EAL is a broader and better umbrella term which includes a variety of sub groups in comparison to bilingualism which is aimed at one group of children only.

Conclusion

In summary, it is important for all those who work in education to be aware that the terms EAL and bilingual have different meanings and therefore different practice and provision will need to be in place to support children to make progress. Even though the term EAL may be used more than bilingualism, it is important to note that each term has sub groups with different implications for practice. Every child is unique and it is up to us to meet their needs effectively in a way that encourages them to love learning.

Pen Portrait

Malini Mistry is a Senior Lecturer in Early Years and Primary Education at the University of Bedfordshire. She has worked across a range of different course including Primary PGCE, Primary BA (QTS), EYTS and also leads the BA Applied Early Years Top Up. Prior to this she worked across all year groups in a primary school. Malini is a member of ASPE's National Executive. She is also a member of the Editorial Board of ASPE's International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education: Education 3-13 and Book Reviews Editor.

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**Danielle Sullivan
Teacher and Middle Leader
at the Brindishe Green
Primary School, (part of
the Brindishe Federation),
Lewisham, South London**

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