

Multilingual and monolingual children: differences, and perceptions of language learning.

What this research was about and why it is important

Primary-schools educate a mixture of monolingual English children and children with English as an additional language (EAL). Since the national curriculum is mainly monolingual in its orientation to teaching and learning, it is important to look at current practice, and at how this may be improved. This study looked at whether being multilingual gave EAL children an advantage in learning a modern foreign language (MFL), and whether teachers used EAL children's multilingualism during their MFL lessons. The researchers took a mixed approach, using interviews and observation, background and attitude questionnaires, tests of language proficiency, metalinguistic awareness and aspects of memory. They found that children's multilingualism is not drawn upon in the MFL classroom, and that the EAL children and the monolingual English children had very similar results on all the tests.

What the researchers did

- The study involved 49 children from two Year 4 classes (aged 8 to 9 years) who were learning French for 30 minutes a week in a large mainstream English primary school. The school is in a less affluent area, and has a high proportion of EAL children. 24 children were EAL children (9 different language backgrounds), and 25 were monolingual English.
- All children were individually interviewed. They were asked about their current and past experiences of language learning, how easy or difficult they find learning languages, and whether they like and use certain languages. These questions were linked to information the children provided on the background questionnaires. They were also asked about their current French lessons, whether use was made of EAL children's languages, and how they learned.
- Both class teachers were observed teaching a lesson, and were interviewed about their practice, their thoughts on language learning in schools, and their attitudes. The MFL/EAL co-ordinator was also interviewed.
- Children completed part of a previously used test of metalinguistic (language) awareness to find out whether they were drawing on previous language experience, and a computer-based test of memory to see how well they learned and retained new vocabulary. Children also completed short French tests in listening, reading and grammar.

What the researchers found

- EAL children and monolingual English children achieved similar results on all the tests. Girls did better than boys on the test of French proficiency, although the effect is small. The monolingual children did marginally better on the test of metalinguistic (language) awareness.
- Results from the EAL children showed that greater metalinguistic awareness and better memory for learning vocabulary was associated with better scores on the French test. The monolingual children did not show this pattern.
- The researchers found that EAL children with higher levels of English had higher levels of metalinguistic (language) awareness, better aspects of memory, and marginally better French scores.
- Nearly all children liked learning French. Children found spelling and pronunciation difficult. For all children, their understanding of French as a language did not go beyond a set of new words to learn.
- EAL children were much more aware that they did not know much of the language they were learning.
- All classroom instruction and management was in English. Teacher expectation in learning French was low, and in the busy curriculum was 'definitely not a priority'. Children were enthusiastic and engaged in lessons, but lessons consisted of rote learning of words and short phrases. There was no use made of children's home languages.

Things to consider

- In this study EAL children did not display any particular advantage from knowing more than one language.
- Unexpectedly, the monolingual English children did better than the EAL children on the test of metalinguistic (language) awareness, but all tests were based on English which may have had an effect on results.
- In this study 'potentially valuable knowledge, skills and experiences of these [EAL] learners [were] under-explored and under-utilised in the primary-school classroom'. This is an important point to explore further.

The test of metalinguistic awareness is available from <https://www.iris-database.org>

How to cite this summary: Tellier, A. & Roehr-Brackin, K. (2018). Multilingual and monolingual children: differences, and perceptions of language learning. *OASIS Summary* of Costley, T., Gkonou C., Myles F., et al. (2018) in *The Language Learning Journal*. <https://oasis-database.org>