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Education that works

**The Education of Portuguese Children in Britain:
Insights from Research and Practice in England
and Overseas**

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Chapter 9

Mother-tongue development and educational achievement: A perspective from practice

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Summary

The relationship between first and second language acquisition and academic achievement has been subject to research over a number of years in the field of second language acquisition and bilingualism. The most notable research into this relationship is that which is expressed in the threshold and interdependence theories of Cummins (1979). This paper uses these two theories to examine the implications of the relationship for the educational achievement of Portuguese-background children in the London borough of Lambeth.

9.1 Context

According to the Lambeth 2001 Pupil Survey, there were 1484 Portuguese background pupils in Lambeth schools. This constituted about 5% of the school population. Portuguese (at 5.2%) was the third most spoken language by Lambeth pupils, after English (62%) and Yoruba (6.7%). Since 1992, there had been almost a 247% increase in the number of Portuguese speakers in the borough's schools, the highest rise amongst the main languages (Lambeth Research and Statistics, 2001-2002). According to the Portuguese Consulate, the Portuguese population is projected to rise still further. The academic achievement of Portuguese-background children, therefore, is especially of interest to the Education Authority.

Since the monitoring of attainment by ethnicity began in 1999 in the education authority, Portuguese-background children have consistently been shown to score lowest across the key stages, and amongst all ethnic minority groups, over the years (RSU, 1998-2001). One of the most important factors for achievement in the case of pupils learning EAL, is that of the level of English language proficiency. It may be that the low achievement of Portuguese-background children is due to their lack of fluency in English. However, a preliminary analysis of the relationship between fluency and the 2001 key stage 2 attainment results in English of three language groups (Yoruba, Portuguese and Spanish background pupils), shows that whilst 33% in the Portuguese group are in the early stages of English language development (i.e. stages 1 and 2 on the Hilary Hester stages of fluency for EAL pupils - Hester et al, 1988), the Spanish group has 53% in the early stages of English language development. In other words, there are proportionately more early stage learners of English in the Spanish group than in the Portuguese group. Yet, in terms of attainment, 60% of Spanish background children achieved level 4+, whilst just over 50% of Portuguese background pupils achieved level 4+. Perhaps of significance is that 11% of Portuguese background pupils judged to be fluent in English did not achieve level 4, compared to less than 2% of Spanish background pupils fluent in English, and 7% of Yoruba background pupils. If the level of English language proficiency has a direct correlation with the level of attainment in National Curriculum tests in English, which data from Lambeths Research and Statistics Unit (RSU) seem to support, then why is it that the correlation does not appear to follow in the case of the Portuguese group, who had less early stage learners compared with other groups and yet achieved lowest?

Another reason for looking more closely at Cummins' theories in relation to the Portuguese pupils in Lambeth, is that poverty, also a factor that is often cited as impacting on achievement (RSU, 2002), does not appear to explain the differences in achievement between groups. To the extent that Free School Meals is used as an indicator of poverty, Lambeth RSU's data show that almost 50% of Spanish background pupils have Free School Meals, whilst a lower percentage (about 35%) applies to the Portuguese pupils.

The number of years of education has also been cited as an important factor (Cummins, 1976; Collier 1989) that impacts on achievement in the second language. Again, data from Lambeth's RSU show that whilst 78% of 11 year old Spanish and Yoruba background pupils who had been in school since Year 3 (8 years old) or before achieved level 4 in the National Curriculum for English, only 58% of Portuguese background pupils did so. Similarly, almost 66% of Spanish background pupils who had been in school since Year 3 or before gained level 4 in Maths, compared to only 54% of Portuguese pupils. So when considering the number of years spent in the education system, Portuguese pupils again compare unfavourably with the other two nearest language groups in that when the length of period in the English education system is taken into consideration, Portuguese pupils again were less likely to achieve target levels on National Curriculum tests than the other two groups.

The underachievement of Portuguese background pupils in Lambeth cannot, it appears, be explained through focusing on their having proportionately more early stage learners of English than other groups, or having more pupils from a lower socio-economic group, or having more who are recent arrivals. What else then may be impacting negatively on the achievement of Portuguese pupils? It surely cannot be that the underachievement of Portuguese pupils is due to many of them having special educational needs (SEN). Surprisingly it seems to be the case in one primary school that almost 28% of the children on the SEN Register are Portuguese pupils. Of all those Portuguese pupils on the SEN Register in that school, 50% are described as having learning difficulties, as opposed to having speech and language difficulties, or emotional behaviour problems, or medical needs.

Whilst proficiency in English is monitored for impact on achievement, and prior attainment has been cited as being 'the best predictor of a pupil's ultimate performance' (RSU, 2001), little attention is paid to the extent that the developing bilingual child's knowledge of their first language (therefore their prior attainment) interacts with their acquisition of English in the schooling context. This paper seeks to look more closely at the relationship between the mother tongue development of Portuguese children and their educational achievement in English.

9.2 Relationship between mother tongue development and educational achievement

Research into second language acquisition and bilingualism has provided evidence that points to a link between proficiency in the first language and academic achievement in the second (see reviews in Cummins, 2000; Hakuta, 1986; Ramirez, 1992; Thomas and Collier, 1997). Cummins suggested that children need to attain a critical level of mother tongue proficiency in order to avoid negative cognitive consequences. He developed the Threshold Theory to explain that 'there may be threshold levels of linguistic competence which bilingual children must attain both in order to avoid cognitive deficits and to allow the potentially beneficial aspects of becoming bilingual to influence their cognitive growth' (Cummins, 1984, p 107; see also Cummins 1976, 1979, 1986).

Cummins posited that 'the attainment of a lower threshold level of bilingual competence would be sufficient to avoid any negative cognitive effects; but the attainment of second, higher, level of bilingual competence might be necessary to lead to accelerated cognitive growth.'(Cummins, 1984, p107)

In seeking to find ways to address the underachievement of Portuguese pupils, I looked at the development of Portuguese mother tongue in some pupils to see whether or not the Threshold and the Interdependence Theories can offer some explanation and ways forward.

For the purpose of the focus of this paper on the relationship between mother tongue development and academic achievement of Portuguese children, what is of particular interest is the claim that children need to develop age-appropriate levels in at least one of their languages in order to offset any potential negative cognitive effects that would arise from not attaining the first threshold level. Specifically, in relation to the role of language and educational achievement, the idea that children need to develop the ability to handle the language of the classroom is of particular pertinence. The interest here is in the first threshold level.

The language of the classroom is often described as involving the academic functions of language. To explain the phenomenon of difficulties encountered by seemingly fluent second language learners in school, Cummins pointed out the differences between having basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic linguistic proficiency (CALP). The former is typified by face-to-face conversational type discourse, where the meaning of a communication is supported by a variety of contextual clues. The latter is typified by more abstract, academic type discourse, where there is less contextual support, and where meaning is carried through the medium of language only.

Cummins also developed the Interdependence Theory which explains that concepts and skills acquired in the first language is transferable to the second language (Cummins, 1984, 1991) and affect the rate and level of development in the second language. The idea is that the greater the first language abilities and the more underlying linguistic knowledge available to support the development of the second language, the more rapid and complete the acquisition.

CALP is the ability to handle the language of academic functions, language used for the less immediate contexts, as opposed to language for the 'here and now' as in BICS. It most typifies the language used for such functions as sequencing, explaining, hypothesising, analysing, synthesising. These functions develop alongside thinking skills. Related to this is the notion of Cummins that there is a Common Underlying Proficiency where concepts and skills acquired in the first language are transferable to or are accessible through the second language (Cummins, 2000). This widely accepted theory explains that if the Common Underlying Proficiency is weak, this will affect the development of the second language. This paper, therefore, is premised on this relationship – that the underachievement of Portuguese pupils is related to the underdevelopment of the mother tongue, which in turn means the development of English as an additional language is based on a weak Common Underlying Proficiency, which then impacts negatively on their achievement.

The challenge, therefore, is to find out as far as possible, whether the mother tongue of the Portuguese speaking children is developing sufficiently to attain the first threshold level, the level which allows skills to be transferable to learning English in

the classroom context. This paper uses mother tongue assessment to investigate this issue.

9.3 Mother tongue assessment

Mindful of the model of second language development as being an interaction between learner characteristics and learning opportunities, mother tongue assessment should not just be about assessing the linguistic competence of the learner. The context is an important factor that impacts on mother tongue development. It is therefore important that mother-tongue assessment takes into consideration other factors such as the sociolinguistic and sociocultural contexts which affect the life experience and background knowledge of the learner. Those with more background knowledge and life experiences will have more to draw on to help their learning whilst those with limited knowledge of their mother tongue and limited life experience and background knowledge will have a weak base for the development of the second language. Therefore, mother-tongue assessment should include not only a comprehensive language assessment but also the gathering of information about the learner's educational and life histories in order for clues to their lack of progress to be gathered.

To look more closely at the relationship between mother-tongue development and educational achievement of the Portuguese children in Lambeth schools, I focused on a sample of children who had been referred to me by the special needs coordinators (SENCOs) in schools. These are generally children who have been in the system some time, and who have had support from EAL teachers but whose progress is considered either to be too slow or lacking. With these children, I used a mother tongue assessment procedure which endeavoured to find out as far as possible a range of information pertaining to the development and level of proficiency of the mother tongue, and which encompasses some of the principles of what is called 'ecological assessment' (Heron & Heward, 1982, mentioned in Cloud, 1994) in which all factors and conditions which impact on the teaching and learning process are examined for possible explanations of failure to learn and for possible interventions to promote learning. These include attitude and expectations of the teacher, curriculum relevance

and presentation, quality and quantity of teaching support, and factors related to the learner him/herself.

Basically, the mother tongue assessment that I carried out follows Spolsky's framework of looking at the external and internal factors that might offer clues to the questions 'why isn't learning occurring?', and 'what kind of intervention is called for to enhance the learning process?' (Spolsky, 1989).

Lee (1996) reported the findings of the No-Cost Research Group who found that 'children as young as 3 and 4 years of age are susceptible to external and internal assimilative forces to learn English...particularly when the curriculum is presented in English, and [when] English proficiency provides a link to social communication and acceptance' (p 515). Children in this situation are then susceptible to the workings of 'subtractive' bilingualism while English takes over as the preferred language and the mother tongue assumes a secondary position in the children's daily communicative lives. At this age switching to using a second, weaker language before the first language has adequately developed can impact negatively on their cognitive development.

When children lose productive as well as receptive knowledge of their mother tongue, and if parents have limited knowledge of the second language, communication barriers can result. Parents are then limited in their ability to socialise and teach children during a critical period of early childhood social, cognitive, and linguistic development. They will be severely hampered in their ability to transmit knowledge, cultural values and belief systems effectively. Certainly, this situation is corroborated in my interviews with mothers, who admit that their children are unable to speak to their parents only in Portuguese and who, themselves, all have limited proficiency in English.

Researchers have stressed the importance of not using norm-referenced tests with language minority children. Therefore, the procedure used for assessing the mother tongue development of the Portuguese pupils in these case studies aims to elicit information on both communicative skills and cognitive/academic language skills in as naturalistic a setting as possible, within the constraints of a school context.

Essentially, the mother tongue assessment that I devised adhered to the following procedure:

- The school is asked to provide background information on the child to be assessed such as age, year group, mother tongue, religion, date of admission into school, reason for requesting mother tongue assessment.
- The parents are invited to an interview with the assessor to elicit further background information, including:
 - language use at home (what language is/languages are used by whom, with whom, to whom?),
 - educational level/literacy of parents,
 - parents' views on child's proficiency in mother tongue,
 - home/social network patterns (to find out the extent to which the child's mother tongue development is supported by access to a community of mother tongue speakers, or not as the case may be),
 - the child's previous educational experiences.
 - Any medical/health information that is relevant (e.g. hearing)
- The interview and assessment are conducted in Portuguese through an interpreter. The assessment is designed to elicit utterances on which a judgement can be made about the child's knowledge of the language (vocabulary and structure), as well as some aspects of cognitive/academic proficiency related to the language of schooling (such as asking the child to follow complex instructions, use language beyond the 'here and now', use language to explain, infer, and to structure ideas in a logical sequence).

For the background information gathering interview, usually it was the mothers who came, even though in most cases they were also working. It is important for any mother tongue assessment to gather as much background information as possible about the child's bilingual development in the period before the assessment. Significant information can be gleaned that provide clues as to what the issues might be for the child. Although in my experience there have been parents whose views of their child's linguistic ability differ from the findings of the assessment, with this set of parents we are discussing I have not found that to be the case. This part of the

mother-tongue assessment procedure also acknowledges that parents are a rich source of information and have a significant role in their children's education (see also Robinson, 2000).

The interview is also important for the opportunity it provides to explain to the parents the relationship between the mother tongue and second language development, and to reassure them that it is fine to continue to speak their mother tongue at home and that it can be helpful to the child in the long term. Any recommendations about supporting language development for young children obviously need to be addressed not only to the class teacher, but also to the parents/caregivers. The interviewer ensures that feedback is given to the parents and suggestions as to how to further support their child are discussed. If this part of the mother tongue assessment procedure is carried out as a three way communication – between the parent, teacher and assessor – then a unified approach can be agreed.

Recommendations for parents need to take into consideration what is realistic and what can be expected of the parents. Often, recommendations are the of the kind that would encourage parents to find out what topics are being studied at school, maybe using a home-school communication book, and to support their child's understanding of the topics by previewing or reviewing the topics at home through closer communication with the class teacher. Parents are encouraged to develop oracy in the mother tongue at home by engaging their child in talk that requires them to explain and describe; by reading and talking about the home reader together and by playing games with their child – games that provide opportunities to use language and develop visual memory. Parents should be made aware of the need for their child to engage in listening to and using language in large, continuous, chunks, and not just short interchanges. Recommendations are made to enrol their child in Portuguese mother tongue classes as soon as possible.

For the part of the school and teacher, recommendations would encourage closer communication, maybe through a home-school liaison book, where weekly topics and key learning objectives are communicated to the parents so that they have a better knowledge of what is required of their child and can help to reinforce ideas/concepts at home. Where appropriate, it may be suggested that the teacher models sharing a

book with the child for the mother – to demonstrate what kind of reading behaviour, talk and questioning skills are involved. Even though language development is a joint effort between the home and school, the onus still falls on the school to ensure that things are happening. To the extent that we cannot monitor or guarantee the support from home, the school has a duty to address the needs of the pupil in their charge. It is here that a Code of Practice for EAL is sorely needed. For unless we can ensure that the school and classteachers are carrying out the recommendations, the needs of the pupil will not be met and the consequence of this is that eventually what began as a language development issue may become a learning development issue, as predicted by Cummins' Threshold Theory.

The recommendations, therefore, seek to focus the teacher's attention on that aspect of language development that goes beyond looking at superficial fluency, and links language to curriculum learning needs. Focused targets can be set for the pupil to develop certain linguistic functions such as describing, explaining, sequencing, making inferences. Various strategies for developing oracy and literacy can be recommended (e.g. using talking partners, opportunities for role play, providing taped stories, dialogue journals, scaffolding for speaking and writing).

Where it is felt that the child may have additional needs, a recommendation is made for further assessment to be carried out by other specialists.

Whilst there are obvious disadvantages in conducting the assessment through a third person (the interpreter), there was no other way in the absence of bilingual Portuguese teachers with training in bilingualism and second language development. The best we could do under the circumstances was to be consistent in the use of an interpreter who was well briefed and who with time gained valuable experience and insights which contributed to the assessment process.

The interviews with the mothers were either conducted before the language assessment or after. The mothers were never present during the assessment lest the child should feel inhibited, or lest the mothers should inadvertently interfere in the proceedings. During the mother tongue assessment, extensive notes from the parental

interviews were kept by the assessor, while the interpreter made notes of language samples during the language assessment.

The purpose of the mother tongue assessment is, on the one hand, to establish, as far as is possible, whether or not the child has age-appropriate proficiency in the mother tongue, and on the other hand, to see if we can find clues as to why the child is not making the expected progress, so that strategies can be devised to further support the child's progress. However, should the child be shown not to have age-appropriate proficiency in the mother tongue, it is not a simple case of concluding that the child has inherent learning difficulties and can be diagnosed as having special educational needs. It is widely recognised that because of the process of 'subtractive bilingualism' experienced by children learning in monolingual English mainstream classrooms, it is not appropriate to assess for academic language proficiency when children have not been receiving academic teaching input in their mother tongue and especially when they have been in the system for some time (Willig 1986, mentioned in Cloud 1994)

Nevertheless, mother tongue assessment can throw some light on the degree of the child's bilingualism and how the lack of progress might be related to the effects of having to struggle in the two languages when they are both below the first threshold level. Where there are specific language difficulties, these should manifest themselves in both languages and may be detected through mother tongue assessment.

9.4 What can mother tongue assessment tell us?

It is worth noting that most of the requests for mother tongue assessment received so far have been for pupils in their early years of education. The six examples used for discussion here span the age group 5 – 7 years old, covering Year 1 to Year 3 in the education system. All of them had been in the English education system since the beginning, i.e. they entered school in the Reception Year in most cases, and in the Nursery in a couple of cases. This is the age group that various studies (see Cummins in Baker & Hornberger, 2001) have found to be particularly at risk in terms of academic progress, compared with older newly arrived pupils with well-developed literacy skills in the L1. This phenomenon is explained by Cummins' Developmental

Interdependence Hypothesis (*ibid.*, p 75) which points out that ‘there is an interaction between the language of instruction and the type of competence the child has developed in his L1 prior to school’, so that if certain aspects of L1 knowledge (such as the more abstract use of language) is not fully developed on entry to school, the child ‘may have limited access to the cognitive-linguistic operations necessary to assimilate L2 and develop literacy skills in that language’. (*ibid.*, p79)

In seeking to find clues from mother tongue assessment that might throw light on the difficulties these pupils are encountering and which might be forming barriers to progress in school, I found that some patterns seemed to emerge in their mother tongue development.

Where the pupils were found to have most difficulties was that part of the assessment which required them to talk beyond the ‘here and now’, which I would consider to be assessing their ability in handling CALP. Also, all the pupils assessed displayed gaps in their lexis. Research into Turkish children growing up in the Netherlands (Verhallen and Schoonen, 1993, 1998) have also found that differences between L1 and L2 children existed in their ‘deep lexical knowledge’ (which includes spelling, word associations, grammatical information and meaning). Another (Leseman, 2000) found that the impact of immersing young Turkish children in L2 all-Dutch preschools and kindergartens was not so beneficial for their bilingual development. Leseman posited two reasons. The first was that for the children lacking in basic communicative skills in the L2, the all-Dutch preschools and kindergartens presented a disjuncture since the learning environment was premised on building continuously on children’s basic communicative skill in Dutch. The second reason was that even though the children were more advanced in their L1 (Turkish), it still required support for further development. However, this support was neither provided in the all-Dutch preschools and kindergartens, nor at home because of the low level of education of the parents and related socioeconomic and cultural factors. Even at this age, the research study found that subtractive bilingualism was already impacting on the bilingual development of the children. Since transfer of the so-called Common Underlying Proficiency can only occur if one of the languages is well-developed, the impact on learning and the development of cognitive academic linguistic proficiency in such a subtractive bilingualism context cannot be dismissed.

The study by Lynne Cameron (2002) into the vocabulary development of some long-term EAL students (i.e. older secondary students who have been in the English education system since the beginning of schooling) is an indication of the kind of impact on academic achievement of EAL pupils that L2 schooling can have, without appropriate support. As Cameron hinted, ‘Both groups (L1 and L2 speakers) need attention to academic and low frequency vocabulary, but they bring to this...different profiles... and thus require different teaching strategies.’ (p. 109). I believe much of the support provided for many EAL pupils is premised on language support which does not take into consideration the pupil’s starting point in L1 and the need to build and extend from there.

In this study, most of the Portuguese pupils assessed also had difficulty in retelling a story in a way which conveyed the gist or the main points. Some could not sequence a series of three pictures depicting a girl pouring water from a bottle and drinking it. Most of them were not able to respond when required to explain (e.g. a favourite game), to infer (from a picture prompt), to suggest solutions to problems (as depicted in a picture prompt).

The comments from parents interviewed all refer to their child being monolingual Portuguese-speaking prior to starting schooling. The pattern of language use, however, at the time of the assessment, shows that the child was becoming a dominant user of English for communication – using English with siblings and friends, and in responding to parents. In most cases they felt that their child’s English is better than their Portuguese.

One parent described her child’s use of Portuguese as, in one instance, ‘she can make herself understood’, and in another instance ‘she can’t express herself’. The same child will speak in Portuguese to her mother, who by her own admission has a limited understanding of English, but ‘for more complex issues, will talk to her father (who can speak English)’. The mother also noted that her child ‘does not like to talk’, yet comments that ‘in school, she is always chatting in English’. She ‘can’t report back (on what she has been doing, e.g. when she has been to a party, or swimming with an

aunt, or playing with friends)'; 'she's just not interested'. At home, the child 'likes to shout and scream when she doesn't get what she wants'.

What would explain the contradictory observations that the child 'does not like to talk' at home on the one hand, and 'chatting away in English' in school, on the other hand? What lies behind the observation that the child 'can make herself understood' yet 'can't express herself'? Can we say anything about the observation that at home she would 'shout and scream when she doesn't get what she wants'? Would it be a fair conclusion to come to that all the observations put together would appear to indicate that here is a child struggling with two languages?

All the parents (mothers) interviewed were of the opinion that the children were more proficient in English than in Portuguese and that at home they would be either speaking English, as with their siblings, or use Portuguese mixed with English. The children would not be able to maintain a conversation in Portuguese or understand conversation of a more extended complex nature. Whilst code-mixing is a common phenomenon, and sometimes cited as a reflection of true bilingualism, it is not so helpful for children who are still in the early stages of developing bilingualism. From the home perspective, the children appear to have more proficiency in English than Portuguese. From the school's perspective, however, the children are judged to be struggling with English. Since so much learning in school is dependent on language (English), one can see how some schools might see these children as having learning difficulties, when they are perceived as struggling across the curriculum, not just in the literacy lessons. In other words, one can see how an issue of language development can become, from the school's perspective, an issue of learning difficulties.

It has been commented (Hamayan and Damico, 1991, mentioned in Gonzalez et al, 1996) that where children have specific language difficulties, their difficulties should manifest themselves in both languages. In one pupil that we assessed, this appeared to be the case. On the form requiring the school to give reasons for requesting the mother-tongue assessment, the school had noted that the child had problems in recalling in sequence, with word order in spoken English, and clarity of expression.

The mother commented that she was concerned about her child's word order in spoken Portuguese and wondered if she was dyslexic.

The mother tongue assessment showed that the child was not able to perform tasks that required sequencing. Although her pronunciation and intonation were clear, thus giving the impression that she was fluent, she was not able to convey meaning clearly. The interpreter noted instances of wrong use of tense, word order, and examples of inversions within words e.g 'valei' instead of 'lavei' (I washed), and 'romeu' instead of 'morreu' (died). In such a case, mother tongue assessment can provide evidence of some underlying developmental problem.

However, for the other case studies, evidence of where the children struggle with their mother tongue is in areas requiring them to use language for more decontextualised situations, language on which literacy will be built. (See Francis and Reyhner, 2002 for more on the interface between L1 oracy and L2 literacy development.)

It may be argued that many monolingual English-speaking children from that age range would find it difficult to express themselves in English when asked to explain, clarify and retell a story in a logical sequence. The point is that English mother tongue speaking children are able to develop these abilities using a language system in which they have already developed a degree of proficiency. The indications from the sample so far seem to corroborate the story of bilingual development in a subtractive context. That is, these children begin as monolingual speakers of Portuguese prior to schooling. They enter school at a time when elements of the first threshold level, aspects of the Common Underlying Proficiency, are being developed. This is when the transfer to the second language occurs. This is also when children are required to move from BICS type communication, as typified by interaction with caregivers and interested adults in familiar settings, to more CALP-like communication. The focus on raising achievement in literacy and numeracy in school may have precipitated an early interest in the perceived lack of progress of these children. In several cases, lack of progress in literacy is cited as the reason for a request for mother tongue assessment by the school. The children in the case studies are all at the stage when literacy development is beginning to take place. I believe that it is the disjuncture in language development, where the move to CALP in

English is not built on previous development in the mother tongue, which is causing many of the problems of lack of progress in English.

9.5 Concluding remarks

Whilst most education authorities are monitoring the levels of proficiency in English for pupils learning EAL, there is a failure to take into account differences in the degree of bilingualism and the impact on second language acquisition and therefore in the educational achievement of pupils learning EAL.

Our own LEA data makes references to the correlation between the fluency in English of ‘bilingual’ pupils and their academic achievement. Whilst this is useful in highlighting the fact that ‘once the disadvantage of language is overcome, it is possible to attain high levels of achievement for all key stages’, it does not offer any insights into the relationship between bilingualism and second language learning and, more importantly, in contradiction to the emphasis on prior attainment in predicting academic achievement, says nothing about the impact of level of proficiency in the mother tongue on second language acquisition and achievement. To that extent, referring to the pupils as ‘bilingual’ sheds no light on the relationship between bilingualism and their educational achievement in the second language, since the emphasis of monitoring is on their fluency in English, their ‘EALness’, rather than their bilingualism. Using mother tongue assessment at least throws some light on the relationship between degrees of bilingualism and educational achievement.

However, it must be emphasised here that mother tongue assessment, in this case, is a tool that is used to shed light on a host of other factors that impact on educational achievement in a second language. It provides a framework for educational professionals to take into consideration the social context and environmental factors, such as the presence or absence of support (in the family, in the school and classroom, or in society) for the development of linguistic and academic skills.

Whilst most educationalists subscribe to the principle of valuing the mother tongue and accepting bilingualism as an asset, precisely how it might impact on cognitive

development and educational achievement seems not to be a matter of concern for understanding. If the weight of evidence from research shows that there is a need to pay attention to mother tongue development, not just for its own sake, but, importantly, because it has implications for educational achievement in the second language, then educationalists must take it upon themselves to develop their knowledge base in relation to bilingualism and mother tongue development.

As Spolsky says, 'it is likely that multiple factors are contributing to a lack of achievement and that all must be identified and addressed in order to enhance learning.' Whilst EAL pedagogy (see NALDIC paper, the distinctiveness of EAL, 2000) covers many of the factors pertinent to the teaching and learning of pupils learning EAL, the issue of mother tongue development has not been given the attention that research into bilingualism and second language development would suggest that it warrants. It is a pity that it is only when there is lack of progress in spite of EAL support that the issue of mother tongue development is brought into play.

In the case of the Portuguese pupils in Lambeth, mother tongue assessment would seem to demonstrate the need to pay closer attention to the issue of concurrent mother tongue development as an essential ingredient contributing to educational achievement which cannot be short-circuited. I propose that more systematic assessment and monitoring of mother tongue development should be included so that the particular needs of Portuguese pupils can be addressed more systematically. Not only that, but since mother-tongue development in this country is primarily supported at home only, there is a need to examine what opportunities there are to communicate to families what is needed in order for that to happen in a way that will support cognitive academic linguistic development – the kind of language development that will support their children in school learning. Rather than the usual well-meaning encouragement on the grounds of promoting self-esteem/identity, and some vague, unexplained statement that development in L1 supports development in L2 offered by school, and rather than parents feeling apologetic and guilty about their lack of English and inability to help their children at home, parents need to understand, and schools need to explain, that it is the continuous use of cognitively complex communication at home that will help their children. Mother-tongue assessment can

be used to facilitate in-depth discussion between school and parents to explore ways of linking L1 and L2 to support cognitive academic linguistic development, so essential to the academic success of the children.

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