Inclusion in the Primary School:
A Case Study of a Year 2 child with English as an Additional Language

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This article considers the importance of inclusion in education and reviews how to identify and overcome the barriers faced by a child learning English as an additional language (EAL). Previous research has focused on how inclusion reduces barriers to learning not only for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), but for all pupils. Additionally, research has noted a continuous increase in the number of EAL children in schools each year and the large number of teachers who are unaware of how to effectively support them. This article brings these ideas together, looking at how teachers’ lack of understanding can lead them to creating barriers to learning for pupils. In particular, it looks at how mislabelling, communication and a lack of independence can limit the amount of progress an EAL child makes in school. It draws on the case study of a 7-year-old EAL pupil who has recently moved to England. Information from this case study will be used to look at how a class teacher can make changes to their teaching practice to try and overcome their pupil’s barriers to learning. It also discusses the importance of teachers having a greater understanding of teaching EAL pupils to try and prevent some barriers to learning being created in the first place. The article thus offers a place to start for discovering how best to support an EAL child in school and how to create an inclusive culture where every child feels a sense of belonging.

Key words: Inclusion, EAL, belonging, SEND, primary teaching
Introduction

This article is based on the case study of a child, referred to as ‘Emma’ (pseudonym), who has English as an additional language (EAL). Emma is 7 years old, speaks no English and has recently started at a new school in the UK after moving from Romania. In addition, Emma’s parents do not speak any English which makes communication particularly difficult for the class teacher who has no experience of teaching an EAL pupil. Due to their lack of experience, the class teacher relied on advice from other professionals for support. Subsequently, this led to the class teacher making decisions which inadvertently created some barriers to Emma’s learning, which will be discussed in more detail below. As a result of Emma’s case study, this article aims to discuss critically the issues surrounding inclusion and will also look at how to identify and overcome some of the barriers to learning Emma faces.

Inclusion is a key concept within education and schools today and is a way of thinking which has become “part of formative education dialogue, policy and practice” (Gibson, 2009, p. 12). Inclusion is frequently referred to when discussing pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), but it can be argued that it is relevant for every child in the class (Corbett, 2001). Gedge (2016) writes that a child has SEND if they require special educational provision as a result of their disability or learning difficulty. However, children with English as an additional language (EAL) are often incorrectly labelled as having a learning difficulty just because they do not speak English (Devarakonda, 2013) and this is one of the issues which will be discussed below.

According to Terzi (2010) many people agree on the importance of inclusion; however, some professionals get confused about its definition in an educational context. Booth and Ainscow (2002) and Topping and Maloney (2005) seem to agree that inclusion in education means valuing pupils’ differences and overcoming their barriers to learning. Booth and Ainscow (2002) expand on this, noting that inclusion reduces barriers to learning for all students not only those who are categorised as having SEND. Due to this, research and reading focussed on inclusion in the context of SEND can arguably also be relevant for children with EAL. Implementing an inclusive approach looks different in every school and is something which takes time to achieve (Briggs, 2016). Booth and Ainscow (2002) identify three dimensions which are necessary to making schools more inclusive: creating inclusive cultures, producing inclusive policies and evolving inclusive practices. An inclusive classroom can consist of creating a welcoming atmosphere, personalising the curriculum, and having additional staff or specialist resources (Gedge, 2016), but overall inclusion should support the civil rights of all learners and is an approach which prepares children for adulthood (Karten, 2005).
Barriers to learning are frequently referred to in definitions of inclusion (Devarakonda, 2013; Topping and Maloney, 2005; Booth and Ainscow, 2002), which suggests that overcoming these barriers is an essential feature when creating an inclusive classroom. Barriers to learning are defined as the difficulties pupils encounter whilst learning and they are a key aspect in the social model of disability (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). The SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) is founded upon the social model of disability which is based upon valuing learners, identifying their barriers to learning and trying to overcome these (Soan, 2004a). Simply put, according to this approach, the way society views somebody with a disability or impairment is what disables a person more than the disability or impairment itself (Gedge, 2016). Identifying and trying to remove Emma’s barriers to learning will be discussed and because Emma has EAL, it can be argued that the social model of disability is also relevant to overcoming Emma’s barriers to learning. Emma faces three main barriers to their learning; firstly, being incorrectly labelled as SEND and having low ability. The second is Emma’s lack of independence and the third barrier to learning is that Emma is unable to communicate with the teacher.

Many new EAL pupils who arrive in school need to feel a sense of belonging, as this promotes children to have a positive attitude to learning, especially if their culture appears to be valued in the classroom (Conteh, 2015). Creating inclusive cultures is one of the three dimensions Booth and Ainscow (2002) state as necessary to become an inclusive school and as a result, it can be argued that valuing a pupil’s home language and culture is an important way to start including them within the school (Crosse, 2007). In addition, Crosse (2007) proposes that employing a member of staff who can speak the child’s language can be one way for a school to value and support an EAL child’s home language. Some schools will not have the funding to do this but Soan (2004b) suggests there are a number of other ways to recognise a learner’s home language. Displaying their national flag in the classroom, listening to their home country’s music and reading traditional tales from their country are all ways to celebrate an EAL child’s language (Pim, 2011). Encouraging pupils to answer the register in their home language is another effective strategy (Northcote, 2014). Including these resources in the classroom to ensure Emma feels valued can therefore arguably be suitable ways to include Emma when they first arrive in school.

According to statistics, 20.1 per cent of primary-age pupils speak a language other than English and this number has been steadily rising since 2006 (DfE, 2016). Due to the rise in children whose first language is not English, it can be argued that EAL needs to become a central part of teachers’ professional knowledge (Conteh, 2015). Another reason why teachers need a greater understanding of EAL pupils’ needs is because EAL pupils are frequently mislabelled as having SEND by teachers. Emma’s class teacher had never taught a child with EAL before so relied on
advice from other professionals within the school to think of teaching strategies. Because of this, Emma was initially mislabelled as having SEND. Some EAL learners have additional SEND, but, if an EAL child has difficulties, saying the child has SEND is not usually the most relevant option (Pim, 2012). Both Northcote (2014) and Devarakonda (2013) acknowledge that many EAL pupils are incorrectly labelled as having SEND and this is often due to a limited understanding of EAL and poor assessment of the child’s needs when they first arrive in school. Furthermore, the SEND code of practice clarifies this, stating “difficulties related solely to learning English as an additional language are not SEND” (DfE, 2015, p. 85). Subsequently, it can be argued that incorrectly classing Emma as having SEND implies that labelling continues to be an issue in education (Richards, 2012; Terzi, 2010).

Incorrectly labelling an EAL child as having SEND creates a barrier to their learning because both Gedge (2016) and Soan (2004a) argue that labelling can result in adults lowering their expectations of pupils and focusing on the child’s deficits, both of which can limit the child’s progress. This means an EAL child who is said to have SEND may not be stretched or challenged as much as they should be because the class teacher has lower expectations of them. One way a school could avoid incorrectly labelling EAL children as SEND, and therefore remove this barrier to learning, is by creating the role of an inclusion co-ordinator within their school. An inclusion co-ordinator combines SEND with the EAL oversight which allows the co-ordinator to have a broader understanding of SEND and EAL because their role covers both labels (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). This could arguably result in fewer EAL pupils being incorrectly labelled because the inclusion co-ordinator will probably be able to recognise the difference between SEND and EAL due to their greater understanding. Appropriately training teachers in Emma’s school on the difference between SEND and EAL children’s needs (Soan, 2004b) may also reduce the number of teachers who have lowered expectations which could subsequently remove this barrier to learning for Emma.

Another situation in which Emma could have been mislabelled is when the class teacher chose to sit her with low ability pupils during lessons. Placing Emma with low-ability pupils may have created a barrier to learning where Emma’s abilities are not recognised and challenged. Many teachers feel it is more appropriate to sit new EAL pupils with low-ability children; however, if the EAL child is not low-ability they may end up hampered in their learning by not being provided with cognitively challenging activities (Conteh, 2015). Northcote (2014) agrees with this, arguing that it is wrong for teachers to assume a child with EAL is less intelligent or linguistically disadvantaged because the child may end up feeling like their previous experiences and knowledge is not valued.
Knight (2017) argues that even though a child has difficulty reading and writing in English, their writing and grammar skills in their home language may be on par with a middle ability child. Incorrectly labelling an EAL child as low ability is an idea which Webster (2011) also supports. As a result, it is important teachers look at the child’s ability in all areas when including them in the classroom because Emma’s capabilities may be disregarded if inclusion only focuses on one aspect, such as the fact they do not understand English (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). Furthermore, it is often better to place EAL pupils in middle ability groups because they will be able to hear discussions take place which model everyday classroom language (Conteh, 2015; Pim, 2012). It is often a difficult balance between providing EAL pupils with challenging activities and supporting their understanding of language (Conteh, 2015) but it is important that the ability to learn an additional language is recognised as an asset by teachers who want to be inclusive (Devarakonda, 2013; Northcote, 2014). Based on this research, it seems reasonable to argue that the class teacher should not label Emma, who cannot speak English, as less able. Instead, placing Emma in the middle ability group seems to be an appropriate way to support her language development and prevent a barrier to learning where Emma’s understanding is not being extended.

Emma often has the support of a teaching assistant in class and out of class, through one-to-one interventions. During these interventions, the TA will work with Emma on areas of learning with which she struggles. While there are benefits to Emma working with the TA, it also may create a barrier to learning where Emma relies too much on this support and has subsequently become less independent during lessons. A child relying too much on the support of another adult is often referred to as having ‘learned helplessness’ (Gedge, 2016; Sullivan, 2005) and in Emma’s case, she has got used to the TA being there to help her understand tasks and to communicate. Research found that high levels of support from TAs often have a negative impact on pupils’ attainment (Webster et al, 2011). Robertson (2014) suggests one reason for this may be because the TA’s role creates a barrier between the pupil receiving support and the class teacher who has main responsibility for the child’s learning. This is often because a pupil’s interaction with the TA is at the expense of time that could be spent with both the teacher and more importantly the child’s peers (Webster and Blatchford, 2015).

When a child becomes attached to or reliant on a TA, the class teacher needs to carefully rethink how the TA’s support should be used in their lessons (Gedge, 2016). This is because it is the class teacher who ultimately has the most responsibility for their pupils’ education (Gedge, 2016). Robertson (2013) notes that some people have misinterpreted the issue of children relying too much on TAs and arguing that schools should stop employing them. However, this should not be the case because TAs are not the problem, it is how they are utilised in the classroom which creates the
problem (Webster and Blatchford, 2015). Being aware of how a TA working one-one with a child can form a barrier is the first step in combatting this issue as the class teacher (Gedge, 2016). The next step is for the class teacher to change the way they plan their lessons so the child who relies on the TA is working in a variety of ways and with different people. Emma could be involved in group work or could work alongside peers who are more confident to support her in becoming an independent learner rather than relying solely on the TA (Soan, 2004b).

Research on collaborative group work has revealed the positive effects it can have on learners’ social skills and academic knowledge (Baines, Rubie-Davies and Blatchford, 2009) and Northcote (2014) writes that it can be a great way to support EAL pupils’ learning so they become more independent. Making pupils work in groups supports Vygotsky’s (1978) theory who argues all learning is done socially by working with the class teacher and their peers. Vygotsky’s philosophy seems to support the view that working with a variety of people is more appropriate than a child spending most of their time working with one adult, such as a TA. Subsequently, it seems that if the teacher is made aware of Emma’s independence issues, and plans lessons where pupils are working with different people in groups, Emma’s barrier to learning may be broken down.

Emma is categorised as a ‘new-to-English learner’ because she is an EAL child who is unable to speak any English. She is therefore at the earliest stages of learning the language (Pim, 2012). According to Northcote (2014, p. 422), “language is a key aspect of our identity” and is the main form of communication people use. Because Emma cannot speak any English, she did not speak during the school day for a number of weeks and has only just started to answer the register. This is considered to be normal for new-to-English learners and is referred to as the ‘silent period’ (Crosse, 2007), where the child does not understand the second language but is listening and taking it in. Despite this silent period being a normal process EAL children go through, it creates a barrier to learning where Emma cannot communicate and may not understand what she needs to do during lessons. Additionally, Emma’s parents not speaking English could have created another barrier to learning regarding communicating with them. However, Emma’s school has been able to set up weekly meetings using an interpreter which has become an effective way to converse with them and prevents communication with the parents from becoming a barrier to learning (Drury, 2007).

Theories are put forward by Cummins (1979 and 2000) and Baker (2001) which aim to explain how a second language is acquired, and these theories provide a basis upon which Emma’s communication barriers could be broken down. Cummins (1979) writes that for a person to learn a second language, they need to be totally immersed in it, and how fast they learn depends on how fluent they are in their home language. Cummins called this ‘developmental interdependence’. Baker (2001), however, argues against Cummins’ theory, claiming social factors and interaction is
what affects the speed of learning a second language. Because Emma has already learnt a first language, her learning of English is via ‘sequential acquisition’ (Devarakonda, 2013). It is suggested that as long as pupils are given guidance, English can be learnt either simultaneously or sequentially, but they need to experience certain skills, which Cummins (2000) refers to as BIC and CALP, to become fluent speakers in both languages (Webster, 2011). BIC is ‘basic interpersonal communication’ which means talking to others about things in common and is more about the oral fluency of the learner (Northcote, 2014). CALP on the other hand stands for ‘cognitive academic language proficiency’ and this refers to high-order thinking such as analysis, evaluation and reflection (Conteh, 2015). According to Cummins (1984) BIC can take up to two years to achieve whereas CALP can take between five and seven years because it is more cognitively demanding.

In order to develop Emma’s BIC skills, she needs to be put in social situations where she can listen to other children conversing and over time, build up the confidence to join in with conversations (Devarakonda, 2013). Arranging a ‘buddy’ to aid an EAL child’s BIC skills could be one way to achieve this. An EAL’s buddy should be a trusted model of good behaviour and be a confident speaker in English. This will allow the buddy to support the new learner throughout lessons, clarifying activities and modelling how to speak English in a variety of contexts (Pim, 2012). In addition to modelling language, the buddy can help the EAL child make friends and become more comfortable around their peers. Making friends with classmates can increase an EAL child’s confidence and eventually make them feel comfortable enough to attempt speaking in the additional language they are learning (Conteh, 2015). When the child starts to verbally communicate with their peers, it is then that learners BIC skills will consequently be developed.

Contrary to BIC skills which can be developed through social interaction, Cummins (1984) notes that developing an EAL child’s CALP skills is dependent on the age they start to learn a new language and whether or not the child is already literate in their first language. Based on meetings with Emma’s parents and an interpreter, the class teacher learnt that Emma is confident at speaking her first language. As a result, it can be inferred that Emma will already have some CALP skills in her first language that she can transfer to her second language. However, Emma will only be able to vocalise these transferred CALP skills when she becomes more linguistically proficient (Cummins, 2000). Subsequently, it can be argued that the class teacher should provide Emma with problem solving activities where she can develop her CALP skills but not be assessed on them until she has become more fluent at speaking English.

In support of a more inclusive learning environment, Emma has been allocated a buddy in her school and as a result has made friends who she plays with at break time, despite not being able to verbally communicate with them. Although she is not verbally communicating, it seems
reasonable to suggest that Emma is communicating with her peers via facial expressions, such as smiling, when they are playing games. This supports the view that verbal interaction is not the only form of communication (Briggs, 2016; Crosse, 2007; Devarakonda, 2013). Briggs (2016) supports this assertion writing that only 7% of understanding language comes from verbally speaking. Instead, the majority of meaning really comes from a combination of things, including facial expression, gesture, eye gaze and the pitch of the voice. This may be why it is possible for Emma to still interact with her peers despite not being able to speak the same language. It has also broken down Emma’s initial barrier to learning where she felt uncomfortable communicating with people in any way.

Although Emma’s communication skills are developing on the playground, in lessons she remains quiet and struggles to understand what to do during tasks. Planning activities which include using visual images, such as pictures, could be one way the teacher can break down the barrier of communicating with Emma during lessons (Leung, 2001). Using visual resources to help communicate with an EAL learner is considered good practice by Soan (2004b, p. 56) because the class teacher is using “non-linguistic forms of communication” to replace “the linguistic ones”, which an EAL child will often understand. A carefully chosen image will make concepts much clearer for the EAL learner and can be used across the curriculum without the task differing too much from what other pupils are doing (Pim, 2012). Using a behaviour chart when rewarding behaviour is another visual way to communicate with EAL pupils. It is based on the principle that behaviour the class teacher wants to see is visually rewarded and encouraged which creates an inclusive classroom where every child is able to celebrate other pupil’s achievements (Gedge, 2016). For Emma, who does not have any behaviour issues, it may be useful to reinforce positive behaviour with something she has an interest in. In Emma’s case, her love of butterflies could be incorporated into her visual behaviour chart which may make her more interested in the process. In addition, using facial expressions to communicate praise or sanction visually is another way to conduct and communicate behaviour management to an EAL child (Chaplain, 2014).

Using bilingual books during lessons is another way to communicate with and include Emma in the whole classes learning (Devarakonda, 2013). Providing a bilingual book is a useful way for new-to-English EAL pupils to follow along with a story the class teacher is reading (Soan, 2004b). This prevents the child from feeling left out because they are able to understand what is being said and know that other children have enjoyed the same story, despite not being able to understand it in English (Crosse, 2007). The pupil’s language development can then be built on because the English version of the book they are reading could be introduced through the use of puppets or drama (Northcote, 2014). Based on this research, it seems reasonable to suggest that
using images and bilingual books during lessons is an appropriate way to break down the barrier of communication when teaching Emma. In addition, providing Emma with a buddy also seems to have been an effective way to start breaking down the learning barrier of communication in a social setting.

According to Blamires (2012), differentiation requires teachers to plan lessons flexibly in order to meet the needs of the diverse pupils in their class. As a result, differentiation is arguably something that underpins an inclusive classroom and is a strategy which is also capable of removing barriers to learning (Westwood, 2005). For example, the effective use of TAs and use of images to adapt lessons are both forms of differentiation, and are both strategies which have been suggested as ways to remove barriers to learning. The link between differentiation and what has been previously discussed can be made because differentiation is an ‘iceberg’ term where what is seen on the surface “covers something much bigger” (Bearne and Kennedy, 2014, p. 355). If teachers’ planning is done carefully, it can increase pupils’ independence whilst learning because the child’s learning has often been differentiated so they can access it without support from an adult (Gedge, 2016). Differentiation can also support a child’s independence because it is a form of scaffolding where the teacher can help learners “do today what they can independently do tomorrow” (Wrigley, 2000, p. 18). This can be applied when supporting Emma’s independence which was previously identified as a barrier to her learning. Although differentiation has many benefits, a challenge many teachers face when differentiating is the heavy demand it has on their organisation skills, knowledge and time (Westwood, 2005). Subsequently, limiting differentiation to a couple of effective strategies each lesson may be a solution which is less time consuming but still an appropriate way to overcome barriers to learning (Conteh, 2015).

**Conclusion**

It can be argued that promoting inclusion is highly important in education and is applicable not only to pupils with SEND but potentially every child in school, including EAL children. Furthermore, barriers to learning and a sense of belonging are both key aspects of inclusion. As a result, it is important to consider the potential barriers to Emma’s learning and to analyse and reflect upon how to overcome them. Based on statistics, which noted an increase in the number of EAL children in school, it is suggested that understanding how to support EAL pupils should become a central part of teachers’ professional knowledge. Additionally, it has been noted that the role of an inclusion co-ordinator should be introduced in school because this combines support for SEND and EAL children and can potentially reduce the number of EAL children who are incorrectly labelled as having SEND. Based on Emma’s case study, in which the class teacher had no experience, ways
they could adapt their teaching to overcome existing barriers to learning have been suggested. Increasing teachers’ awareness of labelling, using images and planning lessons with a variety of strategies and TA support are just some of the suggestions which can be acted upon to support Emma in learning a second language. The importance of collaborating with peers to support Emma’s language development has also been acknowledged, because it has the potential to increase both her sense of belonging in school and her BIC skills. It is hoped that this article might contribute to a greater awareness of the need for teachers to be as inclusive as possible not only in their understanding, but in their practice of working with all children in primary school.

References


