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# The language and learning loss of pupils using English as Additional Language (EAL), following the closure of schools to most pupils in England: Teacher Perceptions and Policy Implications

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## 1. Introduction

From March 2020 when schools across England closed to most pupils, anecdotal evidence from teachers and others reached The Bell Foundation which highlighted that pupils who use English as an Additional Language (EAL), and particularly those whose families are new to English or at the early stages of English acquisition themselves, were at risk of additional learning loss: language learning loss. Without the teaching of ‘standard academic’ English in the classroom, and with reduced exposure to social English conversation from both adults and peers, pupils who speak EAL who were developing English skills were at a disadvantage, in comparison to pupils for whom English is their first language (Ofsted, 2020; Government of Jersey, 2020; Education Scotland, 2021).

Given the strong correlation between English language proficiency and educational attainment (Strand and Demie, 2005; Demie, 2011; Whiteside et al., 2016; Strand and Hessel, 2018; Demie, 2018; Strand and Lindorff, 2020; Department for Education, 2020; Hessel and Strand, 2021) language loss will have a significant impact on learning loss. Research has demonstrated that

pupils’ proficiency in English explains as much as 22 per cent of the variation in EAL pupils’ achievement compared to the typical three to four per cent that can be statistically explained by gender, free school meal status (which is commonly used as a measure of wide socio-economic deprivation) and ethnicity (Strand and Hessel, 2018).

In 2021, schools in England were closed for a second time to most pupils. In all, children in England lost over six months of face to face classroom time due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This chapter presents findings from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) Teacher Omnibus Survey for Spring 2021 (National Foundation for Educational Research, 2021), which was completed by over 1500 practising teachers and analysed by The Bell Foundation<sup>20</sup>. In particular, it analyses questions that were specifically commissioned by The Bell Foundation<sup>21</sup>, that examine teacher perceptions

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<sup>20</sup> The National Foundation for Educational Research corroborated The Bell Foundation’s analysis as part of the publication process.

<sup>21</sup> The Bell Foundation is a charitable foundation which aims to improve policy, practice and systems to enable children, adults and communities in the UK that speak EAL to overcome disadvantage through language education.

of the extent of language loss in EAL pupils and the subsequent effect on learning loss. Survey findings are presented and discussed alongside the evidence that The Bell Foundation received from teachers and schools during school closures,

which indicated that pupils who speak English as an additional language were experiencing language loss, in addition to the learning loss experienced by many pupils in England.

## 2. Teacher Omnibus Survey (Spring 2021)<sup>22</sup>

### 2.1 Survey Sample

The survey sample (1,535 practising teachers) includes teachers from 1,349 schools which are nationally representative of school-level factors including geographical region and school type and eligibility for free-school meals. Each survey was completed by at least 500 teachers in primary schools (with pupils aged 5 – 11) and 500 teachers in secondary schools (11 upwards). The sample is based on publicly-funded schools in England. This excludes private schools (i.e. fee-paying) and includes ‘academies’, which are run independently of local authority control. The sample includes teachers from the full range of roles, from class teachers to headteachers.

The sample of primary schools was nationally representative of Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility – however, the secondary schools with the highest rate of FSM eligibility were underrepresented in the sample<sup>23</sup>. It should be noted that this will mean that the findings are likely to be conservative estimates of impact on pupils using EAL in the secondary sector, as there is a link between the proportion of pupils acquiring English

and deprivation<sup>24</sup>. In 2018, 41% of pupils living in the most deprived areas were acquiring English compared to 27% living in the least deprived areas (Department for Education, 2020). The highest band of school level FSM eligibility would therefore have a greater proportion of pupils still acquiring English, than schools with lower rates of FSM eligibility.

### 2.2 Measures

The aim of the research is to identify the extent and nature of English language learning loss for pupils who use EAL across the four skill areas (listening, reading, writing and speaking). Within that aim, the research identifies further specific sub-questions:

- How does language learning loss manifest in the classroom?
- How have pupils using EAL fared in general learning impact (i.e. not language specific loss) and how does that compare to their English-speaking peers?

The survey was administered in March 2021, shortly after schools re-opened following

<sup>22</sup> Teacher Voice Omnibus Survey - NFER <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/key-topics-expertise/teacher-voice-omnibus-survey/>

<sup>23</sup> NB Data used in analysis for this report was not weighted for the secondary school or combined samples using FSM eligibility data. As the sample of substantive responses in the highest band of FSM eligible secondary schools was small, weighting would have risked over representing views which may not be an accurate representation of their entire demographic group.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/eal-programme/research/eal-learner-proficiency-attainment-and-progress-maps/>

the second national period of closures to most pupils. The responses therefore draw on observations from the autumn term (first school closure impact), or from the return of all pupils from March 2021 (second closure impact, or both). The survey asked teachers an initial closed question: 'Following school closures, have you noticed a negative impact (learning loss) for pupils who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL) in the following English language skills areas?'. (Listening, Writing, Speaking, Reading, None or Don't Know). Two open-ended questions were used to gather teacher's verbatim responses about learning loss:

1. If you have observed any learning loss in English language skills for pupils who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL) please describe your observations giving specific examples where possible
2. Thinking of learning in general, how does school closure impact EAL pupils in comparison to those pupils for whom English is their first language?

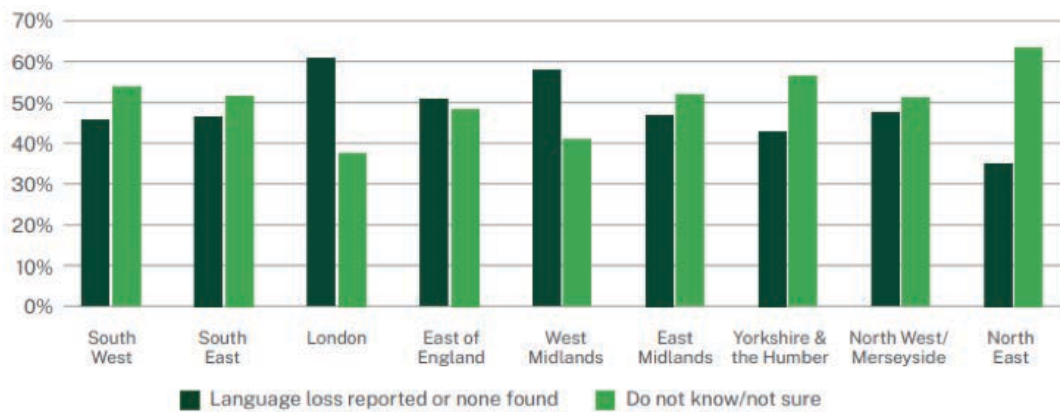
### 2.3 Analysis: Proportions of EAL pupils

As the research questions explicitly require teacher observation of pupils who use EAL it is important to note that, despite national EAL pupil proportions of 21.3% in primary school and 17.1% in secondary school level, 59% of schools do not have any pupils who use EAL (Department for Education, 2019) (TALIS, 2018). Therefore, findings of national samples must be read with this awareness. The regional disparity in the proportion of pupils using EAL has been well documented. For example, in North East England only 8% of pupils use EAL, whilst the figure rises to 49% in London (Department for Education, 2020). Within regions, the variation between schools can also be significant (Strand et al., 2015; Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council, 2021). A nationally representative sample, such as the NFER Teacher Omnibus panel,

contains a significant number of respondents who will not have observations of pupils who use EAL in their classroom. In the verbatim responses to the open-ended questions 62 teachers explicitly stated that they did not have EAL learners in their classrooms.

The first question in the survey is used to filter out those from schools who have too few or no pupils using EAL on which to base meaningful observations. In Question 1 teachers were given the option of selecting an English skill area (reading, writing, listening or speaking) that had been negatively impacted, selecting 'none' if there had been no negative impact, or selecting 'do not know/not sure'. It is reasonable to assume that respondents who selected 'do not know/not sure' are likely to have too few or no pupils on which to base observations. 770 out of 1,535 respondents selected 'do not know/not sure'. This is half of the total sample size which is broadly consistent with the data above regarding the proportion of schools in England with few or no pupils using EAL. To further test the validity of this assumption the two subsequent open-ended questions were cross-referenced against respondents who selected 'do not know/ not sure' in Question 1. Typically, respondents either made no further comment, or explicitly noted that they had no or too few pupils using EAL to comment. A very small number of respondents noted that it was too early to judge language loss. The proportion of teachers who felt able to comment versus those who did not has been broken down by geographic region (figure 1 below) - the dark green columns indicate teachers who felt able to comment (stating a loss or no loss) and the light green columns indicate teachers who were not able to comment on the impact on pupils who use EAL. This broadly confirms the assumption that respondents selecting 'do not know' are likely to have too few or no pupils who use EAL on whom to base observations. In areas of high EAL pupil proportions (such as London) teachers were more likely to comment on the impact on pupils who use EAL than not, whereas teachers in the North East were less likely to be able to comment on the impact on pupils who use EAL.

**Figure 1:** The proportion of teachers able to comment on language loss (loss or no loss) vs teachers unable to comment (do not know/ not sure) by geographic region [N=1535]



The findings below are based on teachers who do provide substantive answers which gives a sample size of 751 (after removing the ‘do not knows’ a further 14 answers were missing – no response at all). From the 751 substantive responses 491 are from primary schools and 260 are from secondary schools. 518 of those 751 teachers who felt able to comment on the language loss of EAL pupils reported a loss.

The responses to the closed question regarding language loss (Q1) were analysed by school phase (primary and secondary), year group and geographic region. The responses to the open questions (listed in measures section above) were analysed to draw out the common

patterns that teachers observed in pupils who use EAL as a result of disruptions to teaching and learning caused by Covid-19. These include the impact on confidence, the role of family in pupil learning during lockdown, the challenges of remote learning for pupils who use EAL, the risk to secondary school pupils, the role of peers, and the link between EAL and disadvantage.

The report also draws on a selection of representative quotes, taken from teachers in different regions and in different school phases<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> The views expressed in this research are those of teachers and may be at odds with both the views and preferred terminology of The Bell Foundation, who funded this research.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1 Evidence of Regression in English Language Learning

Teachers across England were more than twice as likely to report a negative impact on the English language skills of pupils who use EAL than to report no impact as the following quotes illustrate:

*“For those who are in the early acquisition stage of Learning English, we have had to go back to the beginning with them, as the progress they had made had not been embedded and a proportion has been lost.”* Senior leader, primary school, West Midlands

*“A lot of my pupils haven’t spoken or heard much English during lockdown. Some of the [sic] are now finding it difficult to access the curriculum and have needed pre-teaching intervention of vocab that will be used in lessons”.*

Classroom teacher, primary school, West Midlands

*“Some pupils are more withdrawn, and some whose first language is not English have not returned to school yet. They are being followed up. We have a group of students who are le-*

*arning English in Y8 - these pupils have gone backwards about 10 weeks in their understanding of English.”*

Senior leader, secondary school, Yorkshire and the Humber

Table 1 shows that over two thirds (69%) of teachers across primary and secondary schools reported a negative impact on the English language skills of pupils who use EAL following the disruption to education caused by Covid-19, compared to only 31% who reported there were no language losses in pupils.

**Table 1:** Reported loss on language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) [N=751]

Language skill impact	Number	%
One language skill impacted	123	16%
Two language skills impacted	120	16%
Three language skills impacted	108	14%
Four language skills impacted	167	22%
One or more language skills impacted	518	69%
No impact on language skill	233	31%

Across all schools, within the four language skill areas 54% of teachers reported a language loss in writing skills of pupils who use EAL, 50% observed a loss in speaking skills, 41% saw a loss in the reading skills and 36% in the listening skills. Figure 2 below illustrates the spread of responses across the four skill areas broken down by school phase. It is to be expected that primary schools would be more likely to report a negative impact in language learning than secondary schools, as previous research has shown that primary schools have a greater

proportion of pupils in the ‘acquiring English’ phase<sup>26</sup> (Strand and Hessel, 2018; Department for Education, 2020). However, while the figure below shows a greater proportion of primary school teachers reporting language loss (26% said none, 74% said one or more skills showed a loss), the proportion in secondary schools is still significant (41% said none, 59% said one or more skills showed a loss).

<sup>26</sup> ‘Acquiring English’ refers to pupils in English proficiency bands A-C using the five-point scale formerly used by the Department for Education in England.

**Figure 2:** Observed impact on English language learning in pupils who use EAL primary vs secondary [N=751]

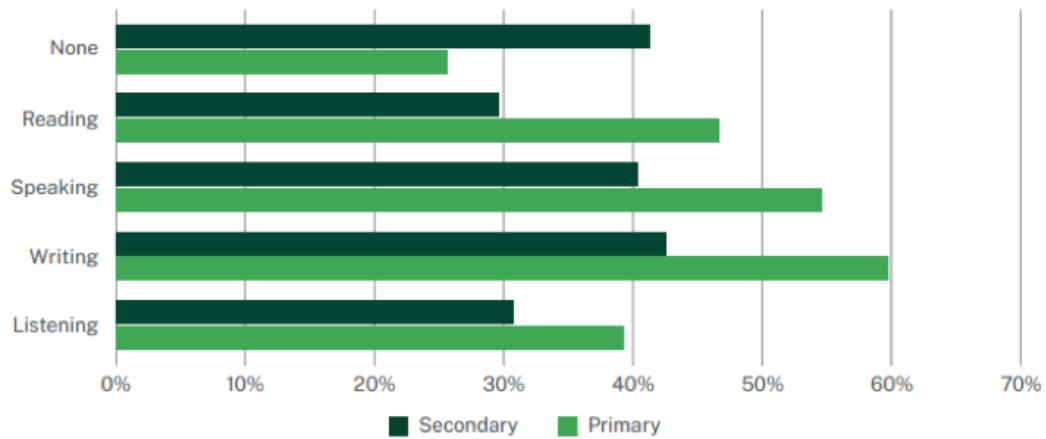


Figure 3 shows the proportion of primary school teachers who were able to comment on the language loss of pupils they had observed, by year group<sup>27</sup>. In secondary schools teachers typically teach across multiple year groups, which makes

breaking down the data by year group in secondary schools unreliable. The trajectory of the primary school data does show a slight reduction in language learning loss as the pupils age (except initially in writing and reading which is to be expected as those skills are not acquired until later). However, the decline in loss is gradual and loss is still substantial in Year 6, so additional support will be needed in recovery throughout Key Stage 2 and beyond.

<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that the majority of primary school respondents taught only one year group – however, some teachers taught two or more year groups and therefore that could have a small impact on the findings as teachers who teach multiple year groups could be referring to pupils from any year group that they teach.

**Figure 3:** English language skill impact by primary school year group [N=491]

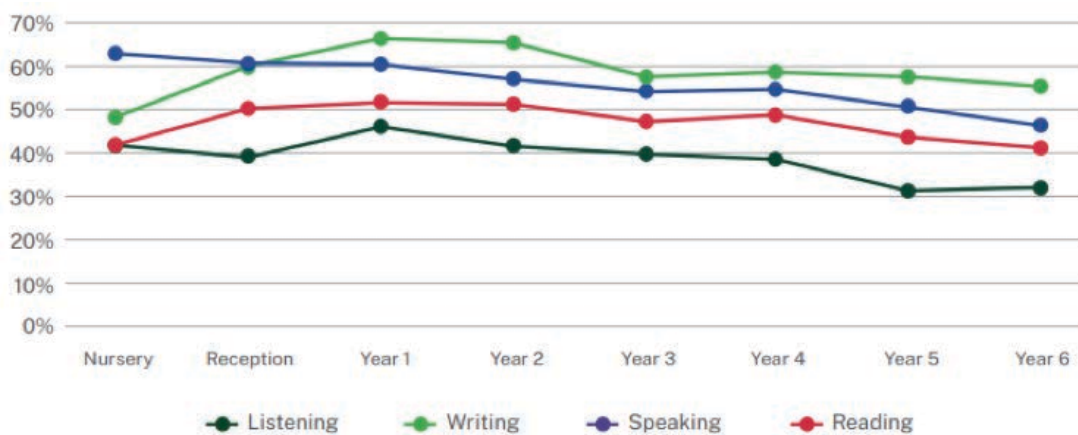


Figure 4 shows the proportion of primary school respondents by region who reported a language loss, or no language loss. Across all regions,

schools are more likely to report a loss than no loss, with the greatest difference in London and the South East.



Figure 4: Primary schools reporting language loss or no language loss by region [N=491]

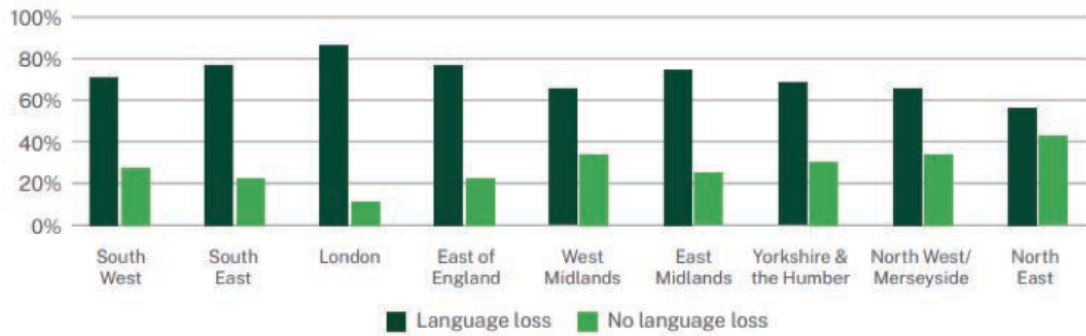
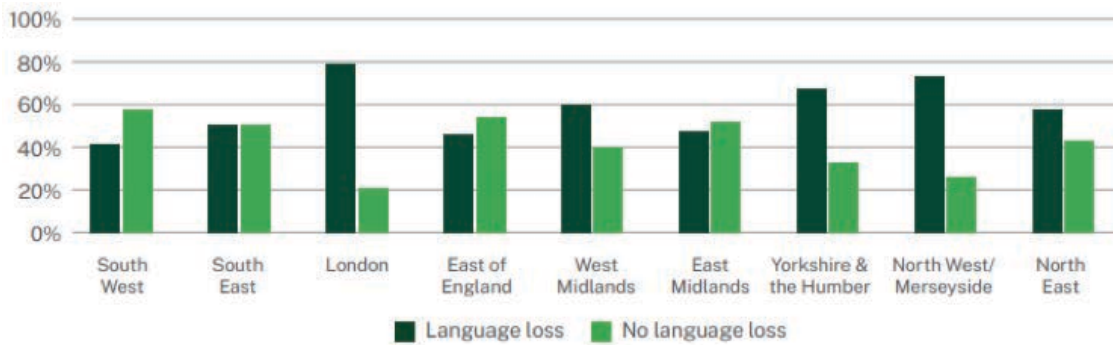


Figure 5 shows the proportion of secondary school respondents by region who reported a language loss, or no language loss. London, Yorkshire and the Humber and North West/ Merseyside are still far more likely to report a loss than no loss. However, in the East of England, the South West and the East Midlands secondary school teachers are more likely to report no loss. This could be due to higher proportions of pupils in secondary schools having reached

proficiency in English. Areas of perceived high language loss at secondary school level, such as London, could indicate places with more late arrivals of migrant families who moved to England after their children had started school, and therefore may not have had the necessary six years plus needed to acquire competence if they were new to English (Strand and Lindorff, 2020; Strand and Lindorff, 2021; Hutchinson, 2018; Demie, 2011, 2013).

Figure 5: Secondary schools reporting language loss or no language loss by region [N=260]



### 3.2 Hesitant to speak: How school closures impacted pupils' confidence

As the following quotes illustrate there is a consensus among both primary and secondary teachers that school closures adversely impacted on the confidence of EAL pupils:

*“These children have arrived back at school, very quiet and subdued, they have lost a lot of*

*the vocabulary they were learning and some that they were confident with and are lacking in confidence to speak.”*

Senior leader, primary school, East Midlands

*“As they’ve had no exposure to any English, they have found returning to school very stressful. They have found following instructions hard. They have found mixing with peers*

*tough. Their receptive skills have been impacted greatly as has their confidence”*

Senior leader, primary school, East Midlands

*“Lack in fluency particularly in speaking means that some EAL pupils find it more challenging to contribute to and participate in discussions and learning. They feel disempowered and disengaged in subject [sic] that before they enjoyed”*

Classroom teacher, primary school, East England

*“Students find it harder to start talking in English again as they haven’t really practiced speaking it in months. Can affect their confidence, as students that were once confident to answer questions in class are a bit more shy and reserved in case they say the wrong thing”*

Classroom teacher, secondary school, London

Of the teachers who reported a negative impact on the language learning of their pupils who use EAL, over one in five (22%) secondary teachers reported that pupils had lost confidence to speak to their peers or in class. Nearly one in six (15%) primary school teachers reported that pupils who use EAL had lost confidence to speak to their peers or in class. The lower rates in primary school may be because primary school is an environment where all pupils, those who use EAL or those whose first language is English, are learning English. However, it may also reflect a higher susceptibility to self-consciousness in teenagers, and the higher demands of language in the secondary school curriculum. It will be important for the pastoral care providers in secondary schools to be aware of the increased risk for social isolation for pupils who use EAL.

### 3.3 Children left behind: remote learning for pupils who use EAL

As the following quotes illustrate, whilst useful for some pupils, remote technology did not result in equitable access for all, in part due to language barriers:

*“We have observed a significant and tangible loss in learning in the majority of our pupils where English is an additional language. A major factor in this is the inability of parents to support their children effectively due to barriers over accessing resources and technology as a direct result of language barriers.”*

Senior leader, primary school, South East

*“They have been less likely to access online provision due to the fact their parents are unable to help them. They are left behind.”*

Classroom teacher, primary school, West Midlands

*“There is also the difference that EAL students wouldn’t have been able to have access to support during lessons or individual support from small class teaching of EAL students together by a specialist who either speaks the home language.”*

Classroom teacher, secondary school, South West

Of the teachers who reported a language or learning loss in pupils who use EAL, one in twelve reported that pupils who use EAL were explicitly disadvantaged by online learning compared to their English-speaking peers. It is interesting to note that, out of all respondents only three teachers thought that online learning provided pupils who use EAL with an advantage through access to translations, subtitles or the ability to pause and re-watch videos. More work needs to be done to ensure that teachers are provided with training in using technology effectively with the EAL cohort. A number of schools opted to invite pupils who use EAL into school in response to concerns that remote learning could not meet their needs and that they were at risk of being left behind.

*“EAL children in the first lockdown were the children least likely to complete home learning and therefore, they were among those invited to go back to school in small bubbles during the latest lockdown”*

Classroom teacher, primary school, East England



### 3.4 The role of family or caregiver in learning during lockdowns

When access to face to face schooling was restricted, schools in England provided lessons to homes (either through worksheets and suggested resources and activities, or through recorded or live lessons) which were in the medium of English. As noted previously (Part 3), remote learning was particularly disadvantageous for pupils who use EAL as it did not readily lend itself to the kind of strategies that schools typically used to support their EAL pupils, and teachers did not have training or expertise in using technology effectively with pupils who use EAL. With more limited capability for individualised support, parents were expected to fill that gap. With schools providing resources, lesson plans, activities and tasks in English, parents who were new to English or at the early stage of English language acquisition themselves were not necessarily able to access or 'teach' those materials.

The following verbatim quotes from primary school teachers illustrate how children in homes where the primary language is not English are affected:

*"Children in homes where the primary language is not English have been slow to participate in class and group discussions. As their parents have limited knowledge of English, they haven't been as able as some other parents to support their children's daily learning. As a result their reading can lack fluency and writing mistakes have not been picked up and corrected as much"*

Classroom teacher, primary school, West Midlands

*"Some parents are less able to support children if English is not their first language, and therefore some children cannot access all the learning opportunities - in reception we rely on parental support to some extent"*

Classroom teacher, primary school, South West

*"Parents of EAL pupils find the learning more difficult to understand. We have had less engagement with this group. Also the parents of the EAL children we have work more and work shifts so have less time to support their children and have been more difficult to communicate with through phone calls (due to language and availability)"*

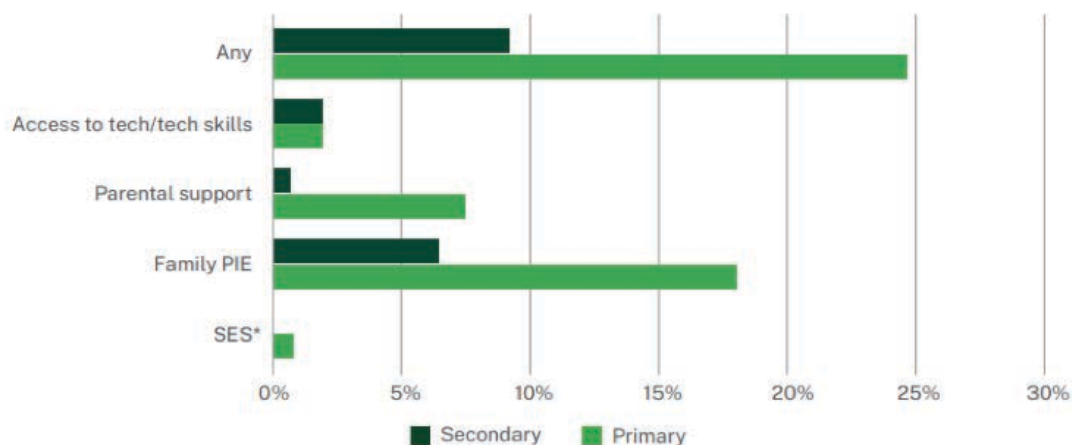
Classroom teacher, primary school, South East

For teachers who reported an impact on the language loss of pupils who use EAL, the pupils' family's ability to support the home learning due to English language barriers was frequently cited as having had a significant impact on learning and learning loss<sup>28</sup>. The role of family was perceived to be more significant by teachers surveyed in the outcomes of primary school pupils. During lockdown, parents of primary school aged pupils were usually required to provide more support than parents of secondary aged pupils, due to age related differences and independent learning capabilities.

Families having access to technology or the technological skills to access online learning, the family speaking another language at home, the ability to support learning generally, and the socio-economic status of the family were linked, by teachers, to the learning and language loss of pupils who use EAL. Figure 6 below shows the teachers' perception of the role of family in learning by school phase. Amongst primary school teachers reporting a negative impact on the learning of pupils using EAL, 25% cited the barriers for families in supporting learning as impacting loss. Amongst their secondary colleagues the figure drops to 9%. Across both phases it is the proficiency in English (PIE) of the family that is perceived to have had the most marked impact.

<sup>28</sup> Family here was the term commonly used by teachers but refers to the person(s) responsible for caregiving during lockdown and could include one parent, two parents, siblings, extended family or other caregivers.

Figure 6: Family-related barriers for language or learning loss, secondary vs primary [N=518]



\* 0% of secondary teachers said that it was the family's low socio-economic status (SES) that they thought contributed to the language loss

Whilst teachers cited the role that the proficiency in English of the family played in the language and learning loss experienced by pupils who use EAL it is interesting to note that the pupil's emerging proficiency in English was not frequently cited. Of all teachers who reported a loss, 15% attributed it to the family's proficiency in English (18% in primary schools, and 7% in secondary schools) but only 1% cited the pupil's proficiency in English as a factor. This is unexpected given the link between a pupil's proficiency in English and the pupil's ability to access the curriculum and achieve. The findings could suggest that parents were considered 'in loco teachers' and the expectation was on parents to bridge the language gap for pupils in the way that teachers and teaching assistants do in the classroom. Teachers are both proficient in English and in pedagogy; for parents who are new to English or in the early stages of acquisition of English, taking on this role of mediator of a curriculum taught through the medium of English may not have been possible.

It is interesting to note that high fluency in English was, however, cited by 18 respondents as the reason why some pupils using EAL had not experienced language or learning loss:

*"I teach only older boys, many of whom are bilingual, and English is not their first lan-*

*guage, but by the time they are 15+ they are already very fluent!"*

Classroom teacher, secondary school, London

### 3.5 The challenge for EAL pupils in secondary school

The evidence discussed in earlier sections has shown a consistent pattern of primary school aged pupils being more greatly impacted by learning loss associated with Covid school disruption than secondary pupils (one exception was in confidence to speak, where secondary school impact was greater than primary). Nevertheless, it is important to note that addressing any language learning loss is particularly urgent for pupils who are new to English and at the early stages of language acquisition at the same time as they are preparing for the national examinations such as GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education). For some, the timing of exams can mean that the adverse impact of language loss affects outcomes including further and higher education admissions and employment opportunities. As noted in previously published research, late arrivals (those who are still acquiring English at secondary level) are at greater risk of underachievement (Hutchinson, 2018; Strand and

Hessel, 2018; Demie, 2018; Department for Education, 2019b). For late arrivals, as well as being late to begin the acquisition of English necessary to attain in examinations, they have now lost six months (or more) of classroom time and the opportunity to be exposed to academic and social English.

*“We have very few EAL students, but they tend to fall into one of two categories: - those with high levels of motivation & English language skills. They tend to thrive whatever happens. - a recent cohort of older (Yr 11) students who have only just joined us after arriving in the UK. They have been unable to access online learning for a complex variety of reasons and our main focus is pastoral support to help them with recent migration trauma.”*  
Senior leader, secondary school, South East

In addition to the risk to new arrivals, teachers raised concerns regarding subject specific terminology which is often required in high stakes exams.

*“Struggling with scientific language they previously had a solid grasp on”*  
Classroom teacher, secondary school, North West/Merseyside

### 3.6 The role of peers

The social restrictions due to Covid-19 are likely to impact on most children, including those who use English as their first language. However, for children who use EAL, their peers play an additional role: supporting the development of their English language skills. A small proportion of teachers who reported language or learning loss in pupils specifically flagged the lack of peer interaction (4% of primary respondents, 7% for secondary) as a factor in the loss.

*“The lack of a role model to speak English [...] has meant the children have now reverted to single word answers. The lack of play*

*with children speaking English has made the return to school difficult socially, meaning the children rely on physical responses rather than explaining how they think or feel”*

Classroom teacher, primary school, South West

*“EAL students have less opportunities to converse in English, both in lesson and, perhaps more crucially, out of lessons with their peers.”*

Classroom teacher, secondary school, South East

### 3.7 EAL and disadvantage

In their verbatim quotes, some teachers tended to conflate EAL with, or as, a type of disadvantage:

*“EAL pupils often responded in a similar way to pupils who could be labelled as disadvantaged.”*

Senior leader, primary school, South East

*“Similar to those living in disadvantage. Less opportunities to practice oracy skills.”*

Senior leader, primary school, North West/Merseyside

As 25% of pupils who use EAL are ‘disadvantaged’ according to a Department for Education analysis of 2018 National Pupil Database data, this is not surprising, and it is slightly higher than pupils whose first language is English (at 24%). Rates of Free School Meal (FSM) entitlement are identical amongst the EAL cohort as their English speaking peers at 14% (Department for Education, 2020). Overall, 19% of all disadvantaged pupils will use English as an Additional Language and 19% of all FSM pupils will use EAL (Department for Education, 2020). Furthermore, as noted above, 41% of children living in the most deprived areas will be in the early stages of developing English language competence (levels A-C) which is the group at risk of under-performing compared to their English-speaking peers – by contrast, in a less deprived area, only 27% of pupils will be at the early stage of developing lan-

guage competence (Department for Education, 2020). So, there is an intersection of both deprivation and EAL status for a significant portion

of the EAL population as there is with their first language English peers.

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## 4. Conclusion

Across England, there was a clear pattern of both English language and learning loss observed by school teachers in both primary and secondary phases. Many pupils at the early stages of English language acquisition did not have opportunities to hear, speak or read in English during school closures. Whilst the primary school teachers were more likely to identify a language loss in their pupils, the limited time left in school for recovery, and the proximity to high stakes examinations is concerning for secondary pupils. Pastoral concerns were also raised regarding the

negative impact on the confidence of pupils using EAL to socially integrate and participate in the classroom.

Of all respondents only five thought that pupils who use EAL had actually fared better than the pupils who speak English as their first language, typically citing high proficiency in the pupils and/or families.

The findings demonstrate a need for continued investment in supporting EAL pupils and training teachers to support them to recover lost learning and fulfil their capabilities.

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