

# Audit of English Acquisition in Lambeth Secondary Schools 2010

## Introduction

In July 2010 I set out to investigate the underlying factors contributing to how rapidly young people in Lambeth schools travel from being unable to communicate at all in English to achieving fluency. The initial aim was to interview up to ten pupils in each secondary school, all of whom had been born abroad and were now virtually fluent users of age appropriate standard English in order to assess their use of English and hear from them and their teachers what they thought had made a difference. With the agreement of head teachers and the support of EAL coordinators, it was decided that pupils in year 10 would be the most appropriate group to study.

## Participants

Name of school	EAL Staff involved in the audit	Number of pupils interviewed
Bishop Thomas Grant RC School	Gerry Cuddy	8
Charles Edward Brooke CE Girls' School	Bridget Minogue Kerima Mohideen	10
Dunraven School	Janette Gibbons Maryline Davide	9
La Retraite RC Girls' School	Wanda Jarrett	9
Lambeth Academy	Ann Horton Manju Gujadhur	9
Lilian Baylis Technology School	Peter Henry	9
Olive School	Anthony Gunning	5
St Martin-in-the-fields High School for Girls	Lubjana Matin	8
The Norwood School	Sam Holmes Kate Wallace	10

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## Method

### 1. Selection process

Data pertaining to the current year 10 were gathered with the help of Lambeth's Research and Statistics team. Individuals were selected because

- They had not been born in Britain or a Commonwealth country in which English is an official language
- For each pupil, data gathered over the previous five years indicated a continuing improvement in English language acquisition
- Data showed the individual was now nearly fluent or had recently achieved fluency

### 2. Exceptions

Owing to day to day changes at school some substitutions to the original list were made and some interviewee profiles did not fit the parameters above. Most notably, some schools were keen for 'high flyers', who had achieved fluency in a very short time, to be interviewed. After all data had been gathered, pupils not meeting the criteria set out above were omitted from the survey, leaving a total of **59**.

Four pupils were included in the survey despite being born in London because they had left shortly after birth to live in the home country and had missed a substantial amount of early schooling here. Another four pupils from Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria were included in the survey owing to their particular circumstances.

### 3. Confidentiality

Once pupils had been selected, all data were used anonymously.

### 4. Assessments of Use of English

The Lambeth stages of English are used by all schools in Lambeth to monitor progress and report annually to the Research and Statistics department (see appendix 1 for stage descriptors). These stages are based closely on the descriptors developed by Hilary Hester

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at the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (*Patterns of Learning*, CLPE, 1990). Over the past four years the annual returns have been audited internally by Lambeth EAL consultants and have been found to be wholly accurate in all secondary schools.

All pupils were given a twenty minute interview and as far as possible all asked the same questions. A standard form was completed for each interviewee (appendix 2) and checked by him or her for accuracy. In addition to actual responses, each pupil's stage of English was noted, based on the quality of speaking and listening.

Pupils were then asked to complete a standardised diagnostic reading and writing test, (Jarvis and Gay 2004 appendix 3) based on the requirements to achieve Entry 3 of the Adult ESOL curriculum. No help was given with this, therefore a successful outcome would indicate that the pupil had sufficient grasp of English to work independently at Level 1 / 2 (GCSE equivalent) studies. Lambeth EAL Stages for reading and writing were also awarded, and an overall stage score noted.

It is worth mentioning here that pupils responded very positively to the written assessment if it followed the interview. However, owing to time table restrictions in one school, pupils were asked to start with the test.

## 5. Staff interviews

As far as possible, school staff responsible for pupils with EAL were interviewed at length to discover what they felt made a difference to progress. No standard form was used for recording these interviews but several questions were used as a starting point for discussion:

- *In your opinion, what strategies improve the progress of beginners, developing bilinguals and pupils nearing fluency?*
- *What else makes progress more rapid either in general or for individuals at your school?*

## 6. Analysis methods

Pupil data were tabulated using a simple spreadsheet. From this the following have been calculated and or displayed graphically:

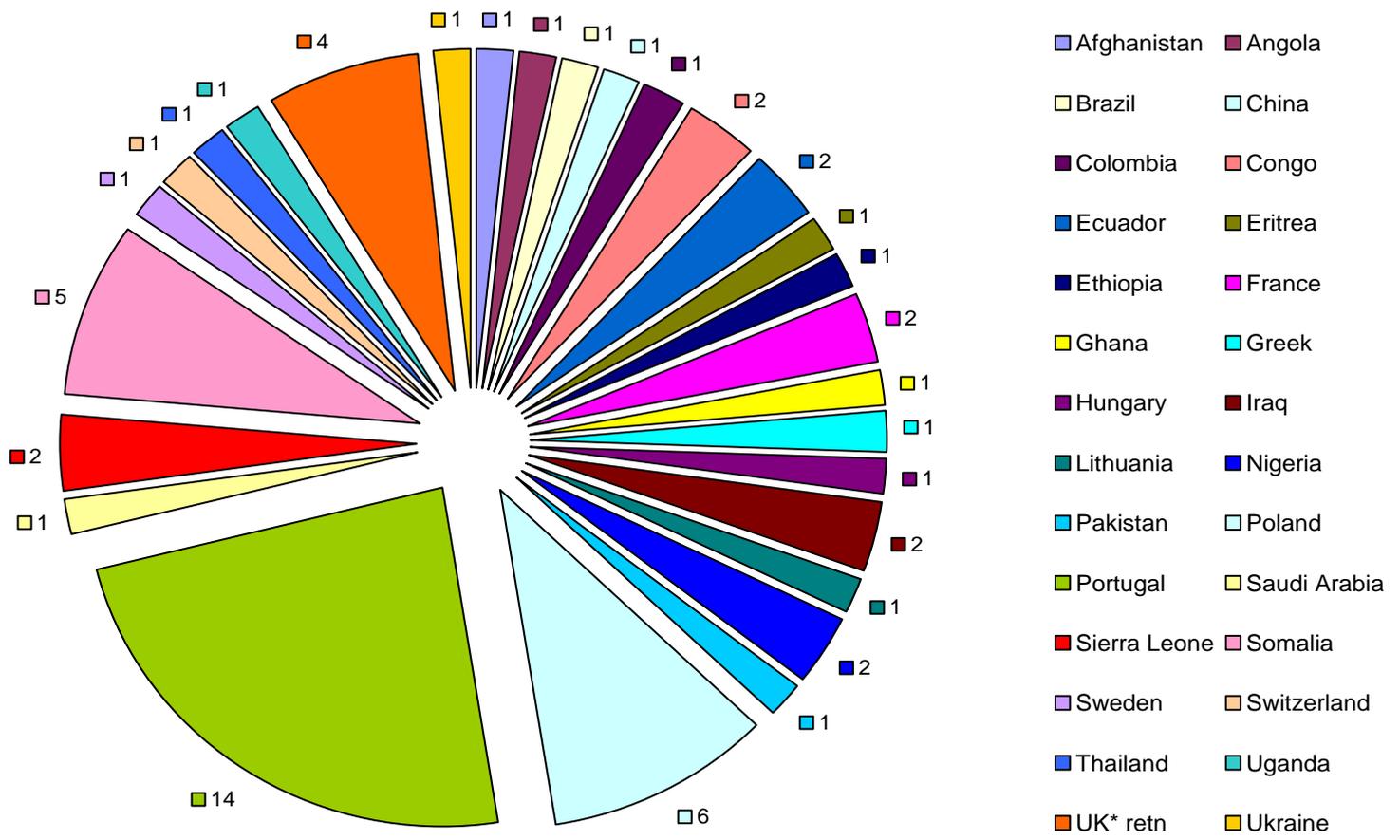
- the birth place of each pupil – fig 1
- the numbers of languages understood per pupil – fig 2
- the different languages understood – fig 3
- home language literacy – fig 4
- factors pupils believe help improve language learning – fig 5
- future plans of pupils – fig 6

In addition, pupil and staff responses were used qualitatively to help define what makes a difference to learning and compare and contrast pupil responses to those of their teachers.

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## Analysis of pupil responses

### 1. The country of birth



Total = 59

Total = 27

Fig 1: Place of birth of cohort pupils

As displayed in fig 1 above, the 59 pupils in the survey were born in 27 different countries. Of these, 14 were born in Portugal, six were born in Poland, and five in Somalia.

Although many pupils in Lambeth were born in Nigeria and Ghana, only three such feature in this survey. As Commonwealth countries with strong language links to Britain, English is an official language in both countries and many schools teach through English. Therefore, most Yoruba and Twi/Asante speakers tend to be fluent / mother tongue English speakers as well and would not be expected to be part of this survey.

## 2. The number of languages spoken per pupil

This figure was calculated to include English but not foreign language(s) being learned at school or religious Arabic in cases where pupils said they did not understand it. Fig 2 below shows that most pupils could understand two languages, but a significant number were able to understand three languages and some even more. Typically, Afghani pupils have an understanding of Pashtu, Dari/Persian and Urdu and many Somali pupils can understand a European language as well as Somali and English.

Number of languages understood including English	
1	Number of pupils
2	31
3	19
4	6
5	2

Fig 2

Total = 58

In addition, many students reported that their parents understood considerably more languages than they did themselves. For example pupils born in Africa often reported that their parents spoke one or two tribal languages each, in addition to being literate in an official African and European language and/or English. The pupils reported themselves as understanding only some of their parents' languages. As reported by one pupil

"At home we tend to speak in English as my youngest siblings do not fluently speak or understand Lingala, French, Portuguese and Dutch"

Interestingly, whereas Portuguese, Somali and Polish speakers in the survey tended to speak their language as a first or home language, some Spanish and French speakers reported that this was a second or third language for them.

### 3. Languages understood by the cohort

As shown below, 19 pupils in the cohort understood Portuguese, 11 Spanish, and 8 Somali, Polish and French. This broadly reflects the overall pattern in Lambeth secondary schools: currently the main languages spoken other than English are Portuguese, followed by Yoruba, Spanish, Somali and French. Numbers of Yoruba speakers are declining in Lambeth schools, which might indicate a movement of families out of the area, to other schools, or a failure to report the home language because of the increased use of English. On the other hand, the number of Polish speakers in Lambeth is growing rapidly and has risen over 15 fold since 1992. But the fastest growing language in secondary schools is Somali. (For much more information, please refer to *Language Diversity in Schools*, LB Lambeth research and statistics department, 2010)

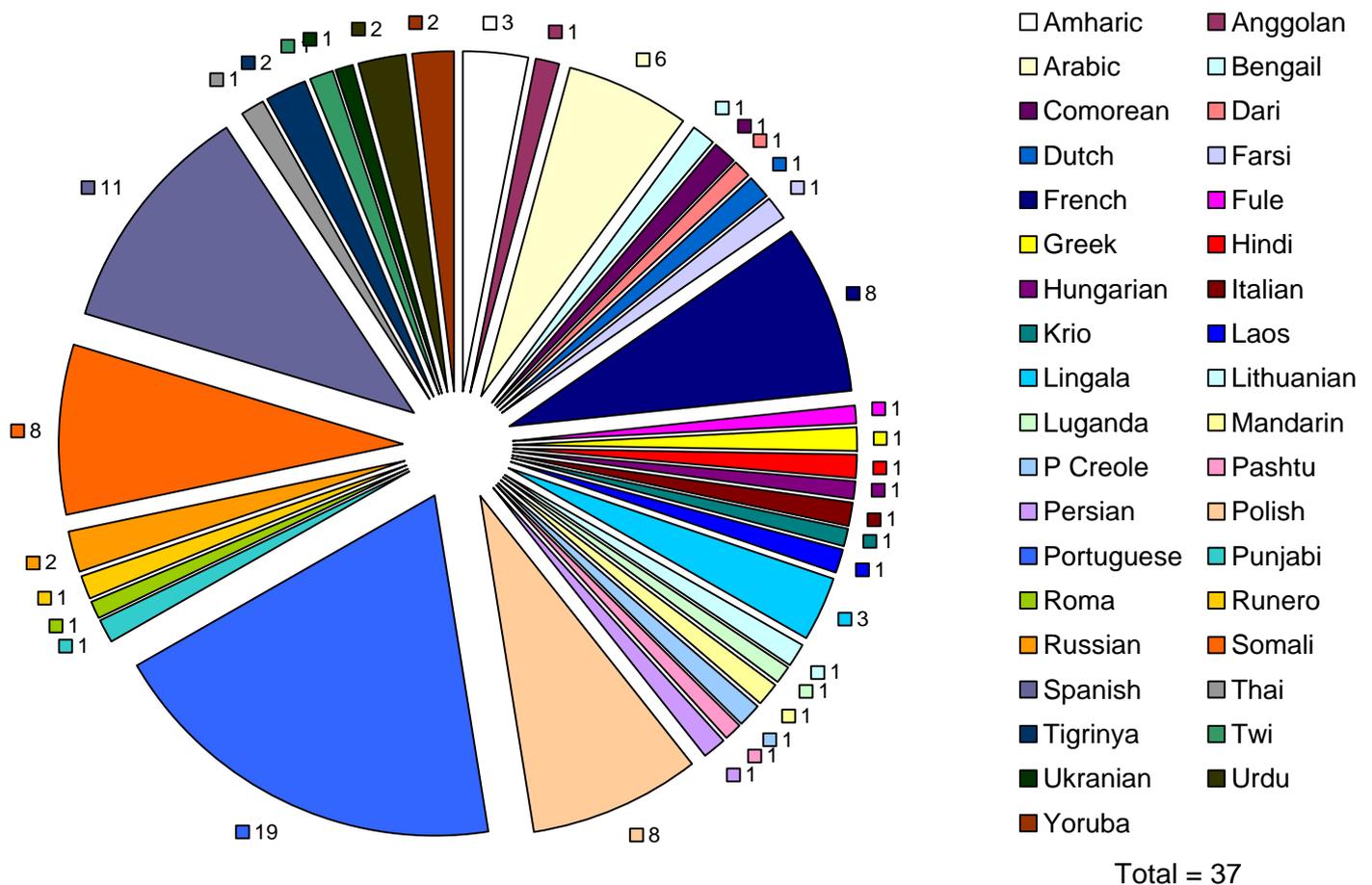


Fig 3: The numbers of pupils who understand each language (English omitted)

Two languages have emerged from the survey which have not been recorded in Lambeth previously. Firstly, a home language reported as Runero (sic), either Runyuro, a dialect of Nyoro or Runyara, a dialect of Ruuli, both being major Ugandan languages. Secondly, Cormorean, one of three different Cormorean languages spoken in Comoros, in addition to

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French, Arabic and Malagasy. (For more information on world languages, see [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com))

## 4. Home language literacy

Fourteen pupils reported that they were not literate in any language other than English. A further eleven pupils reported only limited ability to read and or write a home language. All pupils reported that their parent/s were literate in at least one language. None of these findings were checked.

The correlation of fluency in a home language (L1) to reading and writing test score and time lived in the UK is shown below. All groups achieved the same mean test score but after differing amounts of time lived in the UK. This is explored in the discussion on page 13.

	Total number of pupils	Data adjusted to remove variables	Test Score (mean) /35	Mean years in UK
Pupils reporting as literate in a home language (L1)	34	30	27.9	5.85
Pupils reporting as having partial/limited L1 literacy	11	11	27.4	7.36
Pupils reporting as having only English literacy	14	11	27.7	8.95

Fig 4: Home literacy

## 5. Factors pupils believe to improve language learning

At the end of every interview, pupils were asked to take a few moments to consider what had helped them learn English. In addition some pupils went on to write about their memories of starting to learn English. Each offered between two and four answers, with most giving three. The total number of responses was 168 from 59 pupils. No answer could score higher than 59. The results are displayed in fig 5 overleaf.

A general feeling of learning English at school came first, however this did not necessarily mean formal lessons. Nearly as many cited talking outside the home – to friends, at school, in lessons and socially. Only 17 of the cohort cited special English lessons and support teachers as part of their introduction to English.

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**Pupil Resonances: What, in your opinion, helped you learn English ?**

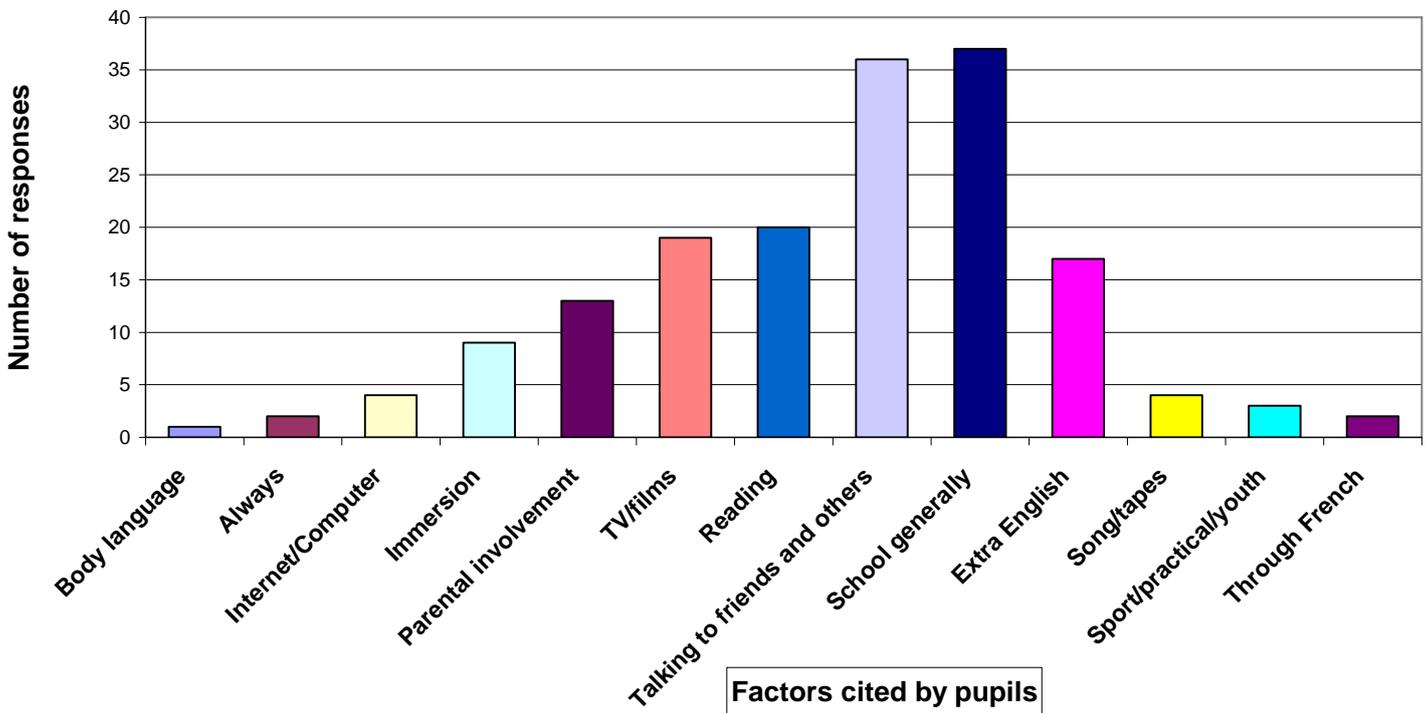


Fig 5: Factors supporting the learning of English

Listening was also noted by many pupils – listening to songs, the radio, television and films as well as to friends and teachers. Clearly schools in which speaking and listening activities are thoughtfully planned will be helping pupils still acquiring English.

Reading, both for pleasure and to reference new vocabulary was noted by about 33% of the group. All these readers were very keen,

“You get to see how to spell the words” in contrast to others who very definitely denied its usefulness.

“I can’t just sit down and read”

Some pupils comprehended that they are still improving their English

“Now I’m in year 10 and things get more complicated”

“I have got to speak good English if I want to get somewhere”

But many did not seem to grasp that they were still improving. For some of these pupils it was though that had been a difficult time, now thankfully past:

“You feel left out - different, like”

“Because I was the only Polish boy in the school I put a lot of effort and tried hard to do my best”

“No-one helped me, I helped myself”

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And the worry now was the loss of the first language.

"By picking up English I lost German"

"I would like to get a job in which I could use both my languages, so that I would never ever again forget one of them as I did a few years ago"

Personal effort was noted in six cases and the advantages of a multilingual home in one other. Several pupils went on to expand the various methods employed by their parents to teach the family English:

"So my Dad decided to stop us from speaking any languages but English at home which was very hard because no one spoke English but my Dad and he was not at home half of the time."

One girl cited her bilingual mother

"That way she could help me when I was younger. Now I sometimes edit her work."

Another girl reported that her father had insisted the family all speak English at first but now had switched back to Somali. And finally, another pupil explained that his parents had prepared early by choosing optional English lessons at his primary school in Lithuania.

## 6 Future Plans

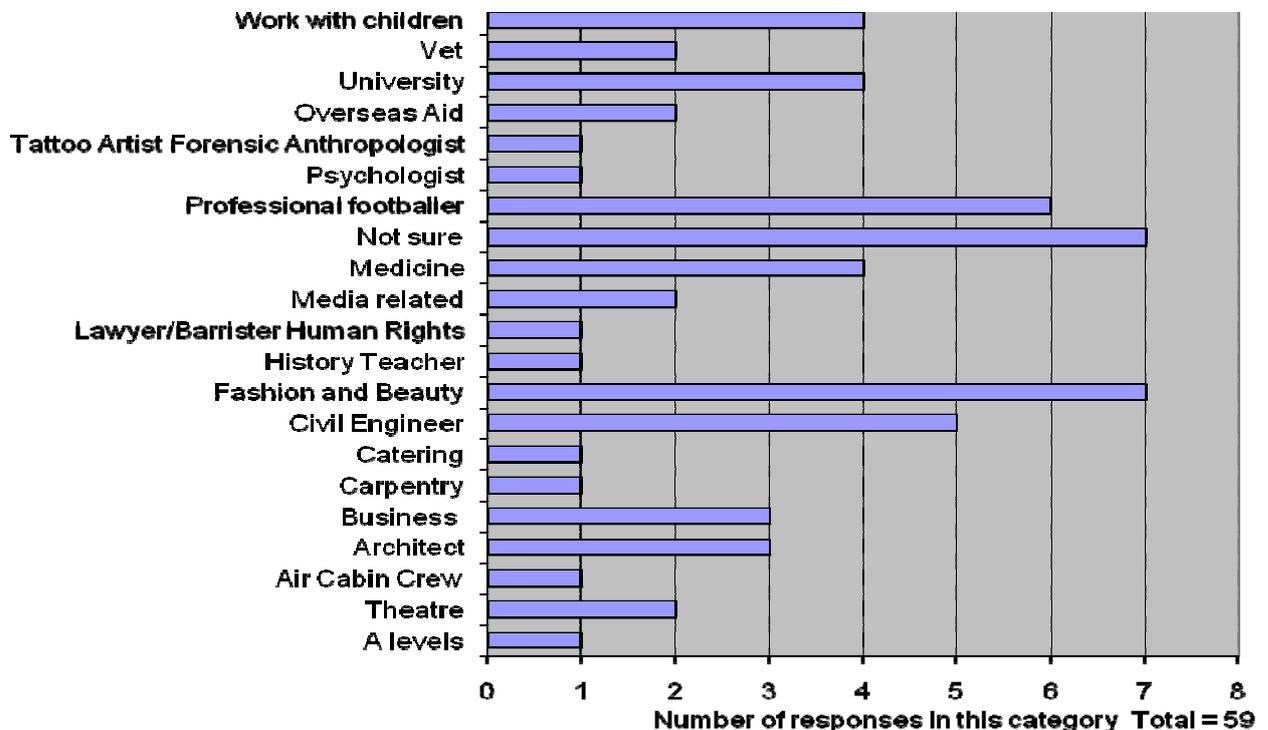


Fig 6: Future plans

As can be seen from the above table, most pupils had already started thinking about their future careers. These spanned a wide range from the individual - tattoo artist - to the more expected. A few pupils were keen to work 'back home' either in overseas aid or in a more permanent capacity but most saw their future to be in London.

## Analysis of staff responses

*“The point at which you stop thinking about what people are saying and think about how they are saying it. That’s the point at which you are fluent.” Ann Horton*

Interviews were conducted with staff at seven schools and their considered responses have been collated below:

### **Q - In your opinion, what strategies improve the progress of**

#### 1 *Beginners*

Strategies cited included

- a reliable base line assessment of newly arrived pupils
- using a buddy system (both home language and English speaking buddies)
- mixing with friends in the playground
- in class support
- withdrawal from mainstream lessons for an induction programme
- project work (on identity, art, language)
- focused English language teaching/English as a foreign language lessons
- focus on vocabulary
- use of visual clues

#### 2 *Developing bilinguals*

Strategies cited included

- good literacy strategies which target the whole class
- preparing for writing by speaking
- scaffolding of work
- spelling activities
- engagement in day to day talk
- use of home language in lessons
- 1:1 reading supported by tapes
- subject specific support
- support with learning academic language patterns
- target setting
- continuous collection of data – mid-term monitoring
- discreet support
- homework clubs
- booster classes

### 3 *Pupils nearing fluency?*

Strategies cited included

- accelerated/fast track programmes
- acknowledgement of dual/mother tongue
- specific targeting of EAL errors
- attention to groupings
- using diagnostic tools to analyse pupils' writing
- partnerships with other departments to influence teaching styles
- day to day formative assessment

#### **Q - *What makes progress more rapid in some pupils?***

Responses included

- high level of cognition
- high level of first language literacy
- personal motivation

#### **Q - *What else do you think makes a difference at your school?***

Responses included

- good discipline in school
- commitment to and knowledge of pupils
- specific teaching of writing skills
- conversing with pupils
- pupils being involved in practical activities
- liaison between EAL, SEN, and G&T in school
- representation of language diversity around the school
- valuing home languages through examinations
- liaising with community groups
- providing interpreters for parents
- open access to EAL room
- enrichment activities/trips
- debating society

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## Discussion

### How many years do the data indicate it takes to become a fluent speaker of English?

This subject has been extensively explored by Feyisa Demie (Demie 2011) using data from Lambeth schools and it is with his kind permission that the following table is reproduced:

Languages spoken by Year 10 EAL students in 2009	Number of Years by Levels of Fluency in English			Total Years in Stage 1 - 3	Number of speakers
	Stage 1- Beginners and <i>New to English</i>	Stage 2 - <i>Becoming familiar with English</i>	Stage 3- <i>Becoming confident as user of English</i>		
Akan Twi- Fante	1.2	2.8	3.4	7.4	9
Albanian	1.7	2.7	3.3	7.7	3
Arabic	1.5	2.3	3.5	7.3	4
Bengali	1.8	3.5	2.6	7.9	10
Chinese	1	3.2	3.4	7.6	11
French	1	1.7	5.3	8	3
Gujarati	2.5	2.5	3	8	2
Lingala	1.3	2.8	4.5	8.6	4
Portuguese	1.6	2.8	3.2	7.6	30
Somali	2.2	3.3	2.3	7.8	6
Spanish	1.8	3.7	2.2	7.7	13
Tigrinya	1	2.5	4	7.5	2
Turkish	1.5	1.8	4.5	7.8	4
Urdu	1	2	3.5	6.5	2
Vietnamese	2	3.5	2.5	8	2
Yoruba	1.3	3	2.6	6.9	7
Other *	1.3	2.9	3.1	7.3	12
ALL	1.5	2.9	3.1	7.5	124

\* Other includes languages for which there is only one speaker in this pupil cohort: Ga, Guarani, Italian, Kurdish, Luganda, Polish and Shona.

Table 1: EAL pupils' English language acquisition and the number of years at each stage of English fluency – (Demie, 2011)

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Demie has concluded that in Lambeth today we should expect pupils to be fluent users of English after six to eight years. This would mean that, in order to enter key stage 4 with age appropriate use of English, an average pupil needs to be in an English speaking school by the age of 7 or 8. These data sit pretty comfortably with the findings of others (Cummins,1992), which suggest fluency takes from five to seven years.

What can be said about the current sample is that the pupils had all lived in Britain for between one and twelve years (mean = 6.8 years) and that all were fluent or nearly fluent English users, with a mean test score of 27.5/35 indicating a secure pass at Entry 3. Although the mean figures conform to expected outcomes, there were pupils who had learned English both much more and much less rapidly than the expected time.

Taking the 30 pupils who reported as fluent in a home language with no underlying special needs, the mean time of learning English was 5.85 years with a mean test score of 27.9 (see fig 4) The 11 non fluent L1 pupils achieved the same mean score after an average time in the UK of 7.3 years and those 11 pupils with no L1 fluency again achieved the same mean score after a mean time in the UK of 8.9 years. Although these results are not statistically valid, owing to lack of elimination of a number of variables and small sample sizes, it might indicate that a secure first language literacy in EAL pupils helps to speed up the learning of English, something which was also noted by teachers in their responses. Thus it would behove schools to promote first language literacy, either through hosting supplementary schools, providing qualified tuition for language exams or developing extra curricular programmes to improve the use of the first language. (Currently two schools in Lambeth are working with the Arvon Foundation on writing projects in Portuguese and Yoruba. For more information see [www.arvonfoundation.org](http://www.arvonfoundation.org).) Of course it could also mean that secure first language literacy makes taking a test more 'do-able' without absolute fluency in English; the sample sizes are too small to say.

For a more erudite perusal of the acquisition of English see NALDIC [www.naldic.org.uk](http://www.naldic.org.uk)  
Search: bilingualism and second language acquisition.

### **Does school make a difference?**

It is interesting to contrast pupil responses with those of their teachers. As reported in Pupil Responses above, many pupils failed to acknowledge the role of any particular classroom strategies as having been of benefit to their acquisition of English. However, attendance at school was important to 36 and more than half (32) cited firmly that they had learned English by speaking and listening to their school friends. This does validate the use of the buddy system in school, play or break times, clubs and all curricular activities involving the scaffolding and modelling of talk. For a starting point to talk based activities in a secondary setting, please refer to the work of Stuart Scott and Steve Cooke at the Collaborative Learning Project.

Seventeen pupils recalled their first days at school, unable to speak English and could remember having some sort of extra help during those early days. However all except one of these pupils arrived in the UK since year 2, and it is possible that the key stage 1 arrivals just do not remember that far back. A further 19 pupils reported that they had learned English through going to school, but for some this was associated with early days at school and

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others as a venue for socialising and talk. Only 12 pupils mentioned the word teacher in their response. For many it appears that they do not now comprehend that they are still learning English and their teachers are helping this happen. However, some pupils were able to reflect more carefully on their feelings. When one boy, who arrived unable to speak English in year 5, was asked what had improved his English he replied:

“Worries...You are forced to talk because you can’t spend the rest of your life talking to no-one”

“At first it feels hard, for example in class you don’t pick English up from the teachers, you pick it up outside by talking to people your own age... They’re gonna put slangs and you can use the slangs if you want to but you must try to learn the right words to use”

And when asked where the right words would be found he responded

“By asking teachers and my mum – or I have to open a dictionary”

One could conclude from this that learning to speak in the same way as one’s peers is the most important goal for many young people. Teachers need to make the learning of grammatically correct English much more explicit and explain clearly to pupils why they are learning particular sentence structures, vocabulary and genres and what they will be able to do once these forms have been understood. A starting point for this could be activities derived from the work of John Polias and Brian Dare (eg LiLAC course, see below)

Another girl, who also arrived in Lambeth with no previous education aged 10 and who is now fully fluent, reflected on her way into English thus:

“When you’re in primary school I think it is easier to grab the language ... I had this teacher and she used to help me... there was this little kid in the year above...

She went on to discuss the importance of reading, starting by naming the first book she read at Hitherfield Primary school in 2004 (*Shana Went Shopping* ©CEA Islington)

“Starting with those baby books gave me the basics ...I think books work wonders – sometimes I will forget lunch and just keep reading... I would sometimes read while I was walking along...It’s just like you are in the book”

And finally she concluded with

“Now I am trying to pass this on to everyone else as well – my little brother is in year 5”

Several other pupils mentioned the importance of having been lent a continuous supply of reading books by a particular teacher or teaching assistant. Clearly all schools have well stocked libraries but some pupils need more than this – an adult who is selecting books for them to read and monitoring their progress. Some teachers also provide accompanying tapes or CDs with easy readers in order to provide a model of spoken English when the book is read at home.

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## Concluding remarks

I would like to thank all those who participated in this survey and hope it proves a useful snapshot of how English is being acquired in secondary schools in Lambeth today.

Amanda Gay Feb 2011

## Further Reading

*Language Diversity in Lambeth Schools* 2010 Lambeth Research and Statistics Unit

*Naldic Quarterly* NALDIC Publications [www.naldic.org.uk](http://www.naldic.org.uk)

*Teaching ESL students in mainstream classrooms: language in learning across the curriculum* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2007 Government of South Australia [www.unlockingtheworld.com](http://www.unlockingtheworld.com)

The Collaborative Learning Project [www.collaborativelearning.org](http://www.collaborativelearning.org)

## References

Cummins, J. (1992). Language proficiency, bilingualism, and academic achievement. P.A. Richard-Amato and M.A. Snow (Eds.). *The Multicultural Classroom: Reading for Content-Area Teachers*, Harlow and Longman.

Demie, F. (2011). English as Additional Language: A study of English Proficiency and Attainment, *Race Equality Teaching*, Summer 2011, vol. 29, no 3.

Hester, H (1990) *Patterns of Learning*, CLPE

Jarvis and Gay (2004), *EAL Assessment Materials for students in Key Stage 4 and 5*, Camden LA