# Terminological tussles: taking issue with ‘EAL’ and ‘languages other than English’


## Abstract

The field of English language teaching and learning has long been full of a plethora of acronyms and terms. Those terms that relate to languages and users of languages that are not those privileged or dominant in any given context should be subject to particular scrutiny. The author argues that labels applied to individuals and less dominant languages have the power to entrench and perpetuate monolingual ideologies and deficit model thinking with regards to multilingualism in education. This paper seeks to offer a critical examination of terminology pertinent for children designated as ‘EAL’ (English as an Additional Language) in the UK school context (as well as other anglophone countries) and to problematise the most commonly used of ideologically-entrenched terms. The author proposes a new option that reconfigures the current hierarchical relationship between the dominant language, English, and those that have a lower status within the wider society. The author concludes by arguing that this discussion is arguably a starting point for a broader reconceptualisation of many of the terms and acronyms that abound in the language teaching and learning field.


## Introduction

The use and misuse of terminology around languages, language learning and language learners in professional and public discourses can underpin negative attitudes and undermine positive ones, perpetuating unhelpful ideologies about languages and people and entrenching privilege through the power of labelling. Language learning and teaching disciplines have often operated very discretely from each other in terms of research, practices, ideology, and terminology (Mallows, 2012; Carder, 2009) despite having a common ‘centrality of purpose’ commented on as far back as the late 1970s (Brown et al., 1977: iii). These language learning and teaching sub-disciplines include those broadly referred to as Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and English as an Additional Language (EAL). However, the range of labels, along with their related acronyms, within and between these professional silos, is very wide, often necessitating extensive glossaries and acronym lists for teachers, such as that found at The Internet TESL Journal (2004) or the National Association for Language Development In the Curriculum (2015). Moreover, beyond those acronyms lie many contested terms that have been the regular subject of discussion and negotiation (McPake et al., 2007; Cummins & Danesi, 1990).

This paper focuses on two key aspects of the vast array of terminology which impacts on the experience of being a multilingual child in a society that is embedded within the monolingual *habitus* (Gogolin, 1994; Gogolin, 1997) that perpetuates the power and dominance of one language. The interest here is in exploring the terms used in public discourse and scholarly circles to denote the languages other than this dominant one.

Following this discussion about labelling languages, the categorising labels (such as 'EAL') attached to the children concerned will be problematised and re-negotiated. This will lead to the proposal of a new term to describe both these non-dominant languages and the people who speak them that may be of value in addressing some of the deficiencies of existing terms.

## Labelling languages

There have been extensive discussions in the English language learning and teaching literature around the terms used to describe the languages to which emergent multilingual children have an allegiance. In the language teaching, learning and acquisition world, many researchers and teachers have traditionally referred to the *first language* or *L1*. This is, of course, problematic as soon as there are multiple languages regularly used in the home because the child in this circumstance is likely to become bilingual simultaneously and it would therefore be difficult for the child to say which was their first language. In the UK context, Bourne highlights this explicitly in her paper for the National Literacy Strategy document in which she contests the use of 'first' language and adopts 'home' language instead, whilst the rest of the governmental guidance document (DfES, 2002) continues to use 'first', even whilst introducing her paper as an appendix. Furthermore, if the *L1* is to be immediately set in context against an assumed *L2* of English, then a language will be missing from the equation. So, counting the languages is not going to allow for a simple one-size-fits-all uncontroversial term. This has caused policy-makers and researchers the world over to invest significant time in finding alternatives.

These have ranged from ethnic, immigrant, ancestral, non-official, the traditional mother-tongue, heritage, aboriginal, autochthonous, (ex-)colonial, community, critical, diasporic, endoglossic, foreign, geopolitical, indigenous, language other than English (LOTE), local, migrant, minority, refugee, regional, strategic and home (Bale, 2010; McPake et al., 2007) to the Canadian and French *langues d'origine* (Helot and Young, 2002). Amongst this impressively extensive list of terms are some of those most prevalent in British academic, media and governmental discourses: mother-tongue, minority, heritage, community, migrant, LOTE and home. It is those terms that will be problematised further below, drawing on recent discussions and reviews in the language learning and teaching research communities.

*Mother-tongue* was widely used, in the UK and elsewhere, until the early 1990s but a focus on terminological accuracy and concern about connotations have led to it falling out of favour although it continues to be the preferred term in the Scandinavian context (Ganuza & Hedman, 2015). The obvious points to make are about the influence of the father and grandparents on the child's developing linguistic world, as well as the fact that simultaneous bilinguals may well not have just one dominant language.

*Minority language* is a term that, whilst still being extensively adopted, is problematic in suggesting that there are only a small number of speakers of the particular language, additionally highlighting the hierarchy of relative values of languages in the UK. In an increasingly globalised world, with a more mobile population, this term is not useful in

that it refers to a particular language only as it is perceived within a fairly small geographical area. Some researchers adopt it strategically to make a direct link with the notion of ethnic minorities (Mehmedbegovic, 2009: 22). However, others may feel that the two should be linked, in part because of the prevalent, oft-contradictory, societal discourse on language, race, ethnicity and immigration, as discussed by Leung, Harris and Rampton (1997).

Adopting the description *heritage* affords a certain importance and attaches a gravitas to the language in question and, therefore, perhaps, to the people who speak it, perhaps even romanticising its use somewhat (Bale, 2010). However, the term also implies that the language is barely living, and that it is something that belongs in the past, suggesting that they may not actually be useful for the speaker in their everyday life. This would not seem to be an optimal message for a child reluctant to engage with their home language to hear.

Although the term *community language* implies positively that the language is used in many shared social and cultural contexts, and is the favoured term amongst relevant teachers in the UK (McPake et al. 2007), it can be criticised for the implications that such sharing is inherent amongst groups who share linguistic and cultural backgrounds. To some it may, once again, highlight the power and hegemony of English by the somewhat parochial or belittling connotation that could be read into the term. The hierarchical distinction that can be drawn between the well-supported, elite 'Modern Foreign Languages' taught in schools and the 'community languages' that are not, is also not helpful (McPake et al., 2007).

Talking of *migrant languages* is problematic in that it draws on associations with another characteristic, which may be hard to define and be too closely correlated in the minds of many with race. Although drawing a closer link between language and ethnic culture may be wise in certain circumstances (Mehmedbegovic, 2009), it is not really a useful term as a label for an already disenfranchised group. This term has increasingly being adopted in the recent highly negative media discourse around immigration and therefore arguably should not be adopted by researchers or practitioners that have any kind of social justice agenda.

Cummins and Danesi (1990) and Bourne (2001) amongst others, have indicated that *home languages* may be the better term to adopt and it is the term that is starting to be seen more widely in research literature. However, there remains an issue even with that term because of the strong correlation with domain. Can a *home language* belong in a school environment? What should it be called if English is now principally used in the home environment (for example within families who have been settled in a diaspora for two or three generations) and the *home language* has really become the language of the grandparents?

*Languages other than English* (or another dominant language) is a purposively broad term that seeks to be neutral in its lack of characteristics. In this respect it succeeds but an

ideology is still present in the use of ‘other than’, which lends an air of dismissiveness to the languages that are not the dominant.

Of course, the very fact of seeing languages as monolithic constructs is problematic as it related to the ‘one nation, one language’ ideology that feeds into much of the public and professional discourses on language use (Pennycook, 2009; Hall, 2014). Althusser’s (1972) concept of interpellation is used by Garcia and Li Wei (2014) to demonstrate how individuals are ‘hailed’ by social institutions that enforce and constrain individuals into adopting monolingual practices. This perpetuates the myths about bilingualism and the supposed difficulties of managing multiple language systems cognitively (Grosjean, 1997).

## Labelling speakers

Speakers of more than one language are also subjected to a range of descriptive categorisations that are often ideologically loaded. Terms such as ‘bilingual’, ‘multilingual’, ‘trilingual’, ‘quadrilingual’, and ‘plurilingual’ and related qualifying terms like ‘dynamic’ and ‘emergent’ are extensively discussed and contested elsewhere (García et al., 2008; Aronin & Hufeisen, 2009; García, 2011; García & Li Wei, 2014; Grosjean, 1982; Chen, 2007). Therefore, the focus here will be largely on the acronym-led descriptions for children (in education, and speakers of multiple languages in other domains).

Mallows (2012) was primarily concerned with the distinction between EAL (English as an Additional Language) and ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages), within the UK context, where ‘ESOL’ classes are aimed at those over the age of sixteen and ‘EAL’ is used to describe children within the mainstream education system. Any pupil who has indicated that or is thought to speak a language at home that is not English is designated as EAL. The current definition of ‘EAL’ covers an extremely wide range of pupils, including multilingual children who are fluent in English and (an)other language(s), as well as new migrants who may not speak English at all and may also not be literate in their first language (Arnot et al., 2014). Cornwell (2015) posited that the use of the EAL ‘flag’ is a poor basis on which to base funding decisions and that other factors should be adopted that are more relevant, and Murphy (2018) recently went so far as to denounce the term as ‘reckless’ because of its general nature, pointing out that ‘it does not speak to whether and to what extent the child is exposed to English since birth or any other context, and it doesn’t say anything about their proficiency in English. And, importantly, it does not say anything about their knowledge of their home language or proficiency in that language’.

Distinctions on a global scale are also confusing and unhelpful (Carder, 2009), but discussions of these distinctions can highlight attitudinal points of interest, as with LEP (Limited English Proficiency), the term, until recently, used in the USA instead of EAL. This term can, however, also be found in non-educational literature in the UK such as this National Health Service report from the Mid-Lothian region in Scotland (Robinson,

2010). Whilst linguistic deficiency is highlighted as the focus of the report, the ideological stance that communication difficulties are the fault of the individual newer to English is clear.

LEP is now being phased out in favour of ELL (English Language Learner) but both of these terms buy into a deficit model stance, perpetuating the notion that there are "apparent deficiencies in these children's development" (Genesee, 1994: 1). 'ESL' (English as a Second Language) describes a specific program in the USA but in Australia it equates more to the classification of EAL, despite its potential for inaccuracy in that children are sometimes users of three or four languages. Also in Australia, the adult equivalent to ESOL classes is the AMEP (Australian Migrant Education Programme). The key issue, however, is, as García, Kleifgen, and Falchi (2008: 6) point out, using these acronyms at all 'signals the omission of an idea that is critical to the discussion of equity in the teaching of these children', that of their emerging bi- (or multi-)lingualism and any acknowledgement of what an achievement this is. Over time, it is to be hoped that a more cohesive approach to acronyms and other labels could be adopted, to avoid the unhelpful labelling and categorisation of learners whilst assuring the on-going support of those who need it, and to allow for a more useful sharing of research and best practice between academics and practitioners. The difficulty is always in attempting to be accurate in the description of the particular individual or group, but positive, or at least neutral, in the connotation of the term itself.

## Proposal: *Languages Beyond English*

Whilst these tussles with terminology are important for educational researchers and it is important to acknowledge the power of terms such as those discussed above in perpetuating ideologies around language learners, educational discourses, individuals and groups, it is also important that we retain a pragmatic approach and consider the value of using any of the above terms, subject to a suitable explicit technical definition, and grounded in good reasoning, for research and writing purposes. However, as McPake et al. (2007) say, terms should remain subject to negotiation and constant evaluation and that is the value of revisiting them at regular junctures in professional and research contexts.

With that in mind, I contend that the notion of an individual as a speaker of languages *beyond* English (LBE) arguably offers a valuable reconfiguration, building on existing terms. In common with LOTE, this denotation does not imply any particular number of languages but also avoids deficit model thinking through a positive focus on the languages that those children speak rather than simply *not* speaking English. It recognises better the range of the children's linguistic repertoires without demanding that practitioners become acquainted with more challenging notions such as 'translingual practices' (Canagarajah, 2013), for example, that may feel a long way from their own experiences. The use of the word 'beyond' could also be said to capture a desired shift within the currently perceived hierarchy of languages, diminishing the power of English, with the other languages here being seen as, at the very least, equal to the dominant language.

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to offer a critical examination of terminology that is pertinent for children designated as EAL in the UK mainstream schooling context. However, the discussion and problematising of terms has broader relevance than that in that any context in which one language is dominant is likely to apply these, or similar, ideologically-entrenched terms. The introduction of a new politically neutral and anti-deficit term to describe people and their *languages beyond English* is intended to be a contribution to the on-going evaluation and negotiation of terminology recommended by previous reviewers (McPake et al., 2007).

However, it may well be that *Languages Beyond English* does not go far enough, ideologically speaking. Although it is a positive term that can be used across the range of (anglophone) language learning and teaching contexts, it still involves an instrumental categorisation of individuals, and, particularly, a de-personalisation through the use an acronym. The aforementioned silos created between different kinds of language learning and teaching (TEFL, TESOL, ESOL, EAL), and those between different classifications of children in mainstream (EAL, SEN(D), Gifted and Talented), as well as those that are related to (monolithic) distinctions between languages themselves are, in reality, those that may be better de-constructed over time.

## References


Arnot M, Schneider C, Evans M, Liu Y, Welply O and Davies-Tutt D (2014) *School approaches to the education of EAL students*. Cambridge: The Bell Educational Trust Limited.

Aronin L and Hufeisen B (2009) *The Exploration of Multilingualism: Development of Research on L3, Multilingualism and Multiple Language Acquisition*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Bale J (2010) International Comparative Perspectives on Heritage Language Education Policy Research. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 30: 42–65.

Bourne J (2001) Doing 'What Comes Naturally': How the Discourses and Routines of Teachers' Practice Constrain Opportunities for Bilingual Support in UK Primary Schools. *Language and Education* 15(4): 250–268.

Brown HD, Yorio CA and Crymes R (1977) Teaching and Learning English as a Second Language: Trends in Research and Practice. *On TESOL '77: Teaching and Learning English As a Second Language: Trends in Research and Practice*: 241–249. Available at: http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED187115&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED187115.

Canagarajah S (2013) *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Carder M (2009) ESL or "EAL"?: Programme or "support"? The baggage that comes with names. *International Schools Journal* XXIX(1): 18–25.

Chen Y (2007) Equality and Inequality of Opportunity in Education: Chinese Emergent Bilingual Children in the English Mainstream Classroom. *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 20(1): 36–51.
Cummins J and Danesi M (1990) *Heritage Languages: the development and denial of Canada's linguistic resources*. Toronto: Garamond Press.
Department for Education and Skills (2002) *Supporting Pupils Learning English as an Additional Language*. London: HMSO.
Ganuza N and Hedman C (2015) Struggles for legitimacy in mother tongue instruction in Sweden. *Language and Education* 29(2): 125–139.
García O (2011) Educating New York's bilingual children: constructing a future from the past. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 14(2): 133–153.
García O, Kleifgen JA and Falchi L (2008) From English Language Learners to. *Equity Matters* (1).
García O and Li Wei (2014) *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Genesee F (1994) *Educating second language children*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Gogolin I (1994) *Der monolinguale Habitus der multilingualen Schule*. Munster: Waxmann Verlag.
Gogolin I (1997) The " Monolingual Habitus " as the common feature in teaching in the language of the majority in different countries. *Per Linguam* 13(2): 38–49.
Grosjean F (1982) *Life with two languages: an introduction to bilingualism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
Grosjean F (1997) The bilingual individual. *Interpreting* 2(1–2): 163–187.
Hall CJ (2014) Moving beyond accuracy: from tests of English to tests of 'Englishing.' *ELT Journal* 68(4): 376–385.
Helot C and Young A (2002) Bilingualism and Language Education in French Primary Schools: Why and How Should Migrant Languages be Valued? *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 5(2): 96–112.
Leung C, Harris R and Rampton B (1997) The Idealised Native Speaker, Reified Ethnicities, and Classroom Realities. *TESOL Quarterly* 31(3): 543–560.
McPake J et al (2007) Valuing All Languages in Europe, Project Report. *Languages for Social Cohesion*: 1–62.
Mallows D (2012) *Innovations in English language teaching for migrants and refugees* London: British Council.
Mehmedbegovic D (2009) Promoting learning for bilingual pupils 3-11: opening doors to success. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 12(1): 111–113.
Murphy V (2018) Why using the term EAL can be "reckless." *TES*. Available at: https://www.tes.com/news/why-using-term-eal-can-be-reckless.
National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum (2015) EAL glossary. Available at: https://www.naldic.org.uk/eal-teaching-and-learning/eal-glossary/ (accessed 6 June 2017).
Pennycook A (2009) Plurilithic Englishes: Towards a 3D Model. In K Murata and J Jenkins (eds) *Global Englishes in Asian Contexts: Current and Future Debates*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK: 194–207.

Robinson J (2010) Interpreting and Translation in NHS Lothian Policy for Meeting the Needs of People with Limited English Proficiency. Available at: https://nhslothian.scot.nhs.uk/YourRights/TICS/Documents/InterpretingTranslationPolicy.pdf (accessed 4 July 2018).

The Internet TESL Journal (2004) Acronyms related to TESL. *The Internet TESL journal*. Available at: http://iteslj.org/acronyms.html (accessed 6 June 2017).