Comparative Literacy Development Trajectories in Bilingual and Monolingual Learners: Observation-Led Evidence from English-Dominant Schooling

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Abstract — The acquisition of literacy competence is a cardinal propeller for the attainment of early academic progress and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) identification in English-dominant education systems. However, despite the increasing variations of language, early literacy standards are often adopted using monolingual norms. This study assesses corresponding literacy development indicators, in bilingual and monolingual learners, observing patterns through which early decoding difficulty, reading fluency, and comprehension patterns are understood over time. Against the backdrop of longitudinal, observation-based data across dominant and professional settings in England, the study analyses (i) early literacy behaviours in bilingual and monolingual pupils, (ii) developmental divergence and convergence patterns across time, and (iii) decision points where literacy difficulty is interpreted as transient, developmental, or indicative of SEND. Observation records from active professionals are assessed alongside school-level SEND/EAL documentation and Local Authority context. A comparative section draws on education programme data from Rise to Inspire Africa Initiative (RIA) to contrast literacy recovery approaches in multilingual, low-resource contexts. Findings demonstrate that bilingual learners frequently exhibit delayed but accelerated literacy trajectories once language integration stabilises, while monolingual benchmarks applied prematurely contribute to misclassification risk. The paper proposes a linguistics-informed, trajectory-based literacy framework with implications for assessment practice, teacher development, and inclusive SEND decision-making.

Keywords: Bilingual Learners, Literacy Development, Monolingual Learners, Observation-Led Evidence, English-Dominant Schools.

I.   INTRODUCTION

The English education policy which oversees curriculum design and feedback frameworks, prioritises early literacy development (Male & Palaiologou, 2016). Certain indicators including phonics screening, reading age benchmarks, and early comprehension measures, influence intervention decisions, ability grouping, and SEND referral pathways (Learning Wales, 2015). Originally intended to assist pupils requiring additional support, the application of these indicators has raised critical questions about acceptability, equity, and interpretation (Scarino, 2017).

Immigrants, in addition to their native languages, receive early literacy guidance, at the same time, acquiring English as an additional language. Their proficiency in the English language is largely affected by the interaction between home-language literacy experience, oral language proficiency and exposure to the world of English in written form (DfE, 2020).

The assessment of formative literacy in people with non-English background continues to follow monolingual developmental parameters, however, notable research activities indicate that these categories of people have a unique but not an unusual trail (Fashanu, Wood, & Payne, 2020).

The progression of literacy acquisition when compared between native speakers of English and those who rely on bilingual dictionaries for translation between English and their native languages, forms a cardinal aspect of this study, taking into cognizance how contextual distinctions are communicated in different educational set-ups.

1.1 Aim

The aim of this paper is to provide a much-needed exposure into the discourse of literacy competence in different experiential instances, with considerations around how much effort is being made to integrate, provide instructional support, and ensure effective interpretive systems.

1.2 Objectives

The objectives of the paper include:

i.   To examine through observation-led evidence, the effect of longitudinal development on bilingual early learners in English-dominant schools.

ii. To assess how over time, difficulties with decoding, fluency, and comprehension among early bilingual learners diverge or converge, and the influence of this on SEND referrals.

iii. To propose a framework that will help reduce misclassification, and engender inclusiveness, in both high resource and low resource contexts.

Figure 1. Comparative literacy development trajectories in bilingual and monolingual learners across time.

Bilingual learners show delayed early decoding followed by accelerated growth once language integration stabilises, while monolingual learners demonstrate steadier early progress.
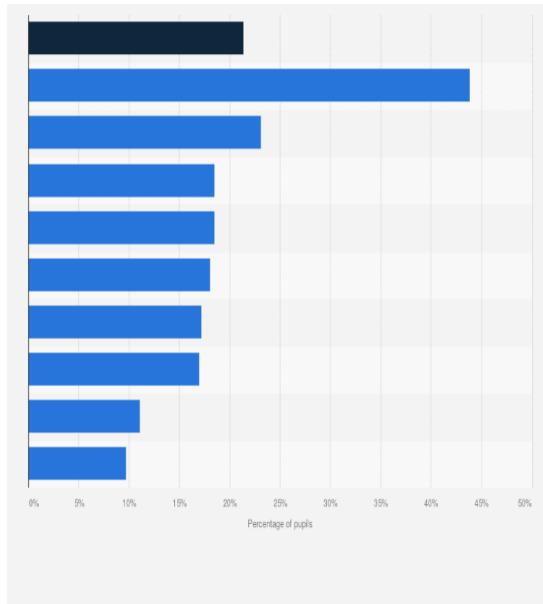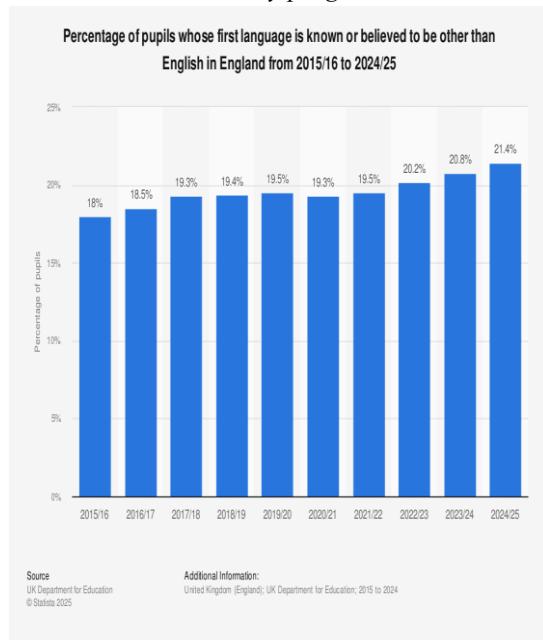
II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Bilingual Literacy Development

From research it is noted that bilingual learners, in the early stages of literacy competence development, are not as quick and precise in understanding, but become better as syntax and orthographic alignments concretise (Cummins, 2000; Bialystok, 2011). Cross-linguistic transfer can initially interfere with English phonics while supporting later comprehension and metalinguistic awareness (Hanafi, 2014; Ke & Xiao, 2015; Kehoe, Babatsouli, & Ingram, 2015; De Pilar Agustin-Llach, 2019). These findings can be implemented in the curriculum planning or classroom practices of preschool ESL children (Kehoe, Babatsouli, & Ingram, 2015). Findings from these studies show that the development of phonological awareness and word recognition in preschool ELLs despite being vital also require a more holistic approach (Ke & Xiao, 2015; Kehoe, Babatsouli, & Ingram, 2015; De Pilar Agustin-Llach, 2019). This may help in better identifying children at risk for learning difficulties and to find out what may be language specific difficulties associated with bilingual backgrounds. Findings show that word recognition in languages is predicted by phoneme awareness and these skills transfer between languages (Hanafi, 2014; Ke & Xiao, 2015; Kehoe, Babatsouli, & Ingram, 2015; De Pilar Agustin-Llach, 2019).

2.2 Literacy and SEND Identification

Early literacy difficulty is the easiest explanation that tries to validate the SEND referral, even though complexities in the system show over-identification and under-identification in varying instances (Hutchinson, 2021). However, where narrow phonics and literacy measures are used for literacy-related SEND categories, linguistically peculiar learners, such as bilinguals, will likely be misidentified (Artiles et al., 2010; Hutchinson, 2021).

2.3 Literacy, Engagement, and Behaviour

Certain behaviours are observed to contribute to literacy difficulty. Disengagement, task avoidance, and frustration behaviours are a number of these observations, hence, linguistic interpretations would help ensure that responses are not translated into contradictory meanings, whether motivational or behavioural disorders (Stanley, 2021; Fakhfakh & Bouaziz, 2022).

2.4 Conceptual Framework

The acquisition of literacy competence follows a collective pattern which imbibes decoding, frequency comprehension and meaning making. Non-native speakers of the English language are influenced by cross-linguistic transfer, phonological mapping between languages, and print exposure. Early difficulty does not necessarily predict long-term outcome, particularly when oral language proficiency is still emerging.

2.4.1 Monolingual Norms and Assessment Compression

Developmental processes in early literacy assessment are often narrowed down into dual submissions, which for bilingual learners, who may not be able to phonologically process information, but may be proficient in comprehension, with acceptable narrative capacity, tends to exaggerate delayed development as inadequacy (Gundarina & Simpson, 2021).

2.4.2 Observation-Led Literacy Analysis

The Observation-led approach which allows the separation of structural difficulty from traditional language-mediated issues, lays out factors like pattern recognition across time examining how decoding strategies, error typology and engagement emerge (Peterson & Elam, 2020).

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This paper used combined methods, longitudinal observational design comparing literacy trajectories in bilingual and monolingual learners across early and middle primary phases.

3.2 Participants and Settings

Participants were pooled from several English educational set-ups, including mainstream elementary and specialist academic centres. The group, made up of pupils from migrant families, featured those with constant home-language exposure before their experience with English-dominant schools. Their peers with English-dominant education were selected from the same system to ensure accuracy of instructional context.

No clinical diagnosis was conducted by the researcher. All data were anonymised and handled under GDPR-aligned safeguarding procedures.

3.3 Literacy Observation Tool

A literacy-focused observation schedule captured:

- Decoding behaviours (strategy use, error patterns)
- Fluency markers (rate, phrasing, self-correction)
- Comprehension indicators (retelling accuracy, inference)
- Engagement markers (task persistence, avoidance)
- Instructional context (phonics emphasis, scaffolding)

3.4 Data Sources and Triangulation

1. Structured literacy observation records
2. School literacy assessment summaries (ranges, not raw scores).
3. SEND Information Reports
4. Local Authority literacy and SEND context indicators.
5. Anonymised parental communication themes.

3.5   Observation Tool and Coding Framework

3.5.1   Coding Framework

Table 3. Literacy Trajectory Coding

Code	Indicator	Typical Interpretation	Trajectory-Based Interpretation
D1	Persistent decoding error	Dyslexia risk	Phonological transfer
F1	Low fluency	Processing deficit	Transitional language load
E1	Task avoidance	Motivation issue	Literacy access barrier

IV. FINDINGS

4.1 Early Literacy Profiles

Findings indicated that bilingual learners exhibited an increase in decoding error, which when studied, indicated a connection to phonological transfer and supressed eloquence, while monolingual learners had more instances of consistent decoding accuracy.

Table 1. Early Literacy Indicators (Baseline)

| Group	Decoding Accuracy	Fluency	Comprehension
Bilingual	Variable	Low–Moderate	Moderate
Monolingual	Moderate–High	Moderate	Moderate
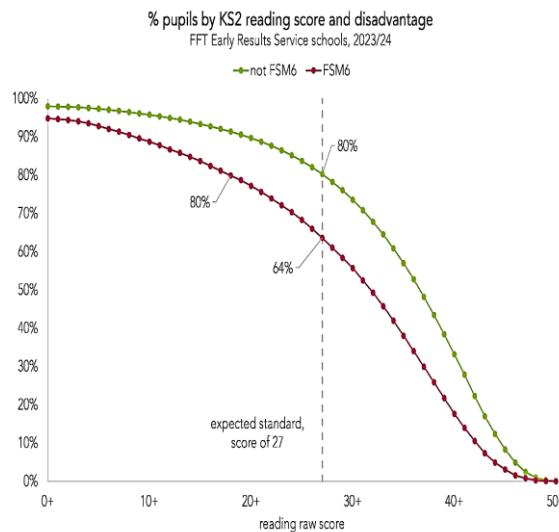
Figure 2. Distribution of phonics error types in bilingual and monolingual learners at baseline.

4.2 Trajectory Patterns

Across observation periods, bilingual learners frequently demonstrated accelerated gains in fluency and comprehension once oral English proficiency increased.

Table 2. Literacy Trajectory Outcomes

Group	Initial Lag	Acceleration	Convergence
Bilingual	Common	High	Frequent
Monolingual	Rare	Moderate	Stable
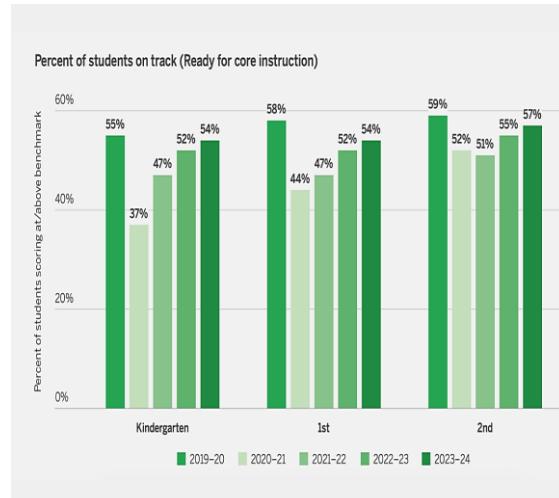
Figure 3. Literacy trajectory outcomes over time by language background.

4.3 SEND Referral Decision Points

SEND referral was more likely where early decoding difficulty was interpreted without reference to language background. Where trajectory-based interpretation was applied, referral was delayed or avoided.
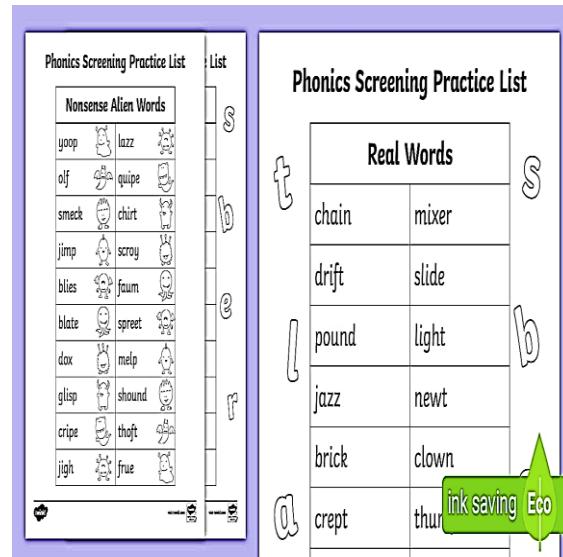
Figure 4. Interpretation pathways leading to SEND referral versus trajectory-based monitoring.

4.4 Comparative Analysis: RIA Literacy Recovery Context

The academic learning programmes that were designed and executed by the Rise to Inspire Africa Initiative (RIA) in Northern Nigeria serviced multilingual contexts where delayed literacy acquisition was common due to schooling disrupted by other social issues. The reports from the assessment prescribe literacy advancement through the development of oral language, multilingual scaffolding, and models designed to accelerate lingual acquisition rather than categorical labelling.

RIA programmes are designed to emphasize trajectory monitoring and re-engagement, which draws a contrast with English systems where each standard bears deep implications. These unique but similar context buttress the argument that the lag in the acquisition of literacy competence is not natural or self-catering, but becomes so only when jaundicedly viewed through rigid assessment yardsticks.
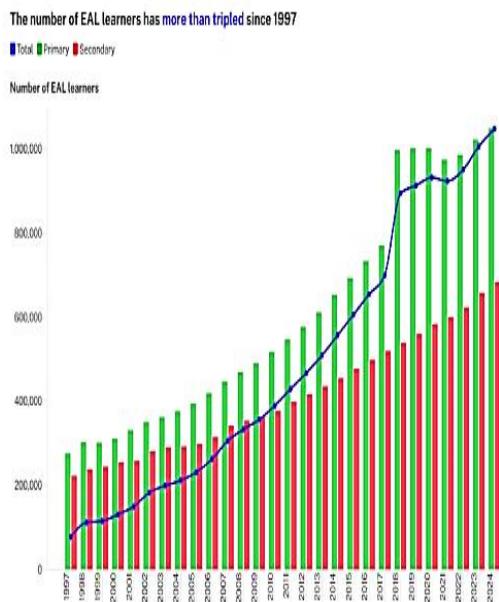

Figure 5. Comparative literacy recovery approaches in English-dominant and RIA-supported multilingual contexts.

Age 7 reading achievement by proficiency in English
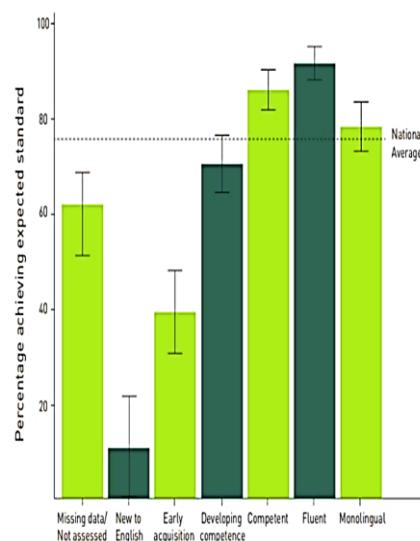
V. DISCUSSION

The result of the assessment informs observers that early literacy difficulty in bilingual learners is more of a function of developmental prioritisation than structural inadequacy. When Single-language benchmarks are practiced without the necessary projection and awareness, it results in amplified misclassification risk and contributes to SEND escalation.

This paper highlights the need to de-emphasise mundane perspectives in literacy assessment. Literacy should be interpreted as a developmental curve rather than a static score, particularly in multilingual educational instances.

An exposure from this study is knowledge that literacy difficulty becomes a SEND issue, but such is not at the point of struggle, rather, at the point of interpretation. Bilingual learners exhibit quick recovery and strong extended outcomes in scenarios where systems allow the influence of time, observation and linguistic context. Where this becomes absent, developmental alteration is usually transformed into institutional deficit.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study contributes a humanities-led, observation-based analysis of literacy development trajectories in bilingual learners. By reframing literacy as a dynamic process shaped by language integration, the research

offers a scalable framework for improving equity, accuracy, and efficiency in SEND decision-making.

Added research will expand and extend this submission through commensurate styling of literacy trajectories, as well as the evaluation of linguistics-informed assessment interventions across diverse the UK.

Implications for Practice and Policy
● Assessment reform: Imbibing trajectory-based interpretation into literacy assessment.
● Teacher development: Training educators to recognise bilingual literacy patterns.
● SEND policy: Reducing premature referral driven by early literacy benchmarks.

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