

A mixed-methods investigation into the home language environment of Bengali and Sylheti speaking children in the UK.

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Language skills in early childhood are among the strongest predictors of academic achievement at 11 years (Pace et al. 2018). The quality of linguistic input parents provide is critical for the development of these skills. For the one-fifth of children in UK primary schools who speak a language other than English at home (Department for Education, 2018), the amount of linguistic input they are exposed to is divided between a heritage language and English. It is consequently important that they receive the highest quality linguistic input in each language. Bengali and Sylheti are the fifth most reported main languages spoken in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2011). However, little is currently known about the home language environment for Bengali children speaking EAL in the early years. Learning more about the current home language environment has the potential to inform the development of future programmes to guide parents in supporting their children's language development before school entry.

This mixed-methods study is currently in the data collection phase. We plan to recruit 30 families with 3-4 year old children who speak either Bengali or Sylheti at home. All parents will participate in an interview, which will first include a structured questionnaire about language use at home. Following this, a semi-structured interview will focus on parent's views, attitudes and beliefs about the importance of their heritage language and English, and the factors that may influence their language practices at home. The primary caregiver in each family will then be invited to complete a detailed language diary for four days. The diary will include a record, in 30-minute time blocks, of each activity the child engages in, the sources of language input during that activity (e.g., mother), and the language of that input. Finally, 15 of these families will also take two, day-long home audio recordings using LENA devices, audio recorders worn within specially designed clothing by the child at home. Segments of the recordings will be sampled and then coded for factors aligned with those collected in the diary. Preliminary findings from the diaries of three families (total 98, 30-minute blocks) indicate that input during play, household activities and media was weighted more towards being mixed Bengali/Sylheti and English, and English only. Input during other activities (e.g., mealtimes, reading) was weighted more towards being Bengali/Sylheti only, or mixed Bengali/Sylheti and English. Five semi-structured interviews revealed that increased Bengali/Sylheti use was often motivated by the desire to strengthen and maintain relationships, and this was sometimes influenced by family members outside of the household (e.g. family members living abroad). Children were sometimes a motivating factor for parents using English, particularly in cases where children preferred to speak English compared with Bengali/Sylheti.

References

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