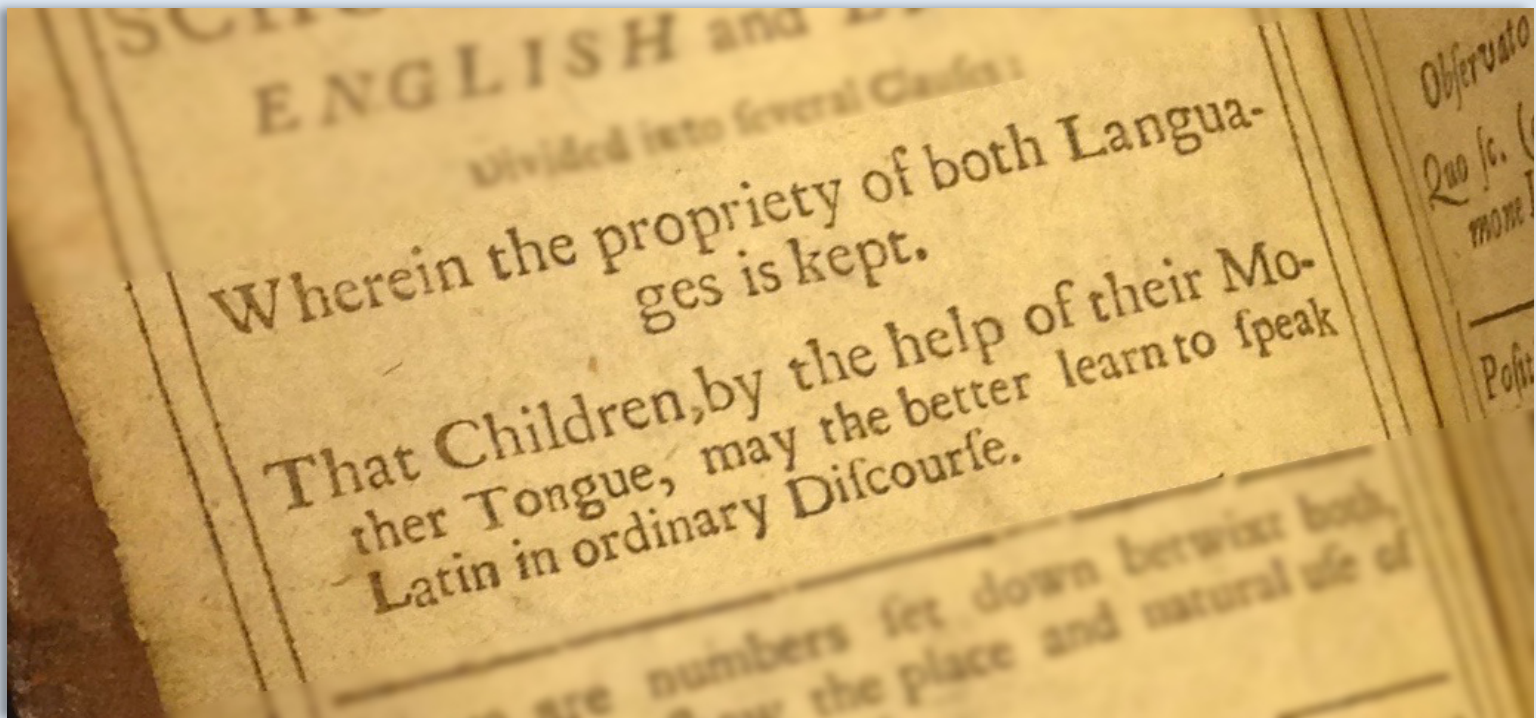


# English Language Learners’ Mother Tongues: help or hindrance?

## A randomized comparison of alternative approaches

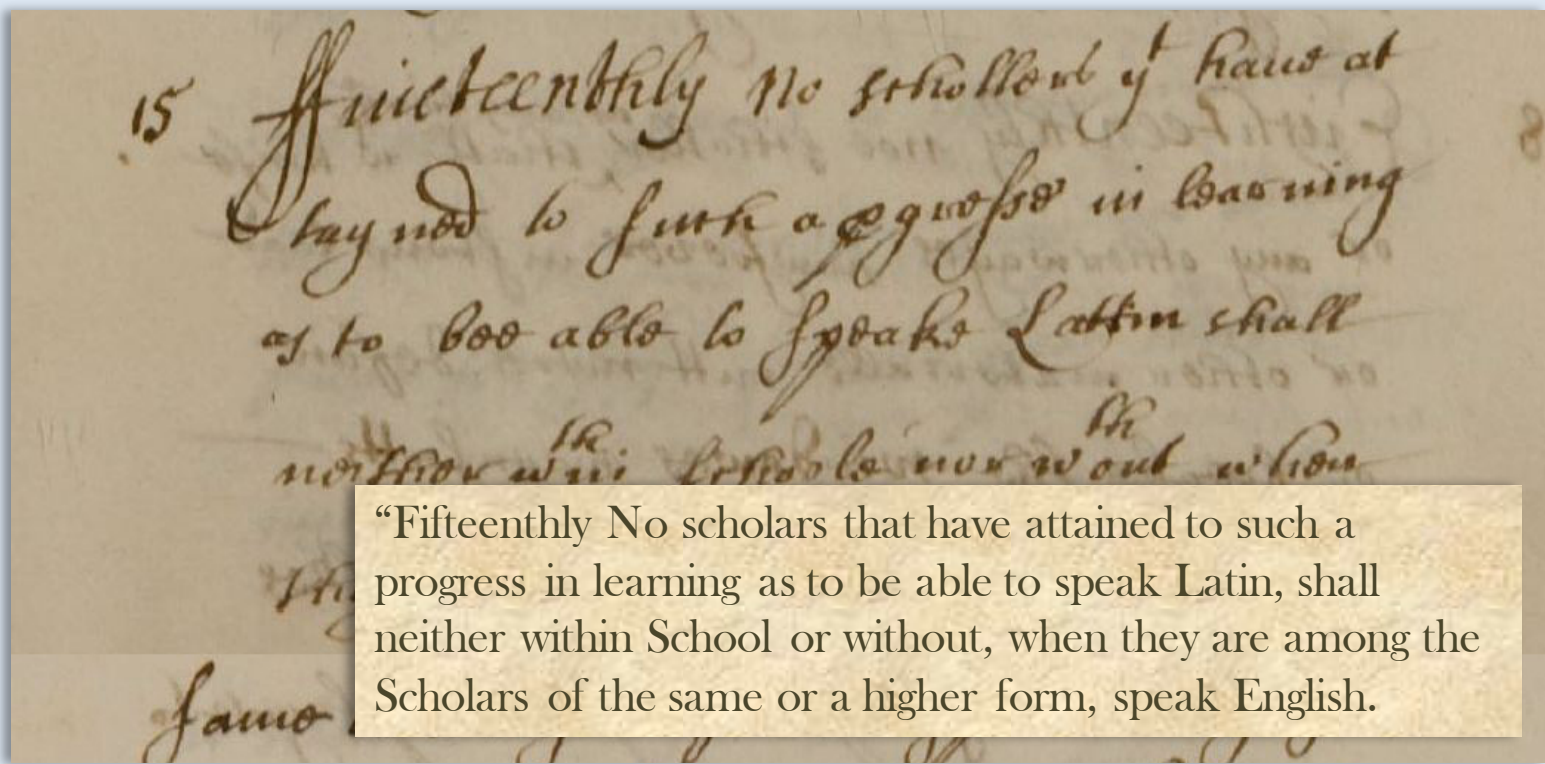
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Collective uncertainty about the place of mother-tongue in second language learning has existed for centuries.



Latin textbook 1684

Then



Adams’ Free Grammar School Rules 1656

**“Before the Literacy Hour, a bilingual teaching assistant and children [should] talk through the pictures and summarise the story of a Big Book in the home language.”** DfES advice 2002<sup>1</sup>

Now

**“English will be spoken in all areas of the school throughout the school day from 8am to 4pm (including breaks) by all students (including primary).”** A linguistically diverse school’s language policy 2011<sup>2</sup>

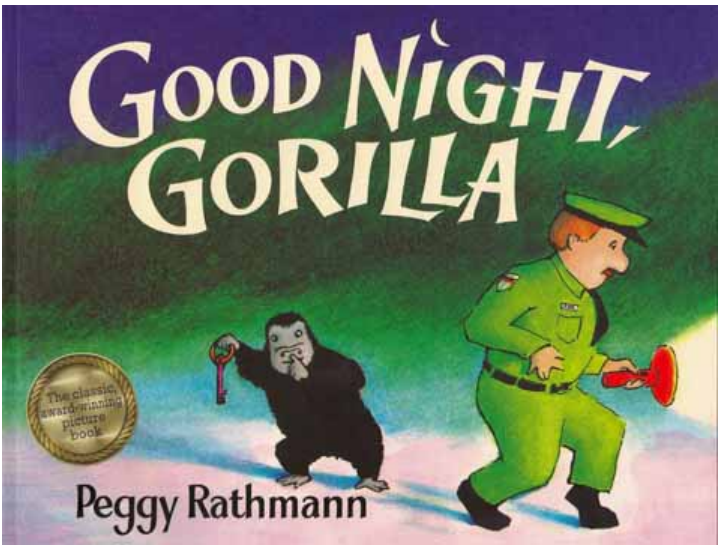
**Aim:** To compare the effects of a mother tongue teaching approach, based on the DfES advice above, with a similar approach using only English.

**Empirical evidence<sup>3</sup>** underpinning theories<sup>4</sup> informing advice to use learners’ mother tongues is mainly based on research in bilingual schools in the USA and Canada. It is not clear whether this can be applied directly to mainstream ‘monolingual’ schools in England that serve linguistically and culturally diverse students. I intended to address that gap.

### Procedure

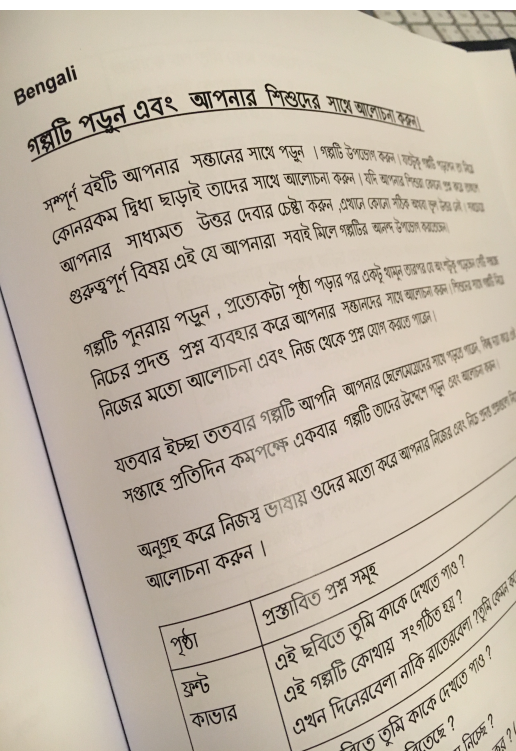


Recruited 36 children aged 5 – 7, with 17 different mother tongues, at one primary school in Oxford, UK.

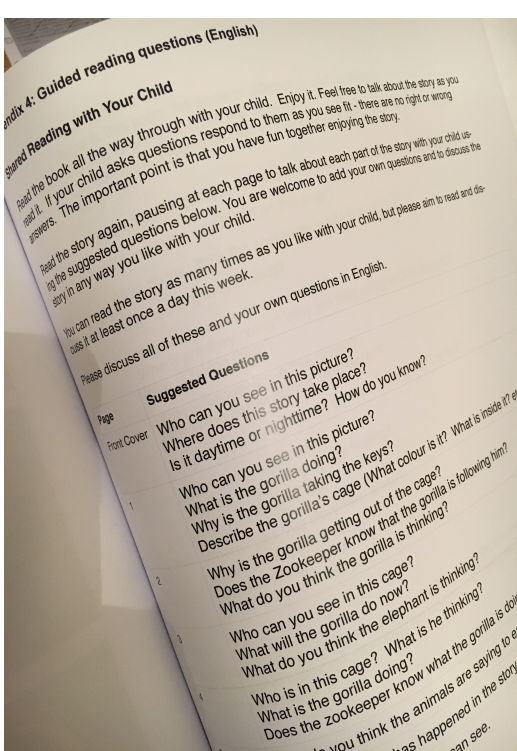


Each child was given a copy of a picture book with few words but a clear and engaging story.

Children were randomly allocated, using a well concealed allocation schedule, to either a mother tongue group or an English only group.



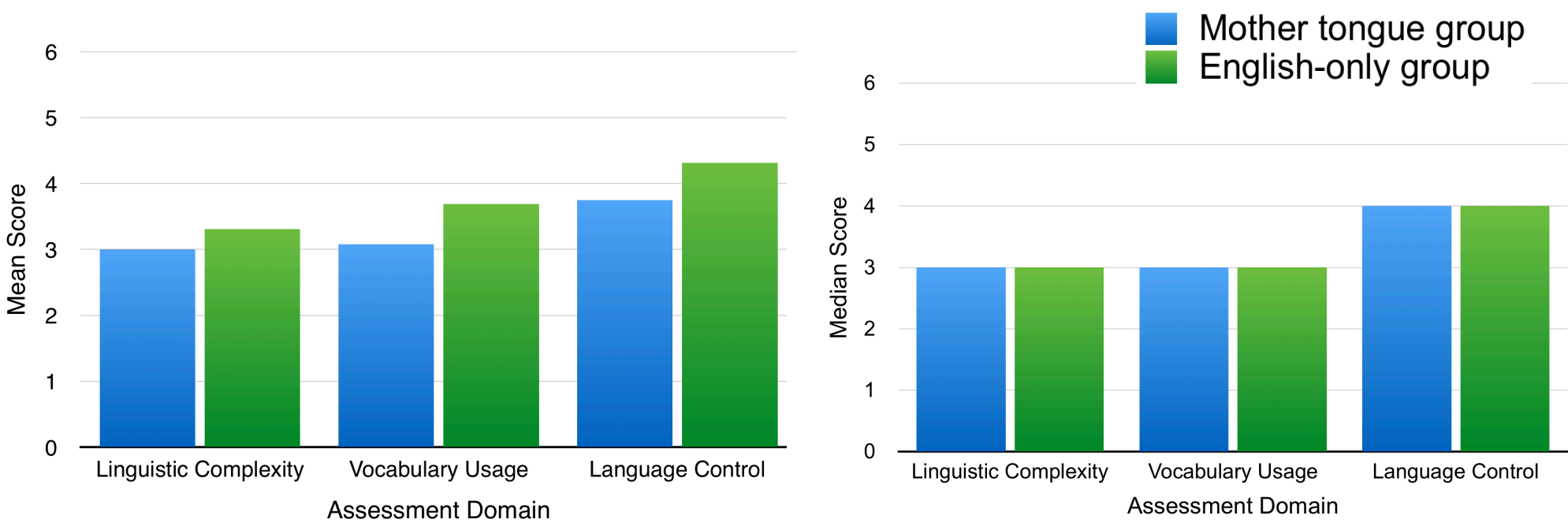
Parents were given instructions and questions to help them discuss and summarise the book with their child, in English or translated into their mother tongue. They were asked to do this with their child, using only their allocated language, over the course of one week.



Children’s understanding of the story was assessed, blinded to their group allocation, by scoring written retellings of it in English using standardised assessment tools.

### Results

The Mean scores on all assessment measures were very slightly higher in the English-only group, but this difference was not statistically significant. No differences were detected when median scores were compared.



### Implications

This small study does not resolve uncertainty about whether mainstream schools in England should promote or discourage use of their pupils’ mother tongues. Despite some educationalists’ advocacy of mother tongue mediated approaches, this appears to be the only randomized comparison of these alternative strategies conducted in UK schools. Teachers need firmer evidence upon which to base their teaching strategies. To help teachers and parents to choose appropriate language strategies for their children, larger controlled comparisons are needed.

### References

1 Bourne J (2002) *Home languages in the literacy hour in the national literacy strategy: Supporting pupils learning English as an additional language*. London: DfES  
2 Bromsgrove International School (2011) *English Speaking Policy*. Available online at <http://www.bromsgrove.ac.th/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/English-Speaking-Policy.pdf> [accessed 18.12.2013]  
3 Slavin R and Cheung A (2005) *A synthesis of research on language of reading instruction for English language learners*. Review of Educational Research 75:2 247-284  
4 Cummins J (1980) *The construct of language proficiency in bilingual education*. In Alatis JE (ed.) Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1970. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press 81-103