

Case Study Bilingual Pupil with ASD (Secondary School)

Background

Pupil X is 14 years old and is S2 pupil who is attending a language unit for pupils with specific language disorder. He arrived from Pakistan about 4 years ago. According to his notes from parental interviews at the time of enrolment he had attended a mainstream primary school in Pakistan. He had experienced isolation and social exclusion from peers in Pakistan due to limited language development and his inability to read social signs. In terms of academic progression, he learned to read and write in Urdu as well as some Basic English. Since arriving in UK, he is also attending after school Arabic classes learning to recite Quran where he is making limited progress.

After arriving in Scotland, he was enrolled in P7 in a mainstream primary school where his limited expressive language was attributed to the “silent period” of “being new to English” therefore he initially received support from an EAL teacher and was placed in a nurture class for a period of 6 months. Teachers have raised concern over acquisition of spoken English and literacy skills as well as some inappropriate behaviour patterns. His poor understanding of time concepts and inability to follow school routines as well as lack of organisational skills and high level of anxiety was at first considered an EAL issue. Pupil X was finding it difficult to find his way around school and was often lost. He completely lacked social interaction skills and missed the social context of situations which resulted in peer group either avoiding him or complaining of aggressive behaviour.

First language profiling by an EAL teacher who shared his first language suggested an additional learning need in addition to EAL and the school was advised to approach the educational psychologist and speech and language therapist.

Further assessment by these 2 agencies was carried out with the help of bilingual co-workers and pupil X was referred to CAMHS team in Yorkhill hospital where the diagnosis for ASD was made. Assessment by the SLT had suggested that pupil X showed significant delays in development of receptive and expressive language in Urdu and English as a result of ASD. At the start of a new academic year Pupil X was transferred to a secondary language unit when he moved from primary to secondary school.

Language Development

Urdu

Pupil X is able to use Urdu as main language of communication at home. Parents have limited knowledge of English, but siblings are fluent in English and they are using it increasingly at home. Mum indicated that Pupil X feels more comfortable in Urdu and very often feels quite frustrated and isolated when siblings are talking in English. Pupil X has reasonably developed

concepts in Urdu but it lacks imagination and is used in quite a literal manner. He finds it difficult to talk about personal experiences and sometimes relies on mum to facilitate the meaning from “what he is trying to say”. He can read and write in Urdu (level 1-2). Parents also indicated that pupil X likes to watch Urdu news on cable TV and is quite obsessive about “political personalities” in Pakistan. He talks repetitively about this and gets upset if he doesn’t get a response.

English

Pupil X has acquired some English vocabulary and language concepts but he is showing slow progress in acquisition of second language. He does not have the confidence to speak English in school and tends to stay quiet. In the playground he prefers to stay by himself and does not approach other children. In the classroom, he occasionally uses physical gestures such as pulling someone’s hand or grabbing their shirt to get attention. He is comfortable working with an adult in one to one situation. He is developing receptive language skills and is able to follow instructions supported with visual and contextual clues. Staff have also noticed that in mainstream settings where he has to rely on verbal language, he tends to get frustrated and may start exhibiting inappropriate behaviour. He is making progress in reading English scripts. However his reading lacks comprehension and he finds it difficult to extract meaning from a context. The bilingual EAL teacher is sometime able to use his knowledge of Urdu for simplification and explanation of concepts.

Main Issues regarding Acquisition of English in pupils with ASD

1. Limited development of concepts and skills in the first language so it cannot be used as a tool to acquire second language. Pupils experience difficulty in code switching.
2. Limited ability to form relationships with peers. Due to difficulty in social interaction pupil X is very reluctant to approach peers for help. He may develop some interaction with another Urdu speaking child. Peer support is often a powerful tool for learning new language.
3. Lack of confidence and skills to deduct from the “context”. For example, pupil X may not realise that he can copy from the board or can use visual information available in forms of posters and displays around him unless specifically pointed in that direction.
4. For pupil X, social interaction is the main issue as he is not able to pick up “playground” or “social” vocabulary from other pupils. Interaction with other non ASD Urdu speakers is also difficult as they use first language differently compared to pupil X.
5. Parents do not fully comprehend language needs of pupil X and this can in turn impact on his understanding of new culture and environment.

6. It is suggested by the staff supporting pupil X that use of visual time tables and organisers, comic strip type sketches for explanations (where behaviour issues are addressed) and use of social stories in first language are effective means of communication.