The UK is an increasingly diverse society. In 2001 the Census showed that almost one in eight school pupils came from a minority ethnic background. By 2010 this proportion is expected to be approximately one in five (DfES, 2003). This can partly be accounted for by the growing numbers of asylum seeker/refugee children, 70% of whom come from homes where little or no English is spoken (DfES, 2002). For the children and their families, English is usually an additional language (EAL) in an already rich linguistic repertoire. Because it is the language of the school and the clinic, as well as the wider environment, families must engage with the issue of their children learning English. For most families, this is a complex task as they negotiate the learning of the language of the dominant culture while trying not to lose touch with the family’s other language(s) in the process. Guidelines from the DfES clearly strive for fluency in English as a means of supporting achievement for pupils from minority ethnic groups. However, there is increasingly a recognition that for pupils to succeed, the home language should be acknowledged and built upon:

Proficiency in the English language is the most effective guarantee that pupils will achieve well in school… It is important that we also recognise and value the skills which many minority ethnic pupils have in speaking a range of community languages and understand how continuing development in one’s first language can support the learning of English and wider cognitive development (DfES, 2003: para 3.12)
Bearing in mind this national context, the focus of this Special Edition on Bilingualism of CLTT is the fascinatingly complex area of bilingualism and EAL in the UK, a field that attracts researchers from different disciplines – education, linguistics, psychology and speech and language science. The complexity of this field is well known. Researchers must deal with familiar problems such as attempting to control variance in heterogeneous groups, and the difficulties inherent in the absence of developmental and normative descriptions of the varieties of languages being used. The papers in this special edition show a range of approaches to dealing with methodological difficulties without sacrificing rigour; this, coupled with the detailed future directions for research outlined by the authors, should inspire researchers.

The study of bilingualism cannot be divorced from the social and political environment: wider societal attitudes to minority languages and their speakers impact directly and indirectly on children’s language learning and use. Research is crucial not only for practitioners like teachers, speech and language therapists and their assistants, but also to inform the educators of these practitioners. As Lindsay and Dockrell (2002) point out, there is much work to be done with regard to the attitudes of different professional groups to inclusion and collaboration – this is also directly relevant to work with bilingual clients. But there is, in addition, more general work to be done on the knowledge base about EAL and bilingualism, on majority attitudes to linguistic minority groups and on the effects that these may have.

While the call for papers for this special edition was widely disseminated, in the event, the papers submitted reflect one main theme of research: the assessment of children’s language skills both in their first (home) language (L1) and in the language of their education. It is appropriate that this is the case, since assessment of children’s abilities is one of the primary concerns of teachers and speech and language therapists (SLTs). Assessment topics covered in the papers in this edition include phonology, syntax and spelling, and we are confident that there is substantial practical relevance here for readers. In addition to the reports of new assessment procedures, there are useful potted descriptions of languages – Arabic, Panjabi, Swedish. The reported findings also go some way towards adding to the evidence base that is now required for all NHS and DfES initiatives.

It has become an accepted dictum that attempts should be made to assess children’s abilities in both L1 and in English (Hall, 2001; DfES, 2001; RCSLT, 1999), but without standardized assessments in languages other than English, this is not always possible in practice. The reception of syntax test (ROST) set out by Howell, Davis and Au-Yeung is an important and useful step towards this goal. Rather than being a translated version of an existing test, versions of the
ROST are being developed from scratch for a variety of languages: English, Turkish and Cantonese are reported here. The test administration is innovative and will doubtless appeal to the young children for whom the test is designed.

Of fundamental importance in assessment is the question of what L1 is being assessed. Pert and Letts highlight the difficulties in establishing which language(s) bilingual children speak and offer some very practical suggestions. The paper by Martin, Krishnamurthy, Bhardwaj and Charles goes further, calling into question the very nature of the target for L1 Panjabi assessment in their fascinating report of changes occurring in the Panjabi spoken in the West Midlands. If, as they suggest, a new British Panjabi variation is developing there, then clinicians and teachers will need to adjust their conception of what is considered to be ‘normal’ Panjabi language – no longer standard Panjabi as is spoken ‘back home’ in Pakistan. It is most likely that the sorts of changes reported in this study are also occurring in the languages spoken by other groups who have been in the UK for some time. Pert and Letts hint at this possibility in their observations about Mirpuri variants used in Rochdale, and the status of lexical items of English origin in children’s utterances. The implications of this type of linguistic change are significant, both for practitioners wishing to assess children, and for the study of linguistic varieties in the UK in general.

Relating language assessments to a developmental language framework is an everyday procedure when working in English, but developmental norms are difficult to obtain in other languages. This is especially the case for EAL groups who have settled in the UK, as the language development of their children is not only about L1 but is influenced by the English milieu. Given the changing nature of the L1s highlighted by Martin et al., an important question influencing research and practice in this area must be how a constantly changing L1 can be reflected in norms of development for the children from that community.

Pert and Letts describe the development of a test for expressive language in three Asian languages spoken in the Rochdale area: Mirpuri, Panjabi and/or Urdu. Not only do the authors demonstrate good practice in the tricky area of working with translated data but they also tackle issues to do with language development. Pert and Letts’ work offers a potentially useful tool for both teachers and therapists to use in assessment of expressive syntax and a framework for development of similar tools in other languages.

For practical reasons, given the complexities of research in this field, many researchers fight shy of dealing with mixed language data. However, this omission means that much of the unique language ability of bilinguals is discounted as researchers continue to treat bilingual children as if they were
‘two monolinguals in one person’ (Grosjean, 1989). A further strength of the papers by Martin et al. and by Pert and Letts is that they take on the thorny issue of code-switching in bilingual language data. Discussion of code-switching and language choice leads us inevitably into consideration of features of interaction. Martin et al. offer possible explanations using the Matrix Language Frame model (Myers-Scotton, 1993) to reflect further on the pragmatic choices children make when code-switching. It is necessary to also apply an interactional approach to this particular area, since undoubtedly code-switching is an important conversational strategy. Auer (1998) has suggested that code-switching in conversation can be related to particular linguistic structures (words, sentences, and so on) and to particular points in time in the talk. It would be interesting for future research to investigate turn-taking and repair strategies in talk between bilingual children and their English speaking teachers or therapists and to contrast these with talk with English children (Ridley et al., 2002), particularly in the assessment interaction.

There is a further point to be made here, with respect to assessment and the professionals involved. This concerns the fact that language choice and performance in the selected language (out of the child’s repertoire) will be affected by the language of the test, and the language of the tester (see for example, Agerton and Moran, 1995; Evans and Craig, 1992; Fagundes et al., 1998; Washington et al., 1998). Real (and often uncontrollable) pragmatic and nonlinguistic issues come into play in the assessment interaction, such as the two participants’ knowledge of each other’s culture, the relative status of their languages, the ‘normal’ language used by different participants and in different contexts, and so on. Professionals need to be aware of these possible effects in order to interpret the results of testing procedures accurately. Related issues such as the circumstances of arrival in the UK and the length and type of exposure to English and other languages need somehow to be taken into account in interpreting the results of language assessments.

Changes in language choice patterns can also be indicative of language attrition, an area of concern for the parents of bilingual children in schools today. This is another rich vein for researchers. Research and practice must acknowledge demographic shifts and the ebb and flow of different language groups in geographical areas depending on the current socio-political context.

Seeff-Gabriel’s paper on assisting second language learners with English spelling reflects some of these issues. In particular, she reports that longer exposure to English positively affects auditory discrimination skills and phonological representations, both of which have effects on spelling. Some of her practical ideas about spelling could lead practitioners to consider changes in practice. Therefore, although the first languages of the subjects in this study are
African languages not frequently found in the UK, the broad ideas about theory and application addressed in this paper will have relevance to a UK readership. The same can be said of the paper by Salameh, Nettelbladt and Norlin, whose work with Swedish- and Arabic-speaking children who have specific language impairment is reported here. They give excellent examples of the development of phonology for both mono- and bilingual children and report some very interesting findings on differences between children with and without language impairment, which are of potential relevance to those working with children speaking a range of language combinations.

All the papers in this special edition view bilingualism as an interesting and worthwhile subject of research. Moreover, the authors do not fall into the trap of regarding bilingualism as a ‘problem’. It is acknowledged (for example, Bialystok, 2001 – reviewed in this volume) that much mainstream linguistic research has originated in monolingual contexts. Bialystok points out how findings from bilingualism research have strong implications for mainstream theories of language acquisition and use. Nevertheless, at present bilingualism is often treated as an add-on to existing theories of child language; sadly, this has been particularly true in the treatment of children with language and communication difficulties. Developmental language, plus language difficulties, plus bilingualism...a viewpoint which takes monolingualism as the ‘norm’ leads to an additive interpretation of the language difficulties of bilingual children, which can make them seem intractable. Moreover, the acknowledged difficulties of reducing this complexity to a set of measurable research variables is often implicitly assumed to be reproduced in the level of difficulty children experience in language learning and use. Put simply, acquiring a single language is assumed to be at difficulty level $x$. Acquiring more than one language, in this model, is then assumed to add a level of difficulty $x + 1$. Language and communication difficulties are therefore seen as an additional level of difficulty, $x + 2$. Assumptions such as this are at the root of the anecdotally reported instances of parents of bilingual children with language difficulties who have been advised to speak only English with their child (in order to subtract a ‘level of difficulty’). Nevertheless, there are alternative views. Cummins (2000) reports research on children with learning difficulties in multilingual contexts where the children’s bi- or multilingualism would never be assumed to be an additional ‘layer’ of difficulty for them. UK practitioners would never dream of advising the parents of a typically developing bilingual child to drop their home language in order to speed the child’s development in English (although this might have been argued for until fairly recently). We must work towards the same point when dealing with bilingual children with language difficulties.
Bi- and multilingualism are the norm for most of the world’s communities, but they are still treated in the UK educational and therapeutic landscape as anomalies. The prevailing view of UK linguistic and ethnic minorities is still assimilationist: that at best bilingualism can be tolerated as long as people can communicate well in English. Despite research indicating the positive effects on English of instruction in the home language, the onus has been up to now firmly on speakers of other languages to acquire English, rather than on the establishment truly to acknowledge the multilingual nature of UK society and make provision for this (for example, by providing for bilingual education). Progress in equal opportunities is therefore slow in this area, and professionals have to operate within the current legislation (CRE, 2000) under rather difficult circumstances. However, there is now a transparent drive from the Government to acknowledge this effort. In its paper on educating asylum and refugee children (DfES, 2002) there is a clear indication that there is a need to ensure that staff receive training on both understanding and meeting the language needs of children with further guidance on what good practice should encompass. Joint training initiatives such as the Joint Professional Development Framework (ICAN, 2001) are a move in the right direction. There is support for teachers through the DfES Standards Ethnic Minority Achievement Service, and for speech and language therapists through the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists Specific Interest Groups. More joint research would be very welcome indeed. Teachers and SLTs do excellent work, especially with respect to delivering the curriculum in a way that will make it possible for all pupils to have equal access. Changes in attitudes and general understanding among practitioners working with bilingual children have made many advances possible; the wider context now needs to catch up with the grassroots. It is hoped that the research reported in this special edition – and the further research that it encourages and inspires – will contribute positively to bringing this about.

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