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More than words: English as an additional language in police recruitment and promotion processes

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the under-representation and potential under-utilisation of officers with English as an Additional Language (EAL) in British policing. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research identifies findings that highlight the prevalence of a problematic 'deficit' model that undervalues the cultural and linguistic competencies EAL officers bring to policing. Instead, the perceived challenges of accommodating EAL officers dominate organisational narratives. While recent decades have seen police forces strive to promote diversity through recruitment and retention initiatives, insufficient attention has been given to the support processes for EAL recruits and officers seeking promotion. Interviews with EAL officers reveal that current recruitment and promotion practices fail to align with the operational and organisational benefits offered by diverse language skills. Additionally, the findings suggest that non-English language and related skills are neither routinely nor effectively utilised post-appointment, representing a missed opportunity to enhance policing within multilingual communities. These issues are particularly concerning in light of the Police Uplift Program's goal of recruiting 20,000 new officers in England and Wales, as they present significant barriers to diversifying the recruitment pool.

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Introduction

In 2019, the government in England and Wales announced a programme, the Police Uplift Programme (PUP), to recruit 20,000 additional officers by 2023. Although primarily focused on returning police numbers to their level prior to an extended period of austerity (Millie and Bullock 2012, Loveday 2015, Smith 2016), it sought simultaneously to promote greater diversity among police officer ranks (Jones *et al* 2015, O'Neill 2016, Stubbs 2023). The introduction of the PUP drew further attention to the experience of applicants from a range of ethnic and national backgrounds who may speak English as an Additional Language (EAL) (Home Office 2019). This paper is based on primary research (including 20 interviews and three focus groups) that examined the extent to which EAL impacts on police recruitment and progression, and the extent to which the often-overlooked diverse backgrounds of police officers can enrich policing. Specifically, this paper draws on the personal experiences of participants, along with an analysis of the materials used in the recruitment and promotion processes for police officers in England and Wales.

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There is relatively little existing research (Mossman *et al.* 2008, Pepper 2014, Travers and Huang 2021) into the recruitment of police officers who speak EAL, either in the UK or internationally. Policy documentation in this regard is scant and predominantly appears directed towards weaknesses of such candidates. Instead of looking for and promoting avenues which would allow the police to benefit from the skills and knowledge base offered by officers with EAL, recruitment and promotion strategies appear to be approached through a problematic, deficit lens. By this we mean, EAL applicants are often seen as having language and other shortcomings, which may be present during entrance and promotional exams. This paper considers whether police forces in England and Wales, while promoting and developing policing to a broader range of applicants, could do more to integrate officers from diverse backgrounds. The significance of encouraging a move away from a 'deficit model' is considerable in terms of recruitment, retention, promotion and police legitimacy in linguistically diverse societies; challenges that remain in many countries in the Global North.

Language and diversity in policing; an overview of extant literature

There are over three million people in Britain who were 'born in countries where English is not the national language and of these, between 1 and 1.5 million people are estimated to lack the English language skills required to function in society and employment' (Schellekens 2001, p. vi). The 2021 census identified growing language diversity, with over 5 million people speaking a language other than English or Welsh as their main¹ language. People with EAL are not a homogeneous group. For example, a person with EAL could be British born but grown up speaking other languages alongside English, or they may have arrived in the UK from another country and not speak English as a first language. The broad term 'EAL' also fails to adequately reflect differing levels of English language proficiency, which can vary according to the function or domain in which English is being spoken (e.g. some EAL speakers will be more proficient in, for example, aspects of academic or specific professions' English-language discourse, whereas some will be more proficient when speaking English in less formal or more socially-oriented environments). The reference to EAL also overlooks the difference between EAL and ESL (English as a second language) speakers, and the varying social networks each belongs to. These networks, or absence of, could have a significant impact on how applicants are supported and prepare for police assessments.²

Data relating to the PUP suggests it has successfully met its overall target but, whilst it has accelerated representation within the police – particularly for women – it had less impact in terms of ethnic diversity (Hesketh *et al.* 2023). As of 2019, around 6 per cent of police officers were of a BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) background, compared to 18.3 per cent of the population (based on 2021 Census data). Whilst the PUP has positively impacted on this figure, with around 8 per cent of applicants from BAME background, it is acknowledged that this cohort are less likely to pass the application process and tend to leave the service sooner than other officers (House of Commons 2022). Our study adds to wider concerns about this failure to diversify policing through adding insight into the position of an overlooked cohort: those who speak EAL. As others have argued more widely in relation to ethnic (Rowe and Ross 2015, Hesketh 2023) and gender (Silverstri 2017, Hasan 2021) dimensions of diversity, we found that the EAL cohort are implicitly understood as a problematic group to be accommodated, and the benefits they bring to police services often under-recognised and under-utilised.

Our research addresses some of these concerns. An original contribution comes from the insight gleaned from those officers with EAL who participated in our study. The CoP and the PUP recognised that a review of the assessment process for new recruits alongside the national promotion exams for sergeant and inspector set by the CoP, was required. We provide rich qualitative insight relating to the assessment of candidates looking to join or be promoted, and their experiences within their wider policing careers.

Recently, there has been increasing representation of officers from diverse backgrounds in UK police forces (Home Office 2024). However, many ethnic minority groups remain under-represented

in policing (Davies *et al.* 2021). When considering police diversity, research has focused on police-community relations in comparison to previous decades, tensions and problems between marginalised groups and police, and the recruitment of a diverse workforce, but with little attention paid to language and language use. A recent investigation by Baroness Casey (2023) identified institutional racism in London's Metropolitan police service, as well as evidence of 'under-protecting and over-policing' minoritised Londoners. Importantly, the Casey Review also acknowledged that there was a significant mismatch between the languages spoken by Londoners (over 300 recorded in the 2021 census), and officers that police the capital:

The majority of the population are not from White British ethnic backgrounds, one in five do not have English as their main language ... In contrast, Met officers are 82% White and 71% male, and the majority do not live in the city they police. As such, the Met does not look like the majority of Londoners (Casey 2023, p. 9)

Casey's report raised concerns about relations with diverse communities, and specifically where English is an additional language. This was further reflected in comments from the Chief Constable of Police Scotland, who stated that his force was institutionally racist, sexist and discriminatory (Police Scotland 2023). In his statement Sir Iain Livingston noted

... We are actively, genuinely, listening to under-represented communities, inside policing and across our country and beyond, to understand how we can better serve them ... A great strength of policing in Scotland is our diversity – anyone can be a police officer. We will attract, retain, and promote a diverse workforce which reflects and represents our communities.

Much of the commentary which followed Livingston's statement, acknowledged that there was a disconnect between policing, police officers, and the skillset required to support communities. Given increased diversity, the ability to communicate and build trust requires a wider range of language skills.

Some years previously, in 2015, the Metropolitan Police introduced a requirement for new entrants to speak one of 14 specific languages, with a second scheme launched in 2016 extending to 25 languages. It was anticipated that the scheme would address challenges associated with policing multi-cultural communities, in the belief that having officers with additional language skills could be beneficial in building trust and confidence. While little is known about the long-term success and value of the scheme, a parliamentary discussion stated that:

... abilities such as language skills relevant to the local policing area, should be assessed by each force and recognised in recruitment planning. (Home Affairs Select Committee 2018)

Whilst there have been extensive efforts to improve diversity in policing (Povey 2002, Rowe and Garland 2003, Brain 2010) – including changes aimed at addressing selection bias, inappropriate uniform regulations, and height and fitness standards, and to broaden the pool of candidates through targeted advertising and mentoring for candidates' pre-application (Rowe 2004) – there has been less discussion as to how the wider range of skills and experiences they bring are utilised post-joining.

What is clear is that language plays a vital role in social interaction by enabling people to express thoughts, share experiences, negotiate meaning, and build relationships. Language, therefore, can foster shared understanding, shape identity, and create a sense of belonging, while its absence may result in misunderstanding, social isolation, and exclusion. As Chomsky (1986) noted 'a language is not just words. It's a culture, a tradition, a unification of a community, a whole history that creates what a community is. It's all embodied in a language'. Consequently, language can be exclusionary, often requiring a conceptual awareness beyond that of literal translation (Rogers 1995). Language can facilitate communication between the police and communities (Ndhlovu *et al.* 2022) or equally can be a source of tension. As communities become more linguistically diverse, therefore, challenges for police community relations become greater. Culver (2004), when considering the impact of migration trends, identified language barriers as the most significant challenge to police community relations. This was further reflected by Monteoliva's (2020) research in Scotland,

which discusses language issues for operational police officers and their ability to make timely decisions which accurately reflect the complexity of their immediate situation. As Carroll *et al.* (2013) noted in research in Washington (USA), 911 calls where callers had limited English proficiency, and an over-the-phone interpreter was used, increased stress levels for the callers and telecommunicators, and made it harder to assess the situation and ensure the safety of responding officers. In contrast, Herbst and Walker's (2001) research in a city in the American mid-west considered police–citizen interactions for Hispanic residents who could not speak English and where no police officer could speak Spanish. Their initial concern was that this could result in a language barrier and impair the service the police could offer. While such encounters were relatively rare, they regularly led to officer frustration. Significantly, the research also noted that during the observation period, no officer-initiated interactions took place, nor did community members directly speak to officers. The extent to which this is due to language barriers is unclear but would suggest a style of policing which is reactive and less focused on building community relationships. To change how police interact with diverse communities, it is not only the officers who need to be appropriately trained, but also the training procedures which they receive that need to be transformed (Fridell 2016). A model that enables officers to more consistently utilise their language and other skills would likely benefit both communities and police personnel.

In the UK, officers looking for promotion and leadership opportunities needed to be equipped with knowledge and skills of the complexity of modern criminality and be leaders in a period of heightened risk and uncertainty. The significance of language within micro-social interactions (subtle interpersonal exchanges) places it as a key aspect in the dynamics of police leadership and legitimacy, yet there is relatively little existing research into the recruitment of police officers who have EAL, either in the UK or internationally.

English as an additional language: the wider professional and international context

Outside policing, the use of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) assessment tools have been debated within the discipline of applied linguistics (Elder 2001, Lockwood 2015). Aiming to support people to develop language skills, most notably those who have EAL and are in, or moving to, a professional context, such tools have been utilised in education, medical professions, aviation, call centres, and other global professional communications businesses. Research and development in LSP is nonetheless 'a relatively new field of enquiry' (Lockwood 2015), and LSP has been largely neglected by disciplines beyond applied linguistics.

As noted, the broad term 'English as an additional language' fails to recognise the variety of languages, proficiencies and cultural implications for its range of speakers. Research has demonstrated that it can take seven years or more for a new EAL learner arriving in an English-dominant country to catch up and gain academic proficiency in English (Cummins 2008, Demie 2016). Australian data suggests 1765 hours of teaching is required to get from no English to the competence level required for further study or a job (Schellekens 2001, viii). The UK Equality Act 2010 states that public sector organisations, including policing, must seek to ensure services are accessible to people with additional needs. The Act, for example, requires qualification awarding bodies to make 'reasonable adjustments' where a person would be at a substantial disadvantage in undertaking an assessment; however, there is no specific mention of EAL. EAL learners share many common characteristics with people whose first language is English, yet they have distinct and different needs from others as they are learning in and through an additional language and are being assessed in an additional language. Furthermore, as noted above, their EAL status often intersects with other cultural, social and economic factors which may increase their potential disadvantage; the possible issues arising from speaking EAL are not simply 'technical' matters concerning language 'gaps'.

Throughout the UK education sector there are provisions to make reasonable adjustments for EAL students. The Bell Foundation created an 'EAL Assessment Framework for Schools' which provides a five-point scale for assessing learners with EAL [A – new to English to E – fluent in English]. In cases

where English is not the students' first language, they may be offered the use of a bilingual dictionary and 10% extra time to compensate for its use. This helps with the translation of unfamiliar words, as well as homophones.

There have been many studies into the use of bilingual dictionaries as a learning and exam support tool (East 2007, Kieffer *et al* 2009, Young-Kyung 2013, Nielsen 2014, Nerlinger 2021), and findings have been mixed (Kieffer *et al* 2009, Nerlinger 2021). Young-Kyung (2013, p. 64) found that '[b]ilingual dictionaries help learners quickly grasp the meanings of words, especially for words that are difficult to translate into English'. If the dictionary contains domain-specific examples, it can help users translate terms (Nielsen 2014) and reinforce the meanings of words to help learners retain them in long-term memory (Young-Kyung 2013). East (2007, p. 331) on the other hand, found that 'the availability of the bilingual dictionary made no significant difference to 'with dictionary' writing test scores in comparison with 'without dictionary' scores. Nonetheless, despite East (2007) and Kieffer *et al.*'s (2009) findings, a bilingual dictionary is still offered as an additional support for those with EAL throughout educational institutions as there have been findings of successful use throughout examinations (Young-Kyung 2013, Nielsen 2014). There is concern that this approach has limited impact since, in and of itself, it does not address the cultural, economic and social marginalisation that impacts on EAL candidates. Sood and Malini (2011) note that institutions need to do more to address the cultural values and beliefs implicit in institutional practices that might disadvantage linguistic minorities, such as a focus on monolingual, English-only communication in the workplace and ways of socialising outside of work. These might be understood as forms of 'indirect' or institutional discrimination identified in policing.

The Office for Students (OfS), the independent regulator of higher education in England (including police programmes delivered with universities), recognises reasonable adjustments for factors such as environmental or medical reasons and for disabilities, and there is a logical argument that this ought to be extended to include language proficiency. This would require consideration of the extent to which language proficiency is *intentionally* being tested in police recruitment and promotion processes, to ensure that the language of tests is appropriate in terms of the tests' goals and the subsequent requirements of the workplace. If the potential language demands of a test are not recognised, then this will likely have an adverse impact on many candidates, including those for whom English is their primary language as well as those for whom it is additional. This of itself raises further challenges for policing, as those who are training to be a police officer through a programme aligned to a university, would fall under the OfS guidance while those training on police-only delivered programmes (some new recruit and promotion examinations) would not, leading to a potential two-tier approach.

Internationally, many education providers are bound by policies which require reasonable accommodation for additional needs. For example, in Australia, the Disability Standards for Education (2005) policy obliges education providers to make reasonable changes to accommodate learners with additional needs such as disability or EAL (CAQA 2018; emphasis added). The changes identified included using methods that do not require higher levels of language or literacy than the job role demands, using short sentences that avoid large amounts of information, whilst also ensuring sufficient time is available and that assessments are carried out through practical, in-field tasks following a demonstration of skills and knowledge (CAQA 2018).

In Canada, support for those with either English or French as a second language is based on individual needs identified via initial language assessments. This support can involve requesting an interpreter. In South Africa, according to the country's official Language in Education Policy 1997, schools must choose a specific language of learning and teaching, although, teachers often teach in diverse languages to accommodate the range spoken by students.

It is also important to acknowledge that learning continues beyond formal education. Adult 'on the job' learning in another language can also be challenging (Jeong *et al.* 2011; Pepper 2014). In the UK, legislation such as the Immigration Act 2016 states that

[p]ublic authorities must ensure that all staff working in public-facing roles (those who are required as a regular and intrinsic part of their role to speak to members of the public in English/Welsh) speak English/Welsh to a set fluency standard. (Harper James 2020)

Schellekens (2001) found that many UK employers identified barriers to recruiting EAL speakers such as: an inability to speak and/or write English to a sufficient level of proficiency; written job applications produced in a non-standard format; an over-reliance on academic qualifications rather than demonstration of work experience; a lack of oral interview skills; and difficulty in establishing the status of overseas qualifications. Similarly, Donnelly *et al.* (2009) found that EAL candidates face not only language barriers but also challenges linked social, economic and cultural factors. These include differences in cultural values affecting teacher-student relationships as well as difficulties with assertiveness, lack of social support, financial pressures and family responsibilities.

Drawing from professions beyond policing alternative approaches can be identified. The armed forces, for example, have entry tests designed to measure communicate skills, follow instructions, and comprehend information. However, if the recruit's first language is not English, they will be provided with additional training to improve literacy skills (Ministry of Defence 2021). On the other hand, for Nursing and Midwifery – candidates must achieve the required score of 7 or above in International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or an equivalent in one of the other internationally recognised English language tests (e.g. TOEFL)³. The British Council define a score of 7, or above as someone who is a proficient user of the English language and who has 'an operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriate usage and misunderstandings in some situations ... [and] handle complex language well and understand detailed reasoning' (British Council 2024).

Research has found that there are particular dynamics at play when adults with EAL embark on learning (Lightbown and Spada 2006, Pepper 2014). Lightbown and Spada (2006) point out that people can acquire a second or additional language within a variety of social and instructional environments. Meanwhile, Ortega (2009) found the most important matter when learning through a second or additional language is 'what learners make of [the subject], how they process the linguistic data and how they live and experience [it in] that environment'.

Internationally, several barriers to recruiting those with EAL in public-facing roles have been reported, including in law enforcement. One such is the entry examination process. For example, the US Department of Justice (DoJ) (2016) found there were many barriers to recruiting speakers of EAL into the police. They stated that reliance on inadequately tailored examinations in the screening process may effectively exclude qualified individuals from under-represented communities even prior to application. Other barriers stopping EAL speakers from joining the police were identified such as '[s]trained relations and a lack of trust of law enforcement may deter individuals from under-represented communities from applying to be officers' (U.S. DoJ 2016, p. ii). Likewise, in New Zealand, a lack of support for initial testing and verbal reasoning tests are barriers in recruiting Māori, Pacific Islander and ethnic minority police officers. Mossman *et al.* (2008, p. viii) found that '[w]hile language barriers are faced by some minority groups there is some evidence that there is a lack of knowledge of support available to help potential recruits meet the relevant standards. In addition, verbal reasoning tests used in recruitment processes might be culturally specific and effectively discriminate against cultural minorities (Mossman *et al.* 2008, NZ police, undated).

Similar challenges are addressed by other justice sectors in multi-ethnic countries where English is the dominant language. The U.S. DoJ (2016) has stated that it will diversify its law enforcement workforce by making hiring and selection procedures more transparent. To achieve this, some agencies have offered pre-examination assistance and preparation materials, undertaken proactive community outreach efforts, and used social media to encourage people from diverse backgrounds to consider law enforcement careers. Furthermore, '[l]aw enforcement agencies have involved community members in the hiring process as a way to develop workforces that reflects the diversity of their communities' (U.S. DoJ 2016, p. iv). Similarly, in New Zealand, police ran recruitment seminars for minority

communities and tailored recruitment advertising in ‘specialist and ethnic minority media’ (Mossman *et al.* 2008, p. 45). They have also offered ‘pre-application support such as mentoring, training and coaching’ (Mossman *et al.* 2008, p. 46). Nevertheless, there is limited literature on how to enhance the learning of those who are bilingual with EAL when joining the police. While not directly related to officers who have EAL, Reuss-Ianni’s (1984) drew attention to organisational and cultural aspects of policing, making specific reference to police training and the experiences of new recruits and the reality of their roles. For all officers the development of professional identity, training processes, and integration into the police community were seen as fundamental to both their operational activity and their sense of belonging.

Of course, language adjustments must ensure that the specific requirements of policing can be met. Demanding application processes that require candidates to make decisions in limited time and under pressure might be considered appropriate given subsequent workplace demands. Pepper (2014, p. 96) found that many new EAL ‘recruits found it difficult to use English when multi-tasking or when undertaking police tasks under pressure ... [t]hey felt they required more time to study or practise certain skills compared to other recruits’. Travers and Huang (2021) found that EAL candidates provided with additional coaching performed better at interview than those without such support. Police work environments mean candidates need to understand certain terminology, legal language, and technical phrases that might prove additionally challenging to EAL speakers, but which remain appropriate for their future context of employment. Ambitions to develop a workforce that reflects the wider population need to be balanced with operational, organisational and legal requirements.

Methodology

The project received ethical approval for a mixed methodology, which included the analysis of assessment and exam materials for new recruits, as well as those preparing for promotion examinations. Using linguistic tools, the research team analysed exam papers, recruitment documents, assessors’ material, candidate guidelines and exercise content. Our review assessed the appropriateness of the English language used in examination materials, and thus needing to be understood and used by candidates, in the online assessment process for new applications and in promotion examinations for serving officers. The discussion draws on Cummins (1979, 1981) distinction between *basic interpersonal communication skills* (BICS) and *cognitive academic language proficiency* (CALP), which, although originally developed in relation to school-aged immigrant children, provided a useful framework for this study.

BICS refers to conversational fluency, whilst CALP refers to the ability to understand and express, in both speech and writing, concepts and ideas that are relevant to educational success. Thus, as Teemat and Pinnegar (2019) note, key characteristics of BICS include that it is:

- the basic language system used in face-to-face communication in informal contexts (intimate or colloquial registers)
- largely acquired in the native language by children in all societies by the age of five
- inclusive of conversational vocabulary
- exclusive of literacy
- only weakly correlated with academic success.

Meanwhile, key characteristics of CALP suggest that it:

- includes formal and academic registers of the language
- is acquired mostly after the age of five, and acquisition continues throughout life
- includes high levels of literacy
- includes tens of thousands of specialised words relating to academic and formal register
- is strongly correlated with academic success.

Complementing this qualitative linguistic analysis is data from 20 semi-structured interviews and 3 focus groups with serving officers who speak EAL. Participants were of various ranks and experience from English and Welsh police forces, the detail of which was not shared with us as part of this research. They were recruited from a list provided by the PUP team and the College of Policing. All were serving officers or staff, and so we were not able to include any respondents who had failed to gain entry. Those on the list had been through a range of recruitment and promotion processes. It was clear from interviews that some participants had not always passed promotion exams, even if eventually they had been successful. Of those 20 participants, two were aged 25–34, nine were 35–44, five were 45–54, one was 55–64 and three did not provide information. Eight reported that they were male, nine that they were female, and three did not provide information. Participants selected either a focus group or an individual interview depending upon their preference and availability. It was hoped that this approach would allow us to maximise the number of participants and provide an environment in which they felt the most comfortable to discuss their experiences.

To preserve anonymity, we provide no details below that might identify our participants. We do not claim they 'represent' the wider population of EAL officers. Participants have been given identifiers so their names, rank and anything that could potentially identify them has been redacted.

The interviews and focus groups allowed for in-depth exploration of experiences of bilingual and multilingual officers who speak English as part of their multilingual repertoire regarding assessments and examinations for recruitment, progression and specialist roles. Interviews and focus groups were conducted online in autumn 2022. The interviews lasted between 25 and 70 min. All were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis, with primary coding carried out by members of the research team independently of one another. Full inter-rater reliability tests were not completed but researchers discussed, reflected on and amended their coding practice to ensure strong mutual understanding of processing this data. A secondary analysis identified the key themes discussed below. A similar process was applied to the online focus groups.

The interview and focus groups encouraged participants to share information relating to their background and experiences as speakers of English as a non-dominant language, considering how long the candidate has lived in the UK, their language use at home (*'what language do you speak at home?'*) and in general, how they learned English, how they viewed their proficiency level. The discussion also asked about their educational background, particularly related to English learning and assessments (*'how did you find doing your assessments in english'*). In addition, the questions focus on the candidate's experience within the police, including their history with exams (*'when did you last take an exam?'*), how they prepared, the challenges faced, their feelings about the outcomes, and what support might have helped (*'Based on your experience of sitting the exam what do you think would have helped you the most both in terms of preparing for an exam?'*)

Participants had diverse cultural backgrounds and spoke eighteen languages other than English (Italian, Polish, Arabic, French, Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi, Hungarian, Welsh, Pahari, Romanian, Bulgarian, Cantonese, Mandarin, Gujarati, Russian, German, Greek) with varying levels of proficiency. They volunteered to take part in the study and thus were a self-selecting cohort. It is noteworthy, therefore, that the complexities of defining who speaks EAL, or who an EAL speaker actually is, were evident from the outset of the project. For example, during the interviews, participants were asked to describe their proficiency in English, twelve replying that they were 'fluent', and eight that they were 'advanced' in their use of English. We note the self-report and, thus, subjective nature of these responses, and also the possibility that speakers with similar English language proficiencies might perceive and report on their own language use in more or less positive ways (e.g. 'fluent' arguably reflects a more positive stance towards the speakers English proficiency than 'advanced'). However, as the research sought to unpack the participants' own perceptions, we did not seek to evaluate the speakers' self-assessments against more objective language assessment criteria.

Overall, therefore, participants provided a rich and nuanced response, highlighting their own strengths and weaknesses specifically regarding their role and experience within policing. Interview questions addressed participant's proficiency and qualifications in English, their experience of police

entry and promotion processes, and their wider perspectives on their 'EAL status' within policing. The approach was largely inductive in that we were not guided by a particular theoretical framework although the researchers were cognisant of wider debates and theory with regards to diversity in policing. While the analysis is primarily inductive, it is situated within a constructivist-interpretivist nexus. The approach informs our thinking around issues such as the participants self-reported fluency, which rather than viewing it as problematic we see it as analytically significant, not as objective measures but rather a reflection of how the participants approach and make sense of the assessment processes. This stance also informs our approach with BICS / CALP, not as diagnostic tools but rather as conceptual lenses through which participants experience of language(s) use is understood. This awareness informed the design of the research tools. On that basis interview questions were designed to be open-ended (as far as possible) to allow maximum opportunity for participants to direct the content. They were asked about the general experiences of being a 'EAL speaker' within policing and the strengths and weaknesses of this for their working life [for example, 'Is there anything else you would like to share with us based on your experiences as a speaker of English as a non-dominant language?']. Our experience helped craft the style and format of the questions in the interviews, as well as their actual content. On that basis we did not ask directly about experiences of racism or discrimination but rather more general questions about experiences and perceptions from their own entry, training and promotion examination experiences.

Results

The research findings will be discussed in relation to the two main areas of focus (1) a linguistic review of sample examination materials, and (2) respondents' reflections from the focus groups and interviews.

1. A linguistic review of examination materials: language, proficiency and academic/test success

As mentioned in the methodology section, our analysis included analysis of examination materials used in various stages of officer careers. In doing this we distinguished between BICS and CALP dimensions of language. *BICS* refers to conversational fluency, whilst *CALP* refers to the ability to understand and express, in both speech and writing, concepts and ideas that are relevant to educational success. We found that highly variable levels of language skill are used interchangeably throughout processes, with no apparent link to the qualities of what is being tested in various questions. There might be a lack of appreciation that different levels of proficiency might apply across these two forms: a candidate with high skills in one might not be as adept in the other. Similarly, there seems to be a lack of appreciation of the 'hidden curriculum' of language in terms of cultural and other assumptions that are reflected in examination materials. Each of these key points is elaborated further in the discussion of findings below.

Language users with higher levels of CALP are more able to process and deal effectively with written texts (and similarly 'academic' oral texts).³ Such as these instructions to candidates:

Candidates are advised to notify their force examinations officer of their disability, as well as their intention to request reasonable adjustment, in the first instance. The force examinations officer should ensure that the candidate provides a report containing a diagnosis of their disability and recommendations for reasonable adjustment from an appropriate specialist in the area of their disability. The candidate may wish to discuss options with their local force occupational health department prior to sourcing a specialist. In making their recommendations, it is helpful if the specialist has a clear understanding of the format of assessment that the candidate will be undertaking. Please note that registering an intention to submit a request for reasonable adjustment on AIMS at registration is not a formal request. It is candidate's responsibility to ensure they provide the necessary documentation and request form to their force examinations officer in sufficient time – (NPPF Candidate Handbook 2022, p. 16)

While it is recognised that candidates may not always thoroughly read the guidance in its entirety (Stubbs and Tong 2024), this, by itself, can be challenging (as the guidance above demonstrates).

However, having examined the language demands of the sample questions, and thus the linguistic proficiency required of candidates taking the tests, we can see that both BICS and CALP are necessary, albeit to differing degrees for different types of assessment. Within the field of applied linguistics, discussions around BICS and CALP typically focus on the ways in which some speakers with strong BICS are often (wrongly) assumed to also have strong CALP, as the differing facets of proficiency develop at different rates. For such language users, academic assessments are particularly challenging, not only because their academic language proficiency may not be developed enough to deal with the language challenges of assessments, but also because there is an (erroneous) expectation that they will succeed due to their proficiency in conversational English.

We should recognise, that 'academic language' varies across disciplines, between cultures, and between speech and writing. That said, a number of features can be identified in written academic texts in English. These include long and/or complex sentence structures (a main clause with associated dependent clauses); an increased used of nouns and nominalization rather than verbs (e.g. '*There is interference ...*' compared to '*It will interfere ...*'); passivisation (e.g. '*It was taken ...*' compared to '*She took it*'); increased hedging and modality (e.g. '*it might be correct*', '*it seems correct*', '*it could be correct*' etc.), and increased used of technical/subject-specific terminology, jargon, and abstractions. The above sample text from the NPPF Candidate Handbook exemplifies many of these features, albeit to varying degrees (e.g. 'Candidates are advised' (*passivization*); 'should ensure', 'may wish' (*hedging and modality*), 'force examinations officer', 'reasonable adjustment', 'sourcing a specialist', 'format of the assessment', 'necessary documentation' (*increased subject-specific terminology, jargon and abstractions*); 'Candidates are advised ... the first instance', 'The force examinations ... their disability' (*complex sentence structures*)).

Furthermore, language is often identified as a 'hidden curriculum' (Christie 1985) for those studying and/or being assessed in other fields. In tests, although subject knowledge is generally assessed overtly, the vehicle for conveying such knowledge (in both test questions and candidate answers) is language, which is often not explicitly formally part of the assessment criteria. However, language clearly plays an important role in effectively conveying subject knowledge. In the context of this research, therefore, police exam candidates needed to have both the receptive skills in English necessary to understand test tasks, including what is required in general terms and the details within the tasks, and the skills to provide answers to an appropriate level of depth.

Thus, when reviewing of recruitment and promotion exams made available by the PUP, the following language challenges were evident:

- 1) Linguistic features commonly associated with 'academic discourse' were found in many assessment questions and tasks (and review criteria/guidelines), in particular: verb forms – time references and passivation; complex sentences; modality and hedging; terminology.
- 2) Some tasks also required candidates to summarise their conversational proficiency/interpersonal communication skills, and, potentially, to draw upon these skills during some assessment tasks (particularly oral tasks)
- 3) The CVF framework against which candidates are assessed embeds criteria which are commonly thought of as being those of (UK/English-language) 'academic discourse'.

Examining the language demands of the sample questions, and thus the linguistic proficiency required of candidates taking the tests, we can see that both BICS and CALP are necessary, albeit to varying degrees for different types of assessment. Example texts we reviewed required candidates to process 'academic language'; to demonstrate an understanding of how degrees of certainty are carried by different modal verbs and to process lengthy texts and, ultimately, provide a written summary report, in a form of language-in-use that most commonly draws on 'academic language' norms. Meanwhile, further examples ask candidates to summarise their communication skills in speech, a task which is far more likely to draw on their conversational proficiency (both as the

'message' and the 'medium' of the answer, i.e. what they actually did or said to resolve a conflict, and how they convey this to the assessor).

It is important to note that this is not a critique of the questions set by the CoP – as noted, to answer any examination question, in any subject, candidates need to draw on and deploy their linguistic resources. However, it raises concerns as to whether recruitment and promotion tests support or hinder the development of a diverse police service, specifically, how to ensure that language demands embedded within assessments exams (and thus the proficiency in English required) are an integral part of subsequent roles candidates will take up. In other words, is it possible and desirable to assess candidates without, for example, using key technical phrases, establishing their ability to differentiate between (ostensibly quite similar) vocabulary, exploring their ability to report data and so forth? if these are part of the subsequent necessary skillset? Conversely if we need to develop the breadth of languages spoken within policing, to reflect wider society, further consideration of how we achieve this is required.

2. Respondents' reflections from the focus groups and interviews

For those officers born outside of the UK (most participants), the length of time spent in the UK did not seem to absolutely determine English language proficiency. One officer who had lived in the UK for 6 years described their English as fluent and another who had lived in the UK for 18 years described it as advanced. This picture is further complicated by the example of a respondent who were born and educated in the UK, but for whom English remained their non-dominant language until university; meanwhile, some UK-born participants spoke Welsh and English interchangeably. Many respondents had completed language courses to aid their knowledge and proficiency of English. Half (10) had attained ESOL, IELTS or GCSEs in English, and two respondents had completed a Level 2 Functional Skills course after joining the police. One respondent learned English by speaking to their neighbour whilst growing up in the UK.

Most respondents held at least a Level 6 UK university qualification or equivalent, but their responses and the specific exam/assessment components they struggled with were broadly similar to their counterparts who did not have a HE qualification. One respondent who has a UK university degree and has worked in other customer-facing roles noted that since joining the police she has had to re-evaluate her proficiency in English:

ever since I started this job I just like lost confidence in using English cause English is really a complex language ... I just didn't realise English would be a problem in in my job until I entered this one – Participant 12.

When questioned about assessments and their language skills, participants cited examples of when participants would need to draw upon their CALP, such as formal writing, understanding the nuances of grammatical forms, and completing assessments within the given timeframe, due to the time needed to process complex information including translating from one language to another. Respondents who had recently completed the NPPF expressed difficulties with the Multiple-Choice Questions (MCQs) assessment in the limited time allocated, whilst others applying for specialist roles struggled with the language of the Competency and Values Framework. The reasons given for this were twofold. Firstly, most participants observed that due to English being their non-dominant language, it took more time (relative to native speakers) to read and understand questions and then translate them to a different language and back to English. This process was described as arduous and stressful and, compounded by time-pressure, they believed this put EAL speakers at a disadvantage during assessments. Some respondents also felt that the number of acronyms and the routine use of legal language often made it more difficult to apply for specialist roles.

I'm scared about the numbers of questions and the limited time available ... and you have only three hours ... So for me, the fear is about ... because I need more time to read and the pressure. – Participant 1

Furthermore, due to the time constraints and the number of questions, participants observed that they had just 1 min and 12 s to answer each question. As EAL speakers, they felt this meant that if they did not understand a question or found it confusing due to the language used, they would have no option but to skip it, meaning they were aiming for the same minimum pass mark but by completing fewer questions. EAL officers also discussed how, for those educated outside the UK, MCQ papers were not commonplace, many having never experienced this assessment method previously.

The second reason given by participants in relation to why they struggled in the MCQ concerned how certain questions and scenarios were framed. Participants stated that lengthier questions with too much context or background information were designed to test their grasp of the English language rather than their knowledge and ability to serve as police officers. Sometimes that information was culturally unfamiliar to them and so formed an element of the 'hidden curriculum' discussed earlier. It was often those MCQ questions with very similar answer options that took the most amount of time to process.

The wording can be tricky ... It's obviously a test so they are there to catch you out. But when it's just down to one word – a 'may' or 'might' or 'must' – it just plays with your mind sometimes as the second language – Participant 6

All respondents said they struggled with the MCQ exams, and those preparing for such exams, suggested that more time should be given to EALs to 'level the playing field',

I'm baffled that you know ... people with ... dyslexia would be given extra time, but the language wouldn't be taken into consideration – Participant 16

Some participants suggested that instead of extra time, questions and promotion criteria should be simplified and written in a more accessible way. This would benefit all candidates, of course, and we argue later in our conclusion that all should be given longer time, so as not to reinforce the 'deficits model' that marginalises linguistic minorities:

Just show me how it is and I will show you my ability ... I don't need extra time ... I take time to understand the things, but once I understand it, I just fly. I give my best ... – Participant 4

Participants reflected on the format and nature of written assessment questions in recruitment and promotion processes.

[there] is loads of text to read and the answers are confusing ... you need to analyse the information you need to analyse the text and all ... if the British person who's always been speaking English and only speaks English ... and that exam confused them ... how would I feel? – Participant 2

There was a recurring perception of a disconnect between the language used during routine work and the highly corporate language expected for promotions or specialist roles. While authors such as Fox (2004), articulated the challenges EAL speakers could face making fast-paced decisions in the workplace, this was not raised by our participants, rather that the language of the assessment processes did not align to the realities of their roles. One participant noted:

I can converse very well with you when you're talking to me, but I cannot articulate it in a policing way, which is what College of Policing ... wants ... 25 years in this country and still I speak plain English ... I know for a fact that I have to work double the amount to get where I am ... I can't do the corporate talk and that's why I don't fit in well with the bosses you see, so that nepotism is still there, because I can't talk that corporate language, they think I'm dull, but I'm not dull – Participant 8

The overall perception of participants was that they would benefit from less focus on using correct police terminology. Instead, they preferred procedures which test real-life scenarios and their ability to deal with these effectively and appropriately.

Participants discussed the positive action measures which could be available for exams. There was a sense that some participants felt that having measures such as extra time for exams risks further

entrenching the deficits model that hinders their working relationships with colleagues who were native English speakers.

It's just it's the same job for me as for anybody else, I don't think I should be treated differently because it will come back and bite you in a sense ... It will cause resentment from your colleagues if you get something that they don't. – Participant 15

However, others, who recognised that to be successful in the examination processes they would need some additional support, had resorted to paying for third-party training and materials to prepare for specific promotion exams, as they were not aware of any support for EAL learners within their force or from the CoP.

I had to spend some money and look at what resources are out there to help me study. I mean it came out of my own pocket ... I think I spent about a grand on learning materials – Participant 7

... help as in for somebody who's English is not their first language? There is no such thing. There's no provision for that. – Participant 10

Traver and Huang (2021) found that EAL candidates provided with additional coaching and feedback performed more strongly than others during an interview process, suggesting that EAL officers can perform well amongst colleagues with the appropriate support in place. The findings also point to a possible misunderstanding of positive action measures and of the experience for EAL learners generally, amongst the wider force.

Much of the data indicates that participants were conscious that, although they formed close bonds with colleagues, they felt the need to try and 'fit in'. This was particularly the case for EAL speakers born outside of the UK who felt they could not relate fully to colleagues who were born and raised in the UK, particularly when reference was made to events and issues from popular culture. This relates to the 'hidden curriculum' discussed earlier in the narrower context of the questions used in some entrance exams. Many commented that they were often the only ones who did not laugh at jokes or could not participate in 'banter' because they often did not understand the context or references.

for example, like when my trainer has some local jokes or funny stories and I was the only person in the room that I won't laugh cause I didn't catch the point – Participant 12

There has been a wealth of literature discussing the different elements of police culture, canteen culture and how this has shaped over time (Fielding 2013, Caveney *et al.* 2020, Van Hulst 2020). Research suggests that the traditional UK policing culture is experienced differently by various groups such as women (Brown *et al.* 2019) and minority ethnic officers (Cashmore 2001, 2002). Minority ethnic officers report experiencing explicit racism and 'jokes', reporting that racism from colleagues is often said to 'test' their patience and prevent them from speaking out (Holdaway and O'Neill 2004), all of which is reinforced by police culture (Hasan 2021). Officers in our study did not identify or discuss racism in this way but alluded to a sense of cultural isolation. However, there is an absence of literature exploring specifically how EAL officers embed themselves in organisational culture but concepts such as the 'hidden curriculum' and the 'deficit model' arise from our study as potentially useful in such debates.

In general terms participants frequently expressed concern and disappointment that their skillset, as bi/multi-lingual speakers, were not recognised or used appropriately by their forces. This is evidence of a deficit model for EAL candidates, leading officers to feeling that they are being under-utilised by their forces. Participant 10 commented that;

English is also cultural not just about language and grammar – if you are an EAL you might think differently within different cultural contexts and backgrounds.

The participant went on to discuss how they felt these skills could be better deployed and utilised more strategically within and across policing activity. They felt that the rich cultural diversity that

many EAL speakers displayed could strengthen police relationships with the community, which, as discussed previously, is increasingly heterogeneous. In this context, let alone others (e.g. recruitment practices), reversing the 'deficit model' would have important benefits for officers, police services, and the wider public. Paradoxically, the sense from the interviews and focus groups was that instead, EAL speakers felt that their knowledge of multiple languages was under-utilised in their day-to-day work.

for me to integrate into police is just me being the same as them, even though I'm not ... I used to be like, you know, the dreamer, that I'm pleased I can change world and I can do this and I can do that for my community. No, it's never used actually, it's what I would say. They underuse people who are foreigners. – Participant 15

Fostering strong relationships with communities is the central model of British policing, which as one participant identified.

Being bilingual can have positives and negatives; it can be seen as a strength and help promote diversity. Participant 7

This is of particular importance for migrant communities, who may feel marginalised, and who may have had more strained relationships with the police either in the UK or internationally (Ndhlovu *et al.* 2022). Yet where officers bring language skills to the role the impact can be profound.

When you face difficult members of the public, the level of trust increases because of the foreign accent – living in London I have often experienced people prefer to speak to me, instead of a native English speaker, especially if they come from a diverse background. In very difficult situations my accent has helped diffuse the situation. (Participant 1)

Having officers with rich cultural and diverse knowledge has potential to foster better communication between communities who are harder to reach due to language barriers and an important element of wider diversity strategy. However, our respondents did not feel their language skills were used strategically to improve communication with a wider range of communities. When their language abilities were used, it was seen as incidental rather than intentional or embedded in strategic planning which could benefit them as an individual or the force and community more holistically.

Discussion

This paper makes an original and significant contribution, through analysis of the experiences of applicants to policing who have EAL. It raises issues of significance in many international jurisdictions in relation to wider debates about diversity, the 'hidden curriculum' and the 'deficit model' that serve to under-value and under-utilise cultural minorities within policing. Significantly this paper examines language, and the position of EAL speakers seeking entry to, or promotion within, a policing career, developing existing research in this field which has focused more generally on ethnicity (Sood and Mistry 2009, Culver 2004). Specifically, we outlined the need for recruitment and promotion mechanisms to consider wider social, economic and cultural contexts that may negatively impact EAL officers.

The research found that, for both prospective and existing officers with EAL, the examination, recruitment and promotion processes can be challenging. At present, the processes operate on a quasi-deficit model, with the focus more towards the participants' weaknesses. The use of corporate language and time-limited examinations makes it difficult for officers who need to translate between languages, a common challenge for bilingual speakers (Pepper 2014). There is certainly evidence from this research that a reviewing the language used in some scenario-based questions in the MCQ exams to make them more accessible to EAL speakers would be beneficial. However, there was no evidence to suggest that the imposition of time limits for these exams resulted in any improved outcomes in the workplace, making the practical value of these exams questionable. Our study also found that positive action measures implemented by individual forces were not

well received by all participants due to a fear of stigma from other colleagues, with some candidates discussing a lack of structured support available to them. In terms of practical steps, should there be a desire for the exams to continue to exist in this format, extending the time for *all* candidates with an option to leave the exam early ought to be considered. This should be piloted over a set period of time and demographic data of those leaving early and those using the extra time should be analysed to gain a clearer sense of the impact of EAL. Such a pilot will also allow for comparisons in performance between EAL speakers and native speakers. This would also reduce the possible stigma associated with positive action initiatives.

Once in-service, officers with EAL often experienced disadvantage as they completed professional development and promotion processes. The strengths that such officers bring to policing in terms of their ability to communicate with communities that share their language and insight into their culture experiences tended, our respondents indicated, to be overlooked. The 'deficit model' ought to be re-tooled as a 'strengths model'. Sood and Mistry (2009) are among those who note that institutions need to do more to address the cultural values and beliefs implicit in institutional practices that might disadvantage linguistic minorities, such as a focus on monolingual, English-only communication in the workplace and ways of socialising outside of work which, our participants noted, regularly made them feel like 'outsiders'. EAL speakers successful in recruitment exams questioned their own proficiency in English after joining the police. More guidance and support could be provided to prospective candidates from diverse backgrounds about the distinct role of a police officer and the language demands in relation to the understanding and articulation of legal and professional language. In relation to the concepts of CALP and BICS discussed earlier, our study suggests it is in the former domain that those who speak EAL are particularly disadvantaged. Focusing only on the extent to which those candidates have capacity in terms of their *basic interpersonal communication skills* (BICS) is insufficient given that professional work-related success in recruitment and promotion also require cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP).

As noted earlier, the Metropolitan Police trialed positive recruitment campaigns focusing on EAL candidates. While little is known about its long-term success, developing a model that rewards and recognises EAL candidates, both during the application process and when seeking promotion, could shift away from the traditional deficit model. This approach would instead highlight the added value that a diverse range of spoken languages can bring to policing. Further research as to whether EAL communities would appreciate a policing model that allows them to communicate with officers in their first or additional languages would be valuable. This would be especially important in understanding how such a model might impact engagement and satisfaction with the police.

Based on the empirical analysis of data, attributing EAL as the decisive factor in the success rate of applicants in recruitment, progression and specialist exams is problematic. Many factors adversely impact the lived experience of EAL speakers in terms of professional achievement. There is an underlying assumption (sometimes only implicit) that those who have EAL require 'remedial support'. While adjustments might be appropriate, it would be conducive to recruitment and retention to emphasise the value of a multi-lingual police workforce. These issues particularly concern the support, guidance, and mentoring available to EAL candidates as well as the underutilisation of their skills and knowledge of diverse cultures, backgrounds, and communities, and their career aspirations. Therefore, a more fundamental and radical approach could be considered by the police for all current officers and applicants. This would involve providing coaching and mentoring opportunities and incorporating these processes into future workplace resource planning. By doing so, the additional skills and abilities of officers can be more effectively and holistically utilised and officer themselves could be better prepared for the assessment processes. This would be beneficial for all officers, not just EAL officers. Ensuring the broadest possible appeal and providing adequate support to the most talented candidates is essential. As is developing a police force that reflects the diversity of the communities it represents.

There is little research investigating the experiences of EAL police officers and so this paper presents an original contribution to existing literature. Our findings may contribute to improving the

'onboarding' experiences of officers with EAL and throughout their service. Future research would benefit from widening participation and looking comparatively at the experiences of EAL officers in other countries which have applied the relevant measures such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the US. The terrain mapped out in this paper significantly addresses an overlooked aspect of the 'policing diversity' agenda: the role of language in police recruitment processes. Our findings suggest that the under-pinning processes need further consideration if the benefits of a linguistically diverse workforce are to be fully realised.

Notes

1. The terminology around English and other languages is complex. By 'main' language, we mean 'first', 'dominant', 'own' or 'home' language, all terms that can be found across the literature surrounding English as an Additional Language. We also recognize that terms such as EAL and dominant language do not fully recognize that many language users, both EAL speakers in the UK and language users around the world, are bi- or multilingual.
2. The experiences of ESL candidates were not explored during this research but clearly an area which needs further research and consideration.
3. Although we reviewed the examination papers and the guidance given to candidates in detail, given the confidential nature of the examination process only examples from the guidance to candidates have been used. This was part of our agreement with the College of Policing.

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