



Teacher confidence, interpretive competence, and the misidentification of SEND in linguistically diverse classrooms: an observation-led analysis of professional decision-making

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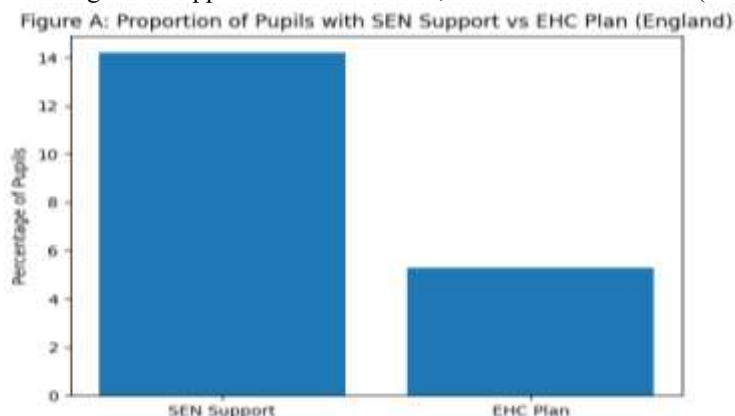
ABSTRACT : Teacher judgement sits at the centre of early Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) identification, particularly in linguistically diverse classrooms where language difference and developmental difficulty may present with overlapping surface features. This paper examines how teacher confidence, interpretive competence, and professional training shape early SEND referral decisions for bilingual learners in English-dominant schooling. Drawing on longitudinal observation across mainstream, specialist, and alternative provision settings in England, the study analyses how teachers interpret language behaviour, literacy difficulty, and classroom engagement under varying levels of linguistic awareness and institutional pressure. Findings indicate that misidentification risk is strongly mediated by teacher confidence and conceptual framing rather than by pupil profile alone. Where educators possess applied linguistic insight and observation-led decision tools, referral pathways are more flexible, accurate, and equitable. Where confidence is undermined by training gaps, accountability pressures, and monolingual norms, referral accelerates prematurely. A comparative section draws on education-in-emergencies and community-based professional learning models implemented by Rise to Inspire Africa Initiative (RIA) to illustrate alternative approaches to teacher development under constraint. The paper contributes an original humanities-led framework positioning teacher interpretive competence as a central lever in reducing SEND misidentification and improving inclusive practice.

Keywords: Linguistically Diverse Classrooms, Misidentification, Observation-led Analysis, SEND, Teacher Confidence

1. INTRODUCTION

Across English education systems, teachers act as the primary gatekeepers to SEND identification (Alix, 2024). Long before formal assessment or diagnostic involvement, it is teachers who raise concerns, document patterns, and trigger referral pathways. In linguistically diverse classrooms, this responsibility is amplified: educators must interpret language development, behaviour, and learning through lenses that may or may not adequately account for bilingualism (Alix, 2024; Kaptungei, 2024).

Figure A: Distribution of pupils receiving SEN Support versus Education, Health and Care Plans (England).



While recent national debates on SEND often focus on resourcing, thresholds, and diagnostic capacity, comparatively little attention is paid to the *interpretive conditions* under which referral decisions are made—an vital factor that has long been recognised as a pivot for referrals (Rosamond et al., 2003; Hinchliffe & Campbell, 2015).

Yet emerging evidence suggests that early SEND escalation is shaped less by the intrinsic characteristics of pupils and more by the confidence, training, and conceptual frameworks available to teachers at the point of decision-making (Gulliford & Miller, 2023).

This paper examines teacher confidence and interpretive competence as central determinants of SEND misidentification in bilingual learners. It argues that misidentification is not primarily a diagnostic failure but an *interpretive one*, arising where educators are required to make high-stakes judgements without sufficient linguistic tools or professional support. This paper positions teachers as the critical mediating agents between learner behaviour and institutional categorisation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Teacher Judgement in SEND Identification

Evidence from studies consistently show that teacher judgement plays a decisive role and is indeed a gateway in SEND referral (Abebe & Hailemariam, 2008; Smeets & Roeleveld, 2016). Studies highlight variability in referral rates across schools with similar demographics, suggesting that institutional culture and professional norms influence interpretation. For instance, some identified predictors that lead to SEN referral, include skills tests, teacher's opinion on low pupil performance, signs of unfavourable work attitude, being more reliant on the teacher, being less popular among the other learners, and impairment/delayed cognitive development (Abebe & Hailemariam, 2008; Smeets & Roeleveld, 2016; Green, Oblath, Holt, 2022).

2.2 Linguistic Diversity and Teacher Training

Despite increasing linguistic diversity in UK classrooms, applied linguistics remains marginal within initial teacher education and SEND training (Erling et al., 2022; Farrel & Masterson, 2023). The deficit perspectives of multilingualism often indicates that teachers have a limited perspective on the multilingual background of their pupils, and linguistic differences are usually not seen as usable resources in the quest to learn the language, which will in turn influence the attitude of the teacher (Erling et al., 2022; Farrel & Masterson, 2023). More so, teachers frequently report uncertainty when distinguishing bilingual language development from disorder, particularly in early literacy contexts, while some others have misconceptions that reveal their inability to distinguish the learning trajectories between learners with impairments/disorders, and those who are multilingual (Hemsley, Holm, & Dodd, 2014; Sawyer et al., 2017).

2.3 Confidence, Risk, and Accountability

The accountability pressures on teachers and educators create asymmetrical and professional risks as failing to refer is perceived as more professionally risky than over-referring, thus this makes the SEND pathway the only escape route where all three professional factors of accountability, the attendant risks that come with not meeting accountability requirements (both from an administrative standpoint and from the point of view of what is best for the child where there is uncertainty, and also the issue of resorting to SEND referrals where uncertainty and lack of confidence on alternative professional explanation comes up (Hutchinson, 2021). This dynamic incentivises escalation, and becomes one of the main reasons for the increasing

2.4 Conceptual Framework

2.4.1 Teacher Confidence as an Interpretive Variable

Teacher confidence in this study is not understood as general self-efficacy, but as interpretive confidence: the degree to which educators feel equipped to analyse, contextualise, and explain observed difficulty without immediate recourse to categorical labelling. Low interpretive confidence does not imply poor teaching. Rather, it reflects environments where: linguistic diversity exceeds training coverage, accountability pressures compress decision timelines, and professional discourse prioritises risk avoidance over developmental interpretation. Under such conditions, SEND referral becomes a mechanism for certainty.

2.4.2 Interpretive Competence vs Procedural Compliance

Interpretive competence differs from procedural compliance. While procedural competence enables teachers to follow referral processes accurately, interpretive competence enables them to decide whether referral is appropriate at all.

This competence requires:

- understanding bilingual development patterns,
- recognising language-processing overload,
- distinguishing behaviour as communication from behaviour as disorder,
- and situating difficulty within instructional and environmental context.

2.4.3 Observation-Led Professional Judgement

Observation-led judgement emphasises longitudinal pattern recognition over snapshot evaluation. It allows teachers to tolerate ambiguity, gather evidence over time, and adjust interpretation as language integration stabilises.

This contrasts with assessment cultures that reward early categorisation and penalise uncertainty.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative-dominant, observation-led research design, drawing on practitioner observation, reflective documentation, and comparative analysis across educational settings.

3.2 Settings and Professional Contexts

Observations were drawn from:

- mainstream primary and secondary schools,
- specialist provision,
- alternative education contexts.

Teachers observed varied in experience, training background, and exposure to linguistically diverse learners.

3.3 Data Sources

Data sources included:

- structured observation of classroom interaction and teacher response,
- anonymised reflective discussions with educators,
- SEND documentation pathways (process analysis, not individual diagnosis),
- comparative programme documentation from RIA teacher development initiatives.

3.4 Observation Tool and Coding Framework

3.4.1 Teachers used an observation framework capturing:

- language demand vs language access,
- behaviour in relation to comprehension,
- response to scaffolding,
- change over time.

3.4.2 Coding distinguished:

- language-mediated difficulty,
- persistent cross-context difficulty,
- environment-dependent behaviour.

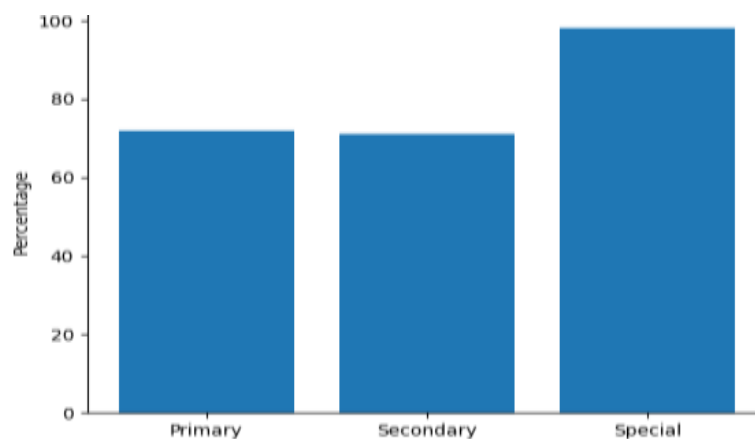
This framework provided support for collective professional discussion and reduced individual decision burden.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Confidence Gradients in Linguistically Diverse Classrooms

Teachers demonstrated markedly different confidence levels when interpreting similar pupil behaviours.

Figure C: Teacher confidence in supporting SEND across educational settings.



Where linguistic awareness was low, behaviours such as silence, task avoidance, or phonics difficulty were rapidly framed as indicators of SEND.

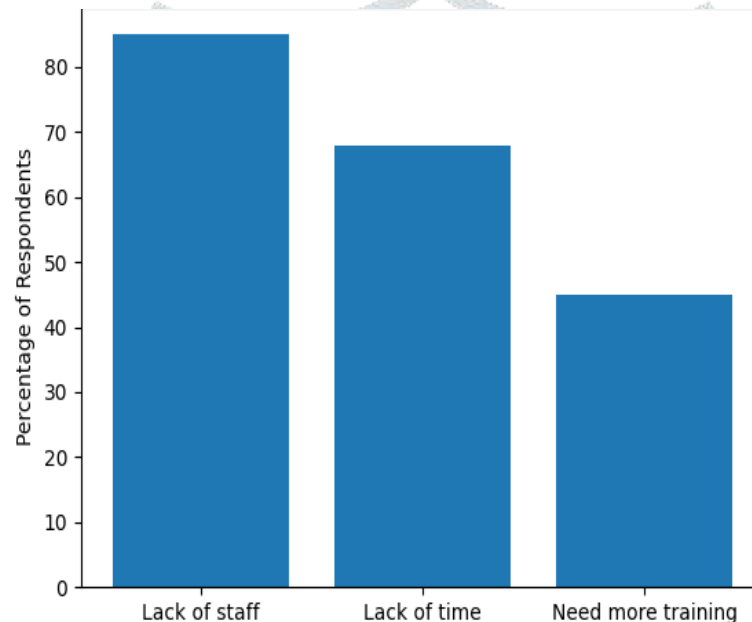
Where linguistic awareness was higher, teachers articulated multiple hypotheses, including:

- processing overload,
- language transfer,
- instructional mismatch.

4.2 Referral as a Confidence Substitute

In low-confidence contexts, SEND referral functioned as a substitute for interpretive certainty.

Figure D. Reported barriers undermining teacher confidence in SEND interpretation.



Referral did not reflect conviction of disorder but discomfort with ambiguity.

Teachers described referral as:

- “covering all bases”,
- “making sure support is in place”,
- or “protecting the child”.

These rationales reveal referral as a professional coping strategy rather than a diagnostic conclusion.

4.3 Impact of Linguistics-Informed Tools

Where teachers had access to observation frameworks and shared interpretive language, referral timelines slowed, and alternative interventions were trialled. This did not reduce vigilance but improved precision.

4.4 Comparative Analysis: RIA Teacher Development Under Constraint

RIA teacher development programmes operate under extreme resource limitation, yet prioritise interpretive competence over procedural compliance. Training focuses on:

- recognising language disruption as structural,
- using observation rather than labelling,
- maintaining professional confidence in ambiguity.

Despite minimal resources, educators demonstrated high tolerance for uncertainty and strong engagement-focused decision-making. This challenges assumptions that interpretive competence depends on formal systems rather than conceptual framing.

4.5 Discussion

The findings suggest that SEND misidentification is not primarily a pupil problem or a system capacity problem, but an *interpretive ecology problem*. Teachers operating without adequate conceptual tools are structurally pushed toward escalation. Improving teacher confidence does not mean encouraging risk-taking, but enabling *better explanation*. When teachers can explain difficulty linguistically, they can justify delay, intervention, or adaptation without feeling professionally exposed. This study suggests that SEND misidentification emerges where professional uncertainty is treated as risk rather than as a legitimate state of inquiry. Teachers escalate

not because they misjudge children, but because systems misjudge uncertainty. Reframing uncertainty as a space for observation, rather than as a failure of competence, is central to reducing misidentification and strengthening inclusion.

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper positions teacher interpretive competence as a central lever in SEND identification reform. By foregrounding confidence, linguistic awareness, and observation-led judgement, it advances a humanities-led contribution to inclusive education research. Future research will evaluate structured linguistics-informed professional learning models in UK settings and examine their impact on referral patterns over time.

IMPLICATIONS FOR UK PRACTICE AND POLICY

- SEND reform must address teacher interpretive capacity, not only thresholds.
- Teacher education should integrate applied linguistics as core content.
- Observation-led frameworks should be normalised within SEND decision-making.

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