EAL learners in the UK

There are currently over a million learners of English as an additional language in UK maintained schools and many more in independent schools. Nearly 19% of the primary population of England has EAL and over 14% of the secondary population. These proportions continue to grow year on year.

The government definition of an EAL learner includes anyone who has been exposed to a language other than English during early childhood ‘and continues to be exposed to this language in the home or in the community’.

This includes, for example:

- new arrivals from abroad who speak little or no English
- children or young people from other countries who are in the UK for a limited time, for example if they have a parent who is studying here, who have been educated in an English-medium school abroad and are fluent in several languages
- young people who were born in the UK and speak English most of the time at home and school, but who also speak another language occasionally to extended family members.

Diversity of EAL learners:

As well as difference in the language levels and use of language of the various groups of EAL learners, there is also huge variation in terms of a range of other factors, such as:

- social class and economic status
- educational background
- religion or belief
- political affiliation
- national, ethnic and cultural background
- ability
- language
- literacy
- knowledge and experience of the UK.

As well as the differences between the experiences of bilingual learners who were born and brought up in the UK those who are from other countries are also a highly diverse group. They may:

- have migrated voluntarily, e.g. for economic reasons, to work or study in the UK
- have been forced to seek refuge in the UK for a range of reasons, including war or persecution
- have already had a high level of education in their own country
- speak and write several languages
- have had little or interrupted schooling
- be illiterate in their first language
- have additional or special needs such as hearing impairment or dyslexia
- be gifted and talented
- come from a highly privileged background
- arrive at any point in the education system.
Language levels of EaL learners:

Beginner learners
New arrivals or learners at an early stage of acquiring English will clearly progress at very different rates according to their educational background and the effectiveness of the support they receive.

Intermediate learners
When we refer to ‘Intermediate’ learners, as a general rule, we are talking about EAL learners who have been learning English for between two and five years.

Advanced learners
Advanced bilingual learners are defined as pupils who have had all or most of their school education in the UK and whose oral proficiency in English is usually indistinguishable from that of pupils with English as a first language but whose writing may still show distinctive features related to their language background.

Specific groups of EaL learners:
EAL learners may be at any stage of developing English, from beginner to advanced. They may have migrated voluntarily or have been forced to seek refuge. They may have had a high level of education in their own country or may never have been to school before. EAL learners may also have additional or special needs such as hearing impairment or dyslexia or they may be gifted and talented.

Specific groups might include:

- **New arrivals**
  International migrants, including refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants from overseas may be described as new arrivals.

- **Refugees and asylum seekers**
  Local authorities have a duty to provide full-time education for all children of compulsory school age resident in that local authority, including refugee and asylum-seeking pupils aged 5-16

- **Roma learners**
  Since the accession of the A8 countries (including Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary) to the European Union in 2004, groups of Roma families have moved to the UK to find work and avoid discrimination in their country of origin.

- **Learners with low-level in first languages literacy**
  Children and young people may arrive in UK schools with limited experience of schools and no literacy in any language.

- **Learners with special educational needs**
  Although being an EAL learner is not in itself a special educational need, learners with EAL may themselves have additional educational needs.

- **Gifted and talented learners**
  In some schools and areas of the UK the gap between EAL learners and English as a Mother Tongue (EMT) learners is as much as 20 percentage points. Similarly, some ethnic groups’ attainment is still below national averages.

British Council EaL Nexus Project:
One of the central aims of the EAL Nexus project is to engage with teachers and work with schools to promote a better understanding of how to teach and support EAL learners most effectively.

https://eal.britishcouncil.org/teachers/teach-and-support-eal-learners

This website looks in detail at key teaching strategies to meet the needs of EAL learners in the classroom, including ideas for homework and the effective use of additional adults. Its Great Ideas pages give suggestions for tried-and-tested strategies that have been shown to be particularly beneficial for EAL learners – using flashcards, graphic
organisers, jigsaw activities, drama, language drills, substitution tables and many more.

- Make the verbal curriculum more visual (see Visuals).
- Make the abstract curriculum more concrete (see Graphic organisers).
- Develop interactive and collaborative teaching and learning styles (see Collaborative activities).
- Think about the language demands of the curriculum (oral and written) and provide models (see Modelling).
- Use drama and role play (see Drama and role play).
- Provide opportunities for exploratory talk (see Collaborative activities).
- Ensure home languages are valued and used (see Using learners’ first language ability).
- Provide opportunities to talk before writing (see Language drills).
- Support through key phrases and structures rather than key words (see Scaffolding).

Information is also included on this website about where to find subject-specific guidance on teaching EAL learners, assessment and developing your own practice.

Language information booklets provide teachers of EAL learners with some information on their first languages (or languages of previous education) and on cultural aspects. Typical differences between these languages and English have been highlighted to make teachers aware where these learners might need additional support.

The following information can be found in the booklets and can help teachers meet the needs of their EAL learners:

- particular features of EAL learners’ languages
- conventions observed by speakers of their languages
- the socio-cultural contexts in the countries or the regions where their languages are spoken
- information about education systems
- cultural-specific naming systems
- cultural and linguistic differences in courtesies and levels of formality
- particular differences between the languages of EAL learners and English in terms of phonology (the sounds used in languages that might make a difference in meaning), grammar (the structures of languages and the ways languages refer to the world and the speakers’ experiences), writing (scripts used for languages and nature of spelling systems) and vocabulary (where the languages get their words from).

Booklets are available to download as pdfs for the following languages: Arabic Chinese Polish Urdu

https://eal.britishcouncil.org/teachers/language-information

The Bell Foundation:

https://www.bell.foundation.org.uk/Work/EAL/

The Bell Foundation’s programme for EAL learners began in January 2014, building on lessons learnt from our commissioned research and the pilot phase which aimed to understand the extent of the issues faced by schools, teachers and EAL pupils. The programme initially spans five years from 2014-2019, and has a UK focus only.

As highlighted in ‘EAL and educational achievement’, a report commissioned by The Bell Foundation, the Education Endowment Foundation and Unbound Philanthropy, key findings about EAL learners include:

- Pupils recorded as EAL are very unevenly distributed and concentrations of EAL students can be very specific to a small local area. A quarter of schools (22%) have less than 1% EAL pupils but in 8.4% of
schools, EAL pupils make up over half of the school population.

- There is no evidence that pupils whose first language is English suffer from attending a school with a high proportion of EAL pupils, an outcome that is consistent at both Key Stage 2 (age 7-11) and Key Stage 4 (age 14-16).
- On average, EAL pupils catch up with their peers by age 16. At age 5 only 44% of EAL pupils have achieved a good level of development compared to 54% of other pupils. By age 16, this gap has narrowed significantly with 58.3% achieving five A*-C GCSEs including English and maths compared to 60.9% of other pupils.
- Average attainment figures mask a huge range of results for different groups of EAL pupils. Speakers of Portuguese, Somali, Lingala and Lithuanian have especially low outcomes at age 16 but Russian and Spanish speakers do particularly well.

Based on these research findings, the Education Endowment Foundation, Unbound Philanthropy and The Bell Foundation made a series of recommendations for LAs and schools.


**NALDIC:**

The national subject association for EAL

This website provides a ‘one-stop-shop’ for downloading a range of EAL guides from NALDIC, National Strategies and other government agencies.


It provides teaching and learning resources, a glossary, and some useful ‘Pupil portraits’ written by teachers, to show real bilingual pupils learn EAL in the mainstream classroom and how their teachers support them to do so. You can read answers to FAQs and listen to an Eal PFAQ podcast series.


**Other sources of support:**

**National Strategies:**

The National Strategies produced some excellent resources that are still relevant today, including:

- Ensuring the attainment of more advanced learners of EAL CPD modules [http://www.naldic.org.uk/eal-publications-resources/key-practical-documents/](http://www.naldic.org.uk/eal-publications-resources/key-practical-documents/)

**University of York VLE:**

EAL Toolkit

[https://vle.york.ac.uk/bbcsweday/pid-1930015-dt-content-rid-5162928_2/xid-5162928_2](https://vle.york.ac.uk/bbcsweday/pid-1930015-dt-content-rid-5162928_2/xid-5162928_2)

**Other useful websites:**

- Beginners in English as an additional language [http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/beginners/index.htm](http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/beginners/index.htm)
- For more specific information on languages and their scripts you may want to visit [http://www.omniglot.com/](http://www.omniglot.com/)

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