



# EMTAS Position Statement on grouping/setting for multilingual learners

This Hampshire EMTAS Position Statement provides an overview of best practice guidance relating to the placement of multilingual learners in 'ability' groupings or sets in primary and secondary school settings.

The intended audience of this Position Statement includes Head Teachers, Senior Leaders in school, EAL Co-Ordinators/Inclusion Managers, Governors with responsibility for English as an Additional Language (EAL), Class/Subject Teachers and Learning Support Staff.

## Key Considerations

### Best practice re grouping & setting in relation to multilingual learners

EAL best practice is to place multilingual learners in groups and sets according to their cognitive ability, rather than the knowledge and understanding they are able to demonstrate in English.

In the vast majority of cases, placement outside the normal age group (a.k.a. back-yearing or deceleration), where learners are placed in a year group below their chronological age, should be avoided. For further information on back-yearing/deceleration, see the full Hampshire [EMTAS guidance on admission outside the normal age group for learners of English as an Additional Language](#).

#### *The first half term*

Newly-arrived pupils need to be given time to settle in before their cognitive ability can be determined. Initially, it is advised that they are placed in at least middle ability groups during this time. This ensures they have access to good models of written and spoken English, a strategy that underpins successful English language acquisition. Whilst additional adults might be available to support learners in lower groups or sets, this should not be used as justification to place even early stage learners of EAL in those lower sets. A better, more sustainable option is to enable other pupils to support the newly-arrived learner of EAL.

As soon as possible after the pupil has been admitted, schools should gather relevant background information about them, including their skills in their first/other language(s). Schools can refer the child to EMTAS to access Pupil Profiling, which includes a first language (L1) assessment. Use the online form on the EMTAS website to refer a child: [New arrivals and referrals | Hampshire County Council \(hants.gov.uk\)](#). Alternatively, South East Grid for Learning (SEGfL) have developed a free [Online Background Information Collation](#)

[Tool](#) to help schools do some of this for themselves. The tool is available in a range of languages, in written form and/or audio, and parents'/carers'/learners' responses can be printed out in English.

Standardised tests should be avoided for early stage learners of EAL and results from such tests should not be used to inform grouping/setting decisions. See the Hampshire EMTAS guidance on [Standardised testing and EAL learners](#) for a more detailed explanation of why standardised tests may not be appropriate for use with multilingual learners.

Parents/carers of multilingual learners may be unfamiliar with the UK education system and with how decisions about sets or groups are made. Schools should therefore be prepared to explain any decisions to parents/carers, listen to their views and answer any questions they might have about their child's placement in a group or set.

During the settling-in period, staff should begin to gather observations of the pupil's use of English in different school-based contexts.

### *Establishing a baseline*

Towards the end of the settling-in period, and using the information that has been gathered on what the pupil is able to do in English, it is recommended that staff use an EAL-specific tool to establish their baseline levels in English. The [Bell Foundation EAL Assessment Framework](#), available as a free download, is an example of one such tool. See the [EMTAS Position Statement on the use of the Bell EAL Assessment Framework](#) for further guidance on its use. Note that oral fluency in a learner's use of everyday English is not the same as 'proficiency' as used in the Bell Foundation EAL Assessment Framework and that assessment should take into account the learner's developing language use and literacy across a range of subjects.

### *Framing practitioner expectations*

It is important to keep in mind the possible timescales for multilingual learners to achieve full proficiency in English.

- Generally speaking, younger learners who start to learn English in Key Stage 1 or earlier may take between 7 and 10 years to acquire full proficiency in their use of English across the curriculum.
- Older learners with better developed language and literacy skills in their first language(s) may take between 5 and 7 years to achieve full proficiency.
- Learners with well-developed literacy skills in L1 tend to make more rapid progress in their acquisition of English than learners with less well-developed L1 skills.

The most reliable indicator of success in acquisition of English is the provision of support appropriate to the needs of the individual learner and in line with EAL best practice; grouping/setting decisions are an important aspect of this.

Contact [emtas@hants.gov.uk](mailto:emtas@hants.gov.uk) for further support and guidance. One of our Specialist Teacher Advisors will be able to provide advice for specific circumstances.

**Hampshire EMTAS Teacher Advisor team**  
**April 2026**