Hampshire County Council

Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service

EMTAS Position Statement: screening and standardised testing for learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL)

This Hampshire EMTAS Position Statement provides guidance on the use of standardised tests with learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL). Its intended audience includes Head Teachers, Senior Leaders in schools, EAL Co-ordinators/Inclusion Managers, Governors with responsibility for EAL, Class/Subject Teachers and Learning Support Staff.

Key Considerations

Introduction

Throughout their education, multilingual learners may be expected to complete the same screening tests as their monolingual peers. For younger learners, screening tests may be carried out using online tools that claim to be appropriate for use with those who are new to English, or ones that focus on phonics. Older learners may complete a range of standardised assessments such as group reading tests (which give a standardised score and a reading age), tests that give a spelling age, and Cognitive Abilities Tests (CATs).

The use of screening tests and standardised assessments with learners who are in the early stages of acquiring EAL is unlikely to yield reliable results, either when the tests are conducted in English or when they are translated. The following paragraphs explore why this is.

Newly-arrived multilingual learners

For learners who are new to English, there are many factors that should be taken into account; for example:

- Education systems differ greatly from country to country.
- The language of the test and any cultural aspects of the test may be unfamiliar.
- A newly-arrived learner is likely to be experiencing a period of upheaval, possibly having left their country, their relatives and their friends.
- They may have no prior experience of being in an educational setting. In many countries, the school starting age is 7 and therefore some younger learners may have limited or no prior experience of school life, academic learning or of completing assessments.
- Some learners may have had interrupted or no education due to war, displacement or having to work in their country of origin; this may have an impact too.
- Some may have been settled at school in their country of origin and now face the daunting challenge of the school curriculum being delivered in a language they don’t yet understand or speak.

- New arrivals may not be familiar with the format and content of standardised tests such as CATs, including the non-verbal elements of such tests.

Whatever their circumstances or previous experiences, the initial focus for newly-arrived learners should be providing pastoral support, not determining an academic baseline.

Younger multilingual learners

Even if a new entrant was born in the UK and has attended nursery or pre-school, they will be adjusting to new school routines and environments and possibly to a new language. UK-born multilingual learners will typically have skills in English that are less well-developed than those of their monolingual, English-only peers. This does not in itself indicate the presence of an additional need but it may suppress the score they achieve on a standardised test. Hence standardised tests may yield unreliable results when used with multilingual learners, even when they are not new to English.

Learners in the early stages of acquiring English

Standardised tests tend to use language out of context and are usually aimed at monolingual, English-only learners.

Standardised tests which focus on language competencies often have an emphasis on aspects of grammar. Given the multitude of differences between English grammar and the grammars of other languages, new arrivals are often being

tested on linguistic features of which they have little to no experience. Multilingual learners will be expected to access and complete the test in English. Therefore the tests only give an indication of a learner's current ability to understand English and to correctly interpret what they are being asked to do. Consequently, the results of standardised tests cannot be relied on for multilingual learners who are in the early stages of acquiring English.

Grouping and setting

Because of the range of factors described above, grouping or setting based on outcomes of screening tests or standardised assessments is questionable. Multilingual learners are at increased risk of being placed in groups or sets which are unsuitable for their English language-learning needs. Inappropriately placing such learners in a lower ability group or set could have a negative impact on their self-esteem as well as giving them access only to relatively poor models of English, which will impede their progress. For further advice, see EMTAS Position Statement on the placement of learners of EAL in groups and sets.

Interventions with multilingual learners

Using the results of standardised assessments and screening tests for placement of learners into intervention groups is also problematic:

- To make progress in their acquisition of English, it is important that multilingual learners engage in curriculum-linked activities.
- Multilingual learners need opportunities for exposure to peer-to-peer talk with strong language role models.
- Multilingual learners are best supported in the language rich environment of the mainstream classroom.

See the EMTAS Position Statement on 'withdrawal provision for learners of EAL' for more information on this topic.

Identification of SEND in multilingual learners

It is also important to remember the distinction between EAL and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Performing poorly on a standardised test should not be the only evidence used to identify SEND in a multilingual learner. See the EMTAS website for more information about how to distinguish the difference between EAL and SEND.

Further implications of standardised testing

- If the results of standardised tests are used as a basis for predicted grades, this can result in predicted and target grades being set too low. This can negatively impact learners' self-esteem as well as their aspirations in life.
- When used with multilingual learners, standardised tests may encourage low expectations.

- Standardised tests (and retests) do not provide a holistic picture of progress made by learners across different curriculum contexts.

How best to assess multilingual learners

Continuous, ongoing assessment that takes into consideration the timescales involved in developing proficiency in their use of English would provide a more accurate indication of a learner's working level. Practitioners should consider collecting samples of a learner's work and using an EAL-specific framework eg the one from the Bell Foundation. This will allow practitioners to track progress in acquisition of English from the early stages (Band A) right up to the point at which the learner has developed full academic language proficiency (Band E). Schools should also access advice from EMTAS and/or parents/carers to assess learners' language skills in listening, speaking, reading & viewing and writing.

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