



EMTAS Position Statement on learners of English as an Additional Language and Phonics teaching

This Position Statement relates to the Ofsted Inspection Guidance effective November 2025, specifically the section on learners of EAL and phonics teaching, which states the following:

For pupils at the early stages of learning English as an additional language, inspectors consider the extent to which teachers ensure that pupils learn to read using systematic synthetic phonics as soon as possible, so that they have access to a wide range of literature that will accelerate their understanding of English (p.20).

Herein we provide guidance relating to the teaching of phonics to learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL) including early-stage learners. Early-Stage learners are defined as those who are assessed as Bell Foundation EAL Assessment Framework Band A (new to English); note that the classification 'Early Stage' does not imply length of time living in the UK.

The intended audience of this Position Statement includes Head Teachers, Senior Leaders in school, EAL Co-Ordinators/Inclusion Managers, Governors with responsibility for EAL, English subject leads, Class/Subject Teachers, Learning Support Staff and Early Years practitioners.

Key Considerations

Children's phonological development

Phonological awareness is defined as the knowledge of the sound structure of a language and the ability to recognise and reproduce those phonological units in their own spoken output (Burt, Holm & Dodd, 1999; Cheung, Chen, Lai, Wong & Hills, 2001; Jongejan, Verhoeven & Siegel, 2007). It is gradually and implicitly acquired through the oral development of a language; children learn to differentiate between the sounds of the language and to segment the stream of speech into words from which they can then derive meaning.

Starting with babbling, which is a developmental stage present in all languages, children gradually master the coordination of the various muscles involved in speech. This enables them to start to produce intelligible words from around the age of one year, progressing to short, two word 'sentences' from around 18 months - two years. By the time they are five years old, the oral language competencies of typically developing, monolingual children are nearly fully formed (Bialystock et al., 2009; Cummins, 2000; Gravelle, 1996; Hall et al., 2013; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; MacWhinney, 2015). This is assumed to be the typical foundation when explicit teaching of phonics starts at the onset of formal schooling in the UK.

Children who are learning EAL differ from their monolingual, English-only peers in that they often have had fewer opportunities to hear and use English before they start school (Murphy, 2016). This can mean that they don't have enough knowledge or experience of spoken English to support emerging literacy skills in English (Paradis, Emmerzael & Sorenson Duncan, 2010; Sharples, 2021). Reading and writing are complex activities involving the mental processing of written forms of language through oral language (Verhoeven & Vermeer, 2006). For learners of EAL, this processing may happen more slowly in the early stages. With fewer opportunities to hear and discriminate between phonemes, especially young children learning EAL may need more time than their English-only peers to successfully convert their knowledge into phonemes and graphemes.

Whilst after an initial slow start for the reasons outlined above, learners of EAL often end up outperforming their monolingual peers on phonological screening tests, their comprehension of what they have read is typically lower (Hutchinson, Whiteley, Smith & Connors, 2003; Sharples, 2021). This has been attributed in part to a vocabulary gap in English and in part to a gap in oral language experience in English. Hence it is suggested that a focus on vocabulary knowledge and factoring in increased opportunities to develop oracy are areas that require greater attention in children who are learning EAL. In schools where these things are understood and implemented, the gap that exists between learners of EAL and their monolingual, English-only peers has been observed to close.

It is noted that for many children learning through EAL, phonics may have a different significance in reading development than it does for monolingual, English-only children. Further, that it may cause unexpected difficulties and require alternative strategies if, as an end result, practitioners are seeking to enable children to become confident users of phonic knowledge in English (NALDIC, 2021). The NASSEA framework discusses the importance of developing phonemic awareness and sufficient vocabulary **before** embarking on the teaching of phonics. This is mirrored in the Bell Foundation EAL Assessment Framework (Primary) which does not reference phonics until a child is in Band B (Early Acquisition).

The framework guidance for early-stage learners of EAL in Foundation Stage advises practitioners to

“...focus on developing the daily vocabulary of nouns and verbs appropriate to the setting and to routines. The child is still tuning into the sounds of English. At this stage, phonics tuition is not appropriate.”
(2015:39)

This is supported by the Rose Report’s emphasis on the development of speaking and listening and strengthening English language comprehension as precursors to reading and writing engagements, including phonics (2006). The descriptors and guidance in the NASSEA EAL assessment framework further reinforce this view:

“Learning phonics is not the starting point. Speaking, listening, vocabulary-building and word recognition are the starting points. Pupils can learn phonics when they have an English vocabulary and when they have become familiar with the way English sounds.” (2015)

Stanyard and Ranson (2021) spent two years exploring how to reposition phonics as part of a whole school approach to enhancing provision for their learners of EAL. They found that for some of their learners whose vocabulary in English was limited, a purely phonics approach was too abstract, resulting in limited salience within phonics sessions. Additional interventions in phonics with these children did not lead to an increase in outcomes; “many of our EAL learners were not ready to start learning synthetic phonics and could not relate to the teaching of these”, they noted. The approach they identified as yielding better results was to focus on vocabulary building, linking the teaching of new words to a text being used in class. This increased the children’s understanding of how to use the new words in context. They also focused on activities that involved recognising rhyme and clapping out syllables in words, prerequisites for phonics teaching.

The importance of meaning-making is thus highlighted by Stanyard and Ranson. It may be that a premature start with phonics teaching has the opposite effect, resulting in learners of EAL coming to expect to be able to decode but not comprehend the texts they read at school and for that to be OK – clearly an undesirable outcome.

So what should staff in schools do with regards their early-stage EAL cohorts and phonics teaching?

The decision whether or not to include children who are in the early stages of acquiring English as an Additional Language in mainstream phonics inputs alongside their monolingual peers might be made in part due to practical considerations related to staffing. It might also be that this approach fits best

with the principles of inclusion, supporting those children to feel they are fully part of the class.

What is inadvisable with early-stage learners of EAL is additional phonics input eg extra sessions in intervention groups. This type of provision would be inappropriate whilst the child is in Band A, only becoming relevant once they had developed some oracy in English. Instead of extra phonics work, such children would derive greater benefit from being given opportunities to build their working vocabularies – which would be best addressed through the deployment of EAL-friendly strategies in the delivery of the mainstream curriculum.

What about children in Band B and above?

Once a child reaches Band B, it is not advisable for phonics teaching to be delivered by sending them down to a lower year group. See the EMTAS Position Statement on Deceleration for more detail on this. For children in Band B (and above), it is preferable to provide individual or small group phonics input with children of the same age and similar underlying cognitive ability using age-appropriate resources.

Older learners, including children who start in Secondary Phase, will need focused support to develop literacy skills if they have not already got these established in another language. Some may benefit from short-term input on the basics of phonics using age-appropriate/culturally relevant resources. This input could be delivered in withdrawal either one-to-one or with children of similar underlying cognitive ability. They may also need support in lessons with reading and writing tasks.

What if a child can already read in English? Do we still need to teach them phonics from scratch?

No.

Some children may have been taught to read in English in country of origin using the letter names rather than phonics. The best way forward for such children is to acknowledge and build on what they already know rather than to start again from scratch with a phonics-based approach.

Does having literacy skills in another language help?

Children for whom English is an additional language may come with literacy skills in another language already developed. These skills are transferrable and can help them make more rapid progress in developing literacy in English.

Note that not all languages are alphabet-based; the concept of phoneme-grapheme correspondence as present in English does not exist in eg Chinese or Korean, which are both character based languages. Children who have literacy skills in a language like this (Chinese or Korean) will still have advantages in that they will already understand the concept of representing meaning using print. They will also know about such things as directionality, and through experience of writing in another language, they may have developed fine motor control skills too.

EMTAS Specialist Teacher Advisors are available to provide further support and guidance to schools on this and on any other aspect of practice and provision for learners of EAL. Email emtas@hants.gov.uk to ask for the Specialist Teacher Advisor for your district to get in touch with you.

Hampshire EMTAS Specialist Teacher Advisor team
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For further information

Visit the [EMTAS website](#).

See the [Guidance Library](#) on the EMTAS Moodle. This is an open access course and includes sections on meeting the needs of learners of EAL, the use of ICTs and the use of first language as a tool for learning (amongst others).

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Acronyms used in this guidance

EAL	English as an Additional Language
L1	First language

References

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