EMTAS Position Statement on the placement of EAL learners

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

Key Features and Considerations

Grouping, setting and streaming

In primary settings, learners are sometimes 'grouped' either on tables or in particular classes for certain curriculum areas, according to their perceived needs or academic ability. The term 'setting' usually refers to the grouping of learners in specific classes for particular subject areas, such as English or Maths in secondary settings. In contrast, the term 'streaming' normally involves grouping learners together in secondary settings for all lessons, regardless of the subjects taught.

Generally, any decision regarding in which group, set or stream to place a learner is based on their perceived academic ability. This principle highlights the importance of proper and accurate assessment of learners with English as an Additional Language (EAL) to determine their true cognitive ability, not merely what knowledge or understanding they are able to demonstrate in English. Furthermore, when making decisions to do with placing EAL learners in groups, sets or streams, the need for them to have access to good models of written and spoken English, which underlies English language acquisition, should be paramount.

Schools should also keep in mind the potential impact of banding. If learners are placed in bands for certain subjects, outside of the banding the options for learners could be limited in terms of the subjects they can access as well as the sets in which they can be placed.

Overview of sections in this guidance

Assessment of EAL learners

It is important to keep in mind the possible timescales for EAL learners to achieve full Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in English:

- Generally speaking, younger learners who start to learn English in Key Stage 1 take between 7 and 10 years to acquire full CALP in their use of English across the curriculum. Older learners with better developed language and literacy skills in their first languages may take between 5 and 7 years to achieve CALP.

- Generally speaking, learners with well-developed first language (L1) skills tend to make more rapid progress in their acquisition of English than learners with less well-developed L1 skills. It is therefore important for a learner's L1 skills to be assessed, using a Bilingual Assistant or Interpreter, to help provide an insight into their language skills and their likely trajectory.

- The most reliable indicator of success in acquisition of English is the provision of support appropriate to the needs of the individual EAL learner and in line with EAL best practice.

- An EAL Assessment Framework should be used as a way of assessing and monitoring the progress of an EAL learner in their acquisition of English. When considering a learner's progress and attainment in relation to the Bell Foundation EAL Assessment Framework Bands A-E, school staff should be aware that oral fluency in a learner's use of everyday English is not the same as 'proficiency' as used in the EAL Assessment Framework and that Assessment should take into account learners' developing language use and literacy across a range of subjects.

See the EMTAS Position Statement on the Bell Foundation EAL Assessment Framework for the full Hampshire EMTAS guidance on the use of the Assessment Framework.

It is vital to keep in mind that a learner's proficiency in English is not directly representative of their cognitive ability or of their understanding of subjects or topics. Schools should therefore base any decisions to group, set or stream learners on a multitude of factors, not solely on the learner's level of proficiency in English, keeping in mind that a newly arrived learner of EAL is unlikely to have a sufficient level of English to demonstrate their full knowledge or abilities. Indeed, if placement decisions were solely determined by a learner's proficiency in English, it could well take EAL learners many years before they were able to access appropriately cognitively challenging tasks in the upper groups, sets or streams.

With this principle in mind, standardised tests should be avoided for early stage EAL learners and results from such tests should not be used to inform the placement of EAL learners into groups, sets or streams. See the Hampshire EMTAS guidance on Standardised testing and EAL learners for a more detailed explanation of why standardised tests are not appropriate for use with learners of EAL.

When assessing EAL learners and when making any decisions relating to the placement of learners in groups, sets or streams, schools should collect and consider a range of information. Background information remains an important component of a learner's unique profile.

Each EAL learner's profile will reflect the influence of:

- age
- previous educational experience (in L1 and English-medium)
- first language skills
- competence socially and academically in L1
- factors that could affect learning eg trauma, racism, SEND
- L1 literacy
- English language proficiency
- academic track record
- experiences of different pedagogical approaches
- any gaps in knowledge (particularly subjects taught in the UK but not in country of origin)
- family and community circumstances.

Schools should routinely collect and record background information and make sure that this is shared with staff, especially when a learner transitions from one class to another.

Where possible, this information gathering process should be done with the support of an EMTAS Bilingual Assistant. This can be accessed using the referral form on the EMTAS website.

Where it is not possible to source a Bilingual Assistant or interpreter, South East Grid for Learning (SEGfL) have developed an Online Background Information Collation Tool to help collate key information from EAL parents and their children. This tool supports the induction and early profiling of newly arrived learners by providing a framework to collect background information. This can then help schools to think about the most effective provision for the newly arrived learner. The tool is available in a range of languages, in written form and/or audio, and parents'/learners' responses can be printed out in English.

EMTAS has also developed and piloted an L1 assessment tool for use with young EAL learners, to be used alongside existing statutory assessments that Early Years practitioners are required to carry out. The tool provides information about children's L1 skills to practitioners in a format that is similar to that of the Foundation Stage Profile (FSP). Used alongside the FSP, it can provide practitioners with a fuller picture of young bilingual learners' language skills both in their first languages and in English.

Involving learners and parents/carers in decisions

When deciding which group, set or stream to place a learner, schools should keep in mind the need to involve learners and their parents/carers in any decisions made as much as possible.

Regular review sessions, in which the views of learners are sought, can help to ensure that decisions on placement are, and continue to be, appropriate. For older learners, for example, banding might have an impact on the options they can choose in Key Stage 4, which could have wider implications on their chosen pathway upon leaving school. Facilitating regular review sessions, such as with a tutor or Head of Year, can help those learners to feed into the decision process and ensure that their views are listened to and that their needs are met.

Parents/carers of EAL learners may be unfamiliar with the UK education system and with how decisions about sets, groups or streams 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, set or stream.

Why should L1 help to inform decisions on the placement of EAL learners?

Research by Cummins (1984, 1996) highlights the interdependency of a learner's academic skills in L1 and their other language(s) – known as common underlying proficiency.

Later research from Rosamund, Bhatti, Sharieff and Wilson (2003) suggests:

> '*This common underlying proficiency allows some aspects of cognitive/academic or literacy-related skills to transfer across languages, including: conceptual knowledge, subject matter knowledge, higher-order thinking skills, reading strategies and writing composition skills*' (Rosamund et al., 2003, p.20)

The principle that EAL learners should be grouped according to their cognitive and academic proficiency rather than their current proficiency in English in the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing is widely accepted (Lucas, Villegas and Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008).

It might be the case that a learner understands ideas or concepts in L1, including those which are more abstract and complex, and is confidently able to demonstrate this understanding in L1. However, when asked to demonstrate this understanding in English, an EAL learner might lack the necessary language of instruction to fully understand the task they are being asked to complete. Equally, an EAL learner might not have a sufficient command of English vocabulary or language structures to be able to convey their understanding to school staff or peers.

Appropriate assessment of an EAL learner, including an assessment of L1, will help to provide a more accurate determination of a learner's existing knowledge and skillset, rather than merely what they are able to demonstrate through the medium of spoken or written English.

Indeed, planned and purposeful use of an EAL learner's L1 can help with access and engagement with the curriculum, alleviating many of the common concerns in relation to a leaner's lack of proficiency in English in classroom settings. For example, EAL learners in the early stages of acquiring English might find it beneficial to demonstrate their understanding in a form other than written or verbal English. This might be, for example, by writing an essay response in L1 or by using gestures or non-verbal responses to show their understanding.

Watch the EMTAS First Language videoscribe to find out more about this cross-phase teaching and learning strategy. EMTAS has also produced an aide memoire highlighting different ways of using first language as a tool for learning.
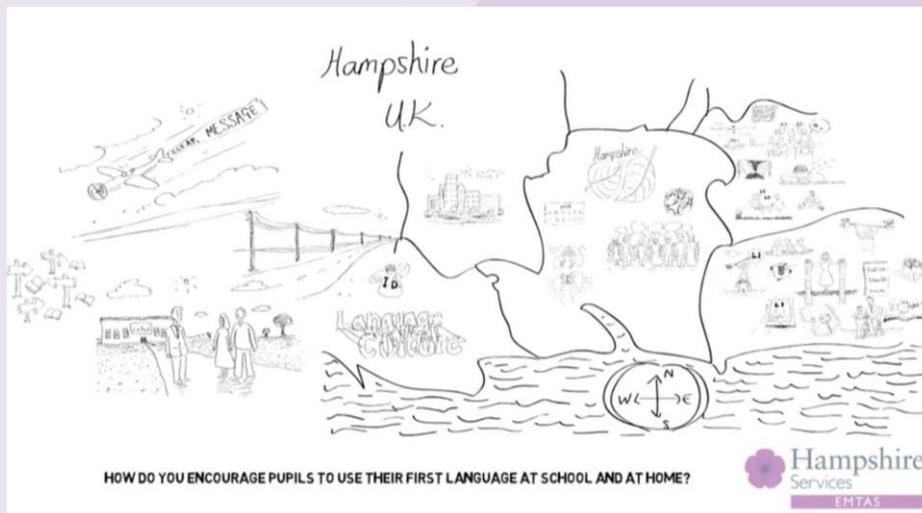
Screenshot of the Hampshire EMTAS First Language Videoscribe

For secondary learners, see the EMTAS 'Accessing the curriculum through first language: student training programme'. This programme seeks to help learners to independently access the curriculum, aiming to boost their confidence and self-esteem, through encouraging the continued use of L1 in meaningful, curriculum-linked contexts.

The EMTAS Multilingual Perspectives e-learning module provides examples of multilingual practice in specific working contexts. The unit covers typical questions relating to the use of languages for learning within the school, home and wider community, and includes case studies to show how to capitalise more effectively on the multilingual proficiencies of children, parents and other adults within the whole school community.

The need for the appropriate placement of EAL learners

The appropriate and accurate assessment of EAL learners should be used to inform any decisions in relation to their placement in groups, sets or streams. Research highlights the fundamental fact that all learners achieve more when they view the learning environment as positive and supportive (Dorman, Aldridge and Fraser, 2006). Therefore, any decisions should look to facilitate the appropriate level of cognitive demand for the individual learner. This is pivotal in ensuring the positive learning journey of EAL learners and in supporting their progression to developing full CALP.

Furthermore, a key part of language learning is having access to a range of strong written and verbal models of English, most likely to be found in higher ability groups, sets or streams. This should be an important consideration when making decisions about the placement of EAL Learners.

The importance of cognitively challenging tasks

It is important that the activities and tasks offered to EAL learners are appropriate to their cognitive ability and language-learning needs. Thus, for example, asking an EAL learner to read from a storybook created for younger learners may be counter-productive. Although the language demand may be lower, the images and concepts may be inappropriate and serve to demean rather than help. Tasks for EAL learners should be cognitively challenging; language is best acquired when there is a clear and accessible context within which the new language and content is being delivered and rehearsed.

This idea is in line with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), defined as:

> '*the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers*' (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86).

Vygotsky suggested that, as long as a learner is within the ZPD for a given task, if they are given the appropriate support and assistance, they are likely to be able to achieve a successful outcome. Support for learners includes having models who are knowledgeable and skilful, opportunities for social interactions with peers or teachers to allow learners to observe and practice skills, and appropriate scaffolding activities to support learners as they work within the ZPD.

With this in mind, back-yearing or deceleration, where learners are placed in a year group below their chronological age, should, in the vast majority of cases, be avoided. For further information on back-yearing/deceleration, see the full Hampshire EMTAS guidance on deceleration for learners of English as an Additional Language.

It is also important to bear in mind that the research from The Bell Foundation (2015) found that, where learners were '*not fully stretched because of insufficient staff assessment and knowledge of their prior learning and attainment, their motivation levels dropped and their behaviour in school could deteriorate*' (The Bell Foundation, 2015, p.33).

Schools should recognise the value of learners' existing L1 skills and any prior educational experiences or knowledge and encourage learners to recognise this too. Learners with proficiency in L1 should be encouraged to use L1 as a tool for learning. They should be encouraged to reflect on the subject knowledge they already have and to build on this. See the links earlier in this document to further guidance on how L1 can be promoted and utilised in school settings. This approach could well help to motivate EAL learners and promote positive attitudes to their learning in school settings. Indeed, the continued development of L1 has been shown to directly correlate with the rate at which learners acquire English, particularly in relation to the development of skills in reading (Collier, 1995).

Rather than using the outcomes of standardised tests or summative assessments, ongoing formative assessment, including observations in class, will help practitioners to track learners' progress and contribute to any review of decisions relating to the placement of learners in groups, sets or streams. The use of an EAL Assessment Framework, such as the [Bell Foundation EAL Assessment Framework](#) will assist with such monitoring.

The distinction between SEND and EAL

Schools should also bear in mind the distinct needs of learners with EAL in contrast to the needs of those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) who do not have EAL. Research from The Bell Foundation (2015) highlights how it '…*seems as though EAL learners are too often considered to be 'learning disabled' and/or classified as SEN[D] rather than simply being less proficient in English*' (The Bell Foundation, 2015, p.98).

The distinction between EAL and SEND is explicitly stated in the Children and Families Act 2014, section 20 (4):

> '*A child or young person does not have a learning difficulty or disability solely because the language (or form of language) in which he or she is or will be taught is different from a language (or form of language) which is or has been spoken at home.*'

Indeed, EAL learners are no more likely to have SEND than any other learner. EAL learners should not therefore be automatically placed in lower sets with learners with SEND. The types of support in low ability groups does not match the language-learning needs of most learners of EAL. For further information on the distinction between EAL and SEND, see the [EMTAS website](#).

EAL learners, like their monolingual peers, are generally aware that learners in schools may be placed in groups, sets or streams and are therefore likely to understand that they are grouped with peers considered to be of a similar academic ability. Inappropriately placing an EAL learner with learners who have SEND or with learners who are not as academically able as the EAL learner is likely to be demeaning and demotivating, having an adverse impact on engagement, progress and attainment.

What if an EAL learner does not have prior knowledge or understanding in a subject area?

The principle that a learner's proficiency in English will increase more quickly alongside accurate, fluent users of English, providing positive models for both language and behaviour, is widely accepted.

According to research from the Bell Foundation (2017):

> '*Give the EAL learner opportunities to work with peers who can provide good models of English (in pairs or groups). This is crucial for understanding and using the vocabulary and structures expected by the curriculum, and particularly for developing academic language*' (The Bell Foundation, 2017, p.17)

Schools should therefore keep in mind, even where it is determined that an EAL learner lacks sufficient knowledge or skills more generally in a specific subject area, their placement in a group, set or stream should facilitate their access to positive language models. An EAL learner's placement in a mid to higher ability group is likely to provide the range of opportunities to hear and see language being modelled appropriately - a vital part of language learning. This will also facilitate opportunities for EAL learners to use and practise the vocabulary.

The fact that additional adults might be available to support learners in the lower sets should not be used as an automatic justification to place learners in those lower sets, especially where those adults have not received specific, EAL-focused language learning training. With appropriate support and guidance, peers can appropriately and effectively model the necessary academic vocabulary and language structures EAL learners need.

Recommendations

1.) Place EAL learners in groups, sets or streams which facilitate access to a range of positive models of written and spoken English in the mainstream classroom. This is a fundamental principle of language learning. Any interventions for EAL learners should be short-term and have a clear language focus.

2.) Use accurate and appropriate assessment of EAL learners' academic and cognitive ability, including skills in L1 and prior educational experiences, to inform decisions about their placement in groups, sets or streams.

3.) During the assessment process, take note of the pedagogical approaches learners are familiar with and support them with adapting to the teaching styles used in your setting.

4.) As part of the assessment process, use an EAL Assessment Framework such as the Bell Foundation EAL Assessment Framework, to assess and then monitor a learner's levels of English across Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing.

5.) Involve learners and their parents/carers in the decision-making process as much as possible. Seek the views of learners and provide regular opportunities for review. Be prepared to explain any decisions to parents/carers and provide opportunities for them to ask any questions they might have.

6.) Avoid automatically placing EAL learners in groups, sets or streams purely because there are additional adults available to support. This is only likely to be beneficial if staff have received specific EAL-focused language learning training.

7.) Avoid relying on the results of standardised tests to inform the placement of EAL learners in groups, sets or streams. See the EMTAS guidance on standardised tests.

8.) Ensure monitoring and tracking of EAL learners takes place and provide regular opportunities for reviewing the groups, sets or streams of EAL learners.

9.) Promote the use of an EAL learner's L1 in school to help with access to the curriculum. Training from EMTAS could help staff to identify how EAL learners could use L1 effectively in school settings. See the information from EMTAS on how L1 can be used effectively to support learning.

10.) Recognise the difference between appropriate support for an EAL learner with SEND and appropriate support for an EAL learner without SEND. Further guidance is available on the EMTAS website.

11.) Provide opportunities for EAL learners to have access to peers who can model language and skills in an appropriate way. This will also facilitate opportunities for EAL learners to practise using the target language in meaningful contexts. Ensure that EAL learners' peers are trained effectively to support them in this way.

12.) Do not backyear or decelerate EAL learners as a matter of course. This will be appropriate in very few cases and should only be done in consultation with Hampshire EMTAS so that the full range of factors of any such decision can be considered. Read the [full guidance from EMTAS on deceleration](#).

13.) Seek training from EMTAS for school staff to help to appropriately distinguish a learner's proficiency in English with their cognitive ability. Full details of the training from EMTAS can be found on our [website](#).

Contact 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
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Reference list

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The Bell Foundation (2015) *School Approaches to the Education of EAL Students: Language Development, Social Integration and Achievement*

The Bell Foundation (2017) Classroom Support Strategies: Working with EAL learners in primary settings https://tinyurl.com/y8vt66e2

University of Winchester in collaboration with Hampshire EMTAS *English as an Additional Language MESHGuide* https://www.meshguides.org/guides/node/112

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978) *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Further reading from Hampshire EMTAS

Hampshire EMTAS blog: https://emtas.hias.hants.gov.uk/blog/

Hampshire EMTAS Moodle: https://emtas.hias.hants.gov.uk/

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