

EAL or SEND? Often a tricky question...

When a school has concerns about the progress of one of their bilingual pupils, an underlying SEND is often suspected. But how can teachers decide whether this is the case or whether the pupil is just going through the normal process of acquiring English as an Additional Language? Lisa Kalim discusses how to tackle this tricky decision and signposts the support that EMTAS can offer.



So, you have concerns about a bilingual pupil in your class - let's call her Agata. She is a likeable, well behaved pupil with good social skills and a talent for sport, but her academic progress has been slower than you had expected. You are worried that Agata will not reach the required standard by the end of the year. You are concerned that she sometimes appears not to understand what is said in class. Agata is very quiet and only responds to direct questions in class, usually with just a one or two-word answer. Sometimes it looks like she has drifted off into a daydream – she seems to find maintaining her concentration difficult for longer periods of time. She struggles to produce independent written work. The written work that she does produce is very short, uses very simple vocabulary and contains grammatical errors. However, you are not sure if this is just because Agata has English as an Additional Language or whether she may also have an underlying Special Educational Need/Disability. Where should you start?

Think of the process as being a bit like doing a jig-saw puzzle but where the pieces are scattered around in different places, are mixed up with some pieces from different puzzles that you don't need, and the box lid is missing so you don't have the picture to help you. You need to gather all the pieces that you need together, discount the pieces that belong to other puzzles and then you can start to put the pieces together to make the picture. So, in relation to Agata, there are lots of pieces of information and evidence that you need to collect, some things you need to check and possibly discount, and then you can start to consider and analyse what you have found out. Following this process will hopefully result in you being able to reach a conclusion on whether Agata could have an underlying SEND or whether her needs are just related to having EAL. However, sometimes it is necessary to continue monitoring a pupil causing concern for a longer period before deciding, or to refer to EMTAS for help if still unsure.

Steps to take:

1. Record the reason/s for your concerns and inform other relevant school staff such as your SENDCo. EMTAS have developed an easy to use suggested format for doing this and recording the information/evidence described below. It can be found [here](#).
2. Collect as much background information as you can about Agata. This should include:
 - when she arrived in the UK or whether she was born here
 - information about her family background including which countries they have lived in and when
 - which language/s are spoken in Agata's home and details of any others that she may have been exposed to in other contexts
 - any relevant medical information such as diagnosed conditions, significant illnesses, periods of hospitalisation etc.
 - information regarding Agata's early childhood development including whether developmental milestones were achieved at the expected times
 - details of her previous education (if any) including information on any gaps or interruptions and her levels of attainment
 - whether she has been identified as having any type of SEND by health/educational professionals in her country of origin or elsewhere and if so, gather as much detail as possible
 - whether the pupil has experienced significant trauma during her life
 - attendance data since she has been in your school

If Agata has been previously assessed by EMTAS you will find much of this information on her profile report. You should also speak with the pupil's parents/carers, using an interpreter if needed. (EMTAS may be able to help with an interpreter if required – please contact our office to enquire.) This can reveal extremely useful information that you may not have been aware of previously which proves key to the decision around EAL/SEND. Sometimes a parent/carer has crucial information but has not been able to convey it to school staff until a meeting facilitated by an interpreter takes place.

3. Collect evidence/information on the following:
 - Agata's strengths and areas in need of development
 - the steps that have already been taken in meeting her needs, including teaching strategies, resources used and support for EAL. If appropriate teaching strategies and resources for learners of EAL have not been consistently used over the time that Agata has been in school in the UK then this could explain her slower rate of progress making it appear that she might have SEND when actually she may not have
 - Agata's current levels of achievement in English (listening, speaking, reading and writing). EMTAS recommends that you use an EAL-specific assessment tool such as the Bell Foundation's EAL Assessment Framework to do this, available here: [Bell Foundation framework](#).
 - Agata's rate of progress over time in English and other curriculum areas. Include information gained from using the Bell Foundation's EAL Assessment Framework (or other EAL-specific framework) together with the perceptions of teaching staff, pupil, parents and any other agencies involved.
 - samples of Agata's work over time

4. Collect information about Agata's proficiency in her first language. You need to know her proficiency in speaking, listening, reading and writing (if literate in first language) in as much detail as possible. This is important as difficulties in first language can be an indicator of some types of SEND. With speaking and listening, check whether there are any difficulties apparent in her speech sound pronunciation, her use of grammar and vocabulary use, as well as how fluent she is, how well she can communicate and whether she has any difficulty understanding what has been said to her. With reading and writing it is important to know how much schooling Agata has had conducted in her first language when considering her proficiency. Remember that many countries start their formal education later than in the UK which may mean that they have had less years of schooling than their contemporaries here in which case a lower level of literacy is to be expected. It is also important to bear in mind that pupils who were born in the UK will have had less exposure to their first language compared to their peers born in their country of origin and so may have less well developed proficiency. Thus, it is very important to bear in mind that a lower level of first language proficiency does not always indicate an underlying SEND.

5. Analyse all the information/evidence collected. (Try and put the pieces of the jig-saw together.)

6. Carefully think about whether there are other factors that could explain Agata's perceived difficulties:

- Is her attendance poor or has she had extended absences from school either in the UK or whilst in country of origin?
- Has she experienced a high level of mobility during her life involving frequent moves between countries or schools?
- Has she had exposure to multiple languages/different languages at different times during her life? (if so, she will require additional time to acquire proficiency).
- Has she had an unnoticed problem with her eyesight, hearing or other medical problem that has affected her ability to learn?
- Has she received appropriate EAL support in school or was it stopped too soon?
- Has she been placed in appropriate ability groups/sets (if used)? – EAL learners should not be placed in lower ability groups unless they are known to also have SEND.
- Has she experienced significant trauma, bullying, racism, bereavement or difficult living situations which could have affected her learning?
- Is she unhappy in school or about living in the UK?
- Has there been a misunderstanding about the typical length of time required for pupils with EAL to reach equivalence with their monolingual peers, leading to you having unrealistic expectations?
- Have tasks been set that are too academic for Agata's current level of language proficiency? Remember that it generally takes around two years for pupils to acquire conversational fluency in English and up to ten years to reach full academic equivalence.

7. Based on all the above, try to decide whether Agata does have an underlying SEND or whether her needs are just related to having EAL. It may be helpful to talk this through with a colleague such as your SENDCo. If you are still unsure it may be that further monitoring of Agata's progress over a longer period is needed after which it will become clearer whether she does have an underlying SEND or not. Additional help is available from EMTAS if you need it (see below).

Help available from EMTAS:

EMTAS have a range of resources available to help you when distinguishing between EAL and SEND.

Our website has a section dedicated to this topic [here](#).

A handy [aide memoire](#) which summarises key points around EAL/SEND (pictured at the beginning of this blog)

An article on [standardised testing and EAL learners](#) which discusses why such tests may not be helpful when assessing bilingual pupils.

Our Moodle has an [e-learning](#) module on distinguishing the difference between EAL and SEND

The EMTAS EAL/SEND phone line runs every Tuesday afternoon in term time from 12.00-4.00pm. Callers can discuss individual pupils that they have concerns about and receive advice. If necessary, a school visit can be arranged by an EMTAS Teacher Advisor. They will then be able to assist you with assessing them and advise on any appropriate next steps. Before calling is best to have already collected as much information/evidence about your pupil as possible as outlined above.

So, did Agata have SEND as well as EAL or not I hear you ask. After following the steps above, Agata's teacher concluded that she most likely did not. Key to this decision was the collection of background information/evidence which showed that Agata had only been in school in the UK for just over three years and so would require at least another four to five years (maybe even a little more) of UK education before reaching full academic equivalence with her peers. Additionally, assessment of her skills in first language showed a good level of proficiency for the number of years of education that she had received in her country of origin and her progress across all curriculum areas was average to above average before she came to the UK. This suggested that SEND was unlikely. Some of the other areas of concern were in fact quite typical features of pupils learning EAL (e.g. the grammatical errors in writing, finding sustaining concentration for long periods when working in English difficult, and not understanding some more academic language used in the classroom). Furthermore, on reflection, her teacher decided that EAL support had probably been stopped too soon for Agata. As a result of going through this process, Agata's teacher was then able to put in place appropriate on-going EAL support for her. She continued to monitor Agata's progress and was pleased with her rate of progress going forwards.

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