

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

This Hampshire EMTAS Position Statement provides guidance relating to the use of standardised tests with learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL).

Its intended audience includes Head Teachers, Senior Leaders in school, EAL Co-ordinators/Inclusion Managers, Governors with responsibility for EAL, Class/Subject Teachers and Learning Support Staff.

Key Considerations

Introduction

According to 2022 School Census data, in England 21.2% of state-funded primary school pupils and 17.5% of state-funded secondary school pupils are learning English as an Additional Language (EAL). Numbers of learners of EAL in schools in England continue to increase year on year. In a quarter of schools, there may be only 1% of children on roll who are classified as learners of EAL; in contrast, in 1 in 11 schools this classification applies to over 50% of the children on their roll.

Throughout their education, many learners of EAL 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 that focus on phonics whilst older learners may complete a range of standardised assessments such as group reading tests (which yield a standardised score and a reading age), tests that yield a spelling age, and Cognitive Abilities Tests (CATs).

The use of screening tests and standardised assessments with pupils 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 into first language. The following paragraphs explore why this is.

Newly-arrived learners of EAL

For newly-arrived learners who are in the early stages of learning EAL, there are many factors that should be taken into account about the assessment itself; for example the language of the test or any cultural aspects of the test which may be unfamiliar to learners of EAL.

A newly-arrived pupil is likely to be experiencing a period of upheaval, possibly having left their home country, their relatives and friends, and now having to adjust to a new setting in the UK where everything is unfamiliar. This is unsettling for younger and older children alike. The former may be starting school for the first time with perhaps no prior experience of being in an educational setting whilst the latter may have been happy and coping well at school in their country of origin and now face the daunting challenge of the secondary curriculum in a language they don't yet understand or speak.

It should also be remembered that in many countries, including Bulgaria, Poland and Afghanistan, the school starting age is 7 and therefore younger learners from these countries may have limited or no prior experience at all of school life, of academic learning or of completing assessments. Other children may have had interrupted or no education due to war or other issues in their country of origin and this may have an impact too. Education systems differ greatly from country to country and therefore even older 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.

Younger learners of EAL

Even if a new entrant was born in the UK and has attended nursery, their experience of being in a school setting may be more limited than that of many of their indigenous, English-only peers so they will be adjusting to new school routines and environments and possibly to a new language as well. Staff should remember that for UK-born children, if the language of the home is not English, then that child will typically have skills in English that are less well-developed than those of their monolingual, English-only peers. This does not indicate the presence of an additional need, eg a difficulty with cognition or learning, but it may suppress the score they achieve on a standardised test. Hence standardised tests may yield unreliable results when used with learners of EAL even when they are not new to English.

Early stage learners of EAL and standardised tests

Standardised tests tend to use de-contextualised language and are usually standardised on and aimed at monolingual, English-only learners. Furthermore, 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 scant experience – or possibly no experience at all if those features are not present in their first languages. In any case, learners of EAL will be expected to access the language of the test. As screening tests are completed in English, they only give an indication of a pupil's understanding of English. For these reasons, the results of standardised tests cannot be relied on for learners who are in the early stages of acquiring English as an Additional Language.

Streaming, grouping and setting

Because of the range of factors described above, streaming, grouping or setting on the basis of outcomes of screening tests or standardised assessments is questionable; learners of EAL are at risk of being placed in streams, groups or sets which are inappropriate to both their underlying cognitive ability and their English language-learning needs, which runs contrary to best practice for supporting learners of EAL.

Particularly during the early stages of acquiring English, learners of EAL are building their confidence in listening to and using English whilst at the same time they are settling into their new school environment. Inappropriately placing such learners in a lower ability stream, group or set could well 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 good practice advice, see the [Hampshire EMTAS website](#), the [EMTAS Position Statement on the placement of learners of EAL in groups sets or streams](#) and also the [MESH Guide of good practice for EAL learners](#), created by Hampshire EMTAS and Dr. Naomi Flynn of the University of Reading.

The use of interventions with learners of EAL

Using the results of standardised assessments and screening tests for placement of learners into intervention groups is also problematic. In order to make progress in their acquisition of English, it is important that learners of EAL

engage in contextualised activities with opportunities for exposure to peer-to-peer talk with strong language role models; intervention and guided work are best kept to a minimum. Whilst children are in withdrawal in intervention groups, they are away from the mainstream curriculum and are therefore missing the rich language environment of the classroom.

During the initial stages of learning EAL, progress is often relatively swift so it might appear that intervention sessions are working, whereas progress might actually be more rapid by learners having exposure to positive language role models in the everyday, mainstream classroom. Furthermore, inappropriately identifying learners of EAL as in need of support as a result of the outcomes of a standardised test could leave other learners who *do* need that sort of support without appropriate intervention.

It is important to remember the distinction between EAL and SEND; a learner of EAL should not be identified as having SEND or included on the SEND register purely because they are in the early stages of acquiring English. See the [EMTAS website](#) for more information about how to distinguish the difference between EAL and SEND.

There are implications for learners later on in their school lives too, if the results of standardised tests are used as a basis for predicted grades, for example. Often this can result in predicted and target grades being set too low, which not only has a negative effect on a learner's self-esteem but also on their aspirations in life. Ultimately, when used with learners of EAL, standardised tests encourage low expectations of students and of teachers. Furthermore, if learners are re-tested using standardised tests, very little progress may be evident when actually learners have made significant progress – often features of grammar are not secure until the later stages of learning EAL and therefore, if grammar is the focus of the test, it will provide very little information about how much progress has been made.

How best to assess learners of EAL

The advantage of using standardised tests to schools is that they provide some form of quantitative data. However, due to the difficulties already identified, these data would not be meaningful for learners of EAL. Instead 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 pupil's working level than using Age-Related Expectations (ARE) as the main reference point. Practitioners should therefore consider collecting samples of a pupil's work and/or using an EAL-specific framework such as the one from the [Bell Foundation](#) to track progress in acquisition of English from the



early stages (Band A) right up to the point at which the child has developed full academic proficiency (Band E).

Schools could also access advice from EMTAS or parents to assess learners' first language skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening as well as in maths and other subjects. Where a learner's use of first language is demonstrated to be age-appropriate and in line with expectations, it is likely that good progress will also be made in English, given time.

In conclusion

In schools where the policy is for screening tests to be used with all children, best practice would be to remember the limitations of such tests and to use them alongside other assessments to build a broader, more holistic picture of the child's strengths and weaknesses.

In schools where there is no such policy, practitioners are encouraged to use an EAL-specific tool such as the Bell Foundation EAL Assessment Framework to establish a baseline and to track progress over time in acquisition of English, drawing on evidence of what the child can do across a range of curriculum areas. This would be a more reliable form of assessment of the child's progress in acquisition of English than either a standardised test or comparisons made against ARE.

**Hampshire EMTAS Specialist Teacher Advisor team
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For further information

Visit the [EMTAS website](#)

See the [Bell EAL Assessment Framework](#) recommended tool for assessing progress in acquisition of English for learners of EAL

EAL MESH Guide: [MESHGuide of good practice for EAL learners](#)

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 and other position statements produced by EMTAS.

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Acronyms used in this guidance

ARE	Age-Related Expectations
EAL	English as an Additional Language
L1	First language

