
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, 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 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 into first language. The following paragraphs explore why this is.

Newly-arrived learners of EAL

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

- Education systems differ greatly from country to country.
- The language of the test or 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 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 and 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 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 focus for newly-arrived learners should be providing pastoral support, not determining an academic baseline.


Younger learners of EAL

Even if a new entrant was born in the UK and has attended nursery, they will be adjusting to new school routines and environments and possibly to a new language. UK-born learners of EAL 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 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

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. 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 learner'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.

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. Learners of EAL are at 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.](#)

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:



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

It is important to remember the distinction between EAL and SEND. 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 learners of EAL, standardised tests encourage low expectations.
- Standardised tests (and retests) do not provide an holistic picture of progress made by learners across different contexts.

How best to assess learners of EAL

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 than using Age-Related Expectations (ARE) as the main reference point. Practitioners should consider collecting samples of a learner's work and using an EAL-specific framework eg 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 learner has developed full academic language proficiency (Band E). Schools should 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.

In conclusion

In schools where the policy is for screening tests to be used with all learners, best practice would be to remember the limitations of such tests. They should be used alongside first language assessments and EAL-specific frameworks to build a broader, more holistic picture of the learner's strengths and weaknesses.

In schools where there is no such policy, it is advised practitioners also use an EAL-specific framework to establish a baseline and to track progress over time in acquisition of English. This is a more reliable form of assessment of the learner'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: [MESH Guide 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