
EMTAS Deceleration Guidance

Deceleration for learners of English as an additional language (EAL)

Deceleration, also known as ‘back-yearing’, is the decision to educate a child in a cohort below that of their chronological peers.

Deceleration has been described “...as one of the few areas in education where it is difficult to find any studies with a positive effect...” (Hattie 2008, p98). Studies cite negative impact on long-term achievement, self-esteem and risks of dropping out of school early with the Education Endowment Foundation noting “negative impact for very high cost based on extensive evidence” (EEF 2021).

The local authority has a clear position on deceleration:

“Deceleration is not recommended for pupils for whom English is an additional language and has been found to impact negatively on pupils’ self-esteem” HCC, 2017.

Intended audience includes Parents/Carers, Senior Management in schools, Inclusion Managers, SENDCos, EAL CO-ordinators, Governors, Admissions, Virtual School.

Characteristics of EAL progression

A synthesis of research has indicated that it can take between 5 and 10 years for learners of EAL to catch up with their monolingual, English-only peers (Rosamund, Bhatti, Sharieff and Wilson, 2003). This means that learners of EAL who are in the earlier stages of acquiring English are likely to be working below age-related expectations across the curriculum in terms of their application of language and their literacy levels in English for a significant part of their education.

There is a range of factors which can affect the rate at which learners of EAL will catch up with their peers including

- age on entering UK educational system
- previous educational background

- level of literacy in first language (L1)
- the degree to which pupils are educationally supported at home
- quality of school provision
- wider cognitive ability/presence of an additional Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND)

Typically, learners of EAL have spikey profiles of achievement, performing better in some subjects than others with variation also evident in their use of English in different curriculum subjects. Establishing a baseline and tracking progress in a pupil's acquisition of English should be done using an EAL-specific scale such as the [EAL Assessment Framework](#) developed by the Bell Foundation.

Learning EAL is not in itself a reason for pupils failing to make progress at an acceptable rate and there should be the expectation that these pupils must make more than average rates of progress if they are ever to catch up with their peers, unless there are additional SENDs. Depending on their point of entry into the school system, most learners of EAL are unlikely to be working at an appropriate level for statutory tests for a significant period of time. Decelerating children because they are not ready for statutory tests is not recommended and schools should refer to DfE guidance on test administration for detailed information about what to do in such cases. See the [Position Statement](#) 'Screening and Standardised Testing for Learners of EAL' for more detail on this.

When a learner of EAL fails to make satisfactory progress or plateaus in their learning it is essential to first consider whether the teaching and learning environment is meeting their needs as a learner of English as an additional language. It may also be relevant to investigate external factors for example their home circumstances or things going on within the local community. Whatever the reasons for lack of progress, decelerating learners of EAL is unlikely to be successful as the root cause(s) of the problem will not have been addressed.

Learners of EAL with an additional SEND

The definitive identification of pupils for whom English is an Additional Language who have an additional SEND can be problematic, though indisputably some children and young people do have both sets of needs.

The situation for learners of EAL with additional SENDs is more complicated in terms of expectations about rates of progress. However, mirroring advice for learners of EAL, the local authority has a clear position on decelerating pupils with a SEND:

“Special educational needs cannot, alone, be justification for deceleration/acceleration...deceleration will not have the effect of providing an environment where the child’s special needs will be any less.” HCC, 2017.

Catering for children and young people who have both sets of needs can be extremely challenging. However, effective practice and provision requires that schools cater for both sets of needs, which involves understanding and effectively implementing a different set of pedagogies for each.

Decelerating pupils with both sets of needs is not regarded as good practice.

Some observations about good practice for learners of EAL and the potential negative effects of deceleration

1. Social issues and self-esteem

Decelerating learners of EAL is likely to have a negative impact on their self-esteem as they will be aware that they have been placed with learners younger than themselves. Learners of EAL are already at risk of marginalisation because they may look, sound and/or behave differently from their peers; making friendships can be disproportionately hard for learners of EAL because of linguistic and cultural barriers.

Decelerating children later on, after they have already settled into one year group is even more problematic as it may mean that they lose existing friends and have to make new ones. They may also be subject to subtle



and/or overt bullying by peers who may express a view that the child is repeating the year because they failed first time round.

2. Peer support

Using peers to support learners of EAL both in and out of the classroom is a well understood strategy. Arnold et al.'s report highlighted how

"...peers came across as playing a central role in offering language support, be it by sitting next to a newly-arrived child, working as a young interpreter or relying on resources such as 'communication cards' to help the child access words in English. Such peer support played an important role in both EAL pupils' language development and sense of integration within the classroom and the school community." (Arnot et al., 2014, p. 92)

However, peers who are significantly younger than a target learner of EAL will be less equipped to provide effective support eg peers

- modelling use of oral English in different contexts
- translating/interpreting using first language (L1)
- having less life experience and therefore a reduced set of life skills to draw upon
- knowing how to provide appropriate social and emotional support.

3. The learning environment

It is well understood that teaching and learning for learners of EAL must "keep cognitive challenge appropriately high by providing a supportive context for learning" (PNS, 2006).

When a child is educated with peers who are substantially younger, it becomes more problematic to provide a suitable learning environment.

Examples include

- ensuring that the curriculum challenge meets the cognitive and academic potential of the child
- avoiding repetition of curricula for those who are asked to repeat a year
- creating suitable opportunities for peers to model age-appropriate oral language (both English and L1)
- providing learning materials that are age-appropriate.



4. Transition between education providers

It is important to note that any deceleration may not be automatically transferred when a child moves from one school setting to another. For example, when a child starts at secondary school any decision to decelerate that was taken in Primary phase is likely to be reviewed and the new school may decide to place the child back within their correct chronological year group. This may result in the child missing the whole of Year 7.

At the point of transition to 16-19 education (eg sixth form or FE college), there may be funding challenges if the child is older than the rest of the cohort. For example, post-16 providers funded by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) may receive less funding for a student who is over the age of 19 when they undertake a programme of study.

For the full guidance on funding for post-16, see [Funding education for 16 to 19 year olds - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/funding-education-for-16-to-19-year-olds)

Recommendations

Schools should

- take account of the English language support needs of the parents/carers and make a judgement about whether or not an interpreter would be needed for meetings. They should bear in mind that surface control of social/conversational English may not fully equip parents/carers with the language they may need in terms of appreciating the complexities that may arise in a deceleration case;
- ensure that any disadvantages of deceleration are effectively communicated so that parents/carers can make a fair judgement that ensures any decision to decelerate would make “a clear difference to their child’s future education and life chances”;
- encourage parents/carers to fully engage with the school, preferably through a face-to-face meeting (supported by an interpreter if necessary);
- be confident that whilst parents/carers have the right to disagree with the school’s decision and the right to have their views heard, any decision to decelerate must be made in the best interests of the child.



In some cases, parents/carers of learners of EAL may request that their child be decelerated. There may be a number of reasons for this but often it is because the family has lived in a country where deceleration is a relatively common occurrence. Whilst schools must give this type of request due consideration, they should bear in mind the overwhelming drawbacks of deceleration and ultimately, in consultation with Education and Inclusion Advisors and EMTAS EAL Specialists, it should be the Head Teacher's final decision, not the parents'.

Involving pupils

Involving pupils who are of an appropriate age in decisions around deceleration is important because "school-imposed grade repetition is stressful to students and associated with reduced self-esteem, impaired peer relationships, alienation from school, and sharply increased likelihood of eventual dropout" (Brophy, 2006, p.16).

Hampshire County Council promotes a Rights Respecting agenda amongst its schools and EMTAS is a Rights Respecting service. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1998) states

"Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

It is recommended that schools automatically involve secondary aged learners of EAL in decisions around deceleration and think carefully about seeking the views of older primary aged pupils.

Involving parents/carers

"It is the view and policy of the Children's Services Department of Hampshire County Council that acceleration/deceleration should only occur in exceptional circumstances and only after detailed discussions with parents/carers and relevant professionals." HCC, 2017.

There is evidence that certain groups of parents are less likely to access educational services than others, including those from a Black or Minority Ethnic (BME) background. A number of potential barriers has also been identified, for





example staff misconceptions around different cultural attitudes towards child-rearing and parents' inability to communicate well in English. In some cases, families "originate from cultures where parents are not expected to take an active role in child education" and conversely there are situations "where parents put complete trust in the school and rarely question its authority and the decisions it makes" (Katz, La Placa & Hunter 2007).

Experience also supports the notion that parents/carers from BME backgrounds will be disproportionately vulnerable to fully understanding complex decisions taken by schools and other educational providers around practice and provision for their children. The research reinforces this key message with the finding that "...negative effects are disproportionately greater for disadvantaged pupils [and] for pupils from ethnic minorities" (EEF, 2021). For these reasons it is imperative that where a deceleration is being considered, every effort is made to ensure that linguistic and cultural barriers are addressed in any discussions with parents/carers.

Parents may proactively request deceleration for their child, sometimes because they are concerned about their child not having 'good enough' English to be able to achieve end of Key Stage standards. Parents may not appreciate the longer term impacts of deceleration in the UK system, nor that promotion to the next year group is automatic. Another issue is that the deceleration may not be honoured at key transition points, eg the transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3.

Involving EAL specialists

Hampshire Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service (EMTAS) employs interpreters and Specialist Teacher Advisors who are available to facilitate parent conferencing and offer advice about pedagogy, practice and provision for learners of EAL. It is recommended that schools involve EAL specialists before any final decision is taken, even if the principal reason for decelerating a child is not because the child is a learner of EAL.





Supporting Literature and links

Arnot, M., Schneider, C., Evans, M., Liu, Y., Welply, O., & Davies-Tutt, D. (2014). *School approaches to the education of EAL students*. University of Cambridge: Bell Foundation.

Bell Foundation (2016). [EAL Assessment Framework](#).

Brophy, J. (2006). [Grade repetition](#). *Education policy series*, 6, 420-437.

[Education and Endowment Fund Teaching and Learning Toolkit](#) (2021), *Repeating a Year*.

Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), [Funding education for 16 to 19 year olds - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Hattie, J. (2008). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge.

HCC (2017). *The placement of children outside their chronological year group*. <https://documents.hants.gov.uk/childrens-services/HIAS/placementofchildrenoutsidetheirchronologicalyeargroup.pdf>.

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PNS (2006) Excellence and Enjoyment: *learning and teaching for bilingual children in the primary years*. PDM 2 EAL principles, pedagogy and practice: first language as a tool for learning.

Rosamund, S., Bhatti, I., Sharieff, M. and Wilson, K. (2003). *Distinguishing the difference: SEN or EAL?* Birmingham: Birmingham Advisory and Support Service.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1998) http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publication-pdfs/UNCRC_PRESS200910web.pdf.

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December 2022

