

MAY 2020

GCSE grade allocations in 2020: Considerations for students who use English as an Additional Language (EAL)



About The Bell Foundation

The Bell Foundation is a charity which aims to overcome exclusion through language education by working with partners on innovation, research, training and practical interventions. Through generating and applying evidence, we aim to change practice, policy and systems for children, adults and communities in the UK disadvantaged through language.

The Foundation works in two key areas:

- **The EAL Programme aims to improve the educational outcomes of children with English as an Additional Language in the UK to benefit the individual child and society as a whole. The Foundation works in partnership with a range of organisations across the education system to provide training and resources in order to build capacity, develop and evaluate models of good practice, and provide thought leadership.**
- **The Criminal Justice Programme seeks to break down the language barrier to accessing justice and rehabilitation for individuals in contact with the criminal justice system for whom English is an Additional Language. In 2017 the Foundation developed a long-term strategy for its work in the sector, with a focus on both victims and offenders of crime. The Foundation works through interventions in research, policy, practice and service support.**

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Guidance for Senior Leaders

Introduction

The cancellation of exams announced by The Department for Education and the subsequent guidance from Ofqual on how to assign pupil grades at the end of this school year both have implications for the attainment of well over 1.5 million pupils who use English as an Additional Language (EAL). Research would suggest that these implications are particularly important for those pupils who are new to English and those who entered the English school system late, for example in Years 10 and 11. (Hutchinson, 2018; Strand and Hessel, 2018).

Learners who use EAL are a very diverse group. They may have arrived in the UK at different ages and have varying different socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Some students may come from an advantaged context with a high standard of education; others may have had little or interrupted schooling or experienced traumatic events; and their language proficiency can range from 'new to English' to 'fluent'. It is levels of English language proficiency among learners using EAL that have been shown to be a key predictor of attainment (Strand and Hessel, 2018). Those who are new to English or at the early acquisition stage typically attain below the national average, those developing competence attain very close to the national average, and those pupils who are competent or fluent attain significantly above the national average.

About this paper

Ofqual state that *'For students with English as an additional language (EAL), schools and colleges should consider the likely language acquisition a student would have made by the time of the exam, and any increased ability to demonstrate subject content knowledge, as part of this and reflect this in their judgement. They may seek further information from specialist EAL teachers as part of this.'*

The Bell Foundation has produced this paper for Senior Leaders to signpost key considerations on how they can support teaching staff, including EAL co-ordinators and EAL teachers, in ensuring fair and objective grade allocations for students who use EAL.

The paper considers two key areas:

- 1) How to help ensure a fair and equitable process for students with EAL in GCSE grade allocations in the absence of summer exams
- 2) How to support those students with EAL who are entered for Autumn GCSE exams during and after school closures

Senior Leaders may also find it useful to refer to The Bell Foundation paper: *GCSE grade allocations in 2020: Guidance for EAL co-ordinators and EAL teachers*.

1. How to help ensure a fair and equitable process for students with EAL in GCSE grade allocations in the absence of summer exams

Some teachers will require support to ensure predicted grades and rank ordering take full account of an EAL student's current proficiency in English in relation to their ability to demonstrate subject knowledge and understanding.

To help ensure fair and objective judgements for students who use EAL, Senior Leaders should:

- Ensure EAL professionals can inform and contribute to the processes of assigning grades and rank ordering for students who use EAL. By involving EAL professionals in this process, Senior Leaders can limit the risk of any conscious or unconscious bias in relation to EAL learners. The evidence shared in the Equality Impact Assessment from Ofqual demonstrates that students using EAL are more likely to be underrated in teacher assessment than overrated. Of the three subjects analysed (English, maths and science), there were indications of under-prediction in either English or maths in the studies that looked at pupils with EAL. For Senior Leaders, this might mean sending out a whole school message highlighting the important role that EAL professionals need to play in grade allocation and ranking. It may also mean giving a direct instruction for Heads of Department and teaching staff to consult with EAL professionals when assigning grades and rank ordering.
- Communicate the importance of drawing on up-to-date assessments of both proficiency in English and ability to demonstrate curriculum knowledge and understanding when allocating grades. Senior Leaders are advised to draw attention to research evidence which has consistently demonstrated that levels of English language proficiency among learners using EAL are a key predictor of attainment (Strand, Malmberg and Hall 2015, Strand and Hessel, 2018, Strand and Lindorff 2020).
- Ensure EAL professionals and subject teachers are given the time needed to look meaningfully at assessment data where it exists. Some teachers may have no prior experience of working with data looking at proficiency in English and therefore may not see its relevance for their subject without a detailed briefing from EAL professionals on how the data has been calculated and the potential relevance for grade allocations.



2. How to support students with EAL who are entered for Autumn GCSE exams

Students who feel that their grades from the summer do not reflect their full ability will have the opportunity to take the exams in the Autumn. It is, therefore, likely that those students who are new to English or in the early acquisition stages of language development will opt to take exams in the Autumn term. Moreover, schools may not be able to allocate grades to a pupil who has recently arrived, as there may not be enough evidence of their ability to make a professional judgement. These pupils will most likely have to sit Autumn exams in order to receive a grade.

Sitting exams in the Autumn may have both advantages and disadvantages for students with EAL. Advantages may arise from having had more time to develop both language proficiency and content knowledge assuming that schools are able to reopen, and face-to-face teaching and learning is able to take place. However, it is important to consider that academic language development takes place mainly within the school context. This is where pupils are exposed to and take part in a broad range of interactions with their teachers, peers and other school staff that help them make sense of subject content and fully participate in school life. During lockdown many students with EAL may have been deprived of such a rich and conducive context for language development. Instead, many pupils may have spent months with limited input and access to teaching approaches best suited to their needs in the run up to an Autumn exam.

This means that students with EAL will need on-going support both while schools are closed and when they reopen to ensure they can fulfill their potential when taking exams. To support this process Senior Leaders should:

- Ensure teachers actively seek guidance from EAL professionals on which students might benefit from taking the GCSE exams in the Autumn. EAL professionals and teachers should be encouraged to draw on up-to-date assessment data around proficiency in English (where it exists), as well as prior experience of working with students and use this information to inform decisions. By drawing on this information as well as subject-specific progress data, staff will be well positioned to support pupils in their decision making around whether to take Autumn exams.
- Prioritise the on-going assessment of proficiency in English alongside curriculum learning to inform decisions about teaching and learning at a whole-school level. A good way to do this is to adopt and embed an EAL Assessment Framework. Assessing EAL pupils' proficiency in English against an EAL framework will enable more accurate and purposeful assessments of what a learner can do in English alongside curriculum learning, as well as providing a road map for progression to support teaching, learning and preparation for exams. (An example is The Bell Foundation's evidence-informed and freely available EAL Assessment Framework for Schools and companion assessment resources, including, Digital Tracker and Classroom Support Strategies).
- Establish systems and ensure resourcing is in place to provide students using EAL with extra support during home learning in order to minimise potential loss of learning. Without additional support some students may miss out on crucial exposure to models of academic English, opportunities for extensive listening and speaking practice in English and explicit language input and feedback. The disadvantage will be even greater for those children whose parents are ESOL users with low levels of proficiency in English and/or literacy issues and those who have a significant lack of knowledge and understanding of important areas concerning school life. Extra support may consist of tutoring with teaching staff or EAL professionals or tailored work focusing on key areas of input that students may be missing.

- Ensure relevant interventions are in place for when pupils return to school to ensure students with EAL receive focused support to help compensate for any loss of learning while schools were closed. Support should focus on accelerated language development alongside curriculum learning and exam preparation. Additional support will be especially important to those pupils who are recently arrived or new to English. Schools may want to consider providing additional in-class support from teaching assistants or EAL teachers, or scheduling after school EAL support classes which focus specifically on exam preparation, including the language needed for understanding and responding to exam questions successfully.
- Provide training opportunities for school staff to help them build skills and expertise in EAL assessment and teaching approaches that will help pupils achieve their full potential in the Autumn exams. Teaching staff may benefit from professional development on areas such as setting language development targets alongside subject targets, integrating language-focused activities into subject lessons and supporting vocabulary and academic language development beyond subject-specific key words. For additional guidance on CPD for teaching staff see resources from The Bell Foundation including a best practice article in SecEd magazine on CPD for the EAL classroom, freely available Webinars for practitioners, Secondary Classroom Support Strategies and Online training courses for practitioners.

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