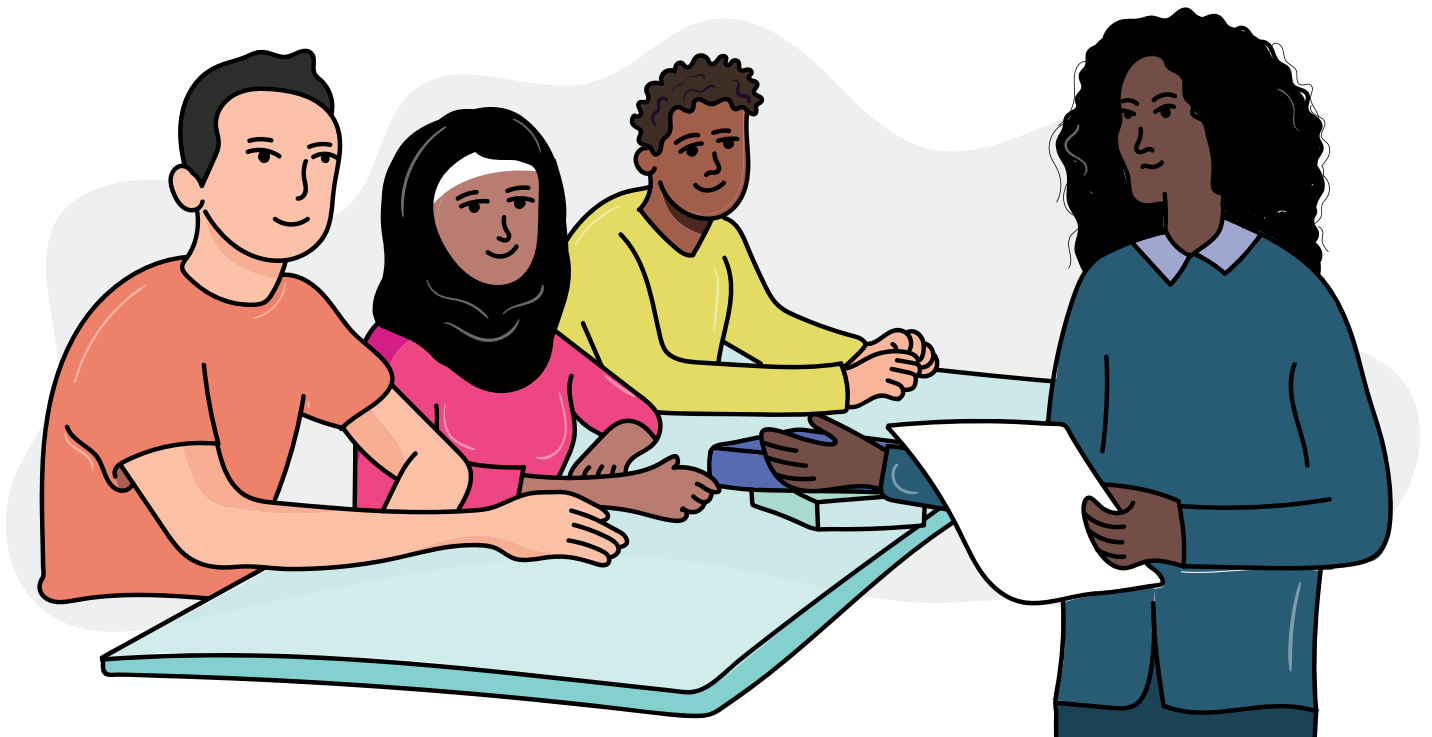


GCSE grade allocations in 2021: Considerations for students who use EAL



Introduction

As the Department for Education (DfE) replace exams with teacher assessment for the second year running due to the pandemic, the impact on learners is likely to be considerable as many will have experienced some degree of learning loss. For pupils using EAL this may also include potential language loss and be particularly significant for late arrivals to the UK school system and those who are new to English.

Research shows that those who entered the UK school system late and those whose Proficiency in English (PIE) is limited are at the greatest risk of underachievement (Hutchinson 2018, Strand and Hessel 2018). Careful consideration by school leaders is needed on how to direct staff to apply the assessment guidance published by [Ofqual](#) to this group. The aim must be to reflect as fairly as possible the attainment of each learner and enable them to progress to suitable courses of further study where appropriate. Ofqual stipulates that grades awarded should reflect “...as far as possible, what a student knows, understands and can do.” The Sutton Trust stresses the importance of determining a student’s future potential to succeed at further study or training. “... the most important thing in all of this is not the grades the students ultimately get, but that they are able to successfully progress in education, apprenticeships or the world of work.” (Sutton Trust, 25/02/2021). The impact of the pandemic on schools, including closures, socially distanced classes and remote learning has impeded progress for many learners. Evidence from [Scotland](#) and [Jersey](#) suggests that learners using EAL were amongst the hardest hit groups.

Learners who use EAL are a diverse group, spanning the socio-economic and cognitive ability spectrums, and may have been born in the UK or arrived very recently. Some are fluent or highly competent in English, whilst others are still at the initial stages of acquisition. Many will have an age-appropriate level of Proficiency in English and literacy in their first language and significant subject knowledge across the curriculum. For those students it is a question of learning to use English to demonstrate their knowledge, transferring existing literacy skills from one language to another. Others, for example refugees who have experienced trauma and interrupted schooling can lack age-appropriate literacy and vocabulary skills in their first language and may have limited or no subject knowledge in some areas, making their task more complex. According to research by Strand and Hessel (2018), there is an important correlation between Proficiency in English and attainment. Those who are new to English or at the earlier stages of acquisition typically attain below the national average. Learners who are developing competence in English attain close to the national average, whilst those who are competent or fluent attain above it. Deprivation is another key factor. DfE analysis found that 25% of learners with EAL are disadvantaged (DfE, 2020).

About this paper

The Bell Foundation has produced this paper for senior leaders to offer advice and suggestions on how best to support teaching staff, including EAL specialists, to ensure the best outcomes for learners using EAL within teacher assessments. The paper considers two key areas:

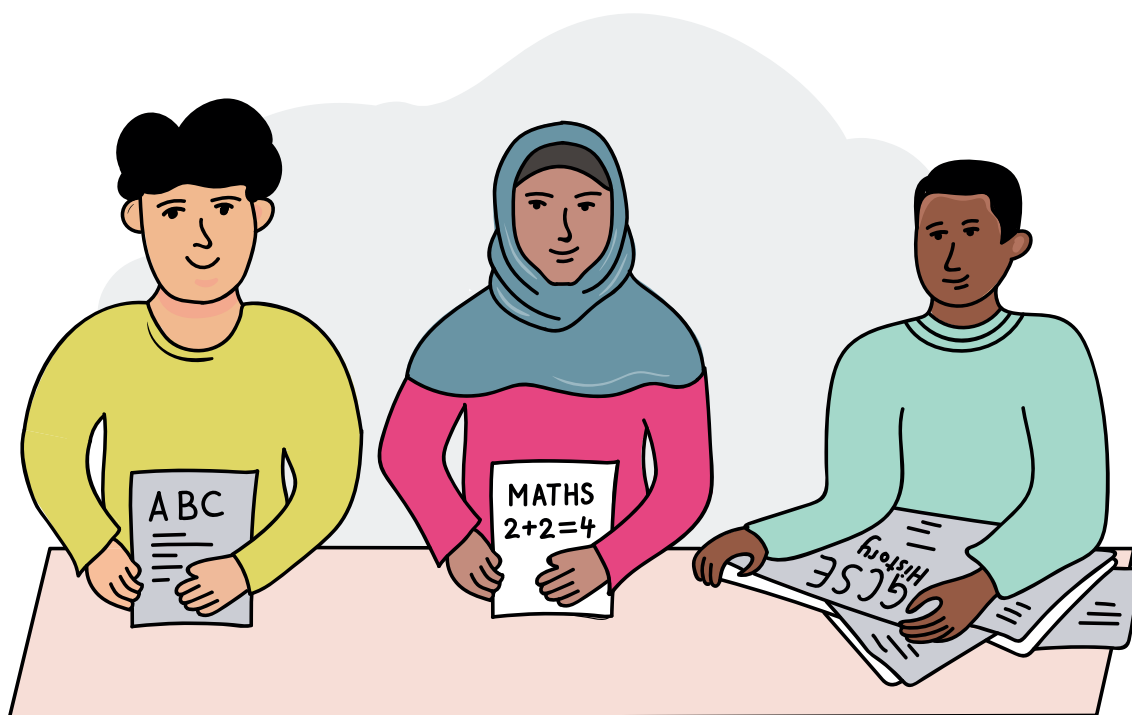
1. **Ensuring the most equitable process possible for the summer teacher assessments of learners using EAL**
2. **Supporting learners using EAL if they are entered for Autumn exams**

1. How to ensure a fair and equitable process for students using EAL in the absence of summer exams

Some teachers may require support to ensure grades take full account of an EAL student's current Proficiency in English in relation to their ability to demonstrate subject knowledge and understanding. The following suggestions should be considered:

- **Enable EAL co-ordinators to play an active role.** [Ofqual](#) recommends that EAL professionals are consulted where they have had involvement with learners and that their evidence is used. It would be pertinent to give EAL co-ordinators oversight of all evidence and access arrangements for EAL learners for moderation and/or inspection purposes. This might mean senior leaders sending out a whole school message highlighting the importance of input from EAL professionals in grade allocation. It will also entail scheduling protected time for them to meet and work with subject teachers. EAL professionals are familiar with assessment procedures to determine a learner's Proficiency in English level, such as The [Bell Foundation EAL Assessment Framework for Schools](#) and are thus well placed to advise teachers. They should also be able to suggest a range of adaptive strategies suitable for enabling learners who use EAL to access assessments.
- **Make sure teachers and EAL co-ordinators are aware of the possibilities for EAL provision within access arrangements** – there is no longer a requirement for timed conditions in assessments and therefore EAL students may benefit from more time as they are processing and relaying content in an additional language. Bilingual resources such as dictionaries may also be used.
- **Direct teachers to draw on a wide range of evidence for each learner, including their level of Proficiency in English.** Teachers may find it useful to examine evidence from pre-pandemic work, where it exists, alongside work produced during remote learning. Additionally, teachers may wish to set assessments which allow learners who use EAL to play to their linguistic strengths, for example a spoken assessment rather than a written one, or vice versa. The aim should be to enable learners to demonstrate their knowledge of subject content. For some learners, classroom-based tasks in the normal working environment may be a more suitable way to demonstrate subject knowledge than a more formal mock exam.

- **Encourage teachers to harness subject knowledge learners may have acquired in their first or other languages.** This can also be an effective way of maximising parental support. Whilst assessments will take place through the medium of English, some learners who use EAL may find it beneficial to revise or clarify subject material through a more familiar language, and parents/carers might be able to help with or facilitate this. The Bell Foundation has produced [guidance](#) for teachers on how to promote use of learners' languages other than English
- **If students are entered for GCSEs in their community languages, consider how the school will be able to assess this.** It may be necessary to engage the support of community school teachers or members of school/trust staff who are proficient in the requisite language. These teachers may need support in administering assessments and allocating grades.
- **Raise awareness of possible unconscious bias.** Ofqual's Equality Impact Assessment (2020) found that EAL learners are more likely to be underrated than overrated in teacher assessments. By ensuring that teachers and EAL co-ordinators work together, alongside robust moderation procedures and clear messaging, senior leaders can help minimise any risk of unconscious bias and ensure the best possible outcomes for learners who use EAL.
- **Explain the assessment and appeals process to parents and learners in a way which is clear, comprehensible, and culturally mediated.** This may include providing translated versions of communications as well as using infographics or enlisting bilingual support where available. Bear in mind that, whilst some parents will not hesitate to appeal, others may feel reticent to question authority in this way, either because it is culturally counter-intuitive to them, or because they find the process daunting. Learners who use EAL can be significantly disadvantaged if these cultural differences are not considered. The Bell Foundation has produced some [FAQs](#) about the assessment and appeals process aimed at both parents and learners.



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

A series of Autumn exams is expected to go ahead this year, open to any student who had expected to sit exams this summer. Students will be allowed to use the better of their two grades. For EAL learners, this might be beneficial as they have more time to develop their Proficiency in English before the Autumn exams, if schools remain fully open.

- **Prioritise the ongoing assessment of Proficiency in English alongside curriculum learning.** This is best done through the adoption and embedding of an EAL assessment framework, such as the one produced by [The Bell Foundation](#). These assessments can then inform planning and decisions about teaching and learning at whole school level.
- **Ensure that staff are suitably trained.** Quality first teaching has been cited as the most impactful solution for catch-up by both the Education Endowment Foundation and The Sutton Trust. Therefore, some investment in quality training for teachers on how best to support EAL learners could be pertinent in order to meet needs, especially in this current climate of language learning loss. Teachers might benefit from CPD covering the integration of language focused activities into subject areas, setting language targets alongside subject targets, and embedding a whole school approach to Proficiency in English assessment, for example. The Bell Foundation has a range of online CPD options available, including free webinars.
- **Consider providing extra support for learners using EAL,** who may have experienced English language loss, as well as learning loss during school closures, especially if school is their only or principal model provider for English. Therefore, it might be apt to consider running some English language interventions. These could take the form of additional classes before or immediately after school and should be taught by a suitably qualified EAL professional. Summer schools and/or tutoring, online or face-to-face, may also be appropriate. It is important that any such interventions do not remove the learners from their exam lessons and that they are focused on curriculum language, including subject specific vocabulary and grammatical structures, which will help prepare the learner for their exams.

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The Bell Foundation
Red Cross Lane
Cambridge CB2 0QU

www.bell-foundation.org.uk