# Creating a learner profile for plurilingual learners who use English as an Additional Language (EAL)

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Learners using EAL are an extremely [heterogeneous group of pupils](). Without recognising the rich diversity that exists within this population, there is a danger of creating a single profile to fit all such learners. This can potentially impact the school staff's ability to build successful relationships with plurilingual learners, recognise their individual strengths and provide appropriate academic and pastoral support.

The aim of this guide is to support educators in creating learner profiles that will lead to improved learning environments, well-being and academic success for plurilingual learners.

In this guide you will find information including:

- Benefits of creating a profile;
- How to gather information;
  - Families and caregivers;
  - Community;
  - Colleagues;
  - Your own research.
- Type of information to collect;
  - Where your learner is from;
  - Reason for coming to the UK;
  - Your learner's family and caregivers;
  - Home language(s);
  - English language proficiency;
  - Previous schooling;
  - Strengths and interests.
- Profile templates.

# Benefits of creating a profile

Good teachers know their pupils well and use this knowledge to inform planning and in-the-moment decision-making in the classroom. They know what motivates pupils, what strengths and challenges pupils face and how to meaningfully connect with them beyond exam scores and proficiency levels.

Getting to know learners using EAL may mean gathering additional information about their lives and lived experiences. This may include information such as their home community or country of origin, their experience of arriving in the UK, cultural and religious traditions, formal and informal educational experiences (or lack thereof), family circumstances, hobbies and interests.

Gathering this information is beneficial as it allows teachers to:

- More fully meet the needs and challenges of plurilingual learners;
- Create welcoming classroom environments;
- Increase interaction with plurilingual learners;
- Engage with the learner's family or caregiver;
- Create opportunities for classmates to learn from each other;
- Build upon a learner's strengths and interests;
- Increase the learner's confidence and pride;
- Improve classroom management (by understanding certain cultural behaviours such as avoiding eye contact out of respect).

# How to gather information

There are numerous sources from which to gather information as you build a profile.

### Learners

Even pupils who are new to English can provide information about themselves if you pay attention. Look for clues in their drawings, classroom behaviour, body language and actions. As their English improves you will be able to learn more through written and spoken interactions.

Suggested activities for gathering information include:

- Provide 'get to know you' games to welcome new arrivals and continue to routinely offer space for learners to share information about themselves in ways they feel comfortable, irrespective of their level of proficiency in English, e.g., through art, collage, posters, etc.
- Take an interest in your learner's family members or caregivers, what they do outside of school and on the weekend, what sports they enjoy, what traditions they celebrate, do they have pets, etc.
- Build trust by sharing appropriate stories about yourself.
- Incorporate these topics into assignments and discussions appropriately throughout the year, for example, journal writing, autobiographical assignments, questionnaires, interviews with classmates and sharing time.

## Families and caregivers

One of the best sources of information is the learner's family or caregiver. Ideally, a meeting with the family or caregivers would be set up as part of an induction programme prior to the learner starting school.

If family members or carers are new to English, you will want to provide an interpreter. Consider speaking with your school's family liaison or EAL co-ordinator to help arrange the meeting and/or share information they may already have about the family or carer. Recognise that some literate families may prefer to write an informational letter about their child instead of meeting in person.

Keep the questions focused on schooling. For example, ask about your learner's educational background and learning interests or about their successes and challenges with learning. Some families may welcome the opportunity to meet and will share additional information about their culture and arrival experience. Others may be more reluctant. Do not push. Remember that each family's situation is unique, and it is important not to make assumptions as you begin to build relationships and trust.

## Community

With appropriate consent, community members, other parents in the school and/or staff from community organisations can also provide information about a particular family or group of families. These individuals may have useful information on a particular country or conflict as well as insights into the culture, religion or language of a particular group. Building partnerships within the larger community can provide ongoing support especially if your plurilingual learners and their families belong to certain organisations or institutions, such as supplementary schools and national associations of specific countries in the United Kingdom. Social media groups managed by national or regional organisations can also be a useful source of information.

## Colleagues

Colleagues are another valuable source of information and are typically easy to access. EAL co-ordinators, teaching assistants, bilingual or plurilingual staff, family liaisons, previous classroom teachers, all might have useful information about your learner and the larger community to which your learner belongs. These individuals are often eager to share useful information to support learners so do not hesitate to ask.

## Your own research

There is a wealth of information, particularly on the internet, relating to traditions, customs, language(s) and histories of countries. Take an interest in personally learning about the culture and traditions of your plurilingual children and families.

## Type of information to collect

Collecting information from the seven areas below will support the development of a comprehensive profile.

### 1. Where your learner is from

Although this may seem like a simple piece of information, knowing where your learner is from can provide additional clues as to their prior experiences, socio-economic situation and cultural background. It is important to remember, however, that learners from the same country will not always share the same experiences, ethnic and religious backgrounds or even languages (if multiple languages are spoken within the same country).

In addition, plurilingual learners may have:

- Been born in the UK.

- Recently arrived from their country of origin to the UK.

- Recently arrived from a different country than their country of origin; for example, a refugee camp or a stay in another country(ies) prior to their arrival in the UK.

- Arrived as an unaccompanied child.

- Moved frequently between the UK and other countries.

Once you know your learner's country of origin and arrival situation, you can learn more about their background. It may be useful to learn about the:

- Political or historic backgrounds.

- Cultural and religious traditions.

- DOs and DON'Ts of social behaviour and communication.

✪ **Classroom tip**: Learn how to correctly pronounce your learner's name. This is one of the most important steps to building a respectful, positive relationship with plurilingual learners and their families. It is also critical that pupils' names are written with correct conventions and are spelled correctly as they are entered into school databases. The 'Getting it Right' reference guide provides useful information on naming conventions for non-English names.

### 2. Reason for coming to the UK

There are many reasons why people move to a different country. These might include adoption, reunification with relatives, studying, a new job, political asylum, escape from a country in conflict or a cultural exchange. Knowing what brought your learner to the UK can provide clues as to whether the learner feels settled, as might be the case if the family is enjoying the benefits of a recent job relocation, or whether they may be experiencing instability or even trauma, as might be the case if they have recently arrived from a war zone and/or have a parent or sibling still living in another country.

Consider who might be an appropriate person to gather this information. Some learners and their families may be reluctant to share too much information about their lives, especially if other organisations have repeatedly asked similar questions. It is worth acknowledging that this can cause families to perhaps feel suspicious or overwhelmed. In these instances, refrain from seeking information unless the learner or family offers it. Do not ask direct questions regarding immigration status. Remember, the goal is to inform school support.

✪ **Classroom tip**: Keep aware of what is taking place within your local community as it relates to your new arrivals. Are there plans within your local council to host refugees? Are certain religious institutions or other not-for-profit organisations supporting newly arrived individuals or families? Are there agricultural, educational or other work places that may attract newly arrived families? Keep your eyes and ears open in the classroom as you look for additional clues through student conversations, art, play, and writing.

## 3. Your learner's family and caregivers

Gathering basic family information will not provide a complete picture of your learner's home life. However, at a minimum, it is important to know who the adults are in your learner's life and to be aware of factors that may affect their school experience.

Some questions that may be helpful to answer include:

- With whom does the learner live?

- Does the learner have family members who are living far away?

- Is there a family member at home who speaks English and can serve as a primary point of contact?

- Does the learner have responsibilities such as caring for younger siblings or relatives?

- Does the learner have a job?

- Are there other factors that may affect the learner, such as financial difficulties, immigration status, unstable home life or trauma?

✪ **Classroom tip**: Keep in mind that speaking about families may not always be appropriate depending on the circumstances, for example where children are separated. Remember that even young learners may have big responsibilities at home, especially if this is common amongst the home culture or if parents are employed in multiple jobs or are unwell. Being aware of these responsibilities and establishing a line of contact with the family may provide an opportunity to find solutions together if there are conflicts with schooling or with extracurricular activities. Also, be mindful of attendance patterns, especially if there are issues with unexplained absences. For example, older children may accompany family members to appointments and act as interpreters. This could signal that the family needs additional support from elsewhere, perhaps including pastoral support systems within the school or from other external agencies.

## 4. Home language(s)

You may discover that your 'new to English' learner may in fact be fluent in two, three or even four other languages! Learning about your pupil's home language or languages can help you:

- Look for books and educational resources in your learner's home language to make available in your classroom.

- Determine how closely related or distant their language is to English so that you can build on similarities or highlight differences. For example, are there certain words that are similar between languages such as, 'tradition' and 'tradicón' in Spanish? Or are the written scripts different as in, for example, English and Arabic? Are there differences in grammatical structures or difficulties with pronouncing certain sounds?

- Partner together learners who share the same home language or other languages they know.

- Make use of appropriate bilingual support staff.

⭐ **Classroom tip**: Language is intimately connected to identity. If a learner's home language or other languages they know are not valued or used in school, the learner may not feel fully recognised or welcomed. Once you know the languages that your learner uses, allow opportunities for them to teach words or phrases to classmates and teachers. Have learners take turns being the 'language teacher' for a week. Those learners whose first language is English can also teach a heritage language from an earlier generation.

In addition, a learner's first language is the most valuable resource they have for learning and for developing English as an Additional Language. Promote its use in pre-teaching, note taking, topic research, use of bilingual glossaries and partnering with learners who share a common first language. Likewise, promote language maintenance at home; recognising the value of bilingualism and plurilingualism, family relations and support that parents and caregivers can offer as a tool for learning subject material.

## 5. English language proficiency

Knowing your learner's English language proficiency will enable you to establish:

- Appropriate supports for learners to access the classroom curriculum.
- Targets for language learning and development.
- Insights into academic attainment.
- Insights into whether attainment is being affected by language barriers or by learning difficulties.

Ask your EAL co-ordinator or other informed colleagues about the assessment tool your school uses to determine English language proficiency. The Bell Foundation provides a free EAL Assessment Framework that can be used to determine English proficiency in speaking, writing, listening and reading/viewing at both the primary and secondary levels.

Assessment of English language proficiency should be an ongoing activity. As pupils develop English from an early acquisition stage to developing competence to emerging fluency, your instructional support and adaptations will need to change accordingly along with the language targets you set.

✪ **Classroom tip**: Carrying out an [assessment of your learner's home language](#) can help to establish the learner's reading and writing skills in their first language. This enables schools to make a comparison between the pupil's levels of competence in their first language versus English and can provide an indicator of potential learning strengths and needs. If a formal assessment is not available, consider asking the learner to write a story based on a picture prompt or complete an assignment in their home language and invite a bilingual staff member to help you read the pupil's writing. You may also wish to ask the learner's family about literacy activities at home, remembering that not all families have access to books and literature materials.

## 6. Previous schooling

This may be rather easy to determine if your learner arrives with records from previous schools (either from the UK or another country) or with the ability to demonstrate academic proficiency in subjects such as maths (even without English skills). Be aware, however, that some learners may have interrupted or limited schooling experiences, as could be the case for some refugee or migrant learners.

Useful educational background information to gather may include:

- Years of schooling.

- Types of school attended (local, private, international).

- Prior English instruction.

- Academic records.

- Literacy background.

- Any SEND needs.

- Areas of academic strengths and favourite subjects.

Learners may be able to provide you with some of this information, however, input from a parent or caregiver will yield more information. In addition, it may be helpful to gather information about your pupil's experience in school. Did your learner enjoy school? Did they prefer group activities or independent work? What was your learner's behaviour like in school? Keep in mind that in some countries there may be a stigma attached to having [SEND](#), and parents or carers may be reluctant to disclose this.

In some cases, it may be possible and appropriate to contact the learner's previous school itself, especially in instances where the child might be staying temporarily, for example, if a parent is studying in the UK for two to three years and then returning to the original school.

✪ **Classroom tip**: Learning about the education system and national curriculum of the country from which your newly arrived learner originates can help you identify the educational background of your pupil. The information can support informed decision-making as to whether your pupil has had prior experience with certain curricular topics or as to what pedagogical approaches they may be familiar with. World Education News and Reviews provides in-depth information on education systems from around the world. Supplementary schools can also be good sources of information about the education system of the country that they represent.

## 7. Strengths and interests

Do not underestimate the value of learning about your pupil's favourite hobbies, talents and activities. In some cases, these activities may be the hook to fostering student engagement and building confidence, as well as to making friends and speaking more English. If your learner is new to English, you may need to provide alternative ways for them to share this information. Consider having your pupil draw their interests or point to options in a book or from visuals that you provide.

Finally, it is useful to know about your pupils and their families plans or goals for the future. Without knowing those goals, you may miss the opportunity to help learners achieve them. Provide encouragement and maintain a positive attitude while setting high expectations for all your learners.

✪ **Classroom tip**: Try and assign young learners to a buddy who shares the same interests. For older learners, social inclusion can be harder to establish. Introduce and encourage learners to participate in extracurricular activities that match their interests and guide them through the process of joining clubs or school teams. Acknowledge their talents in the classroom and connect them with others who share similar interests.

# Profile templates

South East Grid for Learning provides an online background collation tool that is suitable for use with a learner and family who have recently arrived in the UK or transferred within the UK from another school. The online questionnaire is available to use in 17 languages and includes additional support by audio buttons that play an oral version of each question.

The learner profile that forms part of The Bell Foundation's EAL Assessment Tracker includes some of the areas mentioned above. Alternatively, schools can create their own profile questionnaires or templates to use as they meet with plurilingual families and get to know their children. A sample is shown below. Whatever method is used, you will want to ensure that it can be easily and systematically shared with all colleagues and staff as you collectively welcome the newly arrived family and child into your school.

# The Bell Foundation

# Plurilingual Learner Profile

Student name:

School:

Date of entry to school:         /         /

Year:                          Age:              Number of years in current school:

Ethnicity:                                Place of birth:

Home language(s):

Proficiency in English:

Literate in home language?   Yes ◯   No ◯

Age on arrival in the UK (if born outside of the UK):

## Educational history:

Attended school outside of the UK?   Yes ◯   No ◯   If yes, number of years:

Number of years of schooling in the UK:

Number of years the family has been in the UK:

Reason for immigration:

Number of siblings (indicate older or younger if possible):

Parents' or caregivers' proficiency in English:

Are parents or caregivers literate in home language(s)? Yes ⬤ No ⬤

*(tick both boxes if the answer is different for each parent or caregiver)*

Other:

Form completed by:

Date form completed:        /        /