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## Teacher Training – Preparing Teachers for Multilingual Classrooms

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## Teacher training – preparing teachers for multilingual classrooms

- Multilingual classrooms are now the norm, with more than one in five pupils speaking English as an Additional Language (EAL).
- For some EAL pupils, there is a clear attainment gap. It is vital that all teachers have the skills and knowledge, through initial teacher training and continuing professional development, to support EAL pupils effectively, enabling them to reach their full potential.
- However, with EAL currently absent from both the Early Career Framework (ECF) and Initial Teacher Training Core Content Framework, just 37% of teachers report feeling prepared to teach in multilingual classrooms.
- Policy changes are needed to ensure teachers are fully equipped for the multilingual classroom.

We welcome the new Government's commitment to updating the ECF, introducing a new teacher training entitlement and recruiting 6,500 new teachers. EAL pupils make up 20% of the school population, with evidence showing that for some EAL pupils, there is a clear attainment gap ([Hutchinson, 2018](#)). Yet teacher training is silent on how to support this important group of learners. It is important that training on EAL is at the heart of these reforms, ensuring both teachers and learners receive the support they need.

### Why should EAL be a key part of teacher training?

Over the past 25 years, the number of pupils who speak EAL has more than tripled. There are now more than 1.77 million EAL learners in state-funded primary and secondary schools in England. This equates to over one in five of all pupils, meaning that multilingual classrooms are now the norm.

While speaking two or more languages fluently has positive associations with attainment, children who are not given the appropriate classroom support they need may be unable to fully access the curriculum, limiting their ability to achieve their potential. It is therefore vital that all teachers entering the classroom have the skills and knowledge they need to support EAL pupils effectively.

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*“Scientific literacy... I don't think [student teachers] realise that the absorption of English takes as long as it does – and then on the outside a child could be functioning, speaking, getting on with peers but...when it comes to specific subjects like science actually it's got a whole language and literacy on its own that need sort of an understanding.”*

Teacher educator

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EAL learners are a hugely diverse group, including, for example, both a multilingual child from a highly educated and privileged background, and a child who is a refugee with limited prior education or literacy in their home language. Aggregated data on EAL learners is misleading and hides as much as it tells us, masking a huge range of outcomes for different pupils.

The evidence is clear: proficiency in English is central to understanding educational attainment for EAL learners. Proficiency in English can explain 22% of the variation in EAL pupils' achievement compared to the typical 3-4% that can be statistically explained using gender, free school meal status, and ethnicity combined ([Strand, 2018](#)).

For some EAL pupils, there is a clear attainment gap, with those who are new to English, arrive later into the school system (and have less time to catch up with language learning), or are from certain language groups at particular risk of low attainment.

### **How well does teacher training currently prepare teachers for multilingual classrooms?**

The Teachers' Standards (Standard 5) specifies that teachers must "have a clear understanding of the needs of all pupils, including [...] those with English as an additional language [...]; [and that they must] be able to use and evaluate teaching approaches to engage and support them" (Department for Education, 2011). However, EAL is currently absent from both the Initial Teacher Training Core Content Framework (ITT CCF) and Early Career Framework (ECF). There is also no oversight or regulation in schools of staff development to teach EAL children. Schools are not mandated to assess language or develop staff appropriately, even though teachers must adapt to the levels and abilities of all their pupils.

This has contributed to teachers feeling unprepared for the realities of the classroom. Department for Education (DfE) research (2023) found that only 37% of early career teachers (ECTs) felt well prepared for teaching in a multicultural or multilingual setting. The research also noted that only 7% of secondary school teachers had received continuing professional development (CPD) in supporting multilingual pupils in the previous 12 months (DfE, 2023).

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*“...the impression I get is a lot of teachers in the schools feel...that this is a new situation for them that they haven't been trained to deal with, and they haven't had the CPD input...or provision that would...enable them to develop these skills, and they've just been sort of left to get on with it.”*

**Teacher educator**

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Similarly, research commissioned by The Bell Foundation on EAL in initial teacher education (ITE) found that, while prevailing policy has prioritised integration and inclusion, little attention has been given to expanding the knowledge base of ITE student teachers on this front. ITE that includes EAL would enable new teachers to address the English language and literacy needs within linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms ([Foley, 2018](#)). The research also found many student teachers and teacher educators feeling that they lack confidence and experience with EAL learners. For example, while confidence improved during the training, only 39% of student teachers reported feeling confident or very confident in their ability to support EAL learners. Moreover, around half of student teachers responded that they did not receive any input concerning EAL while in schools.

The above findings are all the more concerning when factoring in the decimation of support services for EAL that we have seen in recent years. In 2011, the ring-fenced funding to local authorities to deliver support to EAL pupils was removed. This was replaced with the “EAL factor” in the National Funding Formula, but, since 2017, this has increased at half the rate of funding for other pupils in both primary and secondary schools (EPI, 2021). As a result, the majority of dedicated expertise and support for EAL pupils has disappeared from the system.

The need for effective teacher training on EAL has arguably never been more important as recent years have seen an increase in the use of unacceptable “withdrawal practices” in schools, with EAL pupils having reduced access to mainstream lessons; an approach contrary to EAL good practice. Such approaches were outlawed in the 1980s, after it was recognised that they did not contribute to an inclusive classroom, reinforcing an awareness of “difference”, and restricting access to important educational opportunities (Commission for Racial Equality, 1986).

Evidence from in-class observations conducted by The Bell Foundation and partner schools and designated teaching hubs suggests the following ineffective practices are also commonplace among many ECTs:

- Having low expectations of what learners using EAL can achieve (confusing being new to English with lack of subject knowledge) – in practice, this is evident when placing pupils with secure prior subject knowledge in bottom set classes.
- Arranging “withdrawal by stealth” – i.e., asking a teaching assistant to take the pupil(s) out of the classroom and do some basic, low-level, sometimes age-inappropriate work, for instance at a table right outside their classroom.
- Using teaching approaches for monolingual English speakers and not adapting teaching effectively or at all to meet the needs of newly-arrived pupils using EAL. For instance, not planning how to address the language demands of their curriculum or not utilising distinctive teaching approaches to support access to it.

### **What needs to change?**

To ensure that teachers are fully equipped for the classroom, with the knowledge and skills required to support EAL pupils effectively, urgent policy changes are needed:

- Explicit inclusion of EAL in the ITT Core Content Framework and the Early Career Framework, ensuring teachers receive the skills they need at the very start of their careers.
- Development of an effective teacher training programme to generate and maintain EAL expertise in schools.
- The creation of a National Professional Qualification for EAL specialists to help build expertise in schools and create professional pathways for teachers.
- Introduction of training in EAL for all mentors as a required component of all mentor training programmes, including those for the training of lead mentors.
- Training on EAL should incorporate the following messages and topics into all “core” sessions on EAL:
  - The value of the use of home languages in the classroom.
  - The importance of developing a wider knowledge about languages to include a clear sense of how structures and forms differ across them, which will enable teachers to have better awareness of EAL learners. This means going beyond the necessary knowledge about the English language to prepare

student teachers to teach the grammar and spelling content of the National Curriculum.

- The cognitive and emotional demands of moving between languages.
- Viewing ITE as only the first stage in a career-long process of professional development and enhancement of practice, so that all teachers can be adequately prepared to meet the needs of the variety of EAL pupils.
- Viewing EAL as a way to assist student teachers to make all lessons more accessible to the multilingual, multicultural classes that they will encounter, rather than a specialised area of expertise.
- Adopting a “dual approach” to developing EAL practice within teacher education programmes, so that student teachers not only gain expert EAL knowledge, but that this is infused across all subjects and within all core areas of concern in order to make every lesson accessible for EAL learners.

The Bell Foundation has a wide range of [evidence-based training, resources, and guidance available](#), including free ITT modules to support trainee teachers on EAL and free self-study modules for ECTs. We would welcome the opportunity to assist in the development of new standards.

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## About The Bell Foundation

This briefing has been developed by The Bell Foundation, a charitable, evidence-led foundation that aims to improve educational, employment and justice outcomes for people who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL). The Foundation collaborates with leading universities and think tanks to develop an evidence base and works with a network of schools to develop and deliver practical solutions to help improve the attainment of pupils who are at risk of underachieving. In 2022, the Foundation supported over 26,000 teachers and educational professionals to support children who use English as an Additional Language through the training of teachers and webinars.

A series of policy briefings about our three programmes, EAL education in schools, ESOL and post-16 English education, and overcoming language barriers in the criminal justice system, is available on our website here: [Policy - The Bell Foundation \(bell-foundation.org.uk\)](https://bell-foundation.org.uk/policy)