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Oracy and Children who use English as an Additional Language

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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. The Foundation works with a wide range of school partners, local authorities and academy chains delivering “Language for Results”, a not-for-profit intervention designed to develop the knowledge and skills of all school staff to support EAL learners, with the aim of improving attainment levels. The Foundation also commissions and publishes research on EAL collaborating with universities and think-tanks.

The Foundation has drawn from our extensive network of school-based partners to inform the contents of this briefing.

Oracy and Children who use EAL

The Government’s mission to “break down the barriers to opportunity for every child” identifies that “there is good evidence that spoken language skills are strongly associated with children’s literacy, numeracy and educational attainment”. This is especially true for children who speak EAL whose linguistic development is central to their educational attainment and future prospects. For children who speak EAL, the research evidence is clear: proficiency in English is central to understanding educational attainment. 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).

Children who use EAL have the potential to be great assets to their school and society. Speaking two languages fluently has positive associations with attainment. However, children who are not given the opportunity to develop their English language skills may not achieve their potential and will underperform compared to the national average and not be able to access the curriculum. By enabling children who are still acquiring English proficiency, who are a significant proportion of the school population, to be supported on their language learning journey, and integrated in mainstream classrooms, this potential can be unlocked.

This briefing details key considerations for developing language and communication skills across the curriculum for learners who use EAL. It focuses specifically on the area of oracy, assessing the efficacy and relevance of current interventions and making recommendations for how to implement the Government’s commitment to developing young people’s language and communication skills while ensuring equitable outcomes for learners using EAL.

Learners who use English as an Additional Language

There are more than 1.7 million children in state-funded primary and secondary schools in England who use EAL. In 2023/24, 30.7% of nursery pupils, 22.8% of primary pupils and 18.6% of secondary school pupils spoke EAL (Department for Education, 2024).

EAL pupils are a hugely diverse group of learners, including, for example, both a multilingual child from a highly educated and privileged background, and a child who is a refugee with disrupted prior education and no or early-stage literacy in their home language. Aggregated

data on EAL learners is therefore misleading, masking a huge range of outcomes for different pupils.

There is significant variation in attainment outcomes within the group of pupils who use EAL, reflecting factors like English language proficiency and arrival time to the English school system. This attainment gap is particularly severe for children who arrive late to the English state school system, which may be because there is little time to become proficient in English and learn the curriculum before the end of key stage assessments (Hutchinson, Op.cit.). Children using EAL arriving in the last two years of primary school in 2023 were found to be almost 10 months behind their peers with English as their first language. Pupils arriving in the last two years of secondary school in the same year were found to be almost 12 months behind their first-language peers (EPI, 2024).

The policy in England is to integrate learners who use EAL into the mainstream education system so they can develop their English language proficiency without detracting from their experience of the full curriculum, and all that school life has to offer. A substantial body of evidence supports this integrated approach, highlighting its effectiveness in improving academic achievement (Hutchinson, *ibid*; Demie, 2018), fostering language development (Murphy, 2014; Gibbons, 2002), and promoting social integration (Schneider et al., 2014; Cummins, 2001).

The effects of the disruption to classroom-based learning during the pandemic were acutely experienced by EAL pupils, particularly those at the early stages of English language acquisition. Many experienced language learning loss, as a result of reduced exposure to English from both adults and peers and no modelling of academic English in the classroom.

There is a policy vacuum for this group of pupils and recent years have seen the decimation of support services. In 2011, the ringfenced funding to local authorities to deliver support to EAL pupils was removed. This was replaced with the “EAL factor” in the National Funding Formula (NFF), but, since 2017, the “EAL factor” 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.

This is compounded by the absence of any reference to EAL learners or EAL pedagogy in statutory policy or guidance from the Initial Teacher Training Core Content Framework and Early Career Framework to the Education Inspection Framework used by Ofsted. In 2019, EAL was also removed from the Ofsted inspection handbooks meaning a specific focus on EAL is now absent from school inspections.

Research demonstrates that early career teachers report that they feel least prepared to teach in multilingual classrooms compared to all other training areas (Department for Education, 2023) and that supporting pupils using EAL is one of the top three topics where teachers report a high need for professional development (OECD, 2019).

Oracy: opportunities and considerations

The Bell Foundation welcomes the new Government’s commitment to developing early communication skills and to embedding oracy as part of the planned Curriculum and Assessment review in order to improve young people’s communication skills from the beginning of primary through to the end of compulsory education. We also welcome the principle that the reviewed curriculum should reflect the diversities of our society, ensuring every child is represented.

Oracy skills are important for the academic success and personal development of every child and are critical for children who use EAL, as their social inclusion, as well as their ability to understand what is being taught, to actively engage in learning activities, and to demonstrate learning successfully largely depend on their ability to both comprehend input in English and to express themselves in English, the language of instruction. There is strong evidence that indicates that a carefully implemented, inclusive, oracy-rich curriculum has the potential to support learners who use EAL in building solid foundations in both their home or preferred languages and in English (Gibson et al., 2020) and in promoting social, academic and linguistic inclusion across the curriculum (National Literacy Trust, 2020; Sylva et al., 2004; House of Commons Education Committee, 2020; Cummins, 2008).

There are, however, important factors that policy makers will need to consider when developing oracy programmes and in guidance to schools to ensure that all children who use EAL, and particularly those who are at risk of underachievement, are able to benefit equitably and are not disproportionately disadvantaged by schemes developed for first-language English children that overlook the diverse and distinctive language practices and language learning needs of children using EAL. These are summarised below. The discussion of each factor is followed by recommendations for designing oracy programmes that address the distinct challenges that pupils who use EAL typically face as they develop their oral communication skills.

1. Language exposure

“A pupil is recorded to have English as an additional language if they are exposed to a language at home that is known or believed to be other than English. This measure is not a measure of English language proficiency or a good proxy for recent immigration” (DfE, 2024).

Pupils who use EAL are not a single population of learners. They can range from being British-born and speaking another language at home to newly arrived and new to English. They may also have had very different educational experiences. In terms of exposure to the language of instruction, these learners will differ widely from one another in several respects (Paradis, J., Genesee, F. and Crago, M.B., 2021).

- Whether or not they were exposed to English alongside their home language(s).

For instance, Carolina was born in London to Italian-speaking parents. From birth, her parents spoke to her in both Italian and English and she heard both languages regularly as she was growing up. When she started primary school, she was proficient in both languages and confident communicating in English with her teachers and peers, as well as in Italian with her family at home.

By contrast, Eyob arrived in the UK from Eritrea at the age of nine. Before moving to the UK, he spoke Tigrinya at home and in school. His exposure to English was limited to a few English classes at school and watching cartoons on TV. When Eyob joined a primary school in Leeds, he was in the very early stages of learning English. Eyob had not been exposed to English alongside his home language from birth, making his adjustment to an English-speaking school challenging.

- Whether they have learnt the home language(s) and English simultaneously from infancy or whether they learnt EAL later in life, after their home or preferred language was established.

For instance, Marek was born in Bolton, to a Polish-speaking mother and an English-speaking father. From infancy, he was exposed to both languages simultaneously. His mother spoke Polish at home and his father spoke largely in English. As a result, from a young age Marek had developed proficiency in both Polish and English. He could switch between the two languages with ease, reflecting his simultaneous acquisition of both languages.

By contrast, Javier moved to the UK from Venezuela when he was seven years old. He spoke only Spanish and had had minimal exposure to English. When he moved to the UK, he had to learn EAL, with Spanish already well-established as his home language. This sequential learning process meant that Javier first became proficient in Spanish and then acquired English later. Unlike Marek, Javier had to navigate the complexities of learning a new language after his first language was already fully developed.

These distinctions matter greatly, because of the amount of exposure to English that these different EAL learners have had. While there may be individual variation within the above examples, it can be assumed that those children who have learnt their home language and English simultaneously from infancy are more likely to have had more prolonged amounts of exposure to English than those who have learnt both languages sequentially. In other words, children who have learnt English alongside another language or languages at home may have similar oracy skills in English to those for whom English is their first and only language – they may already be competent and fluent in English and reaching the expected level of development in language and communication in English; whereas those children who have learnt English later in life may also be competent and fluent and reaching the expected level of development in their home or preferred language(s), but may have fewer opportunities to practise English outside of the school environment, limiting their exposure to the language. **These pupils will need support to develop oracy skills in English and to benefit from prolonged and varied exposure to English before they can express themselves confidently in the language.**

Oracy programmes that assume that all learners are already competent listeners of English and fluent in social situations, that measure oracy skills development according to age expectations only, and that place emphasis on speaking production at the expense of listening from the start may only be partially effective for learners using EAL who are beginning to learn English and learn the curriculum through English, especially if they require them to speak in English before they are ready.

Recommendations

Oracy programmes for EAL learners should include the following features:

- For learners who are new to English, ensure sustained and systematic exposure to English in different contexts - both social and academic – to a range of registers, accents, and dialects. This should include opportunities to listen to adults in school as well as to other pupils.
- Provide opportunities for new to English learners to practise everyday language to build up concepts and new knowledge orally. Examples of spaces conducive to oracy development for children using EAL include, in addition to supportive inclusive classrooms, conversation clubs and EAL drama clubs.
- Embed integrated approaches to oracy which provide children using EAL with vital opportunities to listen to classroom interaction in different subjects; adapted teaching, support from teachers, teaching assistants, peers in mixed language groups, as well as the specialist support from EAL specialists if required.

- Oracy development for this group is best achieved overall through insertion in mainstream lessons. Keep oracy programmes that require extensive withdrawal interventions (i.e. temporarily removing students from mainstream classes so they can engage in specific interventions in a separate setting) to a minimum. Where withdrawal approaches are used, ensure these are time-limited, embedded within curriculum contexts, and provide opportunities for listening skills development and scaffolded speaking opportunities that support language development starting from where the children are.

2. Proficiency in English

Research shows there is a clear link between proficiency in English and educational attainment for learners who use EAL, and that proficiency in English is the single most significant predictor of attainment, **which explains up to six times as much variation in achievement as gender, free school meals and ethnicity combined** (Strand and Hessel, 2018).

In 2016 the Department for Education (DfE) introduced mandatory reporting of proficiency in English as part of the annual School Census using a five-band proficiency in English scale. This scale categorised EAL learners' English proficiency into five distinct levels: band A (new to English), band B (early acquisition), band C (developing competence), band D (competent), and band E (fluent). The introduction of this scale provided educators with a clear framework to assess and address the diverse levels of English proficiency among EAL students, ensuring that support could be more precisely tailored to meet each learner's needs.

The DfE scale was crucial in recognising the varying levels of English proficiency among EAL students, influenced by factors such as exposure to English, age of arrival, and prior educational experiences. By providing a structured way to measure and monitor English language development, the scale helped schools better understand the progress of EAL learners and allocate resources effectively.

EAL pupils who are new to English or at the early acquisition stage (bands A and B) typically score below the national average. Those who are developing competence in English (band C) are very close to the national average, while those who are competent or fluent in English (bands D and E) - the highest levels of proficiency - often score higher than first language English speakers (Strand & Lindorff, 2020).

These findings have important implications for oracy programmes that aim to support communication skills development. Because EAL pupils exhibit a broad spectrum of English language proficiency, from new to English to competent and fluent, influenced by factors such as exposure to English, age of arrival and prior educational experiences, it is important that oracy programmes incorporate appropriate tailored support for learners using EAL working at all stages of English language proficiency. The type and intensity of oracy support will vary depending on the specific level of proficiency in English.

Despite its usefulness, the previous Government removed the five-band proficiency scale in 2019, which proved to be a retrograde step. The statutory assessment of English proficiency should be reintroduced in line with the data collected in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, with accompanying guidance from the DfE.

Recommendations

Oracy programmes for learners using EAL should:

- Provide a structured approach for learners who are new to English that emphasises immersion, teaching essential vocabulary and simple phrases for

common school activities, such as asking for help, following instructions, and participating in classroom interaction, daily routines that involve speaking and listening, scaffolded oracy activities, interactive learning with proficient English speakers to facilitate peer learning and practice, videos with subtitles to help connect spoken and written English, age and level appropriate language learning apps that include relevant listening and speaking activities, and continuous support.

- Ensure a different approach for learners who are developing competence in English with a focus on enhancing their listening and speaking skills, building confidence, and preparing them for more complex language use, particularly mastery of academic spoken language, which often lags behind conversational fluency. Oracy programmes for learners at this level of proficiency in English should be integrated into all subjects, and will need to provide opportunities for pupils to use more advanced subject-specific vocabulary and complex grammatical structures in various structured oracy activities such as presentations, speeches, debates, discussions and oral reports to build confidence and fluency, and project-based learning that requires extensive listening, speaking and collaboration, helping learners apply their oral communication skills in practical contexts.

3. Age of arrival

Research has shown that the age of arrival in the English school system is key to understanding the attainment of learners who use EAL (Hutchinson, 2018). Some pupils will have been in the education system in England since nursery or reception, whereas others will have joined later.

Academic research shows that learners who are new to English can take more than six years to become fluent in academic language in English and access the curriculum fully (Strand and Lindorff, 2020) and that arrival within the English state school system systematically predicts attainment levels for children using EAL, with a severe attainment penalty for children arriving closest to the time of the exams (Hutchinson, 2018).

If a child arrives in reception and has the time required to gain competent and fluent proficiency in English, they are likely to have caught up with their first language English peers by the time they reach secondary school. However, for those learners using EAL who arrive during the later key stages, there is an increased risk of underachievement. Even where these learners have been academically able in their home country, they have had a reduced amount of time to learn the language needed to demonstrate that ability in English, learn new academic content and develop the language of the assessment system.

Recommendations

Oracy programmes designed to address the learning needs of pupils using EAL should:

- Provide a supportive, immersive, and engaging environment that helps late arrivals, particularly those arriving from year 9, to develop their speaking and listening skills quickly and effectively.
- Conduct a thorough assessment of each pupil's current language abilities both in English and their home language, including listening and speaking, to inform the creation of individualised learning plans to set realistic goals and target specific areas of development to accelerate learning.

- Use videos, podcasts and audiobooks that expose learners to diverse accents and conversational contexts to promote the development of vital listening skills, which are the foundation for their speaking skills.
- Introduce high-frequency cross-curricular academic language and subject-specific vocabulary to help pupils understand and participate in different subjects.
- Create language-rich classrooms, through pairing learners with fluent English-speaking buddies, and implementing group projects that require communication and collaboration, as these will promote both oral language use in a natural setting and social integration.
- Incorporate daily scaffolded speaking activities, such as discussion circles, role-playing scenarios and structured debates to provide regular practice and encourage expressive language use.
- Use age and context appropriate language learning apps and software for consolidation and self-study to provide interactive and engaging ways to further practise speaking and listening skills.
- Embed opportunities for extra-curricular activities, such as participation in clubs and societies, drama or debate clubs, and opportunities for pupils to engage with the wider community, such as volunteering or attending local events to practise oracy skills in real-world contexts.

4. Home and preferred languages, cultural relevance, sensitivity, and inclusivity

The need that some pupils using EAL may have for language support in developing oracy skills in English should not be seen as a deficit, or a language and communication difficulty or delay. **Speaking EAL is not a special educational need or disability (SEND), however, sometimes a learner's newness to English can be mistaken for a language delay or impairment.**¹ Bilingualism is an advantage and does not cause, or contribute to a speech, language, or communication disorder. Research shows that bilingualism has positive associations with attainment and is not a barrier to learning (Strand and Hessel, 2018), and that proficiency in a learner's home language can facilitate both the acquisition of an additional language and can support academic achievement, because many linguistic and cognitive skills developed in one language can be transferred to another (Cummins, 2000). If a child is encouraged to use their home or preferred language, this will help rather than hinder their acquisition of communication skills in English.

UNESCO (2003) advocates for the use of learners' mother tongues in education to improve learning outcomes and promote cultural diversity. Recognising and promoting the use of EAL pupils' linguistic repertoires can improve their social integration and sense of belonging and self-worth. When schools value learners' home languages, it sends a message that their cultural and linguistic backgrounds are respected and valued. This inclusive approach can enhance self-esteem and motivation, leading to better social interactions and reduced feelings of isolation. García and Wei (2014) argue that the use of multiple languages in the classroom can create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment, fostering stronger social connections among learners.

Oracy programmes that foster monolingualism and the adoption of English-only approaches in multilingual classrooms might suppress the use of the child's home or preferred language. Exclusion of children's full language repertoires and overreliance on monolingual teaching approaches could hinder their development as confident bilingual or multilingual learners, as

¹ Government statistics indicate that 15.3% of children in schools in England who speak, or are thought to speak, a language other than English, also have SEND (DfE, June 2024).

it impedes building on the oracy skills they have developed while learning their first language. It also adversely impacts their social integration with members of their family and their community who speak a language other than English, as well as with extended family living abroad.

As the latest school census demonstrates, diverse multilingual classrooms are the norm for most schools in England², signposting a clear need to foster approaches to oracy which fully recognise the importance of integrating home languages and English into curriculum teaching and learning and that fully respect and value all languages. Promoting such inclusive approaches is in these children's best interests and is vital for newly arrived families who are new to English. For many families, it is essential that their child maintains and continues to develop their home language or languages. Developing and maintaining home languages is essential for supporting cultural identity and strengthening family and community bonds (Garcia, 2009, Cummins 2001). Respecting the parents' and the child's choices and addressing their communicative needs while developing the child's English language skills is key (Ehiyazaryan-White, 2018). By validating and incorporating learners' home languages, educators can bridge the gap between home and school environments, making learning more accessible.

Recommendations

Oracy programmes that recognise and promote the use of EAL pupils' linguistic repertoires should:

- Build in opportunities for communication skills development in both English and the pupils' home or preferred languages.
- Employ multilingual pedagogies, where learners switch between languages during lessons, allowing them to use their full linguistic repertoire to understand and express complex ideas. For instance, utilising bilingual storybooks and storytelling, making notes in the home language in preparation for writing an essay, and using bilingual dictionaries to research concept meaning.
- Make use of bilingual audio-visual materials and resources that reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of the pupil population and integrate cultural references and contexts from pupils' home languages into the curriculum, making learning more engaging and relatable, and validating children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds, identity, and experiences.
- Make the implicit knowledge of oracy features explicit to learners who use English as an Additional Language. This includes understanding physical cues like gestures, posture, facial expressions, and eye contact, as well as social and emotional cues like turn-taking, which vary based on cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
- Engage parents and communities by providing resources and workshops that empower them to support their children's language development at home, and them to take pride in their linguistic heritage.

5. Assessment

Standardised assessments of oracy are unlikely to provide accurate judgements for any learner as they cannot fully capture the nuances of children's communication abilities. For

² Over 1.7 million children in state-funded primary and secondary schools in England use EAL. In 2023/24, 30.7% of nursery pupils, 22.8% of primary pupils and 18.6% of secondary school pupils spoke EAL (DfE, 2024)

learners using EAL this will be especially true, since traditional standardised assessments focused solely on English may not accurately reflect these students' skills and progress or account for the full linguistic diversity of these pupils, and any attempt to do so could lead to biased evaluations of their communication skills and academic potential.

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (2018) has found that bilingual individuals are vulnerable to misdiagnosis where diversity is mistaken for disorder. This tends to affect those pupils who are newly arrived and new to English in particular, who are often thought of as also having speech, language and communication needs. This is because some pupils using EAL who are new to English go through stages which can be easily confused by non-specialists with delays in language but are not. An example is the nonverbal period, when newly arrived children remain silent, listening and "absorbing" the new language they are being exposed to, until they start producing their first few words in English.

Recommendations

Future oracy programmes should include the following assessment features to ensure fair and accurate judgements for learners using EAL:

- Provide holistic and comprehensive assessments of oracy that are culturally sensitive, linguistically inclusive, and developmentally appropriate. Assessments should consider the diverse linguistic abilities of learners using EAL, including, where possible, assessment of various aspects of speaking and listening in both English and the pupils' home or preferred languages.
- Embed effective assessment methods in oracy programmes for pupils who use EAL including structured classroom observations, where teachers observe and record pupils' use of language during different classroom activities; keeping anecdotal records of pupils' oral language use in informal settings, such as during free play or lunch breaks; the use of checklists and rating scales that outline key developmental stages of oracy skills; performance-based assessments of prepared presentations, spontaneous speaking, role-play and simulations; interactive assessments of paired conversations, group discussions, and debates; multimedia and technology-based assessments, such as assessment of oracy skills using audio and video recordings, and built-in speaking and listening assessments in language learning apps that track progress in pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension; oral language proficiency tests, standardised oracy tests, and self, and peer assessments.
- Ensure assessments are ongoing, formative, and adaptable to each pupil's needs and language proficiency levels.

6. Standard English and "Englishes"

The Foundation welcomes the Government's commitment to creating a broad and inclusive curriculum which is reflective of all communities and the contributions they make to British society. To achieve this goal within any new oracy programme there must be an explicit recognition of linguistic diversity and the embedding of diverse language practices into the curriculum. This approach ensures that all students, regardless of their linguistic background, feel represented and included. It also promotes respect for different ways of speaking and communicating, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

Some oracy programmes, as well as the current National Curriculum, have favoured a focus on Standard English, which can lead to deficit views of so-called non-standard varieties of English. Foley (2018) has found that this narrowing of the curriculum meant that schools set out to “police” the forms of English spoken in the classroom, potentially marginalising pupils and teachers’ home languages, impacting their cultural identity (García, 2009).

There is a lack of recognition of linguistic diversity in many oracy programmes with failure to account for the fact that children in the UK are growing up in diverse multilingual environments. This goes against research findings which demonstrate that supporting home languages helps the development of the English language, and that full support for multiple languages leads to improved outcomes for children (Li Wei, 2018).

There is huge variation in oral language use of English across the world, including in the UK (Kerswill, 2007). In addition to their home languages, children who use EAL are constantly exposed to regional and socio-dialects of English in the rural settings, villages, towns, and cities where they live. Any curriculum that does not account for this linguistic variation within its design fails to explicitly accommodate the multiple languages and dialects that are central to children’s identities (Snell and Cushing, 2022).

A curriculum that reflects the issues and diversities of our society, ensuring every child is represented, needs to take account of the fact that all pupils face the task of not simply learning a unitary, discrete body of knowledge about English, but rather, they need to learn “Englishes” – i.e., master a local dialect as well as the “standard” English employed in classrooms, which involves different academic literacies (Foley, *ibid*).

Recommendations

Future oracy programmes designed to reflect the rich linguistic diversity of multilingual societies should:

- Draw attention to features of dialect (a matter that tends not to receive any sustained attention in many oracy programmes), assisting learners in appreciating the variety of “Englishes” that they are likely to encounter.
- Focus on register, so that learners are able to use language that is appropriate for different social situations.
- Involve pupils in considering differences between the grammar of spoken and written language.

7. Teachers’ professional development and learning

There is strong evidence to suggest that while many teachers acknowledge the value of oracy, many do not feel confident or well prepared to teach it (National Literacy Trust, 2021). In addition, teachers report lacking strategies and resources to teach oracy (Education Endowment Foundation, 2019) and feeling unprepared by initial teacher training and ongoing professional learning to integrate oracy into curriculum learning (Oracy All-Party Group Inquiry, 2021).

Additionally, early career teachers report feeling least prepared to teach in multilingual classrooms compared to all other training areas (Department for Education, *ibid*) and that supporting pupils who use EAL is one of the top three topics where teachers report a high need for professional development (OECD, *ibid*).

Recommendation

- Oracy programmes should provide appropriate initial teacher training and ongoing professional learning that ensures teachers know how to support the diversity of EAL learners within oracy programmes.

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