



English as an Additional Language (EAL) and educational achievement in England in 2023: An analysis of the National Pupil Database

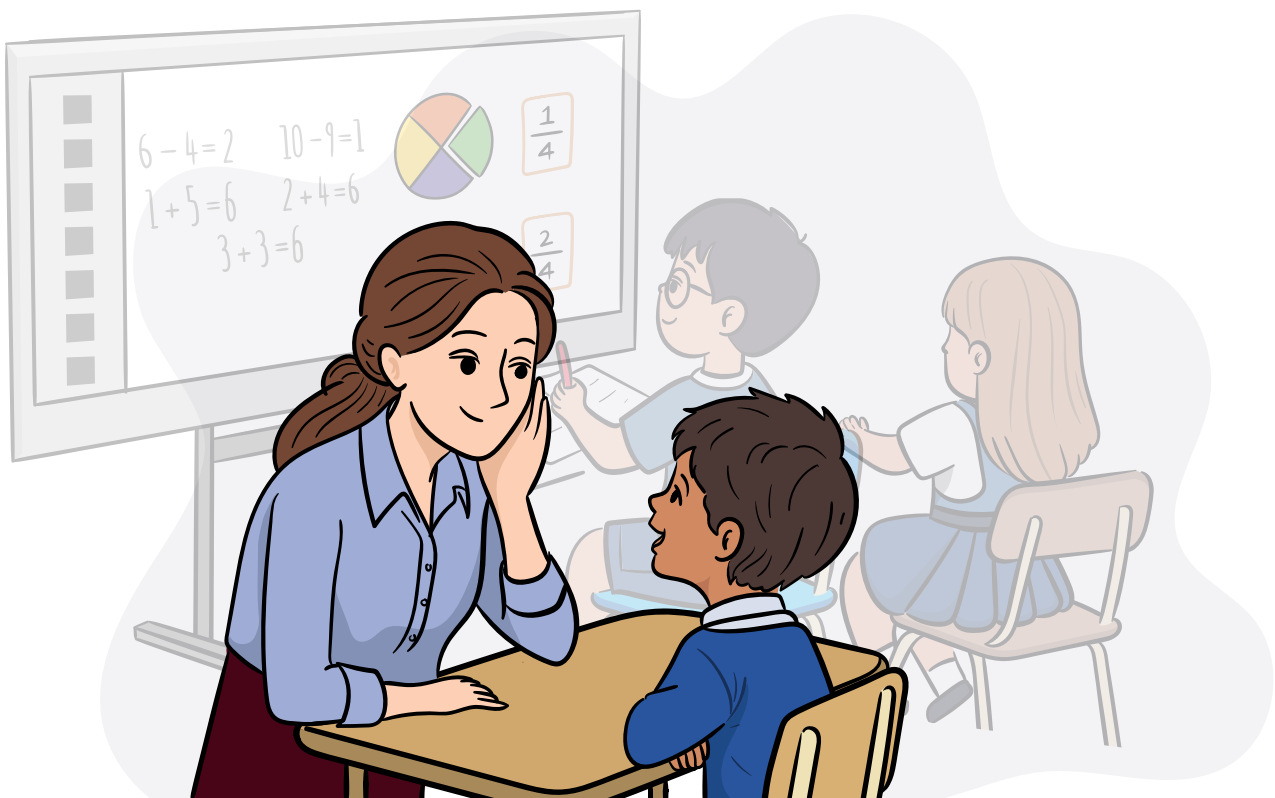
Summary report

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About The Bell Foundation

The Bell Foundation is a charity which aims to change lives and overcome exclusion through language education.

We work on practical interventions, research, public policy, training, and innovation.

By generating and applying evidence, we aim to change practice, policy, and systems for multilingual children, adults and communities who experience social exclusion.

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Executive summary

Background to this report

In the context of schools in England, children who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL) are defined as those who have been “exposed to a language at home that is known or believed to be other than English” (DfE, 2020). Over the past decade, a series of five related reports funded by The Bell Foundation and Unbound Philanthropy have investigated the relationship between EAL status, English-language proficiency, and educational outcomes (Strand, Malmberg & Hall, 2015; Strand & Hessel, 2018; Strand & Lindorff, 2020; Strand & Lindorff, 2021; Lindorff, Strand & Au, 2024; key findings from these previous studies are outlined on pages [10–13](#) of this summary).

This body of work highlights the heterogeneity of the group recorded as EAL pupils, and the limitations of relying on the EAL flag in data and in policy. It consistently points to the need for a direct measure of English-language proficiency in order to understand and meet the needs of EAL pupils effectively. Notably, the Department for Education (DfE) did introduce such a measure in 2017 – based on one used in schools in Wales since 2009 – and started collecting proficiency-in-English data for all pupils in England. However, this measure remained in place only for the 2017 and 2018 school censuses, after which it was discontinued.

The present document provides a summary of results from the sixth and latest in this series of reports. Based on an analysis of 2023 data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) in England, it focuses on the following questions:

- How large are the gaps in attainment between EAL-speaking pupils and their monolingual-English- (MLE-) speaking peers at key stages of compulsory education (ages 5, 7, 11, and 16)? How have these changed over time, if at all?
- How is the size of any EAL attainment gap moderated by other pupil demographics (e.g. ethnicity, free school meals [FSM], gender)?
- Can these gaps be accounted for by socioeconomic factors, such as FSM eligibility?
- What (if any) school-level factors are correlated with large achievement gaps (particularly looking at school-level concentrations of FSM-eligible and EAL learners as respective measures of poverty and language needs)?
- Are there particular regions or local authorities (LAs) where the gaps are wider than others? Do the data suggest any reasons for this?

A technical report containing the full results from this project is available at www.bell-foundation.org.uk/resources/eal-attainment-2025-technical.

Key findings

The number and proportion of EAL pupils in England is growing. In 1997, pupils who use EAL made up 7.6% of the compulsory school-age population; by 2013 this had increased to 16.2%, and by 2023 to over 20%.

Aggregate data on the educational attainment of EAL learners can be misleading.

While attainment gaps associated with EAL status on average – without taking other pupil background characteristics into account – are only particularly apparent in the early years of primary schooling, this masks the fact that some risk factors for low attainment are more pronounced within the EAL-speaking group than for their MLE-speaking peers.

Later arrival into the school system has a significant negative impact on educational attainment. In line with previous research, pupils need up to six years on average to attain proficiency in English, allowing them to fully access the curriculum and “catch up” with their MLE-speaking peers.

Taken together, these findings echo previous research in demonstrating that EAL status alone is a poor indicator of English-language proficiency and of language support needs.

Changes in prevalence and composition of EAL learners over time

The proportion of the compulsory school-age population in England (ages 5–16) using EAL has grown markedly over time, from 7.6% in 1997, to 16.2% in 2013, to over 20% – or more than 1-in-5 pupils – in 2023.

The gap between the proportion of EAL pupils recorded in primary versus secondary school has also changed. In 1997, 7.8% of primary school children were recorded as using EAL, compared to a similar 7.3% of the secondary school population. By 2013, 18.1% of primary school children were recorded as EAL learners compared to only 13.6% in secondary school; figures have remained fairly stable since then. As noted by Strand, Malmberg, and Hall (2015), this gap may reflect issues with recording practices; for example, some secondary schools may be changing pupils’ EAL status from that on their historical primary school records.

The demographic composition of the EAL pupil population has shifted somewhat as well. While Black African and most Asian groups¹ made up an increasing share of the school-age population in England between 2013 and 2023, the proportion of EAL pupils within these ethnic groups decreased substantially. This may reflect the settled status of these groups, with a decreasing proportion of pupils being exposed to a heritage language at home. In contrast, while Chinese pupils comprised a fairly stable share of the school-age population and the share of White Other pupils increased substantially, the proportion of EAL learners among both these ethnic groups remained very high – possibly due to continued inward migration.

¹ Ethnic groups in the NPD data are defined according to the same categories used in government surveys/censuses in England.

We see considerable regional variation in the prevalence of EAL pupils, from 8.3% in the North-East to 44% in Greater London in 2023. In most regions, proportions of EAL pupils increased by around 4–5% between 2013 and 2023, but Inner London is significant as the only area to have recorded a decrease (of about 6%) over this time period.

Looking across local authorities (LAs), the highest percentages of EAL pupils are found in urban areas, such as London, the West Midlands, and the North-West. However, there has been some outward spread to LAs surrounding urban areas, indicating that language support needs are more widely distributed than was the case a decade ago.

In 2013, just under half of all schools in England recorded at least 5% of their pupils as EAL learners; by 2023 this was true of two-thirds of all schools. However, the percentage of all schools with over 50% EAL pupils did not change dramatically; about half of these schools were in Greater London in 2023, but there were also large numbers of schools with high concentrations of EAL learners in the West Midlands, the North-West, and Yorkshire & the Humber. This shows EAL learners can be concentrated in small areas, even where they appear less prevalent across a broader geographic area.

EAL attainment gaps over time: Results from aggregate data

The following results are all based on publicly available data in which the EAL-speaking group is necessarily taken as a whole, and cannot be broken down according to other demographic characteristics or background factors. While these results can therefore only provide insight into patterns and trends on average and without further contextualisation, these factors are addressed via analysis of individual-pupil-level data in later sections.

Early years foundation stage (EYFS; age 5)

In 2023, EAL pupils were about 7 percentage points less likely than their MLE-speaking peers to attain the expected standard or above in literacy and in mathematics, and to fall within the overall category of “good level of development” (GLD) at age 5. The average number of early learning goals achieved was 14.4 for MLE speakers and 13.2 for EAL speakers. These gaps had narrowed by about 2–3% (for threshold measures comparable over time) since 2013.

Key stage 1 (age 7)

In 2023, EAL learners were less likely to achieve the expected standard in reading than their MLE-speaking peers by about 5 percentage points. EAL attainment gaps in writing and mathematics were negligible at around 2 percentage points. Over the period 2013 to 2023 there was a significant improvement in the relative performance of EAL learners in this age group.

In the year 1 phonics screening check, completed at age 6, there were negligible gaps between MLE-speaking pupils and EAL learners in the proportion achieving the expected standard. This was consistently the case in each of the years analysed here.

Key stage 2 (age 11)

From 2013 through to 2023, a lower proportion of EAL learners achieved the expected standard or above in reading compared to their MLE-speaking peers, but the difference was small in 2023 – much smaller than in previous years. Looking at mean reading scores, the EAL gap would be described as small in 2013 and 2017 but very small in 2023 ($d = -0.12$).²

In mathematics, in 2023, EAL learners were more likely to attain the expected standard or above compared to MLE learners, and they achieved a higher mean test score ($d = 0.22$ in 2023). EAL learners also had a small advantage in performance in grammar, punctuation, and spelling (GPS) ($d = 0.17$) in 2023. The average EAL advantage in both domains had increased over time.

Key stage 4 (age 16)

The data at key stage 4 show some change over time in EAL achievement gaps. In English, a lower percentage of EAL pupils achieved threshold attainment measures compared to their MLE-speaking peers in 2013 (4.2% fewer achieving GCSE grades of A*–C) and 2017 (3% fewer attaining a GCSE 9–5 pass), but by 2023 there was a small difference in favour of the EAL group (1% more attaining a GCSE 9–5 pass). In mathematics there was little substantial gap based on EAL status across years and threshold attainment measures, although the proportion achieving a grade 9–5 pass in maths in 2023 was 5% higher for EAL learners.

EAL pupils had slightly higher mean Attainment 8 scores than their MLE-speaking peers ($d = 0.13$ in 2023), and were also more likely than MLE learners to achieve the English Baccalaureate with GCSE 9–4 or 9–5 passes. For both measures, the data indicate an increase in the relative success of EAL learners on average between 2013 and 2023.

Contextualising the relationship(s) between EAL status and attainment: Analysis of pupil-level data

As noted above, aggregate data cannot provide insight into variations in educational attainment among EAL learners – a group that previous research has established to be both heterogeneous in its demographic composition and varied in terms of pupils' proficiency in English.

² For continuous measures, such as test or performance scores, we report Cohen's d . This compares the size of any gap between the mean scores of the two language groups (MLE and EAL). The size of Cohen's d is conventionally interpreted using the following thresholds: values of ± 0.20 = small; ± 0.50 = medium; and ± 0.80 = large (Cohen, 1988).

However, separate analyses of attainment in the EAL- and MLE-speaking groups using individual-pupil-level data from 2023 in the NPD have provided further insight into risk factors for low attainment (accounting for gender, ethnic group, birth season, FSM eligibility, neighbourhood deprivation – measured via the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index [IDACI] – and special educational needs [SEN] provision) and their differential impact according to EAL status. Importantly, these analyses also accounted for pupils' year of entry to the NPD as a proxy for their year of entry into the English school system.

While some pupil background factors tended to have fairly consistent impacts on educational attainment across both EAL and MLE pupil groups, those with the greatest differential impacts were:

- Year of entry:
 - EAL learners who joined in Reception showed no difference in average reading scores at the end of primary school (i.e. at key stage 2) compared to their MLE-speaking peers. EAL learners who joined after Reception scored substantially lower than MLE pupils.
 - EAL pupils who entered after year 5 achieved significantly lower than their MLE-speaking peers by the end of secondary school (i.e. at key stage 4).
 - As many of these later joiners may have been newcomers to England, these results represent the effect of their having had less time to acquire English-language proficiency.
- Being eligible for FSM was less of a pronounced risk among EAL pupils compared to MLE-speaking pupils across age groups.
- Belonging to an ethnic minority group tended to be associated with either a more pronounced underachievement (in the case of White Other pupils) or a less pronounced overachievement (in the case of Indian pupils), relative to White British peers, within the EAL group compared to the MLE group. This may reflect, to some extent, the effect of later entry into the school system in England.
- The presence of SEN was more of a pronounced risk among EAL pupils than among their MLE-speaking peers at later key stages (ages 11 and 16).

Differential impacts within each age group are summarised below.

EYFS (age 5)

- The attainment gap associated with FSM eligibility was much smaller for EAL pupils – mainly because for FSM-eligible pupils, EAL status made little difference to attainment.
- The substantially lower odds of attaining a GLD for the White Other, Black Caribbean/Mixed White and Black Caribbean, and Any Other ethnic groups were unique to EAL

pupils, as were the higher odds of attaining a GLD in the Indian group. We advise caution in interpreting these results, however, as the White British reference group was small among EAL learners.

Key stage 1 (age 7)

- FSM-related attainment gaps in reading and maths were again smaller for EAL pupils than for their MLE-speaking peers.
- The substantial higher attainment of most Asian groups in both reading and maths, relative to their White British peers, was less pronounced in the EAL group than in the MLE group.
- Joining a given school later was associated with lower odds of achieving the expected standard in both reading and maths, particularly for EAL pupils. This may – at least in part – reflect newcomers to England having had less time to develop their English-language proficiency.

Key stage 2 (age 11)

- As was the case in younger age groups, FSM-related attainment gaps in reading and maths were again smaller for EAL pupils.
- Having any level of SEN (i.e. with or without an education, health, and care plan) had a stronger negative association for EAL pupils than for MLE learners, as did belonging to most ethnic minority groups. This was particularly the case for the White Other group, within which EAL learners scored 1.4 points lower and MLE speakers scored about 1.6 points higher than their White British peers.
- First appearing in the NPD – as a proxy for entering into the English education system – in any year later than Reception, was distinctively associated with lower attainment for EAL pupils in reading and to some extent maths.

Key stage 4 (age 16)

- Being a boy, being in an ethnic minority group, or having any level of SEN provision were more negatively associated with attainment for EAL pupils than for their MLE-speaking peers.
- The FSM-related attainment gap was again smaller for EAL pupils than for their MLE-speaking peers.
- As at key stage 2, there was again clear evidence that later entry to the English school system (in this case after year 5) was associated with a negative impact on attainment for EAL learners.

School- and regional-level variation

We used multilevel models to account for the grouping (or “clustering”) of pupils in schools, and to assess whether EAL attainment gaps at key stage 2 and key stage 4 varied by school or region.

EAL status varied in its relationship to reading attainment at key stage 2 and Attainment 8 scores at key stage 4, to the extent that this was positive in some schools and negative in others. School composition (i.e. the percentage of EAL learners and FSM-eligible pupils in a given school) and interactions between school-composition and individual-background factors (i.e. pupil-level EAL status/school-level EAL status [%]; and pupil-level FSM-eligible/school-level FSM-eligible [%]) did not explain this variation. There were some significant differences by region, though these explained little variation in any key stage 2 or key stage 4 outcome.

Regionally, attainment gaps for EAL learners at age 5 were smallest in London and largest in northern regions. These gaps narrowed for later age groups, so regional differences may reflect underlying demographics and proportions of late-arriving pupils rather than structural barriers.

Policy implications

Late arrival to the English school system is a key risk factor for underachievement among EAL learners. EAL status is one of the factors taken into account in the national funding formula (NFF), but is only funded for three years. Results from this research show that while this may be sufficient for pupils who join the English school system in Reception, it is insufficient to close EAL attainment gaps for those who join later.

Three key recommendations emerge on the basis of these results:

1. Funding should be targeted to support the EAL learners who need it the most (i.e., late joiners). In practice, this would mean up to six years of funding for later joiners, to support them for the full time needed to achieve English-language proficiency.
2. A statutory assessment of proficiency in English should be (re)instated in England – as is already the case in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland – to facilitate the delivery of effective and targeted support for EAL learners.
3. Given the increasing dispersion of EAL learners geographically, teachers should receive effective training and continuing professional development, enabling them to assess pupils’ proficiency in English and provide targeted and effective support.

Background

In England, pupils are classified as using English as an Additional Language (EAL) if they have been exposed to a language other than English during early childhood and continue to use it at home or in their community.

Crucially, however, this classification does not reflect the child’s English-language proficiency. Based purely on first-language data from the national school census, the EAL category captures a highly heterogeneous group – from fluent bilingual children who are fully able to access the English-medium curriculum, to recent arrivals who are new to English and require extensive language support. This makes EAL status an imprecise proxy for language needs, and has significant implications for both assessment and support.

Research on EAL and pupil achievement in England

Somewhat unsurprisingly, because EAL status is not an indicator of proficiency in English, previous research on the relationship between EAL status and educational achievement has reflected the complexity and diversity of the EAL group itself.

This is the sixth in a related series of reports published over the last decade investigating the relationships between EAL status and educational achievement, funded by The Bell Foundation and Unbound Philanthropy. These previous publications are summarised below.

Strand, Malmberg & Hall (2015)

Analysis of individual pupil data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) in England for the year 2013 showed that:

- At age 5, 44% of pupils who use EAL had achieved a good level of development, compared to 54% of their monolingual-English-(MLE-) speaking peers. By age 16, on average, EAL learners had caught up with MLE learners.
- There was substantial variation in educational achievement within the group of pupils who use EAL. Indicators that can be seen as proxies for international arrival from abroad – such as certain first languages (especially within the “White Other” and “Black African” ethnic groups), absence of a prior attainment score from the beginning of a previous key stage, and mobility between schools – were all risk factors for lower achievement.

The main conclusion of this research was that the NPD’s EAL-status indicator did not provide any information about pupils’ proficiency in English – which was likely to be the major factor influencing educational achievement. The report therefore recommended

that the Department for Education (DfE) introduce a new “proficiency in English” measure, to allow schools in England to better assess and respond to pupils’ needs. The DfE did introduce this measure in 2017, based on one used in Welsh schools since 2009.³ However, it was only used for two years before being discontinued in 2019, and the data collected in the 2017 and 2018 school censuses were not made available for research.

Strand & Hessel (2018)

This study collected proficiency-in-English data from a nationally representative sample of over 140,000 pupils in 1,569 schools across six local authorities (LAs), with data matched to pupils’ national assessment results at ages 5, 7, 11, and 16. Key findings included:

- Proficiency in English varied widely across the group of pupils who used EAL.
- Age was the most important factor related to these pupils’ English-language proficiency. Language support was especially important in the early years of primary education, but remained crucial for pupils still acquiring proficiency in later years of schooling.
- Proficiency in English was a powerful predictor of educational achievement, explaining 22% of the variation within the EAL group.
- Low proficiency in English was associated with achievement below national averages. However, pupils who were classed as “developing competence” on the English-language proficiency scale reached close to the national average for educational achievement, and those who were “competent” or “fluent” scored significantly higher than their MLE-speaking peers.

This report recommended reinstatement of the proficiency-in-English measure within the school census in England; inclusion of the resulting data in the NPD for research purposes; and assessment of proficiency in English by teachers and schools to allow them to understand and meet their pupils’ language needs.

Strand & Lindorff (2020)

This report used national administrative data from Wales to explore the time taken for pupils to reach English-language proficiency. Key findings included:

- The majority of pupils starting primary education as “new to English” took more than six years to be rated as “competent” or “fluent” in English.
- “New to English” pupils who joined schools in later years could be expected to make about the same rate of progress as those who entered in Reception.
- There were some inconsistencies in how a pupil’s “competent” and “fluent” proficiency levels were being recorded over time.

³ Proficiency in English was measured on a five-point scale: A = new to English; B = early acquisition; C = developing competence; D = competent; and E = fluent.

The government in England has historically provided ringfenced funding and now provides funding mainstreamed into the national funding formula (NFF) for pupils using EAL. However, this funding is only available for three years after the EAL learner joins the school system; this report suggested that this is not enough time to gain language proficiency in order to fully access the curriculum.

Strand & Lindorff (2021)

This report analysed the same dataset from Wales, using multilevel statistical models to consider variation across schools and LAs. Key findings included:

- Schools and LAs varied substantially in both their assessments of proficiency in English and in the average time taken to progress between levels – more so than other teacher-assessed educational outcomes.
- EAL learners in the “White Other” ethnic group took significantly longer to acquire proficiency and had lower achievement than those in other ethnic minority groups.
- After accounting for the clustering of pupils in schools, and controlling for pupil background factors, the proportion of pupils acquiring proficiency in English (i.e. needing language support) in a school was not associated with its average level of achievement across all pupils, nor with school-average levels of achievement specifically for non-EAL pupils.
- Attending a school with a high proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) was associated with lower educational achievement, over and above the effects of individual deprivation (proxied via FSM eligibility).
- EAL pupils with high levels of proficiency in English (particularly those rated as “fluent”), appear to have been re-coded as monolingual (i.e. non-EAL) in some schools.

This report highlighted the importance of robust moderation procedures and clear and consistent definitions and criteria to underpin assessments of English-language proficiency.

Lindorff, Strand & Au (2025)

This interim report for the present project analysed publicly available aggregate data while the research team awaited the processing of our application for individual-pupil-level data. We have included in the present publication an edited version of the main content of the interim report, to allow the reader to access findings from the project in one comprehensive document.

The present research

This report summarises results from the analyses of individual-pupil-level data from the NPD for the year 2023. Building on the interim report findings from aggregate data (Lindorff, Strand & Au, 2025), the additional individual-level data now provide more nuanced insight into the educational achievement of EAL pupils in England.

Additionally, we consider throughout how these results compare to the findings from the Strand, Malmberg, and Hall (2015) report, which used NPD data from exactly 10 years earlier (2013).

Key research questions answered in this report are:

- How is the size of any EAL attainment gap moderated by other pupil demographics (e.g. ethnic group, FSM eligibility, neighbourhood deprivation, gender, special educational needs)?
- Can these gaps be accounted for by socioeconomic factors, such as eligibility for FSM or neighbourhood deprivation?
- Do any school-level factors, such as concentrations of poverty and language needs (measured by the proportion of FSM-eligible and EAL-using pupils, respectively), explain further variability in pupil achievement, over and above pupil-level variables?
- Are there particular regions where the gaps are wider than others? Do the data suggest any reasons for this?



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