

Policy briefing:

Strengthening outcomes for EAL learners who have a SEND

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Background

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 build 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. To date, the Foundation has trained over 100,000 teachers and educational professionals to support schoolchildren who use EAL.

It is important to note that using EAL is not a special educational need. Depending on their level of proficiency in English, the language of instruction in English schools, multilingual children who are using EAL may face linguistic challenges and need targeted language support – both to help them learn English and to learn all their subjects in English. Without appropriate resources and knowledge, schools run the risk of:

- Misidentifying language needs as SEND;
- Overlooking SEND needs due to language barriers;
- Conflating the support provided for EAL with that provided for SEND, despite their distinct nature.

Recent analysis of the National Pupil Database has shown a distinct impact of both using EAL and having any level of SEND on pupils' attainment. Having any level of SEND (i.e. with or without an education, health, and care plan – EHCP) had a stronger negative association for EAL pupils than for monolingual English-speaker learners. Even within the EAL learner cohort, those who have a SEN substantially underperform compared to those who do not. (Lindorff, Strand & Ma, 2025).

SEND can also be masked by language barriers, leading to underdiagnosis. Research from the Education Policy Institute (EPI) has shown that pupils who have ever been recorded as using English as an Additional Language have lower odds of being identified with SEND in both primary and secondary school (EPI, 2025).

The Schools White Paper and opportunities for reforming SEND

The Bell Foundation welcomes the February 2026 Schools White Paper's focus on raising standards, strengthening inclusion, and improving outcomes for pupils with SEND. However, to achieve these ambitions in practice, it is essential that the needs of pupils who use English as an Additional Language (EAL) are explicitly embedded within implementation. EAL learners represent over one-fifth of the school population and are present in the majority of schools nationally.

Leaving EAL learners' needs largely unacknowledged creates several system-level risks. Schools may continue to face inconsistent approaches to identifying need, particularly the challenge of distinguishing between language acquisition and a SEN. This practice risks widening attainment gaps if multilingual learners are not supported to access the full curriculum. It also undermines the intentions behind the new inclusion standards and workforce reforms, both of which assume staff have the expertise to recognise and respond to diverse learning profiles.

The number of schoolchildren in England who use English as an Additional Language has tripled over time, from just under 500,000 (7.6% of all pupils) in 1997, to 1.05 million (16.2% of all pupils) in 2013, to 1.8 million (21.4% of all pupils) in 2025. There are also 1,854 schools across England in which the majority of pupils use EAL (9.2% of all schools), predominantly within London, the West Midlands, and the North-West. Across the country, pupils using EAL are also more widely distributed than ever. In 2013, pupils using EAL made up at least 5% of the pupil roll in just under half of English schools; a decade on, the same concentration of pupils is now recorded in over two thirds of English schools.

Learners using EAL are a diverse group who come from a range of social, economic, and geographical backgrounds. As a result, there are many factors that can impact on their progress in learning English and learning through the medium of English. These can include how much previous schooling they may have had, how old they were when they entered the school system in the UK, and how close the writing systems in the languages they use are to those in English. EAL support needs to be designed to take these factors into consideration.

The intersection between EAL and SEND

As in all learner populations, there are significant numbers of EAL pupils who do have SEND. Government statistics indicate that there are just under 230,000 children in schools in England who speak, or are thought to speak, a language other than English, and who also have SEND (UK Government Statistics Service, June 2023). For those children to thrive and reach their potential, it is vital to identify them as early as possible and to provide targeted and integrated support that addresses both their linguistic challenges and their special learning needs. This requires schools to have systems and provisions in place, and EAL and SEND staff to work together on correctly identifying, assessing, referring, and supporting these learners and their families.

This is a particular challenge for older learners who arrive later into the school system and may have had no or very disrupted formal schooling. Where children have had limited opportunities to learn literacy at school in their home language, the absence of this important foundation can hinder their progress in acquiring school literacy in English.

The challenges faced by schools

Specific learning needs can be difficult for school staff to identify if the child and/or their parents are new to English. Parents may not disclose the existence of a SEND during the admission process – either due to language barriers or for other reasons. In many countries, disabled children do not enjoy full rights to participation in education. Disability can also carry a stigma in certain cultures. These can influence parents' decision not to tell the school about any learning needs. Furthermore, admissions staff do not always have access to appropriate information, guidance, or tools to support them in ascertaining whether a child has a potential SEND in addition to their EAL status.

The fact that schools use a range of tools to assess whether a child learning EAL also has SEND adds to this complexity. These tools – mainly designed for first language English speakers – are not suitable to provide accurate or reliable information about learners using EAL, especially those who are new to English or at the early stages of English acquisition.

Schools varying interpretations of SEND requirements

The SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education et al., 2015) is a statutory document that sets out the requirements for schools to provide for children who have a SEND. This is due to be updated following commitments made in the Schools White Paper to clarify the

responsibilities of education settings and local partners, as well as make the guidance easier to use and navigate. The current Code of Practice states that:

‘Schools should look carefully at all aspects of a child or young person’s performance in different areas of learning and development or subjects to establish whether lack of progress is due to limitations in their command of English or if it arises from SEN or a disability.’

The Bell Foundation’s observations suggest that there are varying interpretations among professionals, schools, and local authorities about how best to identify EAL learners who have SEND and how best to provide support. Without appropriate resources and knowledge, schools run the risk of conflating language needs with SEND and misdiagnosing learners using EAL. For example, a learner who is in a ‘silent period’ as they become accustomed to an English-speaking environment could be wrongly identified as having speech and language difficulties.

Similarly, failure to identify a SEND as early as possible may result in pupils not being offered the targeted support and arrangements they need to make progress in their learning – and to demonstrate it under the right assessment conditions. This particularly affects learners entering the system after Year 7 who are overrepresented in mental health services (CAHMS) without a formal SEND diagnosis. Disrupted educational pathways and limited time for assessment contribute to this gap (EPI, February 2025).

What causes the misidentification and under-identification of SEND in EAL learners?

1. **There is no universal tool to reliably assess SEND in EAL learners.** The complexity of distinguishing between language acquisition and developmental or cognitive needs requires nuanced, culturally responsive tools, which are often lacking.
2. **A lack of English proficiency assessments.** Many schools do not routinely assess or record pupils’ proficiency in English, which is a key factor influencing academic attainment. Without this data, practitioners may misattribute language-related challenges to SEND or similarly overlook genuine SEND needs masked by limited English language proficiency.
3. **Common school assessments such as SATs, GCSEs, phonics screening checks, and reading age tests are designed for monolingual, English-speaking pupils.** While these assessments are valid tools for measuring attainment in English, they are often inaccessible to EAL learners who are still developing proficiency in the language. This means that the results may not accurately reflect a pupil’s cognitive ability, subject knowledge, or learning potential. For instance, a 10-year-old EAL pupil may be assigned a reading age of five based on English-language assessments, despite being a fluent and competent reader in their home language.
4. **Limited use of home language assessments.** Assessment practices rarely incorporate a pupil’s home language, which can provide valuable insights into their cognitive and developmental profile. A child who struggles in English may demonstrate age-appropriate skills in their first language, which is a key indicator that difficulties may be language-related rather than SEND-related.
5. **Inadequate teacher training and professional development.** Only 45% of early career teachers reported that they feel prepared to teach in multilingual classrooms (DfE, 2026). There is a clear need to mandate comprehensive EAL training across all

Initial Teacher Training/Early Career Development, CPD, and leadership programmes. Schools cannot rely on primarily SEND-focused staff to provide the needed expertise in EAL.

6. **Insufficient training and resources.** Many schools lack the appropriate tools, systems, and training needed to differentiate between language development needs and underlying SEND.
7. **Barriers to Family Engagement.** Families may not disclose additional needs due to stigma, language barriers, or difficulties accessing or sharing previous educational or medical records. Parents and carers often hold insights that can help distinguish between typical language acquisition and potential SEND needs, but these perspectives may not always be heard.
8. **Conflation of Support.** Schools often conflate support for EAL learners with SEND provision, despite the distinct nature of these needs.

Recommendations for schools

The Bell Foundation has advocated a whole-school approach to EAL and SEND provision which ensures that all needs are reliably and accurately identified, and that sustainable support strategies are put in place for both language and special needs. Specifically, a whole-school approach¹:

- Enables the early identification of EAL learners who also have SEND, thereby helping to remove barriers to learning.
- Promotes effective communication and teamwork between the EAL and SEND Coordinators to ensure a joined-up approach.
- Build provision for targeted and specialist support.
- Ensures that learners and their families are involved in decision-making and that each child's voice is at the centre of support plans.
- Creates sustainable school–family partnerships which are especially important in supporting learners who have a SEND.

Recommendations for policy makers

1. **Introduce mandatory training for SENCOs on EAL and SEND**
 - The £200m national SEND training programme must explicitly include:
 - i. How to differentiate language acquisition from SEND
 - ii. Bias-aware assessment for multilingual learners
 - iii. Home-language developmental norms
 - iv. How to interpret assessments in linguistically fair ways
 - v. Joint working between SENCOs and EAL specialists
 - Without this, the universal SEND training risks reinforcing monolingual norms and *increasing* misidentification.

¹ Access The Bell Foundation's EAL and SEND Guidance here: [EAL and SEND: Guidance for Integrated Provision in Schools - The Bell Foundation](#)

2. **Ensure multilingual capability within Experts at Hand teams**
 - Educational Psychologists and speech language therapists must be trained in assessing multilingual learners.

3. **Individual Support Plans (ISPs) should include a compulsory EAL profile section for multilingual learners:** proficiency in English, home language use, and literacy, cultural and family context.

4. **EAL specialist involvement in Individual Support Plan (ISP) decisions for EAL learners**
 - ISPs are designed to replace or reduce EHCP dependency for many learners. To avoid inappropriate ISP referrals or missed SEND needs require:
 - i. Involvement from EAL leads
 - ii. Use of interpreters in ISP meetings
 - iii. Correct differentiation between language needs and cognition

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<https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/our-work/with-schools/evidence/>

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