

Policy briefing:

Strengthening educational provision for pupils who use English as an Additional Language (EAL)

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

Katherine Solomon

Head of Training and Resources
01223 275588
Katherine.solomon@bell-foundation.org.uk

Niall Hawkins

Policy and Public Affairs Officer
01223 275518
Niall.hawkinsbell-foundation.org.uk

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.

This briefing aims to provide policy makers with an understanding of EAL learners based on robust evidence and research, for the direct development of policy applicable to this group of learners who make up 21% of the school population in England. All evidence is publicly available at <https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/our-work/with-schools/evidence/#latest-evidence>.

Why is this important now?

The number of school-age pupils in England who use English as an Additional Language has continued to increase 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.¹

Research evidence is clear that it is proficiency in English (or in the language of instruction) that has the greatest impact on attainment for children who speak English as an Additional Language. Proficiency in English allows us to explain up to 22% of the variability in EAL pupils' achievement, compared to a typical three to four per cent explained by other pupil characteristics. This underlines how important proficiency in English is in understanding the achievement of EAL pupils, explaining between four to six times as much variation in achievement as gender, free school meals and ethnicity combined.²

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¹ Lindorff A., Strand S. & Au. I., [English as an Additional Language \(EAL\) and Educational Achievement in England: An Analysis of Publicly Available Data](#), February 2025.

² For further evidence regarding the association between attainment and proficiency, see Lindorff, A., Strand, S. & Ma, Y., *English as an Additional Language and Achievement in England in 2023: An analysis of the National Pupil Database*, November 2025. This is part of a series of research reports which provide the data on proficiency, attainment and progression times, available at [EAL Research - The Bell Foundation \(bell-foundation.org.uk\)](#).

The issues

Inadequate data on pupils' proficiency in English

When considering how to strengthen the integration and outcomes of schoolchildren who speak EAL, it is important to recognise the heterogeneity of this group and to note that there is no such thing as a “typical” EAL pupil. Schools may be having to meet the educational needs of refugee children from Ukraine, Hong Kong, or Afghanistan who may have experienced disrupted or no schooling and/or are new to English, or of Romani-speaking Roma children who have been in the UK for some time. The EAL cohort also includes children of families with settled status who may have spent most or all of their lives in England and who speak another language at home, along with the children of highly educated migrant families who may speak two or three languages fluently.

The current aggregated classification of EAL schoolchildren by a binary yes/no status rather than classifying them by their proficiency in English does not accurately represent this range of experiences. All children, regardless of their background, will need to develop proficiency in English – reading, writing, speaking, and listening – in order to access the curriculum and obtain a quality education. The recently published Ofsted state-funded schools toolkit states that inspectors must consider how ‘teachers assess pupils’ English language proficiency regularly and accurately’.³ However, this cannot be achieved without both robust assessment frameworks, and adequate training for teachers on how to assess their pupils’ proficiency.

Children who use EAL have the potential to be great assets to their school and society. Speaking two or more languages fluently has positive associations with attainment (Strand & Hessel, 2018). However, without equipping schools, teachers, and education policy makers with adequate resources, training, and data, many of these pupils will not be given an opportunity to develop their proficiency in English. This leads to them being unable to access the curriculum and underperform compared to the national average. By enabling children who are still acquiring English to be supported on their language learning journey, and integrated in mainstream classrooms, this potential can be unlocked.

A policy vacuum and lack of systematic expertise

Despite the growing number of pupils who use EAL and the vital role that proficiency in English plays in accessing education, policy interventions for this group of pupils have gone backwards. This vacuum has been accompanied by a removal of systems and support previously available, leaving an expertise gap. The effects of austerity are still being felt in the sector; following the removal of the ring-fenced Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant funding in 2011, local authority Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service (EMTAS) teams have disappeared, and this specialist support is no longer available to schools.

A lack of school accountability and teacher training on supporting multilingual children

In the Department for Education’s latest report on the Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders, only 45% of early career teachers reported that their teacher training prepared

³ Ofsted, [State-funded school inspection toolkit](#) (September, 2025).

them well for teaching in multilingual classrooms. Teachers felt least prepared to teach in multilingual classrooms compared to all other training areas.⁴ Schools are not mandated to assess language nor develop staff to support EAL learners appropriately, even though teachers must adapt to the levels and abilities of all their pupils. How to support children who use EAL is not mentioned in the Initial Teacher Training Core Content Framework or the Early Career Teacher Framework.

EAL learners and their attainment

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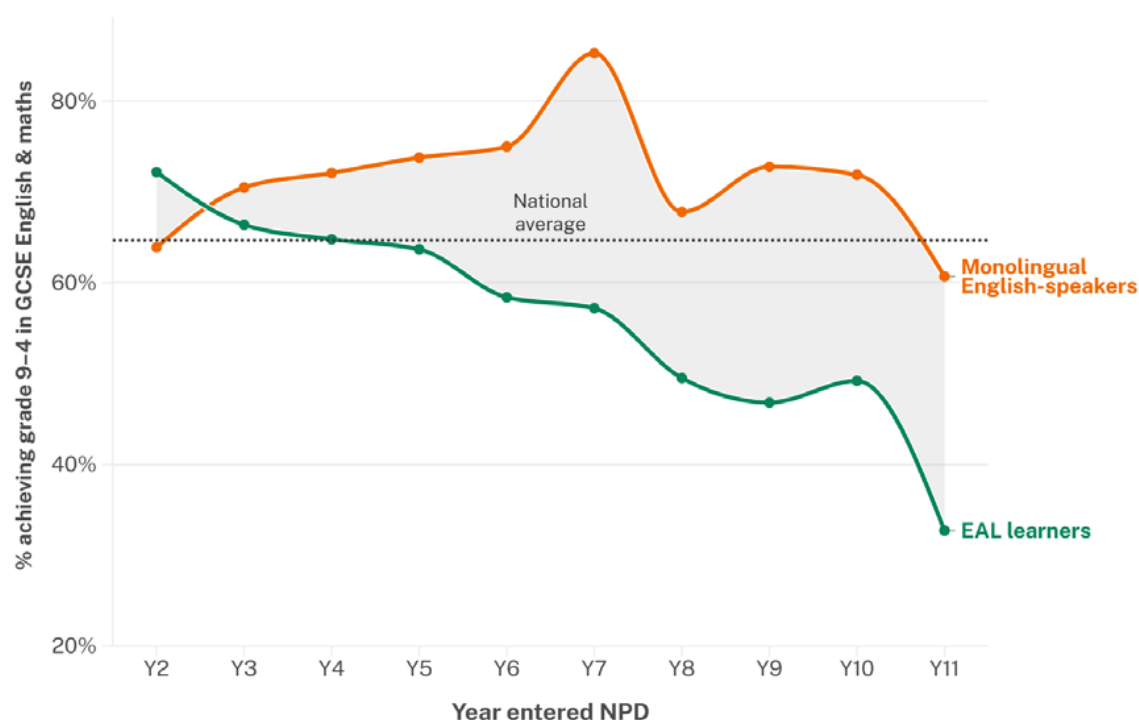
I felt a little bit nervous starting school. My teachers, they helped me... They were reading the questions out for me and started to give me some clues so I can learn better... They just told me like the first letter, and I was able to understand the rest of it.

Spozhmai, EAL learner

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Looking at aggregate data for the group of schoolchildren identified as EAL is misleading as it hides as much as it tells us. For pupils who have been in school since Reception, there is no difference in the average reading score at age 11 between pupils speaking EAL and their monolingual English-speaking peers (Lindorff, Strand & Ma, 2025).

Figure 1: Percentage of pupils achieving Grade 9-4 in GCSE English & mathematics at age 16 (2023) by EAL status and year of entry to the National Pupil Database. (Lindorff, Strand & Ma 2025)



⁴ Department for Education, [Working lives of teachers and leaders: Wave 4](#) (May 2026).

The later an EAL pupil enters school, the less time they have to catch up with their monolingual English-speaking peers (see Figure 1 above). Year of entry is a distinctive risk for pupils recorded as EAL: the negative association with achievement at the end of Year 6 is apparent for pupils using EAL who entered school up to five years earlier; the same trend is visible at the end of Year 11, where an attainment penalty is still visible for pupils who entered school from Year 5 onwards. There is no such trend among monolingual English speakers, who generally have a mean score above the national average. The three years of funding for EAL pupils, delivered through the 'EAL Factor' in the National Funding Formula, has therefore failed to close the achievement gap (Lindorff, Strand & Ma, 2025). This is consistent with research demonstrating that becoming proficient in English takes over six years (Strand & Lindorff, 2020).

Evidence shows that high proportions of EAL children in a school do not have a negative impact on the attainment and progress of other pupils (Strand, Malmberg & Hall, 2015). It is also important to acknowledge the advantages of multilingualism to a learner and that these can be accelerated if there is a whole-school, inclusive approach to language learners.

Pupils using EAL are also shown to have increased negative attainment compared to their monolingual English-speaking peers when they also possess a number of other characteristics. Having a special educational need (SEN – either SEN support or an Education, Health and Care Plan: EHCP) has a stronger negative association for pupils who use EAL. This is also true for most ethnicities, with particular cases where EAL pupils score *lower* than their White British peers while monolingual pupils of the same ethnicity score *higher* – a trend observed especially among the White Other ethnic category (Lindorff, Strand & Ma, 2025).

Recommendations

In order to both improve attainment and recognise the reality that multilingual classrooms are becoming the norm for most teachers, there are some simple and relatively low-cost measures that can be taken.

- **Assess proficiency in English.** Recognise that proficiency in English has a direct relationship with attainment for this group of learners. Assessing the proficiency in English of EAL learners is essential for schools to set targets so they can support this group's progress through the curriculum. A model for gathering this data already exists, as statutory assessment of English proficiency is already collected in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, and was collected in England between 2018 and 2019. This measure should be reintroduced in England. There should be guidance issued by the Department on how to assess EAL learners.
- **Maintain EAL resources in the National Funding Formula (NFF).** The additional funding for pupils who use EAL in the NFF has not been increased at the same rate as for other pupils. For example, the Education Policy Institute's analysis shows that since 2017, pupils that use EAL have received increases at half the rate of other pupils in both primary and secondary schools ([EPI, 2021](#)). Furthermore, the funding is not ring-fenced and there is no accountability regarding its use with pupils who speak EAL. Given the association between limited proficiency in English and underachievement, **it is important that EAL continues to be funded under the NFF.** This, combined with the reintroduction of the proficiency in English assessment,

will allow funding to be targeted directly to pupils with language learning need, and the duration or level of funding could be proportionate to the extent of the language learning need identified.

- **Generate and maintain EAL expertise in schools through an effective teacher training programme.** The Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework does not refer to the needs of this cohort, and teachers currently feel unprepared to teach in diverse classrooms. As EAL pupils are becoming more widely distributed outside of urban areas, there is a need to ensure that staff with adequate training to support these learners are similarly distributed.
- **Support pupils with high needs arriving later into the school system.** Schools and colleges need to develop provision that enables pupils who arrive later into the English **school system** in Key Stage 4, to access a wide curriculum of GCSEs. This will ensure they can continue on to higher education or professional employment as applicable.
- **Admit pupils with the greatest need at the earliest opportunity.** Refugee and asylum-seeking children are a relatively small group of pupils but face significant barriers to accessing education, often arriving later into the school system following a disrupted education and low levels of literacy in their home language. It is vital that these pupils are admitted to schools at the earliest opportunity to allow them to begin to learn and integrate. However, research shows that pupils entering school later face variable admissions practices and a barrier to entry when arriving in the middle of the academic year. Government should provide guidance so that schools are reminded of current arrangements for including learners arriving later into the school system, such as the ability to exclude some of this group's GCSE results from their results profiles, if this is a concern.⁵
- **Ensure that EAL children's special educational and disability needs are made visible.** While EAL and SEND are distinct, it is important to recognise that learners may experience both. Our latest research shows that having any level of SEND has a greater impact on EAL learners' attainment than for their monolingual peers ([Lindorff, Strand & Ma, 2025](#)). Over 220,000 learners are currently identified as both using EAL and having a SEND, a figure we believe under-represents the true scale due to widespread issues in identification and assessment of SEND. For those children to thrive and reach their potential, it is vital to provide targeted and integrated support that addresses both their linguistic development, and their special learning and disability needs as early as possible. The Department for Education should issue national guidance and mandatory training for SEND coordinators on differentiating between EAL-related challenges and SEND, and the use of appropriate assessment tools and strategies.

⁵ For more information please see the report [Education for Late Arrivals](#) (2025), written by Refugee Education UK in partnership with The Bell Foundation.

ABOUT

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 2024, the Foundation supported over 22,000 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:

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

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