The Bell Foundation

Policy briefing:

Preparing teachers for multilingual classrooms

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Policy briefing
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More than one in five pupils speak English as an Additional Language (EAL), making multilingual classrooms the norm.

While some EAL pupils achieve highly, some can have very high support needs and severe attainment gaps. Yet teacher preparation remains inconsistent, with fewer than half of teachers feeling prepared to teach in multilingual settings.

National policy should ensure all teachers develop the expertise needed to support learners using EAL effectively and enable every pupil to reach their full potential.

Why EAL should be a key part of teacher training

Over the past 25 years, the number of pupils identified as using English as an Additional Language (EAL) has more than tripled. There are now more than 1.8 million multilingual learners in state-funded primary and secondary schools in England, representing over one in five pupils. Multilingual classrooms are therefore not an exception but a defining feature of education today.

Multilingual learners are a diverse group, with different language backgrounds, educational experiences, and levels of English proficiency. They may include pupils who have grown up using multiple languages in highly educated households, alongside others such as refugees who have experienced displacement, disrupted education, or limited literacy opportunities. Teachers therefore need the knowledge and skills to understand learners' individual language and educational backgrounds, assess their needs, and adapt teaching accordingly. Research consistently shows that English proficiency is the strongest predictor of educational attainment for EAL learners. Evidence has found that it explains four to six times as much variation in pupils' achievement as gender, free school meal status, and ethnicity combined.[1] However, multilingual learners are not a homogeneous group: evidence also shows that those who are new to English, enter the school system later, or have experienced disrupted education are at greater risk of low attainment.[2]

Multilingual learners bring valuable linguistic and cultural resources that enrich classrooms for all pupils. However, without opportunities to develop the academic English needed to access, engage with, and demonstrate learning across the curriculum, they can face barriers to achieving their potential. Teachers therefore need the expertise to integrate English language development with curriculum learning.

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[1] Strand, S. (2018). *English as an Additional Language, Proficiency in English and Pupils' Educational Achievement: An Analysis of Local Authority Data*. Cambridge: The Bell Foundation.
[2] Lindorff, A., Strand, S. & Au, W. (2025). *English as an Additional Language (EAL) and Educational Achievement in England: An Analysis of Publicly Available Data*. Cambridge: The Bell Foundation and Unbound Philanthropy.

"Scientific literacy… I don't think [student teachers] realise that the absorption of English takes as long as it does[3] – and then on the outside a child could be functioning, speaking, getting on with peers but…when it comes to specific subjects like science actually it's got a whole language and literacy on its own that need sort of an understanding."

Teacher educator

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

Although multilingual classrooms are now a defining feature of education in England, expectations for preparing teachers to work effectively in these settings remain inconsistent at best. While schools are increasingly expected to identify and respond to the needs of pupils who are acquiring EAL[4], national teacher development frameworks do not explicitly set out the knowledge and skills teachers need to work effectively in multilingual classrooms.

Evidence from teachers themselves reflects this inconsistency. The Department for Education's (DfE) *Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders* survey found that fewer than half of early career teachers (45%) reported feeling prepared to teach in multilingual settings.[5] This suggests that many teachers enter the profession without sufficient confidence to support learners who are developing English alongside learning curriculum content.

For example, statutory Teacher Standards require teachers to *"Have a clear understanding of the needs of all pupils, including…those with English as an additional language…and be able to use and evaluate distinctive teaching approaches to engage and support them"* (Standard 5). However, the Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (ITTECF), which sets out what trainee and early career teachers need to know and be able to do, contains only a brief reference to EAL pupils in Standard 1, *"Pupils' experiences of school and their readiness to learn can be impacted by their home life and circumstances, particularly for EAL pupils, young carers, and those living in poverty."* There is no explicit guidance or sense of what's involved in developing expertise in teaching multilingual

[3] Foley, Y., Anderson, C., Conteh, J., & Hancock, J. (2018). *Initial teacher education and English as an additional language*. The University of Edinburgh. Commissioned by The Bell Foundation and Unbound Philanthropy.
[4] Ofsted (2025). *State Funded School inspection Toolkit*.
[5] Department for Education (2026). *Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders: Wave 4*. London: Department for Education.

learners. In regard to EAL provision, there seems to be a striking gap between expectations for teachers and expectations for teacher preparation.

Furthermore, the Ofsted State-funded school inspection toolkit includes a dedicated section that explicitly recognises the importance of effective support for pupils at the early stages of learning English as an additional language, including assessing English proficiency, providing opportunities for structured talk, developing vocabulary, and scaffolding language through teaching (Ofsted, 2026). However, the current Ofsted initial teacher education inspection toolkit does not once mention EAL or multlingual learners.[6] As a result, there is no formalised national expectation that trainee and early career teachers (ECTs) develop the necessary knowledge and skills required to teach effectively in multilingual classrooms.

Furthermore, the early career phase represents a critical opportunity to strengthen teachers' expertise in supporting multilingual learners. However, EAL is not explicitly identified within the Early Career Teacher Entitlement[7], and national mentor guidance does not set out how mentors should support ECTs to develop this expertise. In the absence of clear national expectations, opportunities for early career teachers to build confidence and expertise in multilingual classrooms remain inconsistent.

Clearly, there is a lack of coherence across the teacher development system, as summarised in the table below, resulting in variable preparation for teaching in multilingual classrooms.

National Policy	Explicit reference to EAL?
Teacher Standards	Yes, Standard 5
ITTECF	One brief mention, Standard 1
ECT Programme	No explicit professional learning strand
Mentor Standards/Guidance	No
Ofsted ITT inspection toolkit	No
Ofsted school inspection toolkit	Yes, dedicated section

The wider barriers preventing teachers from receiving EAL training

Alongside the need for greater coherence across the teacher development system, there are wider challenges that make strengthening teacher preparation for multilingual classrooms increasingly important.

[6] Ofsted (2026). *Initial teacher education (ITE) inspection: toolkit, operating guide and framework.*

[7] Department for Education (2026). Early Career Teacher Entitlement. London: Department for Education.

Firstly, while some ITT programmes provide quality EAL provision, many teachers at different stages of their careers have limited opportunities to develop expertise in key areas of EAL practice, including:

- how to use pupils' home language as a resource for learning, wellbeing, and inclusion;
- how to integrate language development into subject area planning and teaching so multilingual learners can fully access and thrive in the mainstream classroom curriculum;
- how to adapt teaching to pupils' English proficiency levels;
- knowledge about how language works to communicate meaning, develop ideas, and support learning across the curriculum;
- how to use language-aware assessment approaches to accurately identify multilingual learners' knowledge and progress.

Secondly, the wider infrastructure for EAL support has changed since the removal of ring-fenced funding in 2011. As specialist support from local authorities has diminished, responsibility for developing EAL expertise has increasingly fallen to individual schools. Yet not all schools have the capacity, resources, or specialist knowledge to develop this expertise. This reinforces the importance of ensuring that all teachers are prepared, from the outset of their careers, to teach effectively in multilingual classrooms.

This challenge is compounded by the way that EAL provision is funded, with schools facing greater responsibility for support despite relatively limited and declining dedicated resources. Since 2017 pupils with EAL received increases in estimated per-pupil funding at around half the rate of other pupils.[8] EAL funding is limited to pupils' first three years in state-funded schools, is not ring-fenced, and schools are not required to demonstrate how it is used.

Thirdly, concerns remain about practices that can restrict multilingual learners' access to high-quality mainstream teaching, including inappropriate withdrawal and placement in lower-attainment sets, potentially limiting their entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum. This is despite evidence that inclusion in the classroom, alongside effective language support, is central to successful EAL provision.[9] The Foundation has observed through its work with partners that these practices persist, highlighting the need for stronger preparation of teachers to teach effectively in multilingual classrooms.

Finally, developing teacher expertise cannot rely on initial teacher training alone; it requires opportunities for ongoing professional learning throughout teachers' careers. However, such opportunities remain limited. Recent DfE research (2026) found that only 8% of teachers and 5% of school leaders had received continuing professional development related to multilingual settings in the previous 12 months. Foley (2018) highlights how limited EAL-focused professional learning for teachers can affect the experiences of student teachers in schools:

[8] Andrews, J. (2020), *Analysis: School funding allocations 2021–22*, Education Policy Institute, August 2020.
[9] Education Endowment Foundation (2019). *Improving Literacy in Secondary Schools*. London: Education Endowment Foundation.

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

Teacher educator (Foley, 2018)

Recommendations

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

- The DfE and Ofsted should work together to ensure national teacher development and accountability frameworks align to provide a coherent and consistent expectation that all teachers develop the knowledge and skills needed to teach effectively in multilingual classrooms.
- The DfE should strengthen the Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (ITTECF) by embedding more explicit content on supporting EAL learners, ensuring that all teachers are equipped to meet the needs of pupils in multilingual classrooms.
- Accredited ITT providers, supported by the DfE, should strengthen EAL content within ITT programmes so that all teachers are consistently prepared to teach in multilingual classrooms and schools develop sustainable EAL expertise.
- Providers of mentor training should embed EAL content within all mentor training programmes, including lead mentor preparation, so that mentors are equipped to support teachers working in multilingual classrooms.
- ECT lead providers, working with schools and trusts, should include high-quality EAL content throughout ECT programmes to build on initial teacher training and support the continued development of expertise in multilingual classrooms.

The Bell Foundation offers a wide range of evidence-based resources and materials in support of strengthening teacher preparation including:

1. The ITTEC EAL Matrix - defines the core knowledge, skills, and behaviours that underpin effective teaching of multilingual pupils who use EAL. It aligns with the ITTECF.
2. ITT EAL Modules - free downloadable teaching materials for ITT providers with a focus on multilingual learners and EAL pedagogy.
3. ECT and EAL Series - free, self-study modules that ECTs and their mentors can embed into the induction process.

The Bell Foundation

ABOUT

The Bell Foundation is a charity that aims to overcome exclusion through language education by working with partners on innovation, research, training, and practical interventions. Through generating and applying evidence, we aim to change practice, policy, and systems for children, adults, and communities who speak English as a Second or Additional Language (ESL).

The Foundation works with schools supporting them to strengthen educational outcomes for pupils who use English as an Additional Language (EAL). We also work with post-16 and adult education partners to improve education and employment outcomes for multilingual young people and adults, and break down systemic language barriers in the workplace, their local communities, and society. For more information about The Bell Foundation, visit:

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

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