

Screening and standardised testing for learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL)

According to 2015 School Census data in England, 19.4% of state-funded primary school pupils and 15% of state-funded secondary school pupils have English as an additional language, an increase of 0.7% for both primary and secondary since 2014. Throughout their education, many EAL learners are expected to complete the same screening tests as their monolingual peers. For younger learners, screening tests may focus on phonics whilst older learners may complete a range of standardised assessments such as group reading tests and Cognitive Abilities Tests (CATs).

The use of screening tests and standardised assessments with pupils who are in the early stages of acquiring EAL is unlikely to yield reliable results, either when the tests are conducted in English or when they are translated into first language.

For learners who are in the early stages of learning EAL, there are many factors that should be taken into account about the assessment itself; not least the language of the test, but also any cultural aspects of the test which may be unfamiliar to EAL learners. A newly-arrived pupil is likely to be experiencing a period of upheaval, possibly having left their home country, their relatives and friends, and now having to adjust to a new setting in the UK where everything is unfamiliar. This is unsettling for younger and older children alike. The former may be starting school for the first time with perhaps no prior experience of being in an educational setting whilst the latter may have been happy and coping well at school in their country of origin and now face the daunting challenge of the secondary curriculum in a language they don't yet understand or speak. Even if a new entrant has attended nursery in the UK, their experience of being in this setting may be more limited than that of many of their indigenous, English-only peers so they will be adjusting to new school routines and environments as well as to a new language. It should also be remembered that in many countries, including Bulgaria, Poland and Finland, the school starting age is 7 and therefore younger learners from these countries may have no prior experience at all of school life, of academic learning or of completing assessments. Education systems differ greatly from country to country and therefore even older new arrivals may not be familiar with the format and content of standardised tests such as CATs.

The recognised advantage of using standardised tests by schools is that they provide some form of quantitative data. However, due to the difficulties already identified, these data would not be meaningful for EAL learners and instead continuous, ongoing assessment would provide a more accurate indication of an EAL learner's working level (such as collecting writing samples or using an EAL-specific framework such as the one from the Bell

Foundation to track progress through the early stages of acquiring English). Schools could also access advice from EMTAS or parents to assess learners' skills first language skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening as well as in maths and other subjects. Where a learner's use of first language is demonstrated to be age-appropriate and in line with expectations, it is likely that good progress will be made in English, given time.

Standardised tests tend to use de-contextualised language and are usually standardised on, and aimed at, monolingual, English-only learners. Furthermore, standardised tests which focus on language competencies often have an emphasis on grammar and, given the multitude of differences between English grammar and the grammars of other languages, new arrivals are often being tested on linguistic features of which they have scant experience – or possibly no experience at all if those features are not present in their first languages. In any case, EAL learners will be expected to access the language of the test. As screening tests are completed in English, they only give some indication of a pupil's understanding of that language. For these reasons, the results of standardised tests cannot be relied on for beginner EAL learners.

Because of the range of factors described above, streaming or setting on the basis of outcomes of screening tests or standardised assessments is questionable; learners of EAL are at risk of being placed in sets which are inappropriate to both their underlying cognitive ability and their English language-learning needs, which runs contrary to best practice for supporting EAL learners. Particularly during the early stages of acquiring English, EAL learners are building their confidence with hearing and using English and settling into the school environment. Therefore, inappropriately placing learners in a lower ability set could well have a negative impact on their self-esteem as well as giving them access only to relatively poor models of English. For further good practice advice, see the [Hampshire Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service \(EMTAS\) website](#) and also the [MESH Guide of good practice for EAL learners](#), created by Hampshire EMTAS and the University of Winchester.

Using the results of standardised assessments and screening tests for placement of learners into intervention groups is also problematic. It is important that learners of EAL complete contextualised activities with opportunities for exposure to peer-to-peer talk with strong language role models; intervention and guided work are best kept to a minimum. Whilst children are in withdrawal in intervention groups, they are away from the mainstream curriculum and are therefore missing the rich language environment of the classroom. During the initial stages of learning EAL, progress is often relatively swift so it might appear that intervention sessions are working, whereas progress might actually be further

accelerated by learners having exposure to positive language role models in the everyday classroom. Furthermore, inappropriately identifying EAL learners as in need of support as a result of the standardised tests could well leave other learners who **do** need that sort of support without intervention. It is important to remember the distinction between EAL and SEN; a learner of EAL should not be included on the SEN register purely because they are in the early stages of acquiring English. See the [EMTAS website](#) for more information about how to distinguish the difference between EAL and SEN.

There are also implications for learners later on in their school lives, if the results of standardised tests are used as a basis for predicted grades, for example. Often this can result in predicted and target grades being set too low, which not only has a negative effect on a learner's self-esteem but also on their aspirations in life. Ultimately, when used with EAL learners, standardised tests encourage low expectations of students and of teachers. Furthermore, if learners are re-tested using standardised tests, very little progress may be evident when actually learners have made significant progress – often features of grammar are not secure until the later stages of learning EAL and therefore, if grammar is the focus of the test, it will provide very little information about how much progress has been made.

The overarching question should be: is EAL best practice reflected in the test and in the actions taken subsequently?

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