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Early Language Support and Children who use English as an Additional Language

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About The Bell Foundation

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. The Foundation works with a wide range of school partners, local authorities and academy chains delivering “Language for Results”, a not-for-profit intervention designed to develop the knowledge and skills of all school staff to support EAL learners, with the aim of improving attainment levels. The Foundation also commissions and publishes research on EAL collaborating with universities and think-tanks.

The Foundation has drawn from our extensive network of school-based partners to inform the contents of this briefing.

Early language support and children who use English as an Additional Language

The Government’s mission to “break down the barriers to opportunity for every child” identifies that “there is good evidence that spoken language skills are strongly associated with children’s literacy, numeracy and educational attainment”. This is especially true for children who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL) whose linguistic development is central to their educational attainment and future prospects. For children who speak EAL, the research evidence is clear: proficiency in English is central to understanding educational attainment. Proficiency in English can explain 22% of the variation in EAL pupils’ achievement compared to the typical 3-4% that can be statistically explained using gender, free school meal status and ethnicity combined (Strand, 2018).

Children who use EAL have the potential to be great assets to their school and society. Speaking two languages fluently has positive associations with attainment. However, children who are not given the opportunity to develop their English language skills may not achieve their potential and will underperform compared to the national average and not be able to access the curriculum. By enabling children who are still acquiring English proficiency, who are a significant proportion of the school population, to be supported on their language learning journey, and integrated in mainstream classrooms, this potential can be unlocked.

This briefing details key considerations for developing language and communication skills in the early years, assessing the efficacy and relevance of current interventions and making recommendations for how to implement the Government’s commitment to developing young people’s language and communication skills while ensuring equitable outcomes for learners using EAL.

Learners who use English as an Additional Language

There are more than 1.7 million children in state-funded primary and secondary schools in England who use EAL. In 2023/24, 30.7% of nursery pupils, 22.8% of primary pupils and 18.6% of secondary school pupils spoke EAL (Department for Education, 2024).

EAL pupils are a hugely diverse group of learners, including, for example, both a multilingual child from a highly educated and privileged background, and a child who is a refugee with disrupted prior education and no or early-stage literacy in their home language. Aggregated

data on EAL learners is therefore misleading, masking a huge range of outcomes for different pupils.

There is significant variation in attainment outcomes within the group of pupils who use EAL, reflecting factors like English language proficiency and arrival time to the English school system. This attainment gap is particularly severe for children who arrive late to the English state school system, which may be because there is little time to become proficient in English and learn the curriculum before the end of key stage assessments (Hutchinson, Op.cit.). Children using EAL arriving in the last two years of primary school in 2023 were found to be almost 10 months behind their peers with English as their first language. Pupils arriving in the last two years of secondary school in the same year were found to be almost 12 months behind their first-language peers (EPI, 2024).

The policy in England is to integrate learners who use EAL into the mainstream education system so they can develop their English language proficiency without detracting from their experience of the full curriculum, and all that school life has to offer. A substantial body of evidence supports this integrated approach, highlighting its effectiveness in improving academic achievement (Hutchinson, *ibid*; Demie, 2018), fostering language development (Murphy, 2014; Gibbons, 2002), and promoting social integration (Schneider et al., 2014; Cummins, 2001).

The effects of the disruption to classroom-based learning during the pandemic were acutely experienced by EAL pupils, particularly those at the early stages of English language acquisition. Many experienced language learning loss, as a result of reduced exposure to English from both adults and peers and no modelling of academic English in the classroom.

There is a policy vacuum for this group of pupils and recent years have seen the decimation of support services. In 2011, the ringfenced funding to local authorities to deliver support to EAL pupils was removed. This was replaced with the “EAL factor” in the National Funding Formula (NFF), but, since 2017, the “EAL factor” has increased at half the rate of funding for other pupils in both primary and secondary schools (EPI, 2021). As a result, the majority of dedicated expertise and support for EAL pupils has disappeared from the system.

This is compounded by the absence of any reference to EAL learners or EAL pedagogy in statutory policy or guidance from the Initial Teacher Training Core Content Framework and Early Career Framework to the Education Inspection Framework used by Ofsted. In 2019, EAL was also removed from the Ofsted inspection handbooks meaning a specific focus on EAL is now absent from school inspections.

Research demonstrates that early career teachers report that they feel least prepared to teach in multilingual classrooms compared to all other training areas (Department for Education, 2023) and that supporting pupils using EAL is one of the top three topics where teachers report a high need for professional development (OECD, 2019).

Early years language development: opportunities and considerations

With over one million children in state funded nursery and primary schools using English as an Additional Language (30.4% nursery and 22.8% primary) (Department for Education, 2024), the Government’s commitment to improving early years language skill programmes is very much welcomed by The Bell Foundation.

There are, however, unique factors to consider in the development of new early years language interventions or in the continued roll out of existing programmes, to ensure that the diverse linguistic backgrounds, previous learning and life experiences, and skills of children

who use EAL are fully accounted for and built into the design of appropriate language programmes.

To fulfil the commitment to improving the language skills of reception pupils (aged 4-5), the Department for Education (DfE) has expressed its intention to expand the use of the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI). Under the previous Government, there had already been significant investment in school staff training and support, NELI resources, and delivery for this intervention. The previous Government extended funding for the intervention into the 2023-2024 academic year with the aim of further enhancing early language skills, particularly for disadvantaged children and those affected by the pandemic.

Two independently evaluated randomised control trials (RCTs) (an early efficacy trial and a subsequent effectiveness trial, both conducted before the COVID pandemic) have shown that children using EAL who participated in the NELI programme made the equivalent of three additional months' progress in language skills compared to their EAL peers who did not participate (see below for a more detailed analysis of this).

However, while headline findings for NELI have shown encouraging results in improving early language skills, including for those children using EAL, the Foundation has concerns about both the appropriacy and efficacy of the intervention, as well as its resources for EAL learners, especially for those children who have recently arrived in the UK and are new to English or in the early stages of English language development.

Having reviewed NELI with regard to learners using EAL and having spoken to our network of early years partners from schools across the UK, The Bell Foundation is concerned that continued widespread roll out of the intervention in its current form is not appropriate for learners using EAL, particularly those who are new to English or in the early stages of language development. We recommend that the following factors are addressed before continued widespread roll out of the intervention, and/or that the concerns outlined are taken into account in the design of any new early years language programmes to be used with these learners.

1. Proficiency in English.

The RCT for NELI included 1,156 children, 231 of whom used EAL (approximately 20%). Various types of data were collected to assess the impact of the intervention on EAL learners including, but not limited to, language background, socioeconomic background, literacy practices and language proficiency. However, the number of learners who were new to English or at the early stages of English language development, or their progress in speaking skills as a result of the intervention are not detailed in the evaluation report, making it difficult to assess the specific impact of the intervention on these learners.

This is important, as research demonstrates a clear link between proficiency in English and educational attainment for learners who use EAL, and that proficiency in English is the single most significant predictor of attainment (Strand and Hessel, 2018). EAL pupils who are new to English or at the early acquisition stage score below the national average, those who are developing competence in English are very close to the national average, and those who are competent or fluent in English - the highest levels of proficiency - typically score higher than first language English speakers (Strand and Lindorff, 2021).

The LanguageScreen app, used in the NELI program, assesses various key areas of language development in young children including vocabulary, sentence structure, narrative skills and listening comprehension.

These findings have important implications for the delivery and interpretation of findings of programmes such as NELI, since the type of support required will vary significantly depending on the level of proficiency in English of the child.

Recommendations:

- Schools should be advised not to use the LanguageScreen assessment app in isolation to identify whether learners using EAL may benefit from the NELI program. Schools should be advised to gather additional information to support decisions to include EAL learners in the NELI programme, including, but not limited to, proficiency in English across all language domains, home languages assessments, educational background, and information from parents.
- Design of future interventions should incorporate detailed assessment of proficiency in English, and this information should be used to inform tailored interventions and support for learners using EAL.

2. Promotion of home language.

Research shows that bilingualism has positive associations with attainment and is not a barrier to learning (Strand and Hessel, 2018), and that proficiency in a learner's home language can facilitate both the acquisition of an additional language and can support academic achievement (Cummins, 2000). If a child is encouraged to use their home language in early years settings, this will help rather than hinder their acquisition of English and is not an unreasonable request but rather a useful aid to support language acquisition, learning, inclusion, and parental engagement.

Promoting an inclusive approach that addresses diverse learning needs is in the child's best interests and is vital for newly arrived refugees. For many families it is essential that their child learns the home language. The current format of NELI risks promoting English monolingualism that might suppress the use of the child's L1 (first language), with negative effects for social integration with family speaking the home language, members of their own community, and extended family living abroad. Respecting the parents' approach while developing the child's English language skills is key (Ehiyazaryan-White, 2018). Exclusion of children's L1 and overreliance on monolingual teaching approaches could hinder their development as a confident bilingual learner as it impedes building on the language acquisition skills which may develop while learning L1.

Recommendations:

- Review the NELI programme to ensure it incorporates relevant content and strategies that promote multilingualism, acknowledging the value of maintaining and developing home languages alongside English.
- Design of future language support interventions to improve children's oral language skills should actively incorporate the use of home languages across the curriculum, fostering a multilingual approach to learning.

3. Language delay.

NELI has been designed for children who show signs of delayed language development, such as limited vocabulary, difficulty forming sentences, or trouble understanding spoken language. Learning EAL does not mean there is a delay in language, the child may have very well-developed language skills in their home language or other languages they know. It is therefore important that, before recommending a child for the NELI programme, detailed information is gathered about a learner's educational background,

language profile, home language proficiency and proficiency in English, so that any language delay concerns can be contextualised within the child's current level of proficiency in English.

There are many reasons why progress in English can be hindered, for example a learner may have had very little or disrupted schooling previously, perhaps as a result of fleeing their country and becoming a refugee. The trauma from dislocation can have a negative impact on learning, while poverty affects how well families can provide for and support their children.

There is not one overarching test that can determine whether a learner using EAL has a language delay. To reach a judgement, a holistic approach is required, using different assessments, observations in and outside of the classroom, information-gathering from multiple sources, including the child's family, and feedback from all those who work with the child. It is important to note that most tests that are available in England could disadvantage learners who are learning EAL. Commonly used tests have a cultural and language bias and contain vocabulary, content and contexts that are unfamiliar; while translating tests into a language the learner knows may alter intended meanings and will still not provide recognisable content.

Recommendations:

- NELI's LanguageScreen app should not be the only tool used to assess oral language skills of children for whom English is an Additional Language. Collection of comprehensive background information on EAL learners, including assessment of literacy in home language, English language proficiency, educational background, other languages the learner knows, should be recommended to ensure practitioners can differentiate between language delays and the natural process of acquiring a new language.
- Guidance for practitioners using NELI should avoid promoting use of standardised tests of language to signpost language delays for learners using EAL. Assessment such as the LanguageScreen app, Preschool Language Scale (PLS) and Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (CELF) have been designed to assess the literacy skills of those pupils for whom English is their first language. Such tests often contain cultural references and vocabulary which is unfamiliar to pupils who use EAL, which means that if they are used to assess these learners, they are likely to underperform. This can then lead to inaccurate information being used to determine if the NELI intervention is needed.
- Future early years language interventions should take full account of the diversity of EAL learners and the factors that may impact the language acquisition process to inform appropriate tailored support based on the unique profile of a learner. They should avoid recommending the sole use of standardised assessments designed for first language English users for assessing EAL learners' oral language skills.

4. Cultural and linguistic appropriateness.

The materials used for the intervention sessions do not always account adequately for the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of EAL learners. For instance, the programme regularly draws on British cultural references and practices and largely reflect the life worlds and language of white British children who speak English as a first language. The stories are drawn from the white British canon and include, for example, *The Gingerbread Man* and *Cinderella*. This means that the programme does not always reflect the diversities of our society or take into account the cultural norms and linguistic needs of those learners for

whom English is an Additional Language. The use of unfamiliar stories as a key component of the programme provides an additional barrier to children learning EAL, particularly for those in the early stages of language development. All of the above impact on the overall appropriacy of NELI for learners using EAL.

Recommendations:

- The NELI intervention should be reviewed and further developed by specialists in multilingual education and assessment to ensure the content reflects the cultural and linguistic diversity of learners using EAL. This should include incorporating stories and materials that reflect a diverse range of cultural backgrounds and experiences. This approach will not only help EAL learners connect more deeply with the content but also ensures that the program is inclusive and representative of the society's diversity.
- Development of future interventions should incorporate input from experts in multilingual education and assessment in the development of the programmes themselves, its resources, and accompanying teacher training programmes and resources to ensure that these are culturally inclusive and address the diverse needs of learners using EAL from the outset.

5. Assessment of learners using EAL.

Numerous factors contribute to a child's progress in English and their literacy development. When learning a new language, many children stay silent for some time, as they listen to and observe the sounds, rhythms, speaking practices and meanings of the new language. A new arrival may stay silent for up to six months before they feel confident to communicate in English. Therefore, it is essential to use assessment methods that are sensitive to this phase, avoiding unnecessary anxiety and pressure by not requiring verbal communication in English before the child is ready. This approach is particularly crucial for children who may have recently experienced trauma from fleeing their home countries, ensuring they feel safe and supported in their new learning environment.

Recommendations:

- For both NELI and future language support interventions to improve children's oracy skills further guidance and training should be developed that teaches school staff not to confuse natural developmental stages in additional language development with "poor spoken language skills" (sic) (EEF, 2020).
- Training should support teachers to recognise children's linguistic and communicative strengths as they play, talk about and tell stories, and engage with their peers using all the languages they know.

6. Withdrawal approaches.

Several of The Bell Foundation's school partners have questioned whether NELI's approach of withdrawing learners from mainstream lessons to work on the intervention with a teaching assistant is the most effective for EAL learners in the early years. Research shows that teachers, teaching assistants and students play a key role as language models and that social interaction between students and between students and teachers is pivotal to additional language development (Leung, April 2005). Extended periods out of class may deprive EAL learners of language rich environments where they will be exposed to English in various contexts, including academic, social, and everyday communication. Extended periods out of the integrated classroom may also deprive learners of the opportunity to access a broad and balanced curriculum.

Recommendations:

- Consider approaches to integrating NELI language interventions within the classroom setting to ensure continuous exposure to good models of language from teachers, teaching assistants and peers and to prevent isolation from other learners and ensure access to a broad and balanced curriculum.

7. Resourcing.

Effective implementation of NELI relies heavily on having appropriately trained teaching assistants delivering the programme consistently. For all children who use EAL, particularly those who are at risk of underachievement, to benefit equitably and not be disproportionately disadvantaged by the implementation of a programme that is designed for first language English speakers, training must include a focus on how to support the diversity of learners who use EAL.

Such training is important since research demonstrates that practitioners do not feel confident to teach in multilingual classrooms (DfE, 2023, OECD, 2019).

Partners are also concerned that that programme takes 20 weeks to run, and this is impractical given challenges with recruitment and retention. They worry that insufficient training or turnover of staff may impact the quality of delivery, potentially reducing the programme's impact for EAL learners.

Recommendations:

- Provide comprehensive and ongoing training for teaching assistants delivering NELI, focusing on strategies to support learners using EAL including, but not limited to, context-building and scaffolding that will help children using EAL engage in meaning making, overcoming cultural barriers and accessing knowledge about social activities that may be unfamiliar to them; using additional props and pictures to support meaning making where cultural references are unknown; drawing on multilingual pedagogies, where children move between languages as they play and learn, for example by encouraging children to share the key words in the NELI programme, in the languages they know.
- Training should also address staffing challenges to ensure consistent program quality.

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