

# Accessibility in exams for students with English as an additional language

Research and Innovation

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## Terminology used in this document: abbreviations and definitions

### English as an additional language (EAL)

EAL describes a heterogenous group of students for whom English is in addition to another language (or languages) used at home or in their community. For some students, English is their dominant language and other languages are spoken elsewhere in their lives; for other students, school will be their first and main source of exposure to English.

### Basic interpersonal communication skills

The linguistic skills used in everyday, social face-to-face interactions.

### Cognitive academic language proficiency

Refers to the academic language, both written and verbal, that is used in educational settings.

### First language English (FLE)

### Modern foreign languages (MFL)

### Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

### Special educational needs coordinator (SENCo)

## Executive summary

This review summarises the key findings around exam accessibility for students with English as an additional language (EAL) and identifies areas for future exploration. It is part of a series of literature reviews shaped by Ofqual's consultation on designing and developing accessible assessments. Other reviews focus on students with learning difficulties, students with hearing impairment, students with visual impairment, students on the autism spectrum, and students with different cultural backgrounds.

Learners with EAL are a heterogenous group of students for whom English is in addition to another language (or languages) used at home or in their community. There are two key factors affecting exam accessibility for learners with EAL: the first is a student's level of English proficiency and the second is the complexity of the language used in assessments. This review explores these issues, looking at existing access arrangements as well as factors that can impact attainment.

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## Introduction

Approximately 17.5% of students (some 623,631) in all state-funded and independent secondary schools in England are recorded as learners with EAL (Department for Education [DfE], 2022; Leung et al., 2021; National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum [NALDIC], 2012; The Bell Foundation, 2015). This group of students speak more than 320 different languages, demonstrating the heterogeneity of learners categorised as using EAL (Leung et al., 2021; Smith, 2022; Strand et al., 2015). In England, students are recorded as learners with EAL to reflect exposure to a language other than English at home or in their community (DfE, 2022). It is important to note that classification as a learner with EAL is not itself an indication of a level of proficiency in English language (The Bell Foundation, 2015). On the one hand, it encompasses students who are fluently bilingual in English and at least one other language; for example, second or third generation ethnic minority students who may be exposed to a language other than English as part of their cultural heritage but who use English as their everyday language. On the other hand, EAL categorisation includes migrants who have arrived in England, are new to English, and may have received varying levels of schooling in their country of origin and during periods of migration (Strand et al., 2015).

There are several factors that contribute to the heterogeneity of learners with EAL. Numerous studies report on the intersectionality between socioeconomic background and language, finding that learners with EAL living in the least deprived areas of England are more likely to be assessed at a high level of English language proficiency (competent or fluent) compared to learners with EAL in the most deprived areas of England (DfE, 2020). There is also a north–south regional divide: 66% of learners with EAL living in the South East and 65% in London are assessed as being competent or fluent in English, whereas only 54% living in the North East and North West are assessed at these higher levels (DfE, 2020). There is, however, considerable variation within these regions related to the different characteristics of individual students, as well as inconsistencies between local authorities in their approaches to teaching and the support provided for learners with EAL (Costley, 2014; Leung et al., 2021; The Bell Foundation, 2015). However, despite the impression given by regional and local authority data, the highest concentrations of learners with EAL are in very specific areas and schools (Strand et al., 2015).

When it comes to attainment, learners with EAL are expected to take national exams appropriate for their age. Because this report focuses only on learners with EAL studying in England, it follows that students' exam answers must be in English, unless they are taking a modern or ancient language exam (NALDIC, 2015). Some learners with EAL are 'new arrivals' (e.g. students who are international migrants and have been in England for less than two years) and are complete beginners to English; while these learners are registered for exams, they are not required to sit them if their language skills are too far below the expected level and schools have coded learners as such (NALDIC, 2015).

## Access arrangements

Exam boards have a common set of access arrangements for learners with EAL. These comprise the use of a bilingual translation dictionary and the provision of extra time; the latter is dependent on student circumstances and is only provided if it aligns with the student's everyday way of working (NALDIC, 2012; Joint Council for Qualifications [JCQ], 2021).

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Bilingual translation dictionaries (standard or electronic) may be used by students whose first language is not English, provided such usage reflects their everyday way of working. Centres do not need to apply for this arrangement and no evidence is needed for inspection purposes, unless extra time is also required (JCQ, 2021). Monolingual dictionaries must not be used; likewise, translators, wordlists and glossaries are not permitted. Reading pens can be used if they reflect the student's everyday way of working but they must not have an inbuilt dictionary, thesaurus or data storage facility.

Bilingual translation dictionaries must not be used for English language or MFL exams that test either one of the languages in the dictionary or a 'similar language': the JCQ gives the example of 'a Portuguese dictionary used in a Spanish exam' (NALDIC, 2012; JCQ, 2021b, p. 27). Bilingual translation dictionaries are not allowed for exams where spelling, punctuation and grammar are assessed. These dictionaries must not display any pictures, nor provide explanations or clarifications of words or phrases; they should merely provide the word in both languages (JCQ, 2021a). Bilingual dictionaries must be held securely by centres and be thoroughly checked to ensure there is no unauthorised information within them, such as revision notes. In addition, the translation of item material or answers into or from another language is not permitted (JCQ, 2021a).

Learners with EAL who have arrived in England less than three years prior to their exam can also apply for a maximum of 10% extra time (JCQ, 2021a). The JCQ (2021a) guidance indicates that extra time for learners with EAL is only granted very rarely. Centres must apply for extra time and provide evidence to support this; the needs of the student must be determined by an EAL coordinator or SENCo. Extra time will only be granted where students meet all of the criteria outlined by the JCQ (2021a, p. 72). Key aspects of this criteria are: the student's first language is not English; neither parent is fluent in English; the student must not have been previously educated in an international school where some or all of the curriculum was delivered in English; the student must not have been preparing for, or previously entered into, an IGCSE exam where the question paper was in English; and the student must not have prepared for any other prior qualifications in English. It should also be noted that in subjects where a bilingual translation dictionary is not permitted, extra time is not available (JCQ, 2021a). For learners with EAL to gain additional access arrangements, such as 25% extra time, a reader or a scribe, there must be evidence to show that the student's needs go beyond those associated with EAL.

## **Factors affecting exam accessibility for learners with EAL**

There are two key factors affecting exam accessibility for learners with EAL: the first is a student's level of English proficiency and the second is the complexity of the language used in assessments (Demie, 2017). This section explores these two factors and how they affect exam accessibility for learners with EAL.

### **Language skills and proficiency**

An extensive body of research demonstrates that English proficiency is the most important factor for predicting the performance of learners' with EAL in high-stakes assessments (e.g. Costley, 2014; DfE, 2020; Demie & Strand, 2006; Owen, 2019; Spencer et al., 2017; Strand & Hessel, 2018). The speed of language acquisition of learners with EAL is affected by numerous factors, including previous education, pre-existing competency in other languages, age when starting to learn English, socioeconomic background, ethnicity, level of parental support, and school attendance (GL Assessment Support, 2022; Leung et al., 2021; Riccardi et al., 2020; Welsh

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Government, 2015). For learners with EAL who have no prior English language skills, it can take up to six years, and in some cases more, to reach a competent level of language proficiency comparable to that of their FLE peers (Cummins, 2008; Demie, 2016; Leung et al., 2021; Owen, 2019; Strand & Lindorff, 2020).

A 2020 statistical review conducted by the DfE found that 80% of learners with EAL who attend English schools for five or more years are likely to reach a competent or fluent level of language proficiency, compared to only 40% of learners with EAL who attend English schools for between one and four years (DfE, 2020). This review also found that learners with EAL and SEND are more likely to have a lower language proficiency level compared to typically developing learners with EAL (DfE, 2020). Since mainstream schooling in England is delivered almost exclusively in English, learners with EAL who have limited language skills are less likely to reach their academic potential because they may be unable to access all of the course content (Giouroukakis & Honigsfeld, 2010).

Learners with EAL are impacted by their overall language skills, not simply their English proficiency (Gottardo et al., 2006). For example, work on language proximity suggests that the degree of similarity in language orthography (i.e. the spelling system) between English and the home language of a learner with EAL impacts their language-specific phonological processing skills (Arfé & Danzak, 2020). Subsequently, this affects their acquisition of written language skills and their ability to learn new words (Gottardo et al., 2006). The Bell Foundation (2015; see also Gottardo et al., 2006), moreover, found that first-language oral proficiency influences second-language oral proficiency, and the learning of both languages needs to be well supported for learners with EAL to progress.

Language assessments are an institutional means of identifying students who require support, although assessments typically focus on a general level of English proficiency rather than differentiating between basic interpersonal communication skills and cognitive academic language proficiency (see Definitions section, above; Cummins, 2008; Uccelli et al., 2015). In January 2017 and January 2018, the national school census asked teachers to assess and record students' proficiency in English for users of EAL by assigning each learner to one of five levels of proficiency (from 'new to English' to 'fluent'; DfE, 2016, p. 63; Strand & Hessel, 2018). Although this scale is no longer utilised and the data produced by teachers is often incomplete, it provides a useful insight into how teachers interpreted their students' language skills. Overall, the five-point scale of English proficiency used by teachers demonstrated that the age of acquisition and the length of time studying English are the most significant factors when gaining language proficiency (DfE, 2020; Strand & Hessel, 2018). There is currently no statutory requirement to assess and record the language proficiency of learners with EAL, meaning it can be difficult to track progress or identify what support is needed and where (Cook et al., 2021).

## **Linguistic accessibility**

This section examines the most pertinent linguistic issues for learners with EAL<sup>1</sup>. Linguistic accessibility refers to how language is used in assessment materials rather than the language skills of the student.

The issue of lexical complexity is often discussed in the context of learners with EAL because they are particularly vulnerable to issues associated with the nuances and contextual dependency of

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<sup>1</sup> See Finch and Quentin (2022) for a review on the accessibility of language in exams.

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vocabulary (Beauchamp & Constantinou, 2020). Although learners with EAL can appear competent or fluent in basic interpersonal communication skills, their cognitive academic language proficiency and written skills may be limited and less developed compared to FLE peers (Cummins, 2008). Owen (2019) demonstrated that learners with EAL often find subject-specific or technical language easier to decipher than general academic language because the precise meaning of academic language is often contextually and/or subject dependent. The distinction between subject-specific and general academic language is not always clear to learners with EAL, regardless of their subject knowledge; subsequently, learners can misunderstand items, meaning their answers may be confused and not reflect their true knowledge (Strand & Hessel, 2018). This, and the lack of consistency in academic language across different subjects, has the potential to create an unfair performance gap between learners with EAL and FLE students (Riccardi et al., 2020).

Additionally, Cook et al. (2021) observed that learners with EAL can face barriers understanding the nuances of English vocabulary and may not have the same cultural insights that their FLE peers possess; these insights can be necessary to correctly understand assessment materials. (The impact of cultural background on exam accessibility is explored in more depth in Surridge, 2022.) Similarly, outcomes from Ofqual's consultation in 2022 highlight that learners with EAL may be less familiar with 'colloquialisms, humour or customs' (Ofqual, 2022, Introduction: Background to this consultation section), which, as with item language, introduces the threat of construct irrelevant variance and could prevent students from accessing items. Riccardi et al. (2020) argued that learners with EAL often do not recognise that their confusion results from a lack of contextual and/or cultural knowledge and instead think their language skills are the issue; learners rarely ask for clarification of cultural references, thus can be disadvantaged when accessing items with unfamiliar concepts.

Supporting the literacy skills of learners with EAL is essential for their attainment. There are considerable linguistic differences between spoken and written language. Analysis reveals that written language, particularly academic written language, is grammatically more complex than spoken language (Beauchamp & Constantinou, 2020). It also uses lower-frequency words, which are often less familiar to learners with EAL, and has greater lexical density (the number of content words in a clause), meaning a larger number of words need to be understood for texts to make sense (Lintunen & Mäkilä, 2014; Riccardi et al., 2020). Research conducted on language-related construct irrelevant variance, particularly focusing on maths exams, found that if the reading level of the assessment is beyond a student's ability, it will pose a significant cognitive burden and students will be unable to demonstrate their subject knowledge (Riccardi et al., 2020). This has the potential to undermine item validity, and the assessment becomes unfair because it is testing students' comprehension and not their subject knowledge (Beauchamp & Constantinou, 2020; Riccardi et al., 2020). While this is true for all students, it especially impacts non-native English users (Beauchamp & Constantinou, 2020).

Hu and Nation (2000) suggest that learners need to understand as much as 98% of a written academic text in order to fully comprehend it. Riccardi et al. (2020) advise that unpacking academic language by reducing phrasal complexity and replacing less-familiar words with synonyms that are used more frequently in spoken language can result in both learners with EAL and FLE students being on average eight per cent more likely to answer items correctly. This emphasises the importance of ensuring that assessment materials are linguistically accessible for learners with EAL to enable them to demonstrate their knowledge, resulting in higher attainment (Riccardi et al., 2020).

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## Attainment

There are numerous factors that can impact the academic attainment of learners with EAL, including language(s) known other than English, age of arrival in England, age of entering education in England, prior education, stage of schooling, ethnicity, socioeconomic background and proficiency in English (Demie & Strand, 2006; Hutchinson, 2018; Rutgers et al., 2021; Strand et al., 2015; Strand & Hessel, 2018; Migration Observatory, 2016).

Demie and Strand (2006; see also Demie, 2017; Strand & Hessel, 2018; Strand & Lindorff, 2020) consider that EAL status alone is a poor indicator of the expected level of attainment, instead arguing that there is a strong association between a student's stage of English language proficiency and attainment. A large body of research demonstrates that learners with EAL who have high English proficiency (i.e. fluent) outperform their monolingual FLE peers in high-stakes assessments, whereas learners with a low proficiency level underperform compared to FLE peers (e.g. Demie, 2017; Demie & Strand, 2006; DfE, 2020; Hessel & Strand, 2021; Rutger et al. 2021; Smith, 2020). The Bell Foundation (2022) found that proficiency in English accounts for up to 22% of variability in attainment of learners with EAL.

Unsurprisingly, learners with EAL who have weaker proficiency in English have more difficulty in language-heavy subjects, such as history or English (Demie & Strand, 2006; Owen, 2019; Spencer et al., 2017; Strand & Hessel, 2018), than they do in subjects that do not rely so heavily on language skills. Indeed, Strand et al. (2015; see also GL Assessment Support, 2022; Gottardo et al., 2006) found that compared to FLE students, learners with EAL typically score higher in maths at GCSE. Learners with EAL are also more likely to outperform FLE students in MFL, although this is partially due to some learners with EAL taking GCSEs in their home language (Strand et al., 2015).

While average attainment figures for learners with EAL are relatively high, these figures mask a huge variability of results for different ethnic groups within the EAL cohort (Evans et al., 2016; Strand et al., 2015; The Bell Foundation, 2015). Research demonstrates that some learners with EAL from specific ethnic backgrounds are substantially more at risk of underachieving compared with those from other ethnic groups or their FLE peers. On the other hand, learners with EAL from other ethnic groups consistently outperform all learners, including FLE students (Smith, 2020; Strand et al., 2015). Learners with EAL who identify as White other, Black African or Pakistani are especially vulnerable to low academic attainment (Smith, 2022; Strand et al., 2015). On the other hand, Chinese and Indian learners with EAL generally achieve substantially higher than all other users of EAL (Smith, 2020). Hence, there appears to be a pattern of intersectionality between ethnicity and varying levels of attainment for learners with EAL (Strand et al., 2015).

There is also a relationship between the first language spoken, other than English, and Attainment 8 scores<sup>2</sup> (Demie, 2013; Strand et al., 2015). At GCSE, learners whose first language is Spanish, Russian or Italian typically have better outcomes than FLE speakers, whereas learners whose first language is Romanian, Latvian, Lithuanian or Slovak tend to have significantly lower Attainment 8 scores (Strand et al., 2015). Data also indicates the existence of an ethnic–linguistic relationship with achievement; for example, within the Black African ethnic group, first language Portuguese, Somali or Lingala speakers have lower outcomes at GCSE than speakers with other first

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<sup>2</sup> Attainment 8 is a way of measuring how well pupils do at Key Stage 4 using the results of eight GCSE subjects (including English and Maths).

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languages, as well as Black African FLE students (Smith, 2020; Strand, et al., 2015; The Bell Foundation, 2015).

Finally, it is worth noting, as Strand et al. (2015) observed, that some schools are better than others at facilitating the progress of learners with EAL and this directly impacts attainment. EAL is not a subject in its own right, meaning it is not taught in schools and it receives limited financial or resource support (Smith, 2022). Although local authorities receive some funding to support learners with EAL during their first three years of education in England, this money is not ring-fenced and schools are not held accountable for how the money is spent (Leung et al., 2021). Consequently, learners with EAL can receive different levels of support – some schools provide EAL coordinators whereas others do not – resulting in different educational experiences, which can impact their attainment (Demie, 2017; Leung et al., 2021).

## **Pedagogical suggestions**

High-stakes testing can impact pedagogical approaches and focus teachers' attention on preparing students for exams, instead of providing learners of EAL with a rounded educational and language experience (Baak et al., 2020; Giouroukakis & Honigsfeld, 2010). Historically, there has been a concern that learners with EAL should learn English as quickly as possible (Costley, 2014). For many students, this has meant prioritising basic interpersonal and communication skills and an understanding of the structures of English to enable them to navigate a range of social situations, at the expense of gaining cognitive academic language proficiency, which is necessary for accessing the curriculum and assessment materials (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004; Costley, 2014). Owen (2019) argues that exposure to academic language is fundamental for increasing the breadth of a student's vocabulary and that possession of a well-developed vocabulary, which is not subject specific, is essential for learners with EAL to be successful in assessments. As such, it is important for language in assessments to be consistent across subjects (Finch & Quentin, 2022).

In addition, vocabulary and everyday lexis may be unfamiliar in a cultural context to learners with EAL (Owen, 2019), and Giouroukakis and Honigsfeld (2010) advise that a culturally responsive pedagogy, which bridges home and academic cultures, has the potential to increase attainment. Finally, because EAL is not treated as a subject in the same way as other MFL, it is not given specified space in the timetable and students cannot gain a qualification in it. This impacts the funding and amount of classroom support provided to students (Cook et al., 2021; Costley, 2014; Leung et al., 2021). Because EAL provision underpins all subjects, it is important to recognise that the challenges faced by learners with EAL cannot be resolved at any one point; learners with EAL require personalised, ongoing support throughout their education to progress and achieve their full potential in assessments (Smith, 2022).

## **Conclusions**

Currently, there are two access arrangements available to learners with EAL: the use of a translation dictionary and extra time. However, these are only available to students who meet the full criteria, and the provision of extra time is very rare (JCQ, 2021). The evidence suggests that English language proficiency has the greatest impact on attainment for learners with EAL. When it comes to exam accessibility, intersections between language proficiency, ethnicity, first language and cultural background can have a significant impact on these learners. If the language used in assessments is not at the appropriate level, learners with EAL will be unable to access assessment materials; hence, they will be unable to demonstrate their knowledge.

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## Recommendations for further exploration

The following suggestions are based on a rapid review of literature and do not form definitive recommendations for AQA to implement; rather, they are points that may be of interest for further exploration.

- Steps must be taken to ensure that language in assessments is unpacked and made accessible to learners with EAL; this, in turn, will benefit all learners. Linguistic, syntactical and grammatical sensitivity should be a fundamental element of the item-writing process.
- It may be that EAL specialists could support item writing by reviewing assessment materials to ensure they are appropriate for learners with EAL.

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