



 Pathways

Revised
and updated
2017

A Guide to Supporting EAL Learners

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Who is this guide for?

Teachers, headteachers, and all those working specifically with children learning EAL, and local education authority support services in primary schools.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

EAL learners and mainstream education

The term English as an additional language (EAL) is commonly used in mainstream UK education to describe children who speak one or more languages in the home and who are learning much of their English in an educational setting. The term English as a second language (ESL) is used widely internationally, however, there has been criticism of the term for the implication that English is the second language when, for many children, it is actually their third or fourth language. Children learning EAL/ESL are often also known as 'bilingual'. In this guide, the term 'bilingual learner' has been adopted to mean children who have at least two languages in their repertoire, but who may not have equal competence in each language.

The percentage of children in our primary schools who speak English as an additional language has risen from 18.1% in 2013 to 20.1% in 2015.² Most of these children belong to well-established ethnic minority communities, and have been born and educated in the UK. EAL support is typically concentrated at key stages 1 and 2, those in the early stages of learning English (current funding is for the first three years of learning English), under the assumption that bilingual learners will catch up with their monolingual peers and will then require similar teaching and learning experiences. However, the features of academic language need to be taught explicitly if EAL pupils are to achieve as well as their monolingual peers as their language develops.

“One in five pupils in primary schools in England is learning EAL.”¹



Key messages

- Established good practice for pupils learning EAL is largely good practice for all pupils. Teachers should explicitly model language structures and patterns.
- Initial whole-school processes for assessment of language, learning and pastoral needs on entry is crucial as is developing a welcoming ethos that reflects diversity and culture.
- Children who are learning EAL will learn more quickly alongside fluent users of English who can provide good language and learning role models.
- Research shows that it can be important to encourage new arrivals to write both in English and their first language, where appropriate, and to have access to bilingual resources and first language texts; this will increase the speed of their English proficiency.
- Learning EAL should not be considered to be a Special Educational Need (SEN).
- Test scores will not accurately reflect the potential of a pupil who is in the early stages of learning EAL and should not therefore be used as the main criterion for placing the pupil in a teaching group. Learn about their previous education and ability in their first language.

Background research

Figures from the Department for Education show that pupils whose first language was English outperformed those whose first language was not English in all four elements of key stage 1,³ although there are important differences between children from different backgrounds and some are very successful. (See [Further reading](#) for more information). All schools, but in particular those with large numbers of children learning EAL, face the challenge of finding effective ways to raise the levels of achievement in language-related subjects, as well as in other subjects for those learners. For teachers, it is essential not to conflate the surface social 'playground' conversational English, Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) with the secured English language ability necessary for academic progress, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). The distinction between BICS and CALP, first proposed by Cummins (1979)⁴ was later elaborated into a new model of communicative proficiency, which analyses communication along two dimensions: the first one refers to the amount of contextual support that is available; and the other one refers to the range of cognitive demands that are involved in communicative tasks (see Figure 1). Activities which take place in the classroom are often cognitively demanding as well as context-reduced (top right quadrant), which makes these particularly challenging, by comparison with language used in the playground (bottom left quadrant) (see also Gibbons (1991),⁵ for the distinction between playground language and classroom language). Hal et al.⁶ elaborates on this model demonstrating that EAL pupils need to be supported with work concentrated in the top left quadrant as their language develops, so that they can eventually operate successfully in the top right quadrant where academic literacy sits.

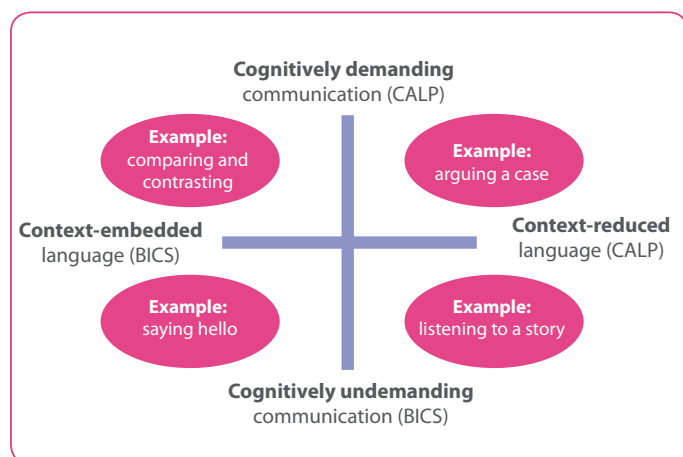


Figure 1 The Cummins framework

Cognitive benefits

While a considerable amount of research has been carried out into the challenges faced by children learning EAL, it is less well known that there are also important cognitive benefits of being brought up bilingual. Bilingual learners demonstrate an advantage over monolingual learners in non-verbal tasks requiring attentional control, such as card sorting tasks where children need to select figures on cards according to shape and then colour.⁷ Bilingual learners are better at switching from one instruction to the next, possibly because they are used to juggling two languages and suppressing one language whilst using the other.

Vocabulary

Bilingual learners often have a smaller vocabulary in each language than monolinguals do,⁸ and do not always have a translation equivalent for each English word in their other language, although the total vocabulary will be comparable. So, teachers will need to be aware of the fact that subtle conceptual distinctions, such as the difference between a *cup* and a *mug*, may need to be taught as they may not exist in the child's first language(s). Teachers should also be mindful that some words in English have more than one meaning in different contexts, such as *table*.

Learner-to-learner communication

Teachers are often fearful about allowing children to communicate in a language they themselves do not speak.⁹ However, studies have highlighted the increase in motivation that young bilingual learners demonstrate when encouraged to speak with each other, for example, in Bengali, as in Kenner's (2010) research in southern England.¹⁰

Code switching

Baker (2006)¹¹ suggests that code switching (the use of two or more languages in one conversation or even one sentence) may be the most 'personally efficient manner' of communicating for bilingual learners, but despite recent research demonstrating how useful it can be, it is often not accepted by teachers in the classroom and policy-makers.¹²

Support in the classroom

Assessing a new pupil

Established good practice for pupils learning EAL is largely good practice for all pupils. Schools which are serious about knowing their pupils well will know the value of initial whole-school processes for assessment on entry. This includes an initial family interview, buddying with an able English speaker (or a bilingual learner with the same first language) and introduction to the school. The basic entry questions about how long/if the pupil has been educated, ability in their home language, cultural norms and expectations regarding education, personal interests and beliefs, are all essential knowledge to know how and what to plan in the English classroom.

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Placing a new arrival in an appropriate class or group:

Children who are learning EAL will learn more quickly alongside fluent users of English who can provide good language and learning role models.

If possible, place the pupil in a class or group that includes a pupil who speaks the same language.

A child with little or no previous experience of schooling needs careful consideration. It may seem appropriate initially to place them in the year below their chronological age or in a lower group. However, there can be disadvantages to such a strategy. Research shows that maintaining an age-appropriate curriculum and securing high cognitive challenge are critical to progress for children learning EAL. Therefore, it is important to differentiate lessons to enable access according to pupils' needs. Use visuals, graphic organisers and practical activities alongside clear language patterns for pupils to express understanding. See <https://eal.britishcouncil.org/>

Learning EAL should not be considered to be a Special Educational Need (SEN) and bilingual learners should not be automatically identified for SEN support, as this is likely to be inappropriate to their needs. Avoid placing children learning EAL in groups with low-achieving children or with children with SEN. Assessment of SEN is complex and should not be undertaken too soon after the child arrives in school.

During independent and group-working sessions, ensure that the child is included in groups that can provide good role models in terms of language and learning. This is in order to create the best fit for their language and learning needs.

Test scores will not accurately reflect the potential of a pupil who is in the early stages of learning English as an additional language and therefore should not be used as the main criterion for placing the pupil in a teaching group. Initial assessment on pupil's previous education and ability in their home language is important in providing appropriate teaching and learning.

Identify the prior knowledge required to access lessons and ensure this is in place so that pupils from a different educational background can access the lesson.

Build on what pupils bring with them, e.g. in geography draw on their knowledge of the capital, rivers, seas, mountains and deserts of the country they come from.



Avoid automatically placing new arrivals with low-achieving children or children with SEN.



Planning lessons

When planning lessons, it is useful to ensure you include episodes of exploratory talk, to scaffold listening and to ensure modelling by able speakers takes place. Language that is needed for various tasks also needs to be planned and modelled by the teacher.

Plan episodes of exploratory talk — James Britton's phrase 'reading and writing float on a sea of talk' (1983)¹³ underpins good English practice. Allow new arrivals to adopt a silent period and 'float' on good-quality models provided by their peers, before they dive in themselves. Once they have acquired playground talk, students need to be supported in understanding the difference between spoken and written English.

Build in thinking and discussion time in small groups/pairs prior to whole class discussion. See below for guidance on how materials need to be used:

1. [Modelling of language: Tower Hamlets Progression in Language Structures](#)
2. [The use of key visuals, talk organisers and/or graphic organisers.](#)

Scaffolding listening — teachers are expert in the uses of word banks of conjunctions, powerful verbs and subject-specific language to support writing. Scaffolding listening for learners of EAL is also useful. It is helpful to identify some of the most complex listening activities planned in English lessons; provide images of key concepts for students to listen out for and mark off on a tick list or bingo sheet. One-way listening, such as audio, instructions and lectures, generally provides the biggest challenge.

Modelling — just as there is a clear argument for the importance of models of able speakers, children learning EAL need constant exposure to models of different writing genres to support progress.

For practical suggestions, see *Learning and Teaching for Bilingual Children in the Primary Years* (DfES 2006):¹⁴

- Unit 1: Planning and Assessment for Language and Learning
- Unit 2 : (two booklets): Creating the Learning Culture: Making it Work in the Classroom.

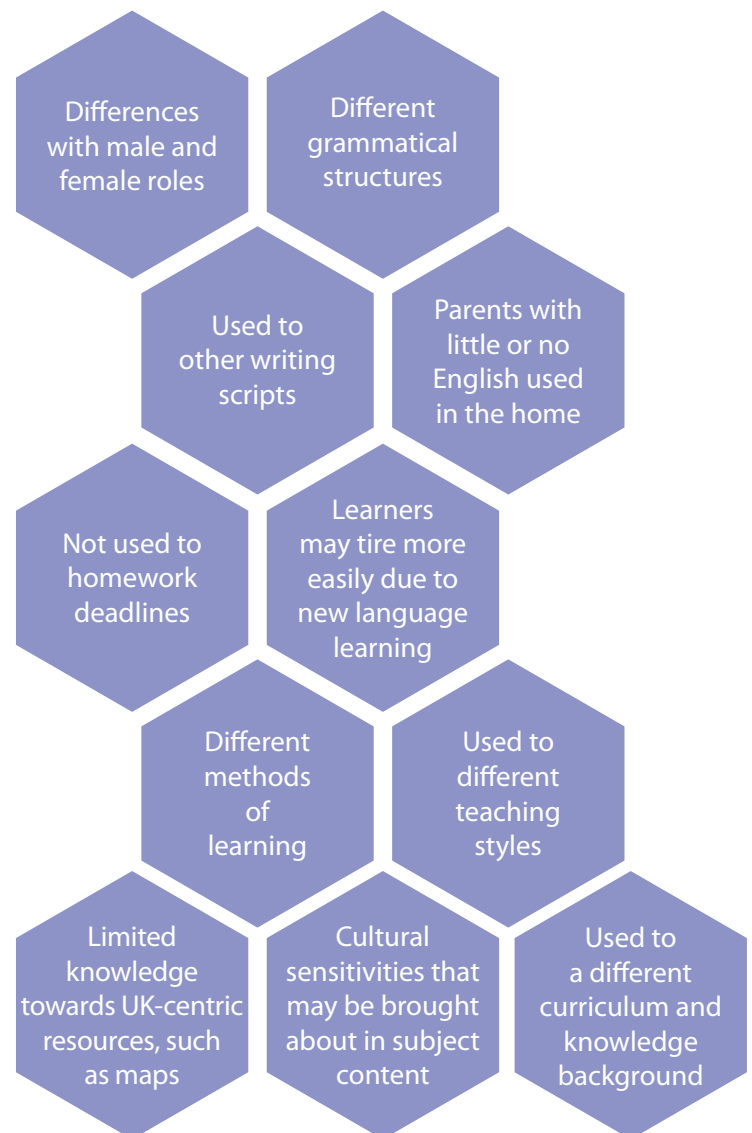


Figure 2 Some common barriers to learning



Tips for putting it into practice¹⁵

Help with settling in

- Introduce yourself and write your name down for the new pupil, if the pupil is literate. Checking pronunciation of child's name and preferred name is also important.
- Allow the pupil plenty of listening time. Do not worry if they do not say much at first.
- Concentrate on communication at first, rather than correction. Involve the pupil in using the language from an early stage. As the pupil's confidence in English increases, provide constructive feedback to help the pupil learn from their mistakes.
- Make the pupil feel included by involving them in routine tasks.
- Show the meaning of any instructions to the pupil/class, for example, stand up, sit down.
- Encourage their peers to assist where appropriate, for example in explaining tasks and encourage the class to say hello in the new pupil's language.

Resources

- Bilingual and/or picture dictionaries can be useful.
- Audio resources provide opportunities for listening to the sounds and patterns in English.
- Use visual support in the form of photographs, artefacts, films, software, etc. to help with understanding. Presenting information using graphic organisers, such as pie charts, graphs, pictograms, tables and grids, can help with comprehension by reducing the amount of language needed.

Home support and learning

- Where possible, encourage parents and carers to support home-learning tasks.
- Encourage the pupil to create their own word lists.

Planning implications

- Include curriculum links to the culture and language of new pupils, where possible.
- Ensure you plan meaningful activities that will allow the pupil to feel integrated into the class, while still differentiating at the appropriate level.
- Plan opportunities for the pupil to repeat the language and learning in context, such as through group work.
- Where possible, pair the child with a proficient speaker of their first language to help with content learning.
- Ensure you provide support for learner independence by using scaffolding techniques, such as writing frames; word banks and sentence banks to model the language structures; and key vocabulary to be learned.
- Remember that pupils may not be familiar with the English alphabet or even reading from left to right, and so may need help with handwriting and capital and lower case letters.



Plan opportunities for visual learning.

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Features of classrooms with strong EAL support based on research evidence:

Enthusiastic teachers who are positive about the benefits of first language (also known as L1 or mother tongue) use in the classroom and aim to prevent language loss.¹⁶

Children being allowed to be silent.¹⁷

Using the L1 more extensively in Foundation and key stage 1, especially in schools with a majority of one heritage language.¹⁸

Lots of one-to-one interaction in the classroom.¹⁹

Planned peer activities.²⁰

Good resources available.²¹

Challenges in language learning

Recognising the challenges

The pupils' facility with 'playground' English sometimes misleads teachers into thinking that the pupils understand and can produce more than is actually the case. Academic English can take much longer to develop and therefore needs to be planned for, explicitly taught and learning reinforced in meaningful and purposeful contexts. It is widely accepted²² that it takes second learners approximately two years to achieve a functional social use of a second language,

but four to seven years to achieve a level of academic linguistic proficiency comparable to monolingual English speaking peers. Cameron and Besser (2004)²³ highlight the need to teach academic writing and key features of English grammar that are critical for children learning EAL.

Pupils learning EAL in your classes are likely to be at different points along a continuum of experience in learning English: new, becoming familiar, growing in confidence and fluent users of English. Schools are required to provide a code from A to E to indicate where their EAL pupils are in their learning of English. (See below for descriptors).

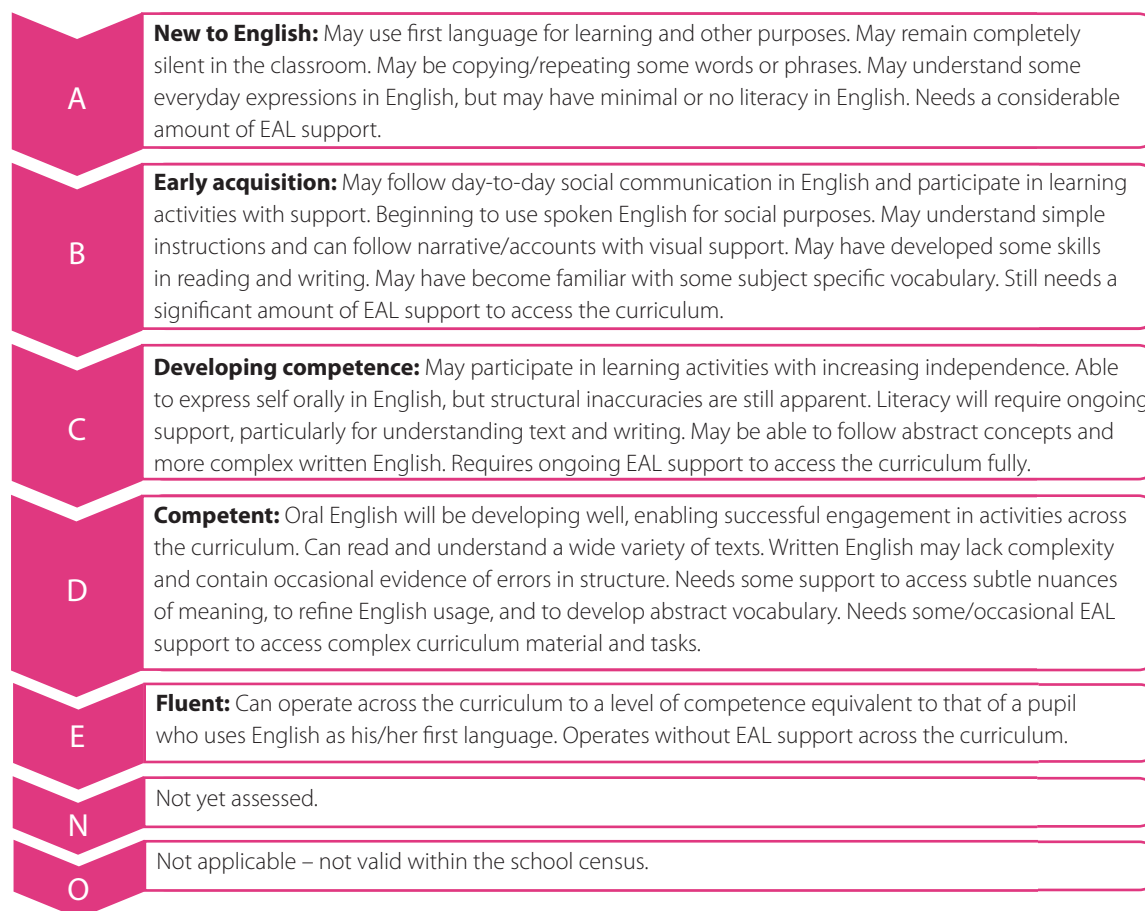


Figure 3 The continuum of experience in learning English

Parents and community: Supporting pupils' learning

Parents, carers and families are the first educators of their children within the community and all are co-investors with schools in raising attainment. When schools adopt the following three-pronged approach, positive engagement often follows:

- **Inform:** work towards a shared understanding of expectations, curriculum, assessment and testing arrangements, marking policy and school tracking systems.
- **Consult:** seek parent and community views and wishes, and act on them where feasible.

- **Involve:** actively engage parents and community in raising attainment and closing achievement gaps by explaining the progress made to date, celebrating achievements and setting attainable goals, which are shared with parents and pupils in parent- and pupil-friendly language. Where parents have little or no English, then seek ways to make parents feel welcome and part of the community. Adult English workshops can help open communication channels. (See [Further reading](#) for more information).



Seek ways to make parents and family feel part of the school community.

Funding

In 2011, the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant was mainstreamed into the Direct Schools Grant (DSG) and schools were allowed freedom over its use. The School Finance Regulations were, however, amended to: 'enable LAs to retain funding centrally within DSG for services which support schools in narrowing achievement gaps for under-performing ethnic groups and in meeting the specific needs of bilingual learners'.²⁴

From April 2013, an 'EAL factor' can be included in local funding formulae for schools, but this factor is limited to bilingual learners who have been enrolled in English schools for a maximum of three years.

Pupil portraits

Anna

Anna is nine years old. She was born in Poland and Polish is her first language. She was admitted to a small primary school on the edge of a small town in September 2003. Anna was the only pupil with English as an additional language at the school. Staff at the school had no recent experience of children learning EAL.

Initially, Anna watched everything intently. She watched her teacher and her peers for visual clues and copied the actions of her peers. She seemed very keen to participate as far as she was able. She responded very well to instructions supported by gestures, visual clues and examples set by peers. The other children were encouraged to show Anna what to do through their actions and examples of work. They were also encouraged to talk to her normally, but not to bombard her with too much attention or questions.

Anna appeared nervous and self-conscious. She was willing to participate but was wary about her ability to join in the conversations of her peers. Fortunately, thought had been given to where Anna would sit in the class and with whom she should be grouped. She was placed in groups and paired with children who could present a good model of language and behaviour.

Anna's teacher was also anxious when Anna was first admitted. She was a very experienced teacher of monolingual English speaking children, however she was initially concerned that she would not be able to meet Anna's needs adequately. She was apprehensive about being able to spend a sufficient amount of time talking to Anna. In addition, she felt uneasy that she would not be able to teach an appropriate curriculum that would meet Anna's language and general learning needs.

Anna's teacher adapted her general approach as a teacher. She increasingly used more visual materials, gestures, actions and concrete referents when speaking to Anna and in a whole class situation. She organised activities of various kinds that were both cognitively challenging, whilst being less linguistically demanding. She also organised collaborative group activities whereby Anna was grouped with very able peers.

Without the pressure to speak, Anna learnt quickly and became familiar with everyday classroom commands and instructions. She always checked her understanding though by watching the other children in her class before responding. By the end of her first term at the school, she began to produce single word utterances and occasionally used a few, short, everyday phrases.

© 2004 NALDIC/Peta Ullmann



Amal

Amal is seven years old and was born in England of Turkish parents. Her mother has very limited English skills. Her father is more competent in speaking English at a conversational level. The school Amal attends has 260 children on roll, of whom 11% speak English as an additional language and come from a variety of different language and cultural backgrounds.

When Amal first arrived in the Early Years class, she had a very limited understanding of basic everyday English. Amal went through a silent period of some four to six months where she was content just to watch and listen to her class mates. While not appearing uncomfortable or distressed, she demonstrated little expression or emotion, which made it difficult for staff to gauge her feelings or level of understanding regarding her new learning environment. Her attendance was somewhat erratic to begin with and this had repercussions in establishing class routines and practices for her to follow. Both her class teacher and the teaching assistant were very experienced in working with pupils in the early stages of learning English and, gradually, Amal settled into school life. The school's specialist EAL teaching assistant also worked with Amal, supporting her individually and within small groups of native English speakers, both in class and on a withdrawal basis. The general objectives, planned in partnership with the class teacher and Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS) Advisory Teacher, were to help Amal:

- communicate and interact with her peers
- feel confident enough to attempt speech
- build up a basic vocabulary to enable her to function in the classroom
- follow simple instructions and fulfil basic tasks.

These objectives were addressed through supported tasks and structured play activities. These included turn-taking, copying, and repetitive and accumulative listening games. By the end of her first year, Amal had acquired a basic vocabulary covering body parts, colours, 2D shapes and some letter sounds. She was using isolated words and some 'chunks' of speech to communicate with her peers, although she was not confident enough to do this other than within a one-to-one or small group situation.

Amal is now in her second term of Year 3 and continues to make very good progress. She mixes freely with both monolingual English speakers and EAL children in the classroom when working, and outside during play. There is a strict divide between the two languages, so English is the language used at school and Turkish is the language used in the family environment. Amal speaks Turkish fluently at home, but has always been reluctant to use it in school.

Amal uses English quite well on a conversational level with her peers, tending to use the Essex dialect models of speech with which she is surrounded, e.g. "Pass me them scissors".

© 2004 NALDIC/Jean Marshall

Further details about Anna, Amal and other children learning EAL can be found on the NALDIC website: <http://www.naldic.org.uk/>.

Further support

Oxford University Press resources



School Improvement Pathways provides the structure, the research and the resources to drive improvement forward in your school – in an easy-to-use online system. There are over 20 Pathways, each guiding you through four key steps to address a different school improvement issue, including a Closing the Gap Pathway. Find out more about School Improvement Pathways and try a free Pathway.

Useful resources

The [DfE's website](#) on inclusion and learner support provides useful information and documentation.

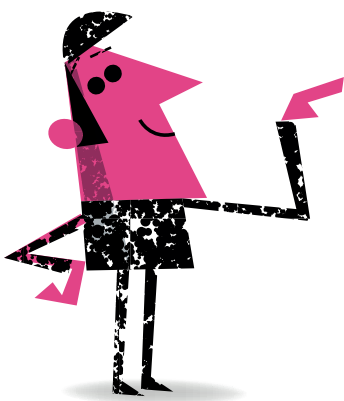
[National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum \(NALDIC\)](#) provides a professional forum to learn more about EAL and bilingual learners.

The [British Council website](#) provides information on EAL related issues and offers support for parents and carers.

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