

Guidance on the assessment of individuals for whom English is an additional language (EAL) and / or where there is a complex linguistic history.

The aim of this section of guidance is to highlight important issues in this area and to provide pointers to good practice, rather than be a comprehensive manual of how to assess individuals with EAL or complex linguistic histories. Assessors could build on their own assessment experience by:

- Attending training provided by their professional associations.
- Collaborating with colleagues experienced in this area of assessment.
- Taking very careful background histories when assessing a child or adult with EAL and/or a complex linguistic history.
- Familiarising themselves with certain key aspects of the languages spoken by the individuals they assess.
- Exploring cross-cultural research into the manifestations of specific learning difficulties (SpLDs).

Assessment in this area requires normal good assessment practice as well as an extra emphasis on knowledge and understanding of how a first language(s) (L1) might affect performance in tests of literacy attainment and cognitive processing in a second language (L2) i.e. English.

Context

What are the most common languages spoken across the UK?

In 2018 the UK population was estimated to be 66.4 million¹. At the 2011 census, English, (or Welsh in Wales) was reported as the main language spoken by **92.3%** of the population. **7.7%** of the population reported another main language, with Polish as the next most commonly spoken language. This was followed by, in England and Wales, Panjabi, Urdu, Bengali (including Sylheti and Chatgaya) and Gujarati. The next most commonly spoken languages were Arabic, French, Chinese, Portuguese and Spanish. The majority of the Chinese speakers in England and Wales do not count Mandarin or Cantonese as their main language but, in the 2011 census, there were 141,000 speakers of one of dozens of regional dialects such as Hakka and Hunanese. Overall, the languages listed above totalled just 40% of other languages spoken, showing the complexity of the linguistic composition present in the UK. London had the lowest proportion of people who reported their main language as

¹ Office for National Statistics: estimate release date 26/06/2019.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates>

English². There were also notable regional variations, with concentrations of speakers of particular languages found in different localities.

Regionally, across the UK, approximately 1.5 million people speak Scots, an estimated 700,000 people speak Welsh, approximately 65,000 people speak Scottish Gaelic, 95,000 speak Irish Celtic and 125,000 use British Sign Language. Much smaller numbers of people speak languages such as Roma and Cornish³.

Net **EU** migration (at time of writing) is declining and migration to the UK in the future looks likely to be spread across a wider range of both European and other countries.

How many EAL learners are there in UK schools?

There are over 1.5 million learners with English as an Additional Language (EAL) in UK maintained schools, representing just over 21% of the primary age population and nearly 17% of the secondary population⁴.

Welsh-speaking students form a special subgroup of EAL students in that although their cultural background is not necessarily different from that of most English-speaking students, their language background may be quite different and thus performance on tests administered in English may be affected. Currently, 16% of pupils in Wales attend Welsh-medium schools, with a further 10 per cent attending schools that are bilingual, dual-medium, or where teaching is in English with significant Welsh provision⁵. A proportion of these students go on to use Welsh extensively in Higher Education, some receiving their entire higher education through the medium of Welsh.

How many international/overseas students are there in UK universities?

In 2017-8 '**Home**' or **UK** students made up **80%** of the student population in UK universities, **6%** came from the **EU** and **14%** from the **rest of the world**. In 2017-8 the total number of non-UK students studying in the UK was 458,490. The number of Chinese students in this cohort far exceeded any other nationality: in 2017-8 one-third of non-EU students in the UK were from China⁶. In 2019 applications from Chinese students to study at UK universities rose 30% from the previous year⁷.

Gathering background information

² Office for National Statistics:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/language/articles/languageinenglandandwales/2013-03-04>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_the_United_Kingdom

⁴ <https://ealresources.bell-foundation.org.uk/school-leaders/eal-learners-in-uk>

⁵ <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/Schools-Census/Pupil-Level-Annual-School-Census/Welsh-Language/Schools-by-LocalAuthorityRegion-WelshMediumType>

⁶ <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/17-01-2019/sb252-higher-education-student-statistics/location>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jul/11/chinese-students-applications-to-uk-universities-up-by-30>

Assessors will recognise that EAL learners can range from those with no or very minimal proficiency in English, to those gradually acquiring proficiency or those who are fully competent in English. Bi- or multi-lingualism can also be defined in various ways, covering a range of proficiencies and contexts in the languages spoken⁸. It is possible to encounter individuals with very complex linguistic histories and care must be taken to attempt to assess the possible impact of factors such as exposure to different languages at different stages of childhood and adulthood, frequent geographical relocation, opportunities for family reinforcement of languages spoken etc.

The effects on test performance are likely to be roughly proportional to the number of years during which the student has been speaking and learning English. Where the student's overall experience of English has been less than seven years, some impact on syntax, vocabulary and comprehension is generally to be expected. Where first exposure to English was after the age of seven years, some impact on phonology and pronunciation is generally to be expected. However, much will depend on the quality and quantity of English experience during formative years. Where English has been spoken in the home, effects may be less marked than where the sole experience of English has been outside the home.

As a general rule, where SpLD is suspected, it is likely that the student will have experienced similar problems (e.g. in reading and writing) in his/her other language(s) and therefore information about this should be sought wherever possible. Assessors should try to find out how long the student has been speaking English, and reading and writing in English, and the circumstances surrounding this. Background information has a heightened role in any assessment of this nature, as it becomes a critical resource to enable the assessor to try and distinguish between difficulties that are due to a SpLD or to other linguistic and cultural factors.

Depending on the particular circumstances and the age of the person assessed, assessors may find it helpful to use some or all of the following questions in compiling background information on their linguistic profile:

What is/are your first language (s)?

What languages were you taught from birth?

What languages were/are spoken at home, especially during your very early childhood?

Which parents/family members spoke which languages?

In which language(s) do you speak to your parents/family?

Do your parents/other significant family members speak English?

Where were you born? How old were you when you first started to learn English?

Did you first learn English when you first attended nursery or school?

What progress did you make in learning English at this point?

⁸ <https://www.naldic.org.uk/Resources/NALDIC/Initial%20Teacher%20Education/Documents/B1.pdf>

Did you receive your education through the medium of English? If not, in what medium were you taught?

How would you describe the methods of teaching and instruction (especially of English) in your early and later education?

Did you attend English- medium schools in this or another country?

What other languages were taught in your school?

What opportunities did you have to speak English outside your school?

Have you had any additional support / intervention in learning English?

Have you attended any formal English classes in the past XXXX years?

What effect have these had on your spoken/written English?

Have you achieved any formal qualifications in English?

How long have you lived in the UK?

Have there been any disruptions to your education or have there been other circumstances which have disrupted family life?

What do you now consider to be your dominant language?

At what age did this language become your dominant language?

Which language do you think in?

Do you consider yourself to be bi/trilingual?

In which languages?

Which language(s) do you use to speak to friends?

Can you read and/or write in your first language(s)?

Did you experience any speech or oral language difficulties in your first language?

For example, did you experience any difficulties learning to talk in your first language?

Did you have difficulty learning to read, spell and write in your first language(s)?

If so, at what age did you start noticing these difficulties?

What was the nature of your difficulties (reading/writing speeds, spelling, writing, handwriting, reading accuracy, memory difficulties, etc?).

Were any difficulties recognised by others e.g. family, schoolteachers etc.

Did you receive any additional support for these difficulties?

Can you describe your difficulties in reading, writing and spelling in English?

Are the difficulties you experience in your first or dominant language the same as your difficulties in English?

A **rating scale** can be helpful:

For example:

How would you rate your abilities? (1-5)

1= very good....5 = very poor)

	Language 1	Language 2	Language 3	Language 4
Reading				
Writing				
Spelling				
Listening and understanding				
Oral fluency				

Have you learned any other language beside English, as a foreign or additional language?

Did you have any difficulties learning this additional language?

Have you ever had an assessment for dyslexia/dyspraxia in another language i.e. not in English (usually the first language)?

What was the outcome? Do you have a copy of the assessment?

Test administration and interpretation

Assessment of children and adults with EAL and /or complex linguistic histories presents special challenges because of the lack of tests for specific use with EAL learners and because it is not known how robust existing tests are when used with EAL students. Most educational and psychological tests have been developed and standardised on populations that are predominantly English-speaking and/or situated within mainstream western culture. The format of the test, the test content and the test norms will all reflect that background.

However, test manuals can sometimes provide information about:

- Whether the standardisation sample included or excluded an EAL / second language cohort.
- Whether reliability and validity studies were carried out comparing, for example, the performance of EAL learners to those with English as a first language.

- How to interpret test results in the light of EAL linguistic patterns and differences.

Case-Study 1

7.9% of the standardisation sample of **The Detailed Assessment of Speed of Handwriting 17+ (DASH 17+)** reported on the consent form that English was not their first language.

Barnett, A., Henderson, S.E., Scheib, B. and Schulz, J. (2010) *Detailed Assessment of Speed of Handwriting 17+ (DASH 17+)*, Harlow. Pearson Education.

Case-Study 2

16% of the participants in the standardisation of the **Adult Reading Test 2 (ART2)** had English as an additional language. The majority (c. 66%) had over 10 years of English experience and only about 5% had been using English for less than 7 years (p.22). These participants were found to score significantly lower than the remainder of the cohort on all measures except the silent reading comprehension measure. It was thought that silent reading allows the effective use of compensatory strategies (p. 32).

Brooks, P. Everatt, J. and Fidler, R. **Adult Reading Test 2 (ART2)** Hayling Island, UK. Senator Press

Case-Study 3

The manual of **The Phonological Assessment Battery, 2nd edition (PhAB2) (p.104)** describes a specific validity study comparing performance on the PhAB of a group of children for whom English is an additional language (but whose years of exposure to English had been sufficient to develop surface competencies in this language) to a representative monolingual sample of children of the same age. The authors conclude that there was little difference in responses to subtests of the PhAB2 among monolingual and EAL children which is in line with the results of a similar study in the first edition of PhAB. They state that PhAB2 may be used as a valid and reliable measure of phonological skills, irrespective of first language.

Gibbs, S. and Bodman, S. (2014) *Phonological Assessment Battery 2nd edition (PhAB2)* London, UK. GL Assessment

Case-Study 4

The **Wide Range Achievement Test 5 (WRAT 5)** contains tests of reading and spelling accuracy, reading comprehension and arithmetic attainment. There is a short but useful discussion in the WRAT 5 manual (p.11) of how to take account of EAL linguistic patterns and differences when scoring the Reading sub-test.

For example, it says:

'Do not penalise for articulation differences due to dialect, regional speech patterns or a first language other than English'....'For example an examinee whose first language is Spanish may pronounce the letter v as /b/.'

Wilkinson, G. S. and Robertson, G. J. (2017) **Wide Range Achievement Test 5 (WRAT 5)**, Bloomington, MN, USA. Wide Range Inc. NCS Pearson.

When administering tests to EAL students, there should be careful consideration of linguistic and cultural variations that might affect test performance adversely. Assessors need to be conscious of:

- Potential cultural biases in the wording of / images contained within test items.
- The language complexity of test instructions.
- Lack of cultural familiarity with test content. For example, nonverbal intelligence tests are based on cultural constructs, such as the matrix, that are widely understood and used in some cultures but almost non-existent in others. In societies where formal schooling is common, students gain an early familiarity with organizing items into rows and columns, which gives them an advantage over test-takers in cultures where formal schooling is rare⁹.
- (In the person tested) Limited English vocabulary – both spoken and written – and lack of experience of doing timed tests.
- (In the person tested) Impact of anxiety when being tested in a L2 (i.e. a second language for the individual)

Wherever possible, and when justifiable, allowances should be made for such variations. Particular care should be taken when preparing EAL students for assessment and in ensuring that test instructions are fully understood. Some EAL students may need more explanation and/or practice items than usual, in order to grasp test requirements. Where it is suspected or obvious that some or all of the issues listed above have affected test performance, this can be mentioned in the assessment report.

A balance must be struck between **adaptation** of test administration procedures and instructions to meet an EAL student's needs, and **maintenance** of the standardisation of the test, which supports interpretations of test performance. The greater that test administration procedures are varied, the less valid and reliable the test will become.

Interpreting test results / scoring tests.

⁹ Patricia Greenfield, PhD, of the University of California, Los Angeles quoted in **Cross-Cultural Analysis of Image-Based Assessments: Emerging Research and Opportunities** edited by Keller, Lisa, Keller, Robert, Nering, Michael IGI Global, 13 Jul 2017

The key question to be addressed is the extent to which test performance is most likely attributable to EAL or a complex linguistic history **or** to a SpLD. Several issues need consideration.

As far as possible, interpretation of test results from EAL students should endeavour to take linguistic and cultural factors into account as well as any adjustments that were necessary in the process of test administration. Assessors must decide whether or not to record errors made in tests that are clearly attributable to linguistic 'interference.' These types of errors can substantially affect final test scores and assessors should make it clear how they have managed this issue in the reporting of scores. Assessors who are lucky enough to be fluent in the non-English language(s) spoken by the person they assess may find this an easier process but all assessors can familiarise themselves with typical linguistic 'interference' errors by consulting online and other resources (see key resource recommendations below).

Although non-verbal measures of intelligence might, on the surface, appear to offer less linguistically compromised indicators of the general ability of EAL students than verbally-based measures of intelligence, non-verbal tests are not free from cultural factors and care also needs to be taken in interpreting the results from these tests.

Measures of cognitive skills such as phonological processing and working memory may be less susceptible to linguistic and cultural influences than tests of literacy attainment and consequently should be provided wherever possible. However, measures of cognitive processing are unlikely to be valid or reliable where students carry out covert translation of material from English to another language for processing and then back into English again in order to make the response, because this imposes an additional cognitive processing load. When assessing EAL students it would therefore be appropriate to investigate this, e.g. by enquiring what strategies the student was employing to carry out the task.

However, phonological differences between languages mean that developmental conditions such as dyslexia can exhibit themselves differently. For instance, reading and spelling may be more accurate (but not necessarily more fluent) in a language with a more regular orthography. This is because dyslexia is usually due to an underlying problem in processing phonological information and irregular orthographies (such as English) make higher demands on phonological processing. Hence dyslexia may not have been detected in an EAL student in his/her primary language or before they were required to attain a high level of functioning in written English. Additionally, there may not have been sufficient professional awareness of SpLD in the country where the student was brought up or went to school, so any features of dyslexia may not have been formally recognised.

Assessors will therefore find it helpful to familiarise themselves, depending on the circumstances of the assessment, with some or all of the following **particular differences** between the language(s) spoken by the child/adult assessed and English in terms of:

- **Phonology** (the sound-structure of language).
- **Grammar** (the structures of language).
- **Writing** (script used and the nature of the spelling system).
- **Vocabulary and morphology** (word-structure and where the language gets words from).

- **Conventions** observed by speakers of the language.
- The **socio-cultural context** in the country or the region where the languages is spoken.
- Information about the **education systems**.
- Cultural and linguistic differences in **courtesies** and **levels of formality**.

Weighing the evidence: factors to consider.

Key 'risk' factors	Key 'confounding' factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A history of difficulties in first language(s). • Additional support during school / a previous assessment. • Family history of similar difficulties. • Slow / inaccurate reading, spelling and /or writing. • In logographic languages e.g. Chinese/Japanese, difficulty learning the phonology of these languages and/or particular difficulty remembering the pictorial scripts. • Significant underlying difficulties in auditory and /or visual processing speed, phonological awareness and / or 'working' memory. • More than seven years' exposure to English but persistent difficulties. • Good oral fluency in English compared to written fluency. • A greater ease with/preference for listening comprehension rather than reading comprehension¹⁰. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English not learned until age 5+. • Less than 7 years learning English. • A very complex linguistic history. • Disrupted education / poverty / refugee experience. • No or limited recognition of SpLDs in the student's home country. • Very high levels of family/tutorial support. • Most errors on literacy tests (e.g. reading accuracy, spelling accuracy, writing fluency and accuracy) attributable to L1 'interference'. • Preference for science/maths subjects over humanities subjects. • Cultural issues in test administration. • Cultural bias in tests

Writing the report and making recommendations

When preparing the report it is helpful for the assessor to state how long the student has been speaking, reading and writing in English, whether English is now his/her principal medium of spoken and written communication, and what experience they have of being

¹⁰ <https://www.naldic.org.uk/research-and-information/research+summaries/language-needs-or-special-needs.html>

educated in the medium of English. An impression of the student's oral skills in English may also be helpful to contrast with any observed literacy difficulties.

The validity and reliability of test scores obtained by an individual with EAL / a complex linguistic history may be less secure than for students for whom English is the primary language. It may be less straightforward to reach a clear diagnostic conclusion and assessors may need to explain this situation to the person assessed.

Where the assessor is sure that there is sufficient converging evidence for SpLD, as opposed to evidence only of difficulties in literacy, the assessor should state why they believe that possible linguistic and cultural causes of the observed difficulties may be ruled out in this particular case, or – at the very least – that the impact of the dyslexic /other SpLD difficulties on test performance outweighs the impact of linguistic and cultural factors.

Where a SpLD is identified, recommendations will focus upon support for SpLD learners with EAL and, depending on age and circumstances, could include:

- Recommendations for access arrangements in examinations.
- Recommendations for external funding such as the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), where applicable.
- Recommendations for institutional support, i.e. in the school, college, university etc.
- Recommendations and advice that supports classroom teachers / lecturers and academic tutors / SENCO / specialist tutors / disability advisers
- Study skill and other personalised recommendations.

Three key resources

- For invaluable information on the features of four languages: **Arabic, Chinese, Polish and Urdu** see: <https://ealresources.bell-foundation.org.uk/school-leaders/countries-cultures-languages-and-education-systems>
- For specific information on languages and their scripts: <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/>
- **Learner English** Eds Michael Swan & Bernard Smith Second Edition Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers. Cambridge University Press. 2001

Other references and resources

There are now literally hundreds of small-scale research studies focusing on cross-linguistic issues in the assessment of specific learning difficulties and dyslexia. The following readings are a good place to start.

- Caravolas, M. *The Nature and Causes of Dyslexia in Different Languages*: Chapter 18 in Snowling, M.J. and Hulme, C. (2008) *The Science of Reading: A Handbook*. Wiley Online Library.

- Goswami, U. ***Phonology, Reading Development and Dyslexia: a Cross-Language Analysis***. PATOSS Journal Vol 16 No.2. Nov. 2003
- Smythe, I., Everatt, J., & Salter, R. (2004). ***International Book of Dyslexia—A Cross-Language Comparison and Practice Guide*** (3rd ed.). Wileys. Chichester.
- Hansen, L. ***Can we distinguish between difficulties accompanying SpLD/dyslexia and those experienced by learners who have English as an additional language?*** PATOSS Bulletin Summer 2012.
- Rifkin, Carol (ed.) (2008). ***Language Learning and Dyslexia*** Symposium Proceedings. London: SOAS
- N. Goulandris, & M. Snowling 2003, ***Dyslexia in different languages***. London. Wiley.
- Kenneth Pugh & Ludo Verhoeven (2018) Introduction to This Special Issue: ***Dyslexia Across Languages and Writing Systems, Scientific Studies of Reading***, 22:1, 1-6
- Nicola Brunswick, Siné McDougall and Paul de Mornay Davies (Eds.) (2010) ***Reading and Dyslexia in Different Orthographies***. Hove and New York: Psychology Press.