

# Reading development for learners of English as an additional language

## A National Literacy Trust Membership resource

Learners of English as an additional language are not a homogenous group. Some children learn English at home alongside another language and become fully bilingual at an early age. Others may grow up speaking another language at home and only begin speaking English when they start nursery or school. EAL children may join UK schools with little or no English at any time up to the age of 16. According to current data, 5.3% of EAL learners are 'New to English', with 10.5% at the 'Early Acquisition' stage.

Similarly, there will be a wide range of literacy experiences and skills among EAL learners in any school. Many children will have already learnt to read in their own language before starting school in the UK, whereas others may not yet be able to read in any language. Some pre-literate learners will speak a language that has no standard written form, but others will be pre-literate because their education has been interrupted by war, poverty, or even work.

It is important that all schools make an in-depth assessment of the language and literacy development needs of every child who is new to the school. This is best done through in-class observation, language sampling and mother tongue assessment where possible. For more advice and information about EAL assessment, see [www.bell-foundation.org.uk/eal-programme/teaching-resources/eal-assessment-framework/](http://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/eal-programme/teaching-resources/eal-assessment-framework/).

Below are some specific issues pertinent to school-age pupils learning to read in a second or additional language.

### Whole text level

- Children who are new to reading altogether need to start with sharing and enjoying real books before they are introduced to phonics, whatever their age.
- Children need to be taught to choose books for different purposes, to know which are for sharing with an adult and which are appropriate for independent reading.
- All new texts need to be introduced with background knowledge and subject context explored and elicited from children. It helps to pre-teach key words, identify the title, author and illustrator; read the blurb, if appropriate.
- Some children will also need additional time to look at and interpret pictures and understand different layouts and text orientation.

### Sentence level

- Books with too many unknown words and unfamiliar sentence structures are difficult for EAL and non-standard English speakers. They cannot use prediction to aid their reading which slows them up and leads to frustration as they are wanting to find out what happens next.
- Texts with more than 10% of words unknown are generally counterproductive unless there are plenty of pictures to create a narrative which the child can retell.

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- Sentence word order is different in other languages. For example, a student who can already read in Urdu will expect the verb at the end of a sentence, so may find it harder to predict what is coming next when reading English.
- Using the child's own speech to construct texts and make their own books (with photos or drawings) will allow them to work from words they know to new words outside of their experience. See <http://uk.mantralingua.com> for online book-making resources.

## Word level

- EAL learners may not distinguish word boundaries, or understand the concept of *a word*. The division between words is an arbitrary one - there is no reason why 'my mum' should not be written as one word; it is a single concept. In many other languages the 'my' is included in the 'mum' concept (e.g. Turkish, 'annem').
- Some of the commonest words have to be learned as sight vocabulary. 'The', 'was', 'your' are meaningless out of context i.e. they are not 'content' words.
- Words like 'it' and 'this' are pronouns which refer back to other nouns. It helps to show EAL learners how this works and encourage them to read back and forwards to check meaning.

## Letter level

- English letter names are very different from their sounds – many children will have been taught to recite the English alphabet at an early age but will not know the sounds each letter represents. Some EAL children will be able to say letters or sounds in another language but these will not correspond directly to our sound-symbol system.
- Some other languages have writing systems which are not alphabetic. Bangla (Bengali) is a syllabary and each consonant sound also contains a vowel (e.g. ka, ma, sho). Chinese is semanto-phonetic language with signs which carry both sound and meaning. See [www.omniglot.com](http://www.omniglot.com) for details about sound/symbol systems in other languages.
- A fairly high level of auditory discrimination skills are needed to distinguish between similar sounding 'short' vowels (e.g. i/e, o/u) and between short and long vowels (e.g. a/ai, i/ee). Speakers of other languages may not be able to hear these as separate sounds at first as they do not occur in their own language.
- Similarly, pairs of aspirated/voiced/labial consonants in English are different in other languages e.g. Somali, Bengali, and Spanish – Somali speakers can have problems distinguishing between 'p' and 'b' in terms of spelling for some years. Another pair of commonly confused sounds is 'w/v'.
- Use of unfamiliar words or pictures to prompt initial sounds may confuse EAL children as they have to learn the name of an unfamiliar thing *and* the initial sound simultaneously (e.g. Q – queen, F- fox).
- In cases of difficulty acquiring initial sounds, it is better for the pupil to construct a personalised alphabet in which English words resemble those used in home language, e.g. 'taxi, policeman' or familiar objects like 'ball, table'. Words like 'fox' or 'cottage' are best left to be learned in a narrative context.

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