Assessment of EAL learners

The assessment of EAL learners has been highlighted as an issue for schools recently, following the changes to the DfE school census and common transfer file (CTF) requirements. In Autumn 2016, new regulations will come into force which require schools to assess the EAL proficiency of all EAL learners. This must then be recorded as a code on the census and a record of the outcomes of all EAL assessments done must be included in the CTF.

As well as the EAL proficiency codes for pupils from Reception upwards, there are also new requirements for collecting data on pupils’ country of origin and nationality. The ethnicity and language code collection has been expanded to include Nursery and Reception children below the age of 5.

What does this mean for schools and how useful will it be?

Who is included in the school census EAL proficiency assessment?

Any pupil from Reception upwards who is recorded as having a first language other than English (not having the code ENG or ENB) must be assessed. Pupils should be recorded as having a first language other than English if the language or main language they encountered as a baby or small child was a language other than English and they still have some exposure to that language. EAL is not linked to proficiency in English or first language. An EAL learner could be a complete beginner in English or could be fully fluent in English. EAL status depends on which language was learned first. ¹

What do schools have to do?

First of all, schools with EAL learners will have to assess all of their EAL learners with the aim of completing this in time for the Autumn census. For schools with significant numbers of EAL learners, this may be time-consuming and will need planning. After the first proficiency data collection, any pupils recorded as Fluent will not need to be re-assessed unless they move school. The intention is that the EAL codes will be part of the school census collection in Autumn 2016 and January 2017 but not in May 2017. Thereafter, the collection of EAL proficiency data will take place in the January census only.

Schools will also need to consider how to approach the collection of information on pupils’ country of origin and nationality. The DfE states that there is no requirement for schools to see the pupil’s passport, EEA identity card or birth certificate. However, it may be difficult to collect accurate information without these. An example of a school letter to parents about this will be available on the NASSEA website from late June.
Is it linked to funding?

The DfE states that the EAL proficiency data is not linked to funding. However, the DfE is interested to see how many of the EAL learners qualifying for additional funding under EAL3 (funding for the first 3 years of education in the UK) are at each stage of learning English.²

How useful is this assessment for schools and teachers?

The DfE proficiency scale is taken from the one currently used by local authorities in Wales to assess EAL learners for the purposes of funding. It has been considered for some time by many EAL specialists in Wales to be inadequate for assessing the achievement and progress of EAL learners or for planning the next steps of teaching and learning for these pupils.

Neither the Hester scale nor the All Wales EAL 5 Stage model provide a sufficiently detailed description of additional language development to track pupils’ progress in anything other than a very limited way, over a long period of time.³

However, although the detail of attainment, progress and planning are important to schools and pupils, those are not part of the purpose of the DfE assessment, which is just to give a very broad idea of learners’ EAL proficiency.

For schools to carry out useful EAL assessment, a different system needs to be used. Many schools are using formative assessment frameworks which have cross-referencing to the DfE proficiency scale, such as the new NASSEA EAL Assessment Framework (2015), to assess EAL learners across the school, plan appropriate teaching and learning and track progress over time. The cross-referencing to the DfE scale means that only one assessment needs to be carried out and it is both useful to the school and fulfils the requirements for the school census and CTF.

What makes a useful EAL assessment system?

The diversity of EAL learners means that pupils bring a vast range of experiences and prior learning to their education in the UK. An EAL learner might be: a pupil born in the UK with schooling here from Nursery onwards who speaks a language other than English at home and in parts of their community; a student recently arrived from a country with little formal education and no experience of English; or a pupil with full educational background educated in a language other than English. Differences in educational, social and linguistic experience will mean that EAL learners of the same age and same length of time in the UK might be at very different stages of EAL development in the various areas of language. A useful EAL assessment system should measure development in speaking, listening, reading and writing; should link to the language needed in the curriculum, should be age-related and should support teachers to plan for effective teaching and learning.

How can we make it work in our school?

To implement an EAL assessment system that supports your school, teachers and learners and meets the requirements of the school census, you can use the NASSEA EAL Assessment Framework to assess your learners. This will show you each pupil’s development in different areas of language and will support teachers with suggestions for supportive strategies for EAL learners of this age and stage of EAL development. The NASSEA assessment outcomes can be used to track progress in EAL of individual pupils, groups and the whole school. When you have your NASSEA step levels for your learners, use the NASSEA alignment grid to see which DfE code to assign to each pupil.
The NASSEA EAL Assessment Framework, launched in October 2015, is widely used in England. Information about the framework and training is available on the NASSEA website www.nassea.org.uk

Examples of how this has been used effectively in Primary and Secondary schools will be available on the NASSEA website from late June.

**Where can we find out more?**


The key sections relating to EAL and minority ethnic groups are:

**Section 1.4 (page 10)** on new data items. This tells you where in the document to find the details about proficiency in English, country of origin and pupil nationality.

The same page also has information on amendments to existing data items on ethnicity and language codes.

**Page 32** shows when the information on each data item will be collected. Proficiency in English, for example, will be collected in Autumn 2016 and Spring 2017 but not in summer 2017. The intention is to collect that data only in the January census from 2017-2018 onwards.

**Page 82** has a section on Traveller pupils’ attendance and dual registration.

The codesets start on page 129. These are the full codesets available and may vary from those used previously on your electronic system. Some years ago when the collection of ethnicity data began, local authorities selected shorter codesets relevant to their area to help make data collection more manageable for schools. This groups some codes together rather than having every individual item available. It would be useful to review admissions forms to ensure they collect the information you will need for the census.

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1 ‘First language’ is the language to which a child was initially exposed during early development and continues to be exposed to in the home or in the community. It does not mean that pupils are necessarily fluent in a language other than English, or that they cannot speak English fluently. (DfE: Schools national funding formula Government consultation – stage one, 2016)

2 2.34 EAL funding is determined on the basis of census data which records whether or not a pupil’s first language is English. As such, it is not a precise measure of language proficiency at pupil-level. ‘First language’ is the language to which a child was initially exposed during early development and continues to be exposed to in the home or in the community. It does not mean that pupils are necessarily fluent in a language other than English, or that they cannot speak English fluently. Pupils can therefore be identified in the census as EAL when they are bilingual and have no specific need of support to access mainstream education in English. We are looking at the robustness of the data we collect and whether there is scope to target funding more effectively by gathering and utilising data on the English language proficiency of EAL pupils. (DfE: Schools national funding formula Government consultation – stage one, 2016)

3 Jonathan Brentnall: *Assessment of EAL – observations on data from Wales* in NALDIC Quarterly 15.2