

## Quick Information Guides for Educators

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### SNAPshot No 10

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## Exploring Issues Surrounding High Ability and English as an Additional Language

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## EAL Learners

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The term *English as an additional language* (EAL) means learners who have their first language, and are learning English as a second or additional language. EAL or *English as a second language* (ESL) also relates to learners who are living in an English-speaking environment and need to study English in order to adapt to and integrate into the environment. They may learn English as a school subject, for business, travel, or academic purposes. Additionally, many English language learners may be multilingual in their native environment, so English may be their third or fourth language. They would also be called learners who learn English as an additional language.

Today, learning “English as an Additional Language” (EAL) has become more prevalent than ever before. Recent statistics show that there are 1.5 billion new English Language Learners (ELL) worldwide with the most popular area being Asia (Bentley, 2014). However, EAL learners at some point will face numerous challenges in their learning, since they have to attain both academic and colloquial English. It is important for EAL learners to overcome the cultural aspect of schooling, as well as to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding of the curriculum. Moreover, the National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum (NALDIC, 2009) point out that new EAL learners in particular, will find these areas more of a challenge than existing learners, while they learn to catch up with their colleagues.

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## Social and Cultural Challenges

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At first, new learners may feel bewildered and isolated by the school, especially if they were too young to have enrolled in any formal education in their native country or if their learning had been put on hold at some point (Toohey & Norton, 2010; Bower, 2014). Different countries have different school starting ages, therefore, teachers are unable to determine whether both new students who are starting school in another country and existing students of that school (both the same age) have had the same number years in school. Not only that, Samuda and Bygate (2016) point out that new learners will experience classroom routines they are unaccustomed to, and thus are likely to struggle to stick them if not made explicit. Potentially the most social and cultural challenge facing EAL students is their struggle to effectively communicate their basic needs, thereby exacerbating feelings of isolation, especially during play times outside where students interact with each other (Bower, 2014). Particular attention must be paid to the culture

of gifted learners whose backgrounds may be very diverse; it is not only a matter of language but it is imperative that an understanding and respect of the norms and rules of other cultures, with regard to both knowledge and moral, are demonstrated. The main issue here is not on copying the others countries' culture; but comparing and contrasting these cultures with our culture, thus allowing for the children for whom English is not their first language, to tell others a bit about themselves and the country they come from. This approach serves to honor the heritage, language and culture of these children and, in addition, allows the native English children to learn about other countries and to learn a few words in another language. One example could be to conduct arts and music festivals from other cultures.

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## Language and Learning Challenges

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A number of studies suggest that some minority ethnic students are identified as “model minorities” by their teachers (Flynn, 2013; Mistry & Sood, 2015). For instance, Chinese and Indian students are considered high achievers according to studies from the US and UK. However, these perceptions are potentially problematic for those students who do not follow this particular stereotype (Ng et al., 2007; Ro, 2010; Flynn, 2013). Conversely, students who fall under other minority ethnic groups may be seen as underachievers or underperformers, thereby impacting their progress by low teacher expectation (Arnot et al., 2014).

In terms of teaching and learning approaches, these may significantly differ from those of the student’s native country. For example, these approaches could be less talk-based and more didactic in order to facilitate those activities needing open-ended discussion and problem-solving. Therefore, language learning will consist mainly of vocabulary and concepts tailored to the curriculum area taught, all of which the EAL learner is likely to be unaware of (Cummins, 2000; Krashen, 2003). Moreover, pupils for whom EAL can be categorised as requiring additional support for learning and as a result, pupils are wrongly grouped with low achieving pupils. This can hinder the pupil’s potential and result in activities that are not suitably and cognitively engaging (Flynn, 2015).

English is an alphabetic language, and differs in terms of how letters and sounds map on to each other. Spanish, for example, the letter B sounds more like a V when spoken. In contrast, some languages are logographic, and thus symbols replace letters to form words (e.g. Chinese and

Japanese languages). Such differences present a range of problems for new learners of the English language in terms of accessing written English (Flynn, 2013; Flynn, 2015).

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## Characteristics of Highly Able EAL Learners

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The majority of highly able language learners are likely to demonstrate some or all of following characteristics:

- ✿ have the ability to think in one or more languages, known as code switching;
- ✿ have the ability to quickly and easily acquire English language;
- ✿ have advanced translation abilities; and
- ✿ have the ability to demonstrate appropriate behaviours in their new culture, as well as their own.

In addition to this they may also

- ✿ learn easily and fast
- ✿ own natural abilities in various domains from cognitive, affective to physical domains etc.
- ✿ perform above the expected range for their age
- ✿ have high motivation
- ✿ have good task commitment
- ✿ be creative
- ✿ be wise
- ✿ be, or appear, more mature than their cohorts

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## Issues for Teachers of Highly Able EAL

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In order to effectively teach highly able EAL pupils, teachers must adopt multiple roles, including acting as a role model (Flynn, 2013). This is found to be one of the most significant challenges facing EAL teachers. According to White et al., (2014), teachers' lack of confidence in highly able

pupils is the direct result of the challenges which these students present to their own understandings, skills and knowledge. Various studies have affirmed that teachers seek superior conceptual capabilities in areas they are unaccustomed to (Gould, 2000; Flynn & Stainthorp, 2006; Arnot et al., 2014).

The majority of teachers who teach in their respected classroom will often have EAL students. Similar to other learner groups, teachers will adjust their classroom routine to cater for all types of learners to ensure that they get best learning experience (Drummond, 2014). Teachers achieve this by conducting learner activities where language is a barrier, but suitable to their abilities and interests. However, since EAL students will have varied levels of English, as well as very little or no previous experience or knowledge of schooling, teachers will often face the difficulty to effectively adjust their classroom routine and arrange learner activities (Smithers & Robinson, 2012; Arnot et al., 2014).

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### Practical Ideas for use in the classroom

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- ✿ Understand newly arrival EAL learners' use of silence as a strategy to survive. Do not need to feel pressure of this kind of silence and just give them time to adapt.
- ✿ Highly ability may be hidden by changing a new environment for a learner. Talk to parents may help to find out a totally different EAL learner at home from at school.
- ✿ Try to find reading materials that both match their language level and their cognitive level. Often learners would feel teachers give them infant materials due to their lack of English language expressions. This dis-match will harm their learning motivations.
- ✿ Use multicultural children's picturebooks to encourage highly able EAL learners to start to talk. The familiar images in the picturebook will make them less nervous and involve in a discussion much easier. By doing so other children will also get an understanding of their EAL classmates. More information can be found here: <http://www.journeys-from-image-to-words.com/project-overview.html>
- ✿ Schools can involve volunteers from the same culture as their EAL learners. These volunteers can bridge the gap between Scottish teachers and learners from other cultures. This is especially useful for a newly arrived EAL learner who feels frightened in a totally unfamiliar environment. Volunteers can assist teachers to understand their EAL learners' diverse needs.

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## Summary

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- ✿ The number of EAL learners is continually increasing (1.5 billion learners in 2014);
- ✿ Learners face various social and cultural challenges, such as loneliness, unfamiliarity with new classroom routines, and communication, all of which exacerbate feelings of isolation;
- ✿ Learners also face language and learning challenges, such as stereotyping (leading to perceptions of underperformance), differing learning approaches in different countries, restricted access to proficient speakers and teachers of English, and learning a different type of language (alphabetic or logogenic), all of which hinder their level of EAL learning;
- ✿ Highly able learners exhibit characteristics ranging from being good readers and having a good general knowledge to taking interest in unusually specific areas, such as drama or poetry. Therefore, highly able English students will exhibit levels of literacy beyond the average student;
- ✿ Teachers also face specific challenges; such as a lack of confidence in highly able students, face the difficulty to effectively adjust their classroom routine and arrange learner activities, and newly qualified teachers being less equipped to teach EAL students, all of which contribute to a lack of training, experience and competency in teaching highly able EAL learners;