



EAL & Inclusion: Creating Language- Rich Early Years Environments

In today's early years settings, children grow up surrounded by a rich mix of languages, cultures and experiences. Across the UK, almost one in five children now speak English as an Additional Language (EAL), a number that continues to rise year on year (Bell Foundation, 2024).

This diversity offers a golden opportunity for early years practitioners to create truly inclusive environments where every child feels they belong. But it also comes with the responsibility to understand how language, culture and identity intertwine, and how early years practice can nurture communication in all its forms to set everyone up for their most successful life.

Inclusion is not simply about giving access to everyone. It's deeper than that. Having a wheelchair ramp into a playground can provide access, for example, but that doesn't ensure that the wheelchair user feels welcome. That takes more effort. Creating exemplary inclusive environments acknowledges this and makes *belonging* (the feeling of being seen, valued and understood) part of the practice. And because language is how we connect and express ourselves, the EYFS prime learning area of "Language and Communication" sits right at the heart of inclusion.

When practitioners embrace and celebrate multilingualism, they send a powerful message that "Your voice matters, just as it is," which is very different from "We're doing the minimum to accommodate you."

This guide explores what inclusion really means for EAL learners, the barriers they may face, and how early years practitioners can embed language-rich, inclusive practice into everyday routines.

Understanding inclusion through the lens of language

The EYFS defines inclusion as ensuring that all children, regardless of background or ability, can participate fully in learning and life within the setting. The Equality Act 2010 reinforces this, stating that no child should face disadvantage due to race, disability, religion or language.

Inclusion is more than just a policy requirement; it's a mindset that filters from the top down. It begins with how adults perceive differences. When practitioners see multilingualism as a strength rather than a challenge, they create the conditions where children can also adopt these progressive attitudes, accept diversity as part of their everyday lives, and thrive.



Language is central to identity. It connects children to their families, their histories and their sense of self. For a child entering an English-speaking environment for the first time, every sound, word and interaction carries emotional weight. Whether adults respond with patience, curiosity and warmth, or irritation and annoyance, can determine whether a child feels confident or withdrawn.



Inclusive practice recognises that all languages are equally valuable. The Early Years Alliance (2024) notes that maintaining a child's home language supports their emotional security and builds the foundation for cognitive development. Likewise, UNICEF's Inclusive Education Principles (2023) emphasise that linguistic and cultural inclusion is a human right, not a privilege. By supporting both English and home languages, practitioners show children that they do not have to abandon part of themselves to belong.

Common barriers for children with EAL

While multilingualism is a strength, children with EAL can encounter barriers in early education that can affect their sense of belonging and progress. Recognising these challenges and responding appropriately helps practitioners engage with empathy rather than making assumptions. Some of these challenges, for EAL children and practitioners alike, include:

1. Limited understanding of bilingual development

Practitioners sometimes worry if a child mixes languages or has a "silent period" where they speak little English, but these are both normal stages of bilingual development. Many children observe and listen before they feel ready to speak (think about how you learned a language). Code-switching (using two languages in one sentence) shows linguistic flexibility, rather than confusion and often eases over time.

2. Assessment bias

Standard assessments often rely on English proficiency. The Education Policy Institute (2023) found that English proficiency, rather than a child having an EAL status, predicts academic outcomes. A child who understands complex ideas but cannot yet express them in English may appear behind when they are not.

3. Lack of representation

If a setting's displays, books and songs reflect only English culture, multilingual children may feel invisible or unwelcome. Inclusive representation reassures them that their language and culture are valued.

4. Cultural misunderstandings

Behaviour and communication can vary across cultures. Things that are accepted and valued in one culture may be the opposite in another. For instance, some families encourage children to speak quietly around adults or avoid eye contact as a sign of respect. Recognising these differences can help prevent misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

5. Limited resources or training

Many practitioners feel unsure about how to support EAL children effectively and feel that they need special training or interventions. Much can be achieved by simply working on communication skills and empathy, but it is true that additional resources such as bilingual materials, interpreters or training can enhance everyone's experience.

Understanding these barriers is the first step towards removing them. The next step is building an inclusive practice intentionally into every aspect of early years provision.

Inclusive practice: what effective settings do

Truly inclusive settings don't treat language support as an add-on or a token 'nod' to inspection authorities; they weave it into their daily routines, play and relationships. Here's what they do differently:

1. Representation – reflecting every child's world

Walk into an inclusive nursery, and you'll see books, posters and displays that mirror all children's backgrounds, family setups and cultures. There might be photos labelled in multiple languages, storybooks in Urdu, Polish or Somali, and dolls dressed in clothing from different cultures. Seeing themselves represented throughout the setting helps children feel proud of who they are. This is not about ignoring British culture but about reflecting its multicultural reality more fully. In fact, British culture is multicultural – you can see that reflected in the different foods, clothes and music we embrace and eat. It's been a long time since we all only ate 'meat and two veg' and sang, "Knees up Mother Brown!"

2. Accessibility – making meaning clear

Visuals are a universal language that can help with understanding and creating meaning. Inclusive practitioners use gestures, photos, symbols and props to make routines understandable. Using a gesture of calling a person towards you, whilst saying "Please come here", will allow the child to understand your request as they learn the vocabulary. Visual timetables help all children, not just those with EAL. Actions should accompany words, and adults in exemplary settings demonstrate rather than over-explain.

3. Participation – ensuring every voice is heard

In inclusive environments, children are encouraged to express themselves in any way they can. This may be through talking, signing, drawing or playing. Practitioners should respond to all communication attempts, recognising that meaning can be conveyed without perfect English.

4. Partnership – collaborating with families

Parents/carers are the experts on their children's languages and cultures. Effective settings build genuine partnerships by asking families about home languages, favourite songs or customs, and inviting them to share these in the setting. They also remember that it may not only be the children who are learning English, and make the effort with translations for parents/carers too.



5. Use play as a universal bridge

Children don't need language to play. In sandpits and role-play areas, children communicate through actions and laughter long before they share a common vocabulary. Practitioners can scaffold language by narrating play, modelling new words, and praising children for trying.

A good example comes from a Birmingham nursery that introduced a "Language of the Month" display. Each month, a different family shared greetings and songs in their home language. Soon, children were using simple words from multiple languages during play. The project not only built confidence for EAL learners but sparked curiosity and empathy in everyone.

The role of the home language for EAL children

One of the most enduring myths is that speaking two languages confuses young children. In fact, research consistently shows the opposite. Studies by Speech and Language UK and the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) highlight that children who maintain their home language build stronger cognitive and emotional foundations. They develop better problem-solving skills, empathy and self-esteem.

The "Birth to 5 Matters" guidance provides further practical advice, noting that "children with EAL should have opportunities to develop and use their home languages in play and learning, supporting their language development at home and in English."

Encouraging families to continue using their strongest language at home supports children's thinking and communication, while exposure to English in your setting adds another layer - rather than replacing the first.

Practical ways to nurture home languages include:

- **Dual-language resources, including technology:** Provide books, posters and songs in both English and children's home languages. There are also many devices, online games and activities that encourage bilingualism
- **Home-setting links:** Ask families to record lullabies, greetings or short stories for children to share in your setting
- **Celebrating linguistic diversity:** Display a world map showing where your families' languages are spoken
- **Including sign languages:** Children whose first language is British Sign Language (BSL) or Makaton should also see their language represented through signing songs, deaf awareness activities and visual supports across the environment

When practitioners value all languages equally, they send a message that every child's identity is welcome.

Building practitioner confidence and competence

Inclusion for children with EAL depends not only on good intentions but also on informed practice. Practitioners who feel confident about multilingual development can plan more effectively and communicate with families more sensitively. In your setting, think about the following:

1. Ongoing professional development

Training in EAL awareness should be part of every setting's CPD plan. The Bell Foundation and NASSEA (National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum) offer excellent free and low-cost courses for early years professionals.

2. Observation and reflection

Regularly observe children with EAL in play: How do they use gestures? How do peers respond? What language do they use when relaxed? Reflective discussions among staff help identify what's working and where to adapt support.



3. Collaborative working

Work closely with EAL coordinators, speech and language therapists and local authority advisors. Share strategies and seek advice early if concerns arise.

4. Challenge assumptions

Avoid assuming that a quiet child doesn't understand, or that all bilingual children will learn English at the same pace. Each child's experience is unique. Reflect on unconscious bias and be mindful of cultural differences in communication.

5. Create professional networks

Encourage staff to share ideas and resources with colleagues in other settings. Peer mentoring can help build confidence, especially for practitioners new to working with EAL children. As the DfE's "Help for Early Years Providers" (2024) guidance states, "Every practitioner can make a difference by providing meaningful opportunities for communication that do not depend on English ability."

Practical strategies for supporting learners with EAL

Improving your inclusion and EAL support should be a multi-stranded approach, including:

- Understanding the issues and barriers faced by EAL children and their families
- Learning from best practice and embedding practical, everyday strategies
- Valuing and supporting the home language
- Investing in CPD and practitioner training

To bring these ideas together, here's a practical checklist for settings that want to strengthen inclusion and outcomes for EAL children:

1. Celebrate linguistic diversity

- Display children's home languages visibly in greetings, posters, and activities
- Create an "Our Languages" wall and celebrate cultural festivals

2. Value home languages

- Encourage families to keep speaking their strongest language at home
- Invite parents to share songs, greetings, or stories in their language
- Use dual-language books, rhymes, and resources

3. Model respect and curiosity

- Show interest in every language. Ask children to teach you a new word in their first language
- Celebrate multilingualism as a strength, not a barrier

4. Create a language-rich environment

- Label areas and objects in English and home languages, with photos/pictograms
- Provide culturally diverse books, toys, and displays
- Regularly review your environment: does every child see themselves represented?

5. Use visual and contextual clues

- Provide visual timetables, photos of routines, and gestures
- Demonstrate actions alongside spoken instructions
- Combine words with natural gestures (e.g., nodding while saying “yes”)

6. Model and repeat language

- Use short, clear sentences with repetition
- Emphasise key words and slow speech slightly
- Expand children’s phrases into fuller sentences to model vocabulary – “Car fast” from the child becomes “Yes, the red car is driving very fast” from you

7. Encourage peer interaction

- Pair EAL children with supportive peers for natural language modelling
- Use small-group play, songs, and activities to encourage participation



8. Respond to ALL communication

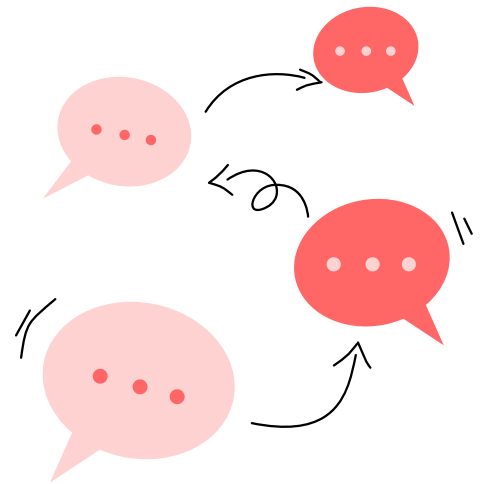
- Recognise the “silent period” as normal
- Respond warmly to gestures, eye contact, or non-verbal communication
- Praise attempts at communication and avoid over-correction

9. Provide emotional security

- Build trust with routines, comfort objects, and warm relationships
- Ensure children feel safe and valued before focusing on language

10. Use music, rhyme, and rhythm

- Incorporate songs, finger plays, and rhymes daily
- Use repetition and melody to reinforce vocabulary
- Build confidence with simple, memorable phrases



11. Scaffold with play and role-play

- Use familiar scenarios (shops, kitchens, doctors) with props and costumes
- Play allows children to experiment with new words safely

12. Encourage storytelling and narrative

- Use wordless picture books so children can narrate in their own way
- Invite children to share personal experiences through drawings or role-play

13. Provide targeted small-group sessions

- Offer short, structured sessions focusing on vocabulary and storytelling where needed
- Use familiar props and repeat key language across sessions

14. Observe and assess fairly

- Use play-based observation, not just English-language tasks
- Track progress over time and share achievements with parents/carers

15. Involve parents/carers as partners

- Communicate with parents using translated newsletters or interpreters if needed
- Encourage parents to talk, read, and play in their strongest language
- Invite parents to contribute cultural knowledge and language resources

16. Include sign language and accessibility

- Incorporate simple signs to support communication
- Ensure all children, including those with SEND, can access language learning

17. Use technology thoughtfully

- Dual-language apps, audio pens, or recordings can reinforce vocabulary
- Record children's voices in both English and their home language to celebrate growth

18. Train and support staff

- Provide CPD on EAL strategies, cultural awareness, and inclusive pedagogy
- Encourage staff to learn greetings in children's home languages

19. Build community partnerships

- Collaborate with local cultural organisations and community groups
- Invite guest speakers or storytellers to share languages and traditions



There are also many other resources and ideas which are free on the internet to help you. Here are just a few:

- <https://www.betterbilingual.co.uk/eyfs-eal/>: Free resources and 'Language of the Month' downloads
- ["Birth to 5 Matters" EAL resource](#): Guidance from the early years sector on EAL matters
- [Free EAL Teaching Resources - The Bell Foundation](#): Offers a wide range of free advice and resources for the classroom to support EAL, including online training courses and webinars
- [Help for early years providers: English as an additional language \(EAL\)](#): Government guidance on how to support EAL
- [Useful Resources Online – EAL Children](#): Signposting to lots of free resources and websites, including games, vocabulary sheets and activities

The bigger picture: inclusion benefits everyone

When settings commit to inclusive EAL practice, the benefits extend beyond individual children. Multilingual environments enrich everyone's learning:

- English-speaking children develop empathy and curiosity about language
- Staff become more culturally aware and flexible in communication
- Families feel respected and involved
- The setting becomes a microcosm of the global community, a place where difference is celebrated, not feared

As one practitioner put it, "When our children teach us how to say hello in their language, the whole room lights up." This sense of shared discovery strengthens community ties and creates a culture of acceptance that lasts far beyond the early years.

Conclusion

Inclusion and EAL support are two sides of the same coin. To include a child is to honour their language, their identity and their way of expressing the world. By recognising language as both a right and a resource, early years practitioners can ensure that no child feels like an outsider in their first learning environment. Whether through spoken English, home language, or sign, every child deserves to be heard.

"Inclusion is not just being invited to the party – it's being asked to dance."

By celebrating every language and embracing every voice, we help children learn one of life's most important lessons: that their words truly matter, in whatever form they come.



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