

Unlock understanding for children with EAL



Successful strategies to support children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) so they can access learning, develop confidence, and flourish at school.

Table of Contents and Credits

Introduction	2
Who are our EAL learners?	3
Key strategies to support children with EAL	6
1. Help children express and share their identity with others	6
2. Create an inclusive environment	11
3. Enable children to access the curriculum	15
4. Build children’s confidence	21
Conclusion	25
References	26

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Introduction

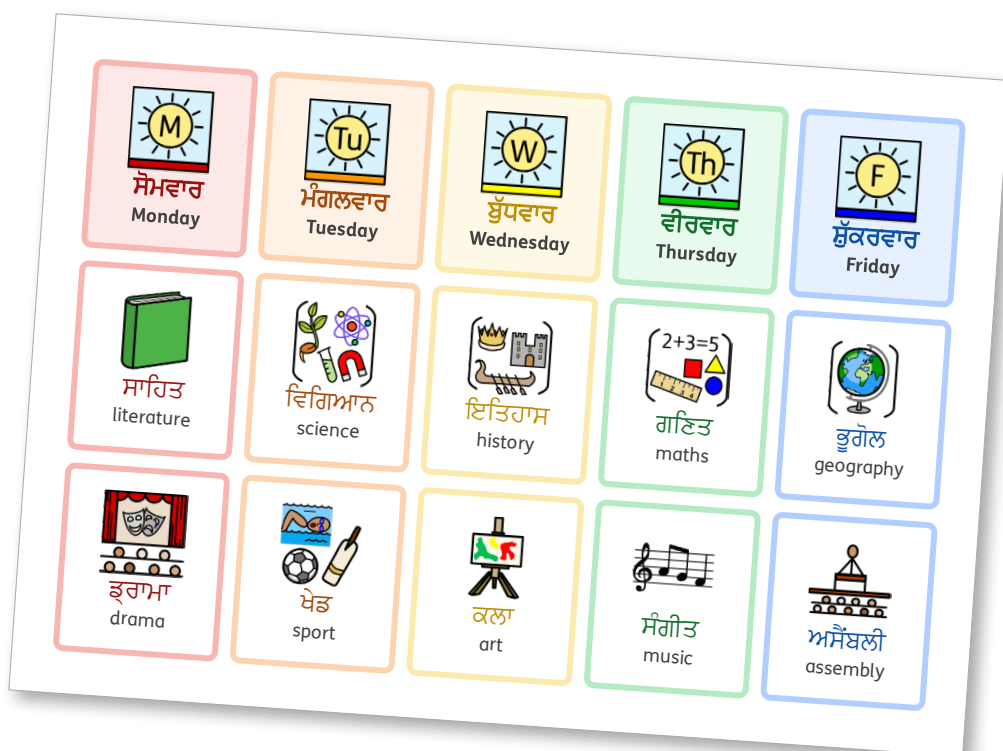
As anyone who has mastered a new language will know, students with EAL face an array of challenges which set them apart from native speakers. Not only do they have to learn the English language, but they must then use it to access the curriculum, form friendships, and navigate the customs and routines associated with school life in the UK.

Learning a language at a young age also gives you superpowers. Many students with EAL have a heightened awareness of the structure and mechanics of how language works.

These advantages can have a long-term impact on a child's life chances. A 2024 study from the [Institute of Education](#) shows that early multilingual exposure creates long-term academic benefits for multilingual students, when compared to their monolingual peers.

UK schools have an important role to play in supporting multilingual students so they can overcome their challenges and unleash their superpowers.

This guide provides some practical strategies for teachers and school leaders supporting EAL learners, backed up by real-life examples used by teachers every day.



Who are our EAL learners?

“There can be extreme differences in a child’s previous experience. Some children arrive in the UK having not had any formal education and with only unwritten knowledge of their first language. Whereas other children come to the UK having been taught some English, which they practise at home.”

Sally Roberts, Multilingualism Specialist, The Harmony Trust

According to research from [The Bell Foundation](#), the number of pupils with EAL in the UK has more than tripled since 1997. Over one in five schoolchildren use English as an additional language, and multilingual classrooms are now the norm.

Each multilingual child brings a different set of experiences to the

classroom, and these can have a profound impact on how a child learns and interacts with others.

Catering for children with a wide range of experiences and linguistic abilities places additional demands on teachers when supporting their students.

Therefore, it’s important to consider what may influence a child’s capacity for learning.



diya



mosque



Halloween



lantern



Nativity



Hanukkah

Who are our EAL learners?

Proficiency in English

EAL is not a 'catch all' category, and children with EAL have vastly different levels of proficiency in English.

Some EAL learners are high-performing, advanced bilingual pupils and may already have a good knowledge and understanding of English. Other children in the same class may have limited literacy in their first language, making it harder for them to start speaking, reading and writing in English.



world



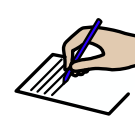
English



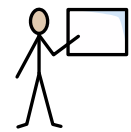
speak



read



write



teacher

There are also EAL learners with special educational needs which might affect their language acquisition.

Teachers have to become experts at differentiating learning tasks to accommodate students' existing knowledge of English.

Exposure to English outside school

The amount of contact a child has with the English language outside school can vary significantly, and this can have an impact on how rapidly children develop informal, everyday language.

Some children are able to practise their English at home with parents. They might see English language books, magazines and newspapers around the house, or watch English language television programmes. While other

children come from homes where English is not used or understood, and there are fewer opportunities to experience the language in a real-life context.

Teachers may need to adopt different approaches to engage parents who are not proficient in English so they can support their child's education and communicate with the school.

Who are our EAL learners?

“If children have opportunities to see and hear English around them, they grow to understand that English is a powerful language to know.”

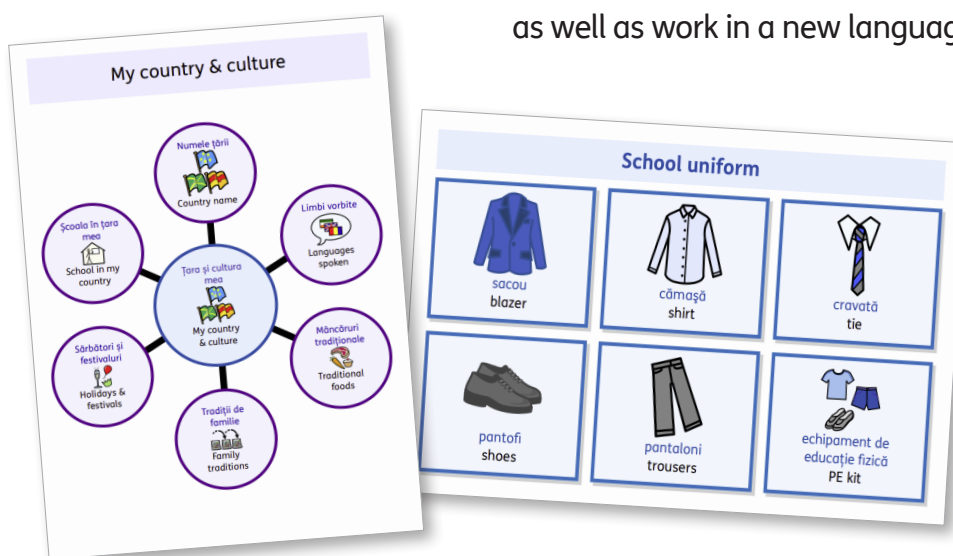
Laura Spargo, Education Consultant and Primary English Specialist

Previous educational experiences

Children’s previous educational experiences can have an impact on their learning style. For example, a child who has already attended school in their home country will have very different experiences from a child who has not had any formal education due to difficult life circumstances.

Many children are not only learning to operate in another language, they are also learning to settle in an unfamiliar environment with potentially different expectations.

Teachers might have to find ways to help children adapt to a new school environment as well as work in a new language.



In a diverse community of multilingual learners, each with different needs, abilities and experiences, teachers are constantly developing new techniques to support learners with EAL, while giving children a sense of belonging.

In the following sections, we look at some tried-and-tested strategies teachers are using to help children describe themselves, take part in activities, use English for learning, and develop confidence both socially and academically.

Key strategies to support children with EAL

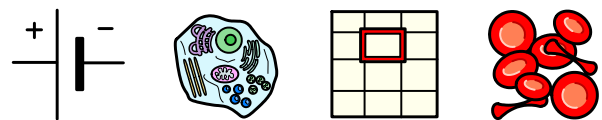
When children are developing their knowledge of English, they need extra support to help them understand what is happening around them so they can communicate with others.

Many teachers in multilingual classrooms find it useful to provide children with visual aids as a stepping stone to support language learning.

Symbols are a form of visual aid which can be particularly effective in helping multilingual students make connections between words and meanings. Symbols are simple images which can represent anything children are seeing or using – such as art materials or sports equipment – presented in a clear and consistent format to aid understanding.

Unlike a photograph or a picture which can convey too much information and be confusing, a symbol has a simple, defined meaning which is easy for a child to interpret.

Symbols are widely used for children with EAL, not only for the very youngest children, but also for students further along the learning path, to help them translate specific terms they need to access the curriculum – such as ‘cell’ or ‘dissolve.’



The strategies in this guide will outline how symbols can be used alongside other techniques to support students with EAL.



1. Help children express and share their identity with others

One of the earliest skills a child needs to master is to be able to introduce, and talk about, themselves. This helps a child develop a sense of pride in their identity, and can provide good conversational foundations by encouraging children to ask and answer questions and share opinions.

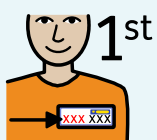
It's a good idea to use structured questions to help children talk about themselves. Speaking exercises can be supported by symbols which represent objects, actions and concepts to aid understanding and get the conversation started.

Key strategies to support children with EAL

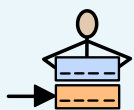
“Who am I?”

A child’s name is fundamental to their identity, so it’s important for teachers and peers to pronounce it correctly and to be aware of how a child prefers to be known. You can ask the child what they would like to be called at school, and capture it phonetically.

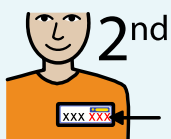
Visual profiles, which help people describe themselves using symbols, can encourage children to think about their names and tell you if they use a nickname or a shortening. This can be crucial in making children feel welcomed and safe.



My name is...



I am known by / My nickname is...



My surname / family name is...



The correct pronunciation is...

Key strategies to support children with EAL

“What can I do?”

When children have the opportunity to tell others some facts about their language and culture, it creates a stronger sense of belonging. It also helps teachers to build a profile of a child’s language ability and their levels of literacy and fluency in languages other than English.

To help learners with EAL talk about their first language, their home country, and other countries they have visited, teachers can provide symbolised statements for children to use.



The country I am from is...



Other countries I have lived in are...



The language(s) I understand are...



The language(s) I speak are...



The language(s) I read are...



The language(s) I write are...

Key strategies to support children with EAL

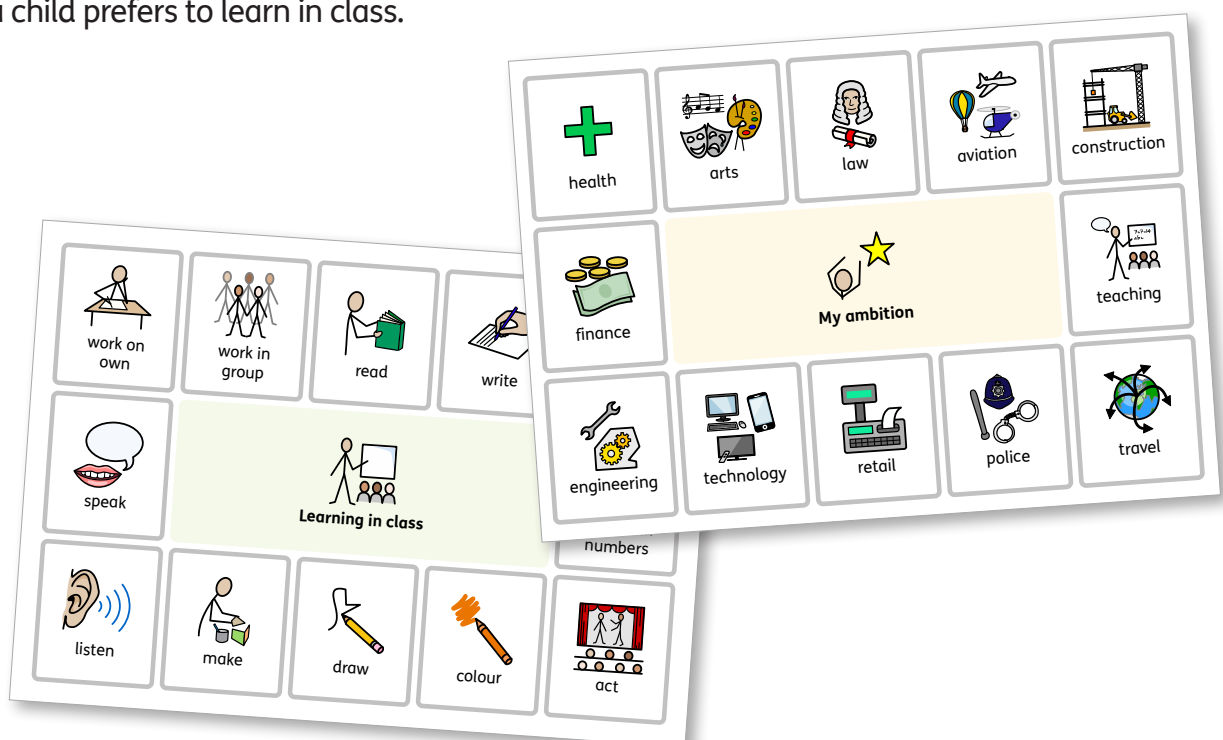
“Once a year we hold a global schools day where children can come into school wearing traditional clothes or the colours of their home country flag. We also invite parents to come in and describe the places where they’ve travelled and lived. It’s a good way for everyone to talk about themselves and share experiences.”

Sally Roberts, Multilingualism Specialist, The Harmony Trust

“What makes me happy?”

To give children a structure they can use to talk about themselves, try providing topic areas such as family members, hobbies and interests, and previous education. This can be useful for teachers to link to learning styles and find out how a child prefers to learn in class.

You can also use symbols to help older children talk about their prospective career choices and ambitions for the future.



Key strategies to support children with EAL

“What would I like my teacher to know?”

Asking a child if there is anything they want to tell the teacher is an effective way to uncover aspects that might affect their learning, such as a dislike of loud noises or a passion for art. It also gives children the opportunity to say what comforts them in difficult situations – a weighted blanket, for instance.

Carry out this exercise when a child first joins the school, and for maximum effect, revisit the exercise later on when a child feels more comfortable talking to an adult they have grown to know and trust.



Key suggestions: How to help children express their identity

- Provide a phonetic version of the name a child wishes to use at school.
- Create structured topics for children to use to describe their interests.
- Use symbols to help children of all ages talk about their hopes and ambitions.
- Give children the opportunity to tell you things they want you to know about them.
- Introduce yourself using symbols and invite children to do the same.

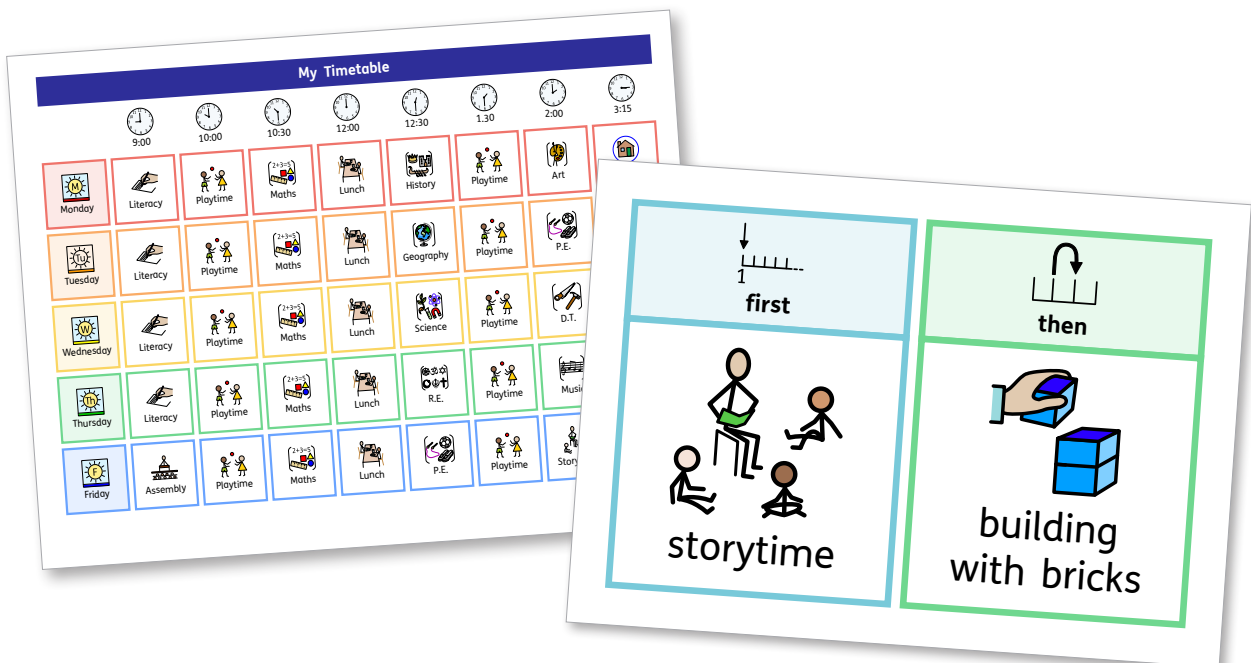
Key strategies to support children with EAL



2. Create an inclusive environment

When a child with EAL starts at a new school, some aspects of school life in the UK may seem confusing if they differ from the child's previous setting. There are some

effective ways teachers can help children navigate the school spaces and enable them to understand what they need to do during the school day.



Explain the school routine

When children understand what is going to happen, they are less likely to be anxious. To explain how the school day works to children with EAL, teachers can provide a visual representation of the day ahead.

This can be as simple as a now/next board for the youngest children, which explains what they will be doing first,

with a symbol to depict one activity, such as story time, followed by another symbol showing building with bricks.

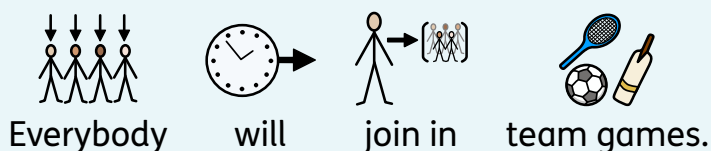
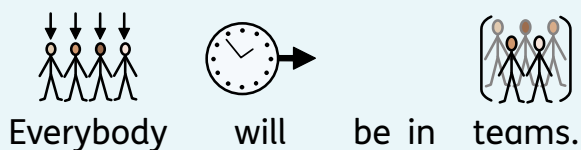
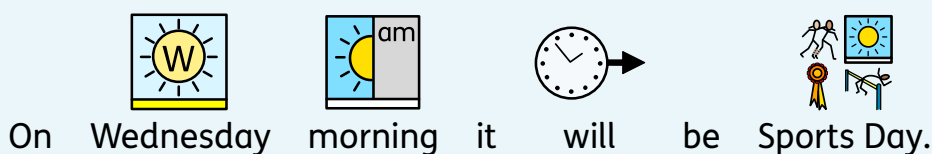
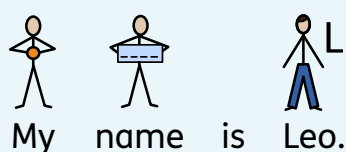
For older children, you can use a full visual timetable with school subjects including symbols and the written word.

Key strategies to support children with EAL

Prepare children for events

Teachers can help children benefit from new or unfamiliar activities by creating stories to show the child what they and others around them will be doing on the day. This enables children to participate fully and feel included in the activity.

To promote understanding, the stories can contain symbols accompanied by simple explanations. If you can personalise the story that's even better, as it focuses on the child's own involvement in the activity.



Key strategies to support children with EAL

Involve parents/carers and families

Teachers can help children adjust to a new activity, or a change to the school week, by involving parents and carers.

If you can send symbolised stories home with the child, they will be able to talk to a parent/carer about the changes and get used to the idea in advance.

“Communicating with parents can really help, particularly with families who don’t speak any English. It’s good to send letters or messages home in a child’s first language, for instance, to let them know we’ve got a special dress-up day, and to tell them what’s involved. This helps to ensure a child can join in with an event and not miss out.”

Laura Spargo, Education Consultant and Primary English Specialist

Label items around the school

A key step towards inclusion for children with EAL is when they feel comfortable using and sharing classroom resources. Labelling areas, objects, and equipment helps children make the connection between a teacher’s instruction to choose some colouring pencils or take a glue stick, and what the child needs to do.

If possible, try a dual language approach by creating labels which contain words in English and the children’s first language, along with a visual of the object. You can use a tool like Widgit Online to provide a translation of the word to accompany the symbol.



Key strategies to support children with EAL

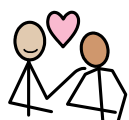
“We ask the parents to help us make signs and labels to place around the school. For example, we might ask parents to translate the word ‘library’ into their own language. This creates an inclusive environment and is a great reminder of all the languages we have in the school.”

Sally Roberts, Multilingualism Specialist, The Harmony Trust

Encourage language sharing

If children see their first language being used and celebrated, it reinforces the message that their language is important, and it can help them feel welcomed and valued at school.

It can be a good idea to run regular activities where children have the opportunity to share their own language knowledge with peers and teachers.



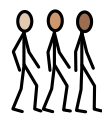
be kind



good sitting



well done



line up



calm



ready to learn

“We have a language club that runs throughout the year. Every six weeks we choose a different home language, and the children who speak that language teach some words to two children from each class. It could be as simple as hello, goodbye, please and thank you, or numbers from one to ten. The children who have learnt those words go back and teach them to the rest of their class.”

Sally Roberts, Multilingualism Specialist, The Harmony Trust

Key strategies to support children with EAL

Key suggestions: How to create an inclusive environment

- Use tools such as visual timetables and now/next boards to explain routines.
- Create personalised stories to help children understand any changes to the school day.
- Label objects around the school so children know what to use and share.
- Involve parents and families in preparing children for new activities.
- Introduce activities where children teach and learn languages.

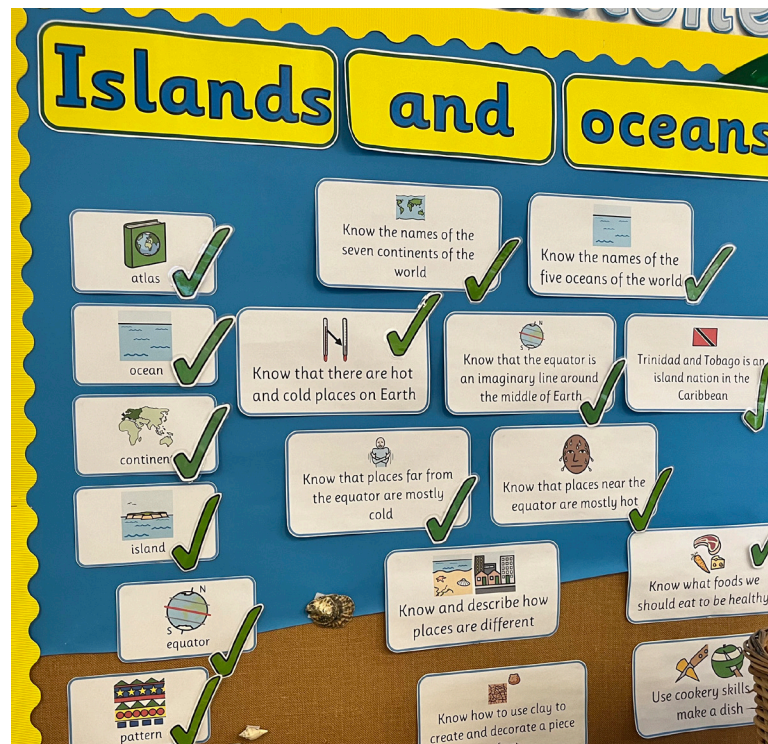


3. Enable children to access the curriculum

Learners with EAL are having to develop their knowledge, skills, and understanding of the curriculum, while learning the difference between everyday spoken English, and a more academic form of the language.

In an interview about EAL learners, [Steve Strand OBE](#), Professor of Education at the University of Oxford, explains that it takes children who are new to English at least six years to become proficient in academic English.

Anything teachers can do to reduce the extra cognitive load children with EAL carry, will help them learn in a more calm and effective way. Combining symbols with the written and spoken word,



incorporating children's first language, and using language translation technology, can all support a child's learning.

Key strategies to support children with EAL

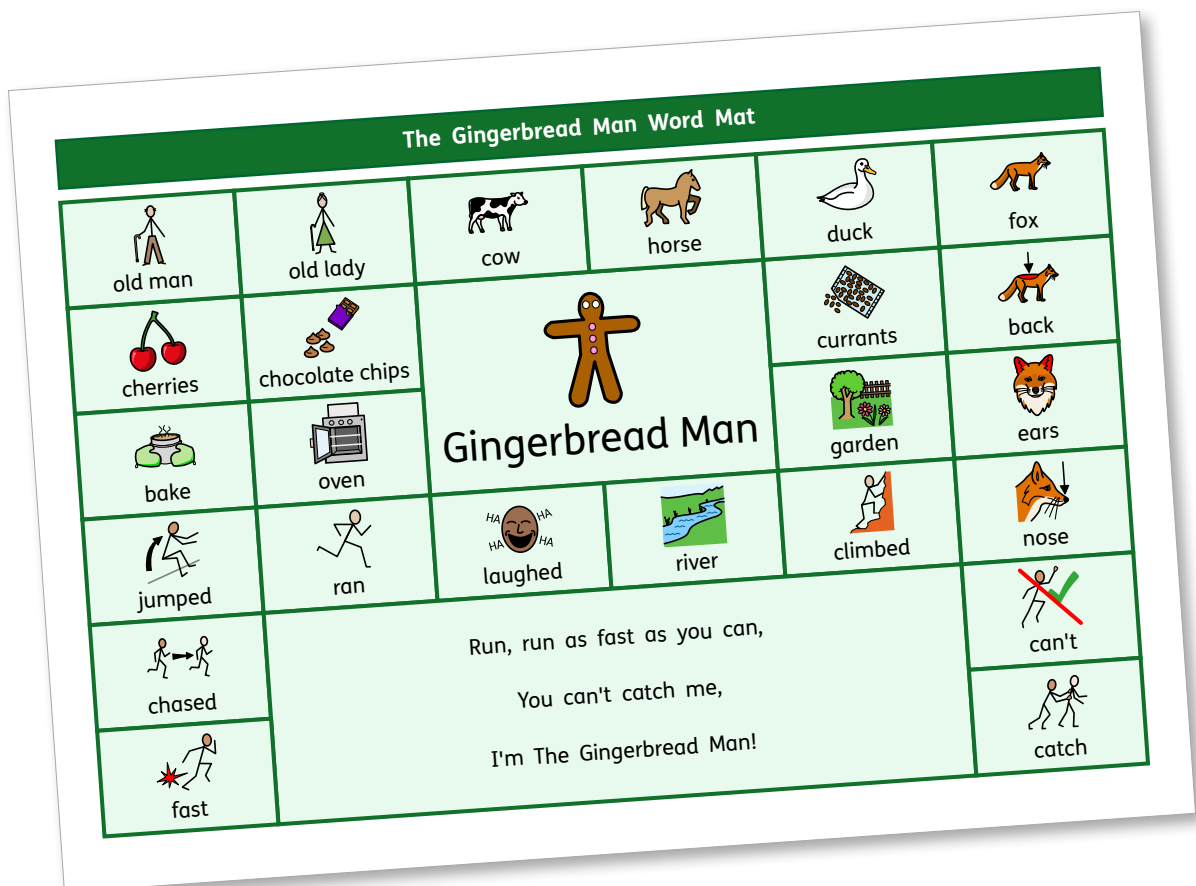
Use visuals to accompany teacher talk

When children with EAL are listening to the teacher give instructions, ask questions, or tell a story, they can easily miss one or two vital words which reduces their level of understanding. An image stays in the mind much longer than the spoken word, so using symbols helps to fill the gaps in understanding and makes the message clearer.

Using symbols alongside words can improve memory retention according to [Dual Coding](#) theory, developed by Allan Paivio. Dual coding suggests the memory uses two different channels to

store information – visual and verbal – and connecting these makes it easier to transform information into knowledge.

To help children understand a story, try using symbols to represent the key characters and actions, and put these together to make a storyboard. You can also ask children to retell the story or create their own versions using the symbols.

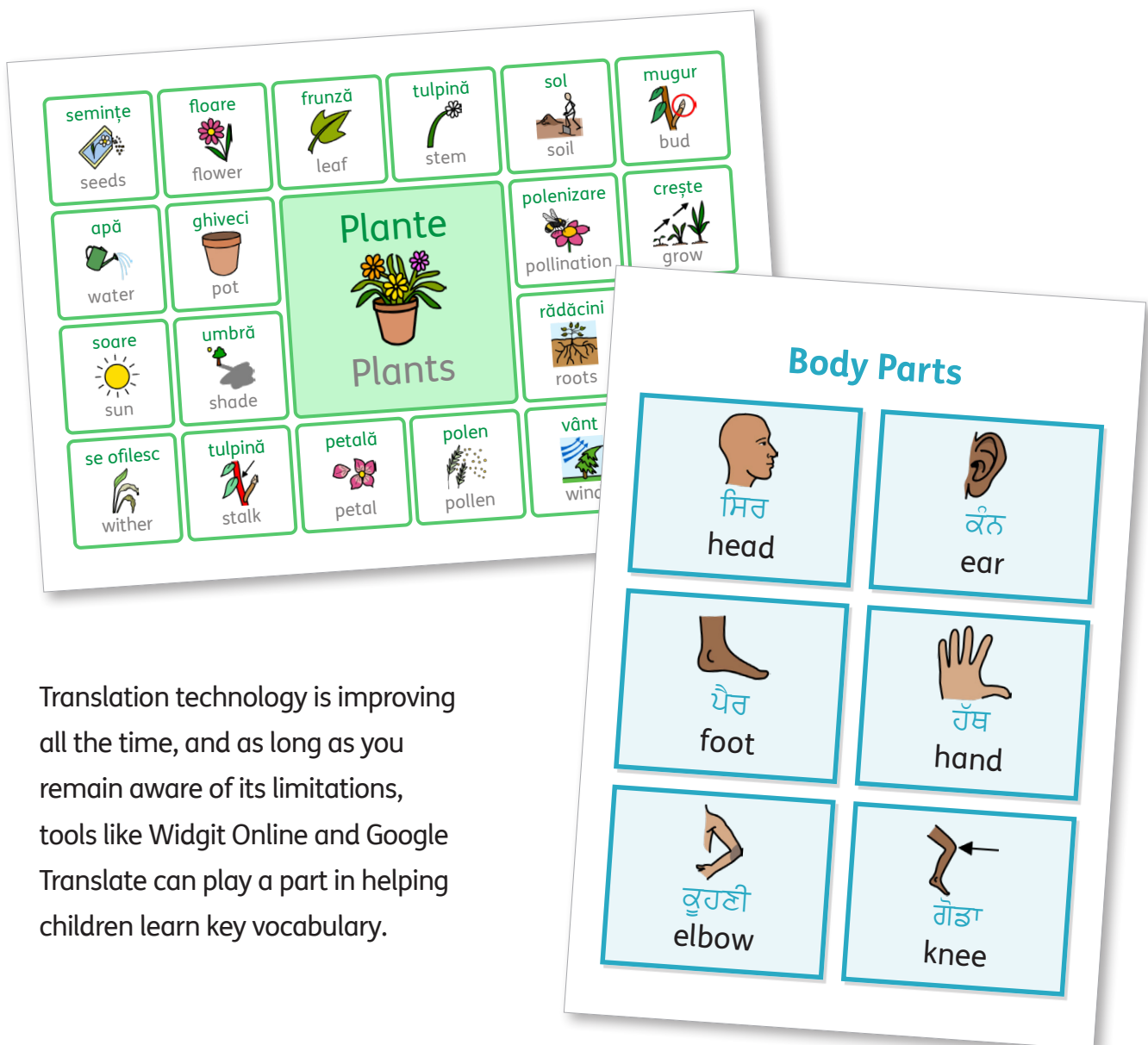


Key strategies to support children with EAL

Introduce subject-specific vocabulary

It takes longer to embed technical and higher tier vocabulary in the memory than everyday speech, so children with EAL need extra support to become familiar with the words they need to make progress in a subject.

Pre-teaching vocabulary, which involves introducing vocabulary in advance of a lesson, gives children an advantage when they come to access the lesson content. Subject teachers can introduce new vocabulary alongside symbols in the form of a word mat, which the child can absorb in their own time.



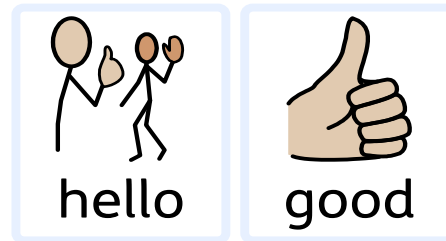
Translation technology is improving all the time, and as long as you remain aware of its limitations, tools like Widgit Online and Google Translate can play a part in helping children learn key vocabulary.

Key strategies to support children with EAL

Create language focused targets

As they start to build their vocabulary, it's important to help children recognise and address common language errors before they become too deeply entrenched.

If teachers are aware of the common errors which often trip up EAL learners, they can create interventions to address



those errors when they occur, and make sure the correct usage is properly embedded.

“Children with EAL often say ‘bigger then’ instead of ‘bigger than’, or they will use the past progressive ‘I was playing’ when it would work better to say ‘I played.’ Language-focused targets help to tackle these errors quickly and allow children to develop their language skills without forming bad habits.”

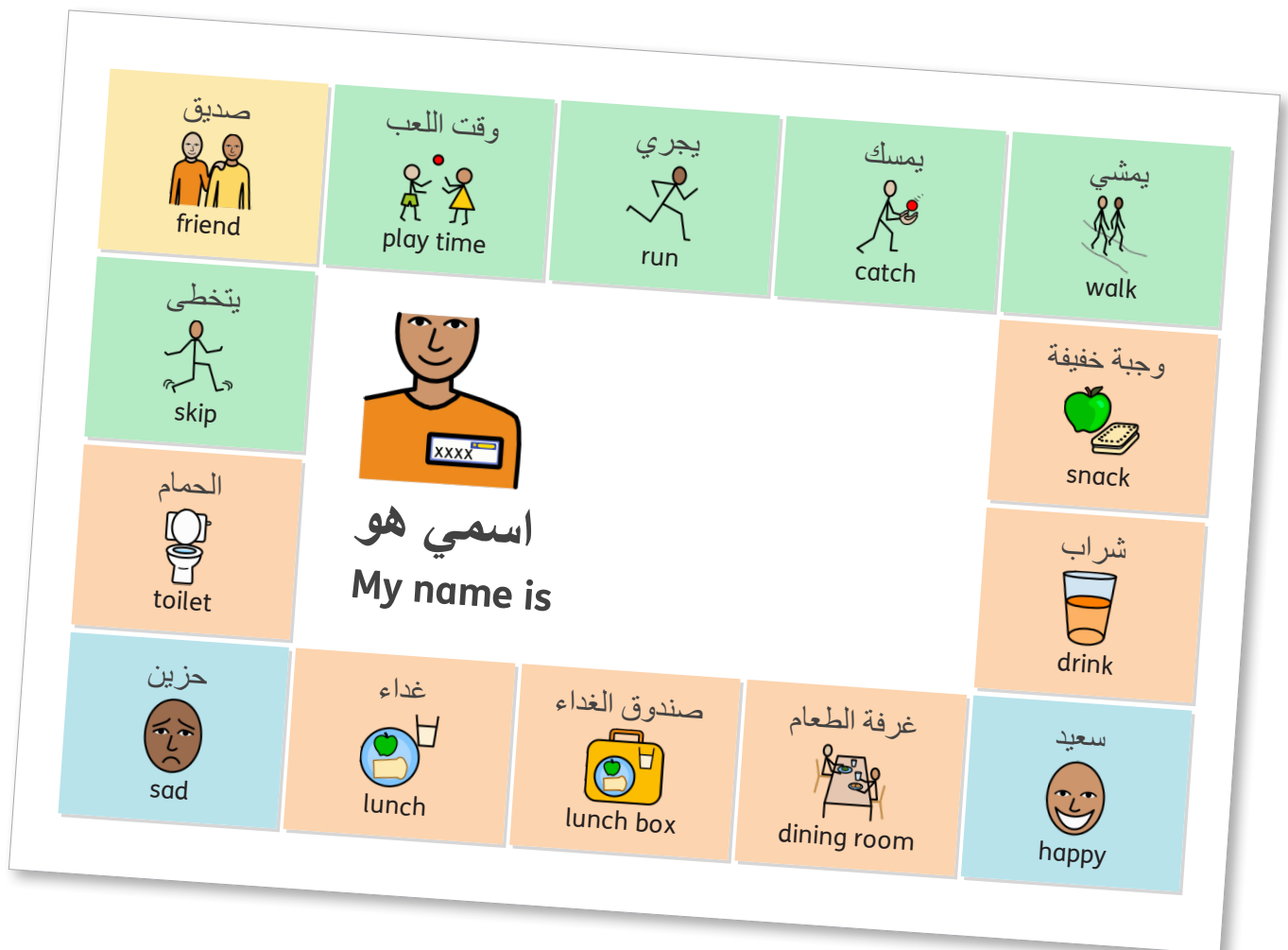
Sally Roberts, Multilingualism Specialist, The Harmony Trust

Encourage a child to use their first language

Translanguaging is the practice of allowing EAL learners to use their full linguistic repertoire to help them to realise their potential. This means encouraging children to speak, write and translate to and from their first language and English, to support their learning.

Where possible, give children the opportunity to use their first language alongside English to deepen understanding of curriculum content and new concepts. You can also create word mats which feature the child's first language as well as English.

Key strategies to support children with EAL



“We try and find children who share a first language and buddy them together. This allows them to share ideas at a richer, more nuanced level and to explore more abstract concepts such as feelings and emotions, as well as curriculum vocabulary.”

“I also really like the idea of giving children a role in creating symbolised resources together, so they can discuss a word in their own language and choose the symbol which most closely represents it.”

Laura Spargo, Education Consultant and Primary English Specialist

Key strategies to support children with EAL

Use symbols to support phonics

Phonics can be a challenge for younger children with EAL who haven't already learnt to read. While a native English-speaking child can sound out a word, and instantly know what that word means, a child with EAL won't necessarily be able to do this.

Using symbols in phonics lessons can help EAL learners to decode a word by giving them the meaning. The child can then focus on learning how the word sounds and how it is spelt.

“If you use the word ‘boy’ along with a symbol, it helps children learn to read and spell the word boy because they already know what it means. The symbols help to confirm what the child is decoding and gives them the confidence to know they are right.”

Sally Roberts, Multilingualism Specialist, The Harmony Trust

Key suggestions: How to enable children to access the curriculum

- Create storyboards which teachers can use for describing characters or telling stories.
- Pre-teach vocabulary so children know the words they will need before a lesson.
- Create language-focused targets to tackle common errors early.
- Allow children to work with a buddy who shares their first language.
- Encourage children to create their own vocabulary mats and storyboards.
- Use symbols with phonics to help children decode words.

Key strategies to support children with EAL



4. Build children's confidence

Children with EAL can find it more difficult to build relationships with their peers if they don't have the language they need to chat, share and play. Teachers can give children some tools to help them

make friendships, take part in classroom discussions, and develop their social vocabulary. As children start to see their language skills having a positive impact, their confidence will grow.

Create opportunities for speaking and listening

Learners with EAL need to practise their spoken language skills as much as possible. When children hear good language role models, they are likely to emulate those skills themselves. Exercises where you pair a child with a more able English speaker can work well.

It's also a good idea to establish a set of ground rules for talking to teachers and peers in a classroom talking activity, as this gives children the confidence to contribute in the right way.



Our Ground Rules for Talk



Everyone should be invited to speak.



Everyone should listen carefully.



We can agree or disagree.

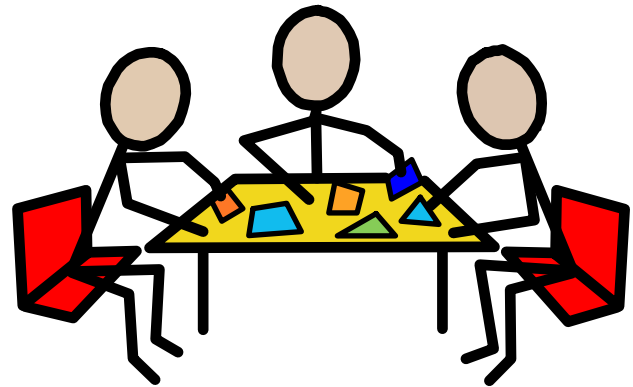


Everyone respects what is said by the group.

Key strategies to support children with EAL

Encourage children to collaborate

As children learn to share ideas and collaborate on a task, they quickly become more confident members of the class. Try introducing activities where children have to describe objects to each other to complete a task, such as asking a partner for a certain colour or shape of a Lego piece so they can build a model.



When children work together in small groups to create a story, it can inspire their confidence to suggest ideas. This works best with a visual prompt, such as a picture of an animal, a favourite toy, or a musical instrument.

“One very successful activity involved inviting a child to choose a mystery item which they could link to themselves and their country. I had several boys in my class who loved cricket and one of them had a cricket bat from Pakistan which he built a story around. Getting this buy-in from children is really important as they feel more inspired to try out new vocabulary and structures.”

Laura Spargo, Education Consultant and Primary English Specialist



trumpet



animals



fidget spinner



globe



doll



cricket bat

Key strategies to support children with EAL

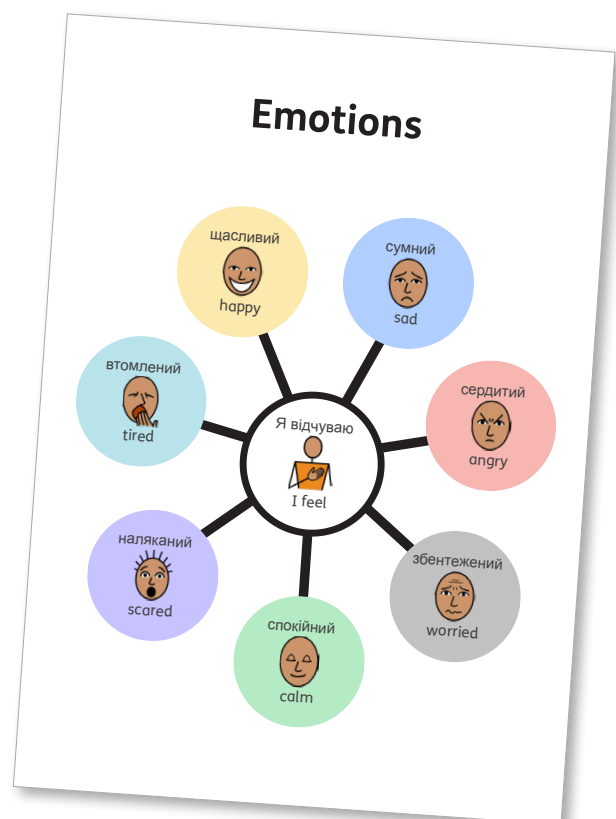
Build independence in the classroom

A child with EAL who is not confident in their language ability may feel reluctant to put their hand up and answer a question. To alleviate anxiety, try giving children the opportunity to work with a partner and practise what they are going to say before speaking to the whole class.

Children with EAL may hesitate to ask the teacher to repeat what they have said, or tell the teacher that they need a ruler or

some paper. Having a poster or flipchart in the classroom can help when children are unsure of the words they need to ask a question or explain how they are feeling.

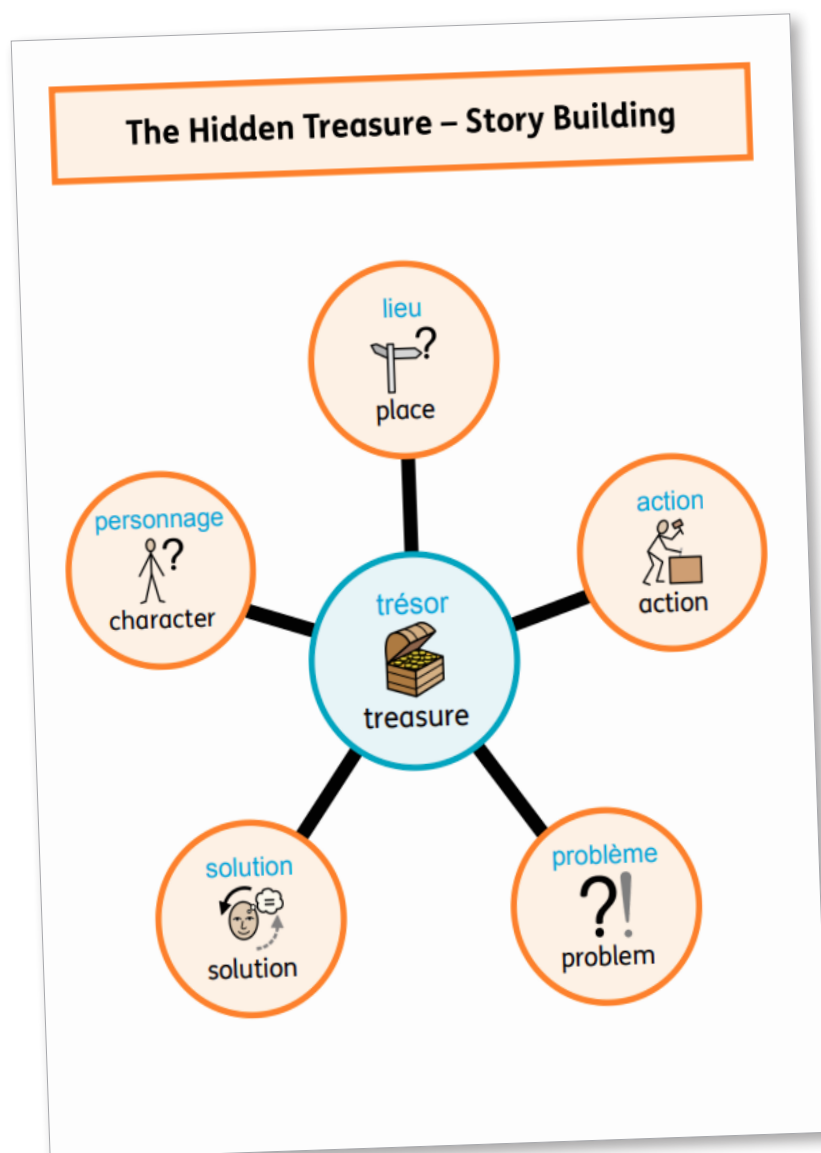
If children can express themselves with the help of a visual aid, they quickly gain independence so they can get ready to learn.



Key strategies to support children with EAL

Key suggestions: How to build children's confidence

- Pair a child with a more able English speaker to help develop spoken language skills.
- Provide some ground rules for classroom discussions.
- Use flipcharts to help children carry out tasks independently.
- Introduce games which involve children completing a task together.
- Encourage children to create stories together based on an object or image.



Conclusion

Many children with EAL have a very special combination of international experience and linguistic ability. While the challenges of learning in a second language are not in doubt, there is so much teachers can do to draw out children's skills and strengths, and ensure they thrive at school.

When children have the tools and techniques to talk about themselves and ask questions of others, they feel valued and understood. To help children find the words to express their identity, teachers can provide prompts in the form of structured topics supported by symbols.

Children make the most of school life when they have a clear understanding of what will happen during the day, and what is expected of them. Schools also become more inclusive environments when classrooms, equipment and resources are labelled with symbols everyone understands.

To help children of all ages access the curriculum, teachers have a range of resources at their disposal, from symbolised word mats to translation tools. It also pays to use children's first language abilities where possible by creating pairs or groups of language buddies, and using dual coding and translanguaging when teaching vocabulary.

Confidence is key, and by unlocking children's understanding, teachers can help them develop independence and become happy, sociable, and friendly members of the community.

Children with EAL may have higher mountains to climb in their learning than their peers, but with the support of their teachers, friends and families, nothing will hold them back.



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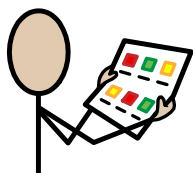
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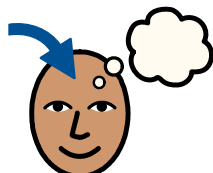
<https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/resources/great-ideas/translanguaging/>



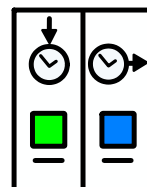
Nine reasons to use symbols



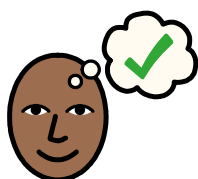
Symbols are permanent
(Spoken words disappear)



Symbols allow time
to process information



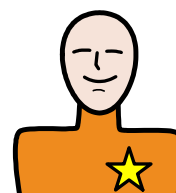
Symbols prepare
children for transitions



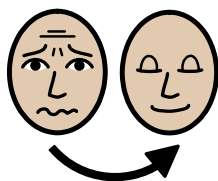
Symbols help children
grasp the nuances
of language



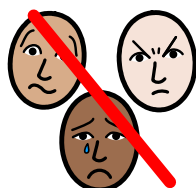
Symbols help
all children



Symbols help build
confidence and
independence



Symbols help reduce
anxiety and stress



Symbols convey
information without tone



Symbols only include
relevant information



Widgit Symbols are images which are used to support text, making the meaning clearer and easier to understand. They provide a visual representation of an object, action or concept.

Widgit has over 20,000 symbols underpinned by a structured educational and language framework. We help teachers create engaging symbolised resources to support children with EAL access a full curriculum. Teachers can use Widgit

software to create topic word mats to enable children to access the curriculum, develop social communication skills, and support their language learning.

Widgit's dual language templates also allow teachers to create resources using a child's first language. Through the power of Google Translate, over 80 different languages can be easily accessed within Widgit's powerful, fast and easily accessible online software.

Find out more: widgit.com

Alternatively, our team are happy to help.
Contact us on **+44 (0) 1926 333680**
or email info@widgit.com



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