

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.

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Insight and resource ideas provided by Jenny Smith and Shabnam Shah from the EAL and New Arrivals Team, Early Years Education and Skills at Sheffield City Council in their webinar [Key Strategies to support learners with EAL in the classroom](#).

Introduction

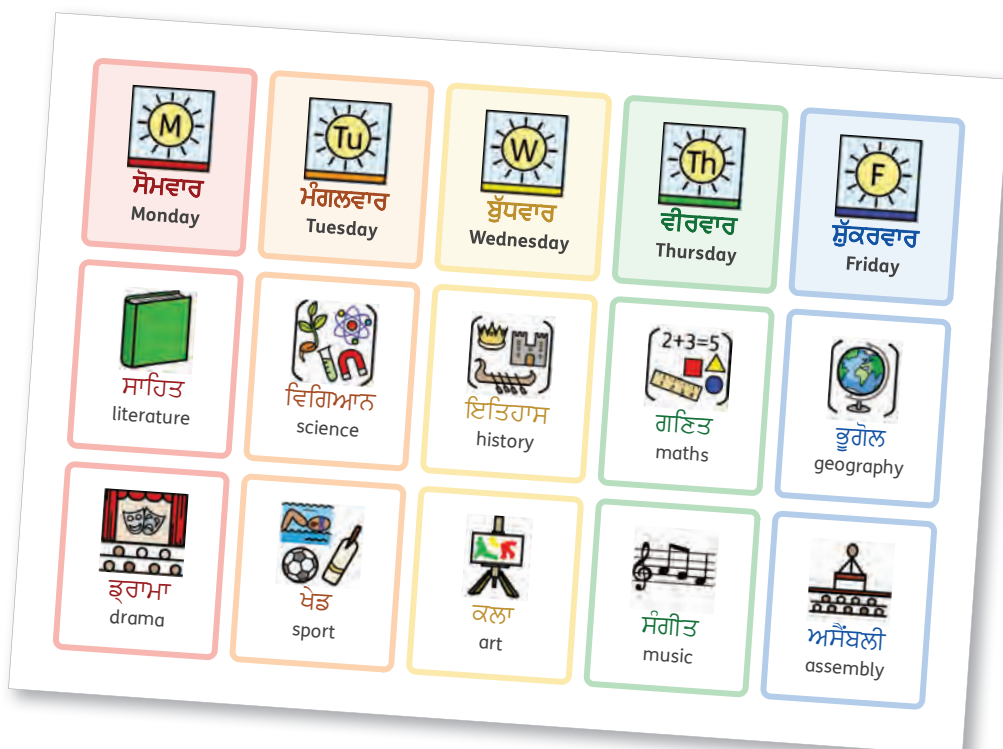
As anyone who has mastered a new language will know, students with EAL face an array of challenges which set them apart from native speakers. Not only do they have to learn the English language, but they must then use it to access the curriculum, form friendships, and navigate the customs and routines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

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 as a result.

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.

International schools have an important role to play in supporting students with EAL 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 in international schools every day.



Who are our EAL learners?

Children with EAL bring a variety of backgrounds and experiences to our classrooms, and these can have a profound impact on how a child learns and interacts with others.

As international schools cater for children with a wealth of identities, as

well as a wide range of linguistic abilities, there can be additional demands on teachers when supporting their students.

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

“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 former Head of Primary English



camel



formula one



desert



dessert



rollercoaster



mosque

How much English is seen and heard outside school?

A child's exposure to English can vary significantly.

While some children are able to practise their English with parents, others come from homes where English is not used or understood. This can also present practical barriers for parents in supporting their child's education and communicating with the school.

A child's wider environment plays a part too. If children are surrounded by English in action, such as on billboards, in newspapers and on television, it reinforces their learning. In countries where this is not the case, international schools have to take on the task of providing those missing opportunities for everyday exposure to English.

Who are our EAL learners?

How many languages are spoken and understood?

Each child has different levels of fluency, reading and writing ability.

A child who can already speak two or three languages might find it easier to learn English than a child who has no second language learning experience.

Many international school students also attend additional lessons in other

settings to maintain their first language skills; this might give them an advantage because they are more familiar with the language learning process.

International school teachers have to become experts at differentiating learning tasks to accommodate students' knowledge and abilities.

What educational experiences have children had?

A child's previous educational experience can have an impact on their learning style. For example, were they encouraged to use their first language to socialise with friends during break times or expected to speak English as much as possible?

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 a new language.

With a diverse community of language learners, international schools are always exploring new tools and techniques to help support learners with EAL, while giving the 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 in international schools

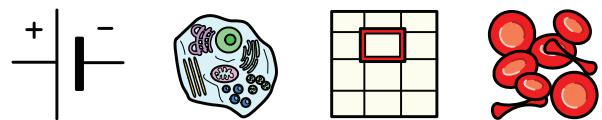
When children are developing their knowledge of English, they need extra support to help them understand what is happening around them so they can communicate with others.

Many international school teachers 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 students with EAL make connections between words and meanings. Symbols are simple images which can represent anything we are seeing or using – such as art materials or sports equipment – which are 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 in international schools, 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.

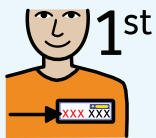
It's a good idea to use structured questions to help children talk about themselves. Speaking exercises can be supported by visuals in the form of symbols which represent objects, actions and concepts. Symbols are an effective way to aid understanding and get the conversation started.

Key strategies to support children with EAL in international schools

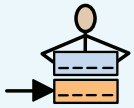
“Who am I?”

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. Ask the child what they would like to be called at school, and capture it phonetically.

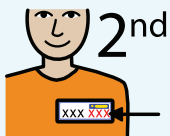
Visual profiles, which help people describe themselves using symbols, can encourage children to think about their names and tell you if they use a nickname or a shortening. This can be crucial in creating a sense of belonging.



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 in international schools

“What can I do?”

In an international setting, many children will have lived in different countries and speak different languages, and their proficiency might vary from being able to speak (but not write) a language through to a high level of fluency.

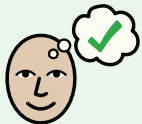
Symbols can help children tell the class which languages they can speak, read and write, and which they use at home.



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...

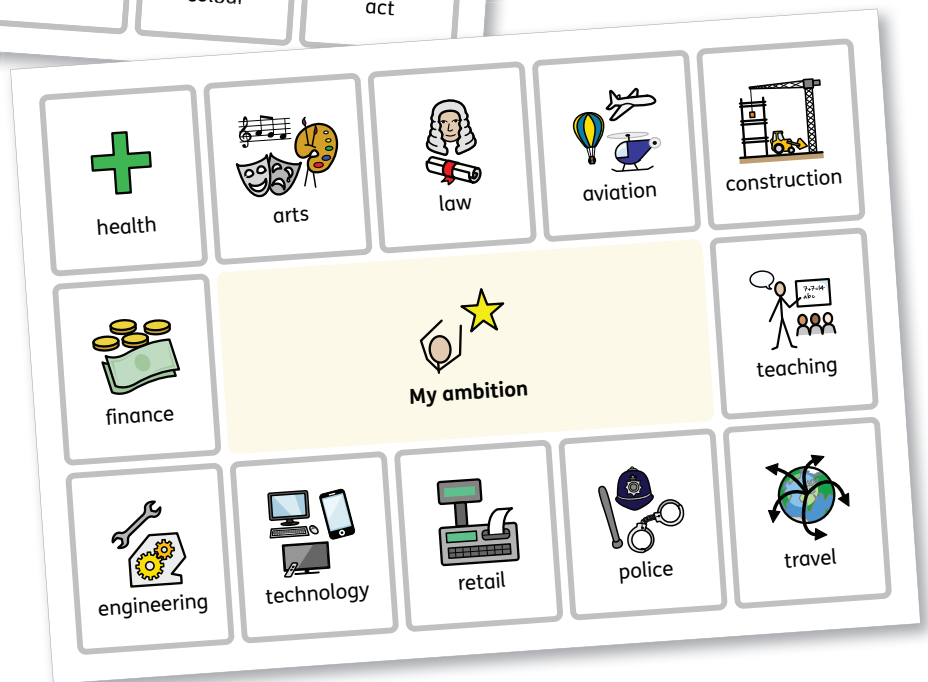
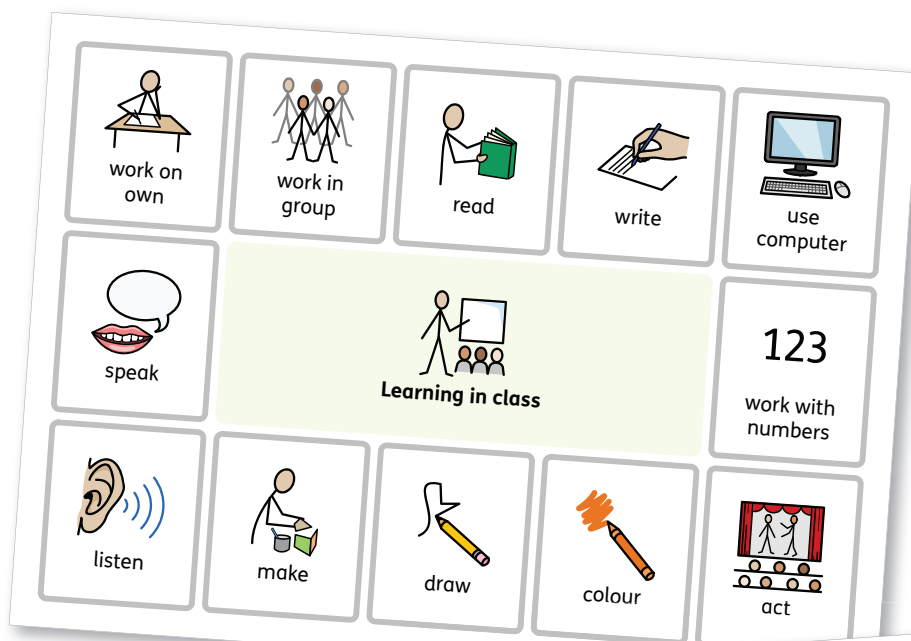
Key strategies to support children with EAL in international schools

“What makes me happy?”

To give children a structure they can use to talk about themselves, it is a good idea to provide topic areas such as family members, hobbies and interests, and previous education.

Teachers can link this to learning styles by asking 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 in international schools

“What would I like my teacher to know?”

Asking a child if there is anything they want to tell the teacher is a good 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.

“At the start of the year I made a ‘meet the teacher’ map with things like my favourite food, my favourite colour and some of my likes and dislikes. I used a visual to symbolise each word. The children were able to use the symbols to ask me questions and to express their own likes, dislikes and identities.”

Orlaith O’Carroll, Inclusion Teacher, Charter Schools, UAE

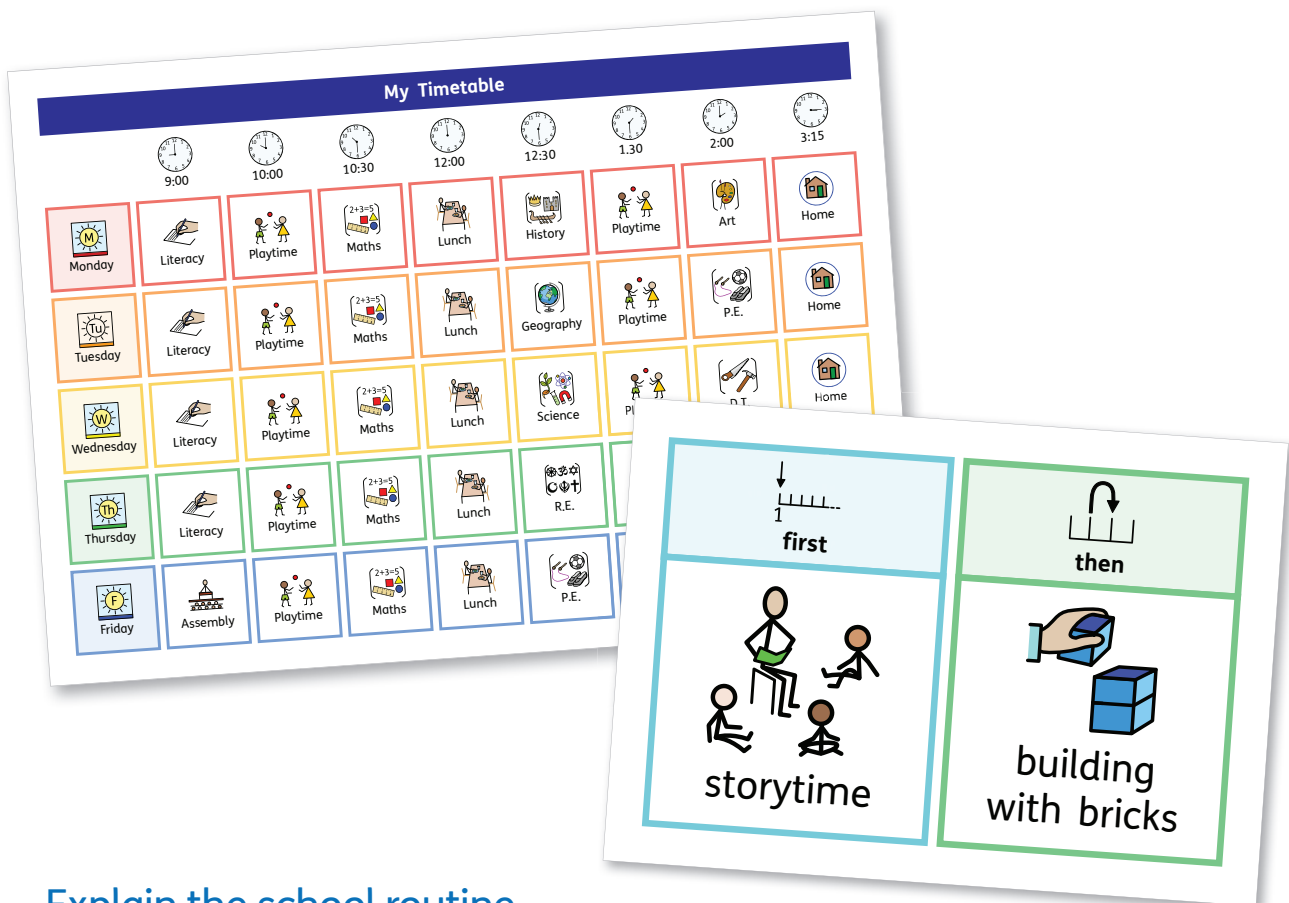
Key strategies to support children with EAL in international schools



2. Create an inclusive environment

When a child with EAL starts at a new international school, some aspects of school life 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.

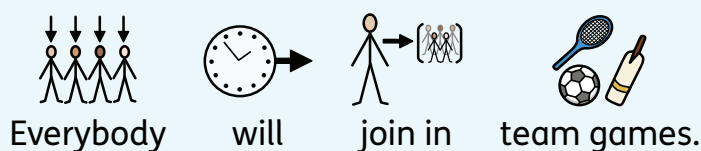
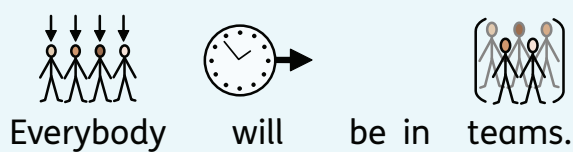
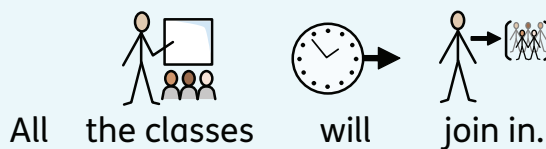
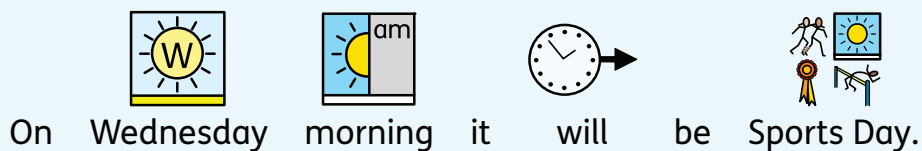
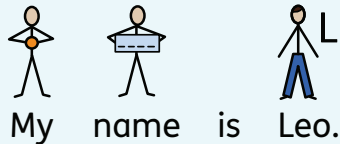
This can be as simple as a now/next board for the youngest children, which explains what they will be doing first, with a symbol to depict one activity, such as story time, followed by another symbol showing building with bricks.

Key strategies to support children with EAL in international schools

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 in international schools

Involve parents/carers and families

When introducing any changes to the school week, or adding new activities to the day, schools can help children adjust by involving parents and carers.

Teachers can send symbolised stories home with the child so they 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 former Head of Primary English

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.



Key strategies to support children with EAL in international schools

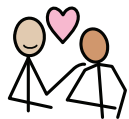
Help children understand expectations

If children are having difficulties with behaviour, it can be because they have misunderstood the language.

It's a good idea to use positive requests, for example 'walk nicely' works well, but 'no running' can be confusing because

a child might just hear and focus on the word 'running.'

Symbolised reward charts can help children understand what the teacher would like them to do. Try focusing on two or three target behaviours to improve.



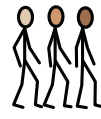
be kind



good sitting



well done



line up



calm



ready to learn

“One child was having difficulty with carpet time and he was distracting other children by taking off his shoes, fidgeting and shouting out the answer. So, we created pictures for the child showing him what good carpet time looked like.

There were symbols of him sitting nicely with his hands on his lap and his shoes on with the behaviours written underneath – good sitting, nice hands, shoes on. Reinforcing these three behaviours helped the child to focus. The teacher also had these symbols on her lanyard, so she could point to them as a reminder rather than having to interrupt the lesson with a verbal instruction.

Each time the pupil demonstrated positive behaviours, he was allowed to put a sticker on his reward chart, which supported his progress.”

Orlaith O'Carroll, Inclusion Teacher, Charter Schools, UAE

Key strategies to support children with EAL in international schools

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.
- Design symbolised reward charts with visuals and descriptions of good behaviours.



3. Enable children to access the curriculum

Learners with EAL are having to develop their knowledge, skills, and understanding of the curriculum, while at the same time acquiring a more academic form of English.

Anything teachers can do to reduce the cognitive load will help children learn in a more calm and effective way. Combining symbols with the written and spoken word, using language translation technology, and incorporating physical actions into lessons can all support a child's learning.



“Children with EAL can become over-stimulated with people speaking to them in their second language all day, every day. The more you can supplement your verbal output with visuals and symbols, the more it helps children manage their learning.”

Orlaith O'Carroll, Inclusion Teacher, Charter Schools, UAE

Key strategies to support children with EAL in international schools

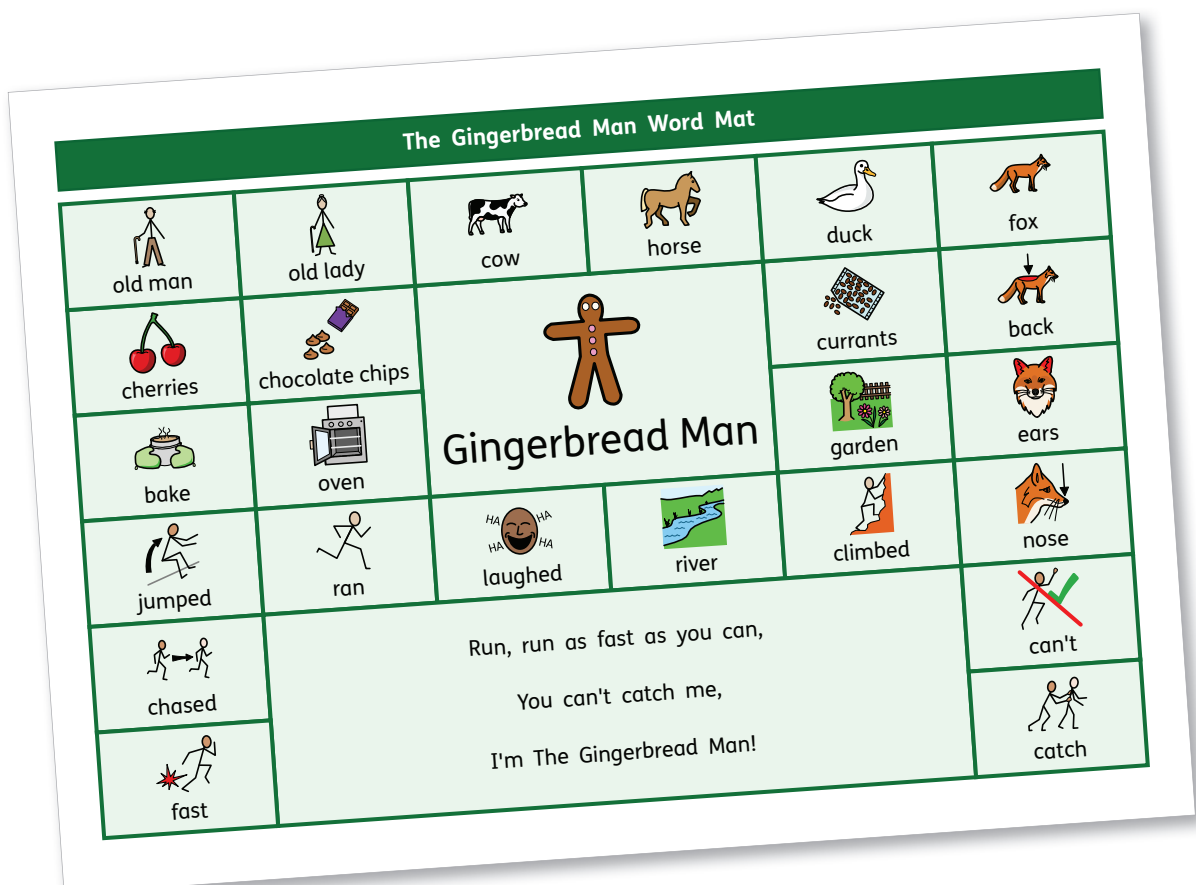
Use visuals to accompany teacher talk

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.

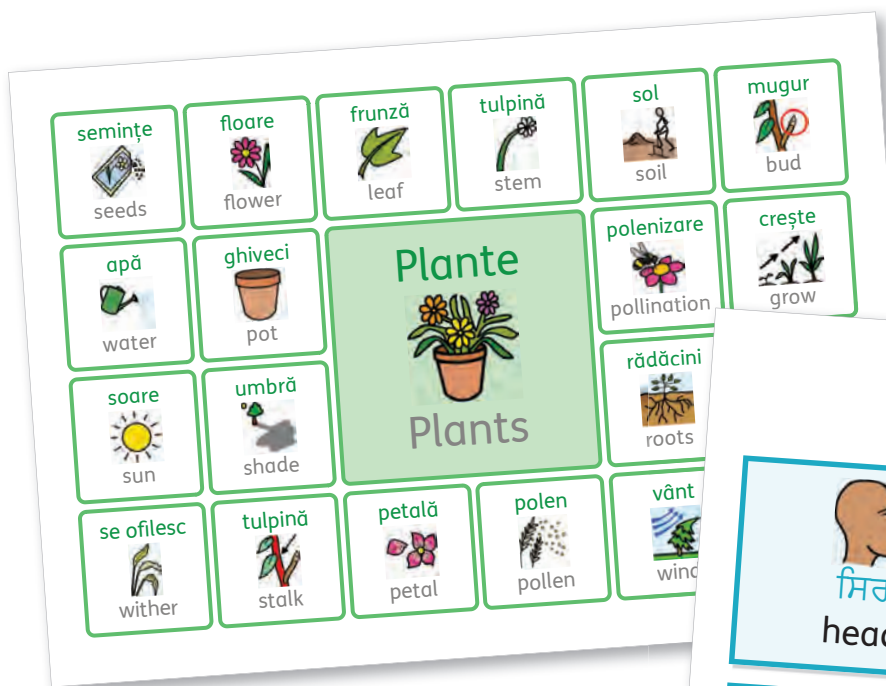


Key strategies to support children with EAL in international schools

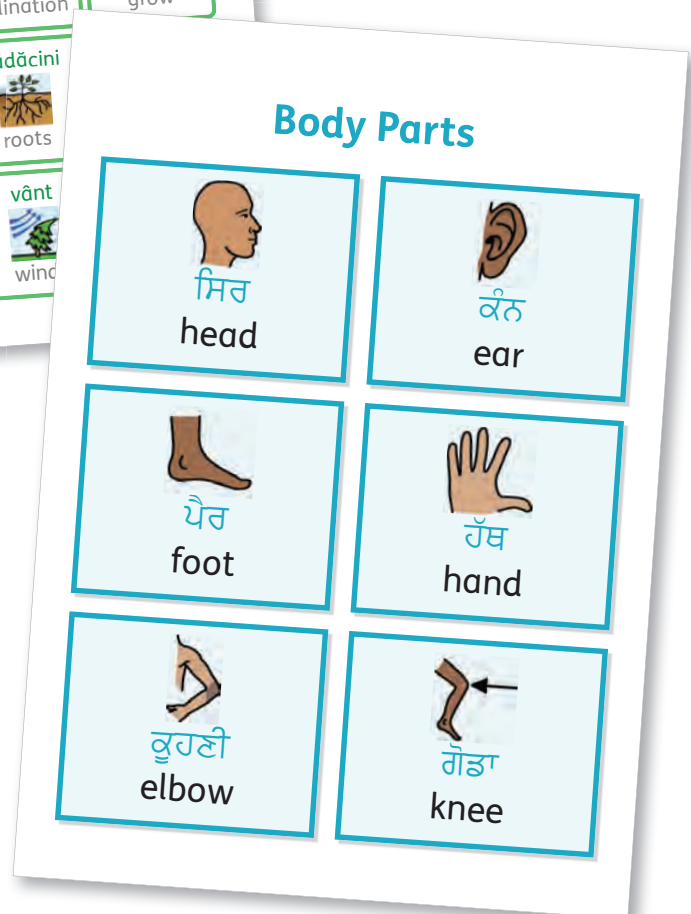
Introduce subject-specific vocabulary

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.



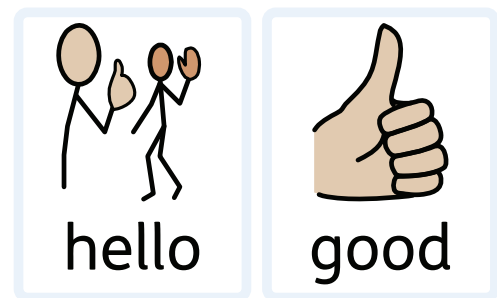
Translation technology is improving all the time, and as long as you remain aware of its limitations, apps like Google Translate can play a part in helping children learn key vocabulary.



Key strategies to support children with EAL in international schools

Use signs and actions in teaching

For younger children, or children at an earlier stage in their learning, using physical movement alongside symbols and text is an effective way to help children learn and remember new vocabulary.



“If children are able link a word with an action, they are more likely to remember that word. I have been teaching children some key classroom vocabulary, such as pencil and whiteboard, using [Total Physical Response \(TPR\)](#). TPR connects a word with an action, for example a teacher writing on a whiteboard or a child using a pencil. The student can help to create the actions themselves, and this serves as a powerful memory aid for them.”

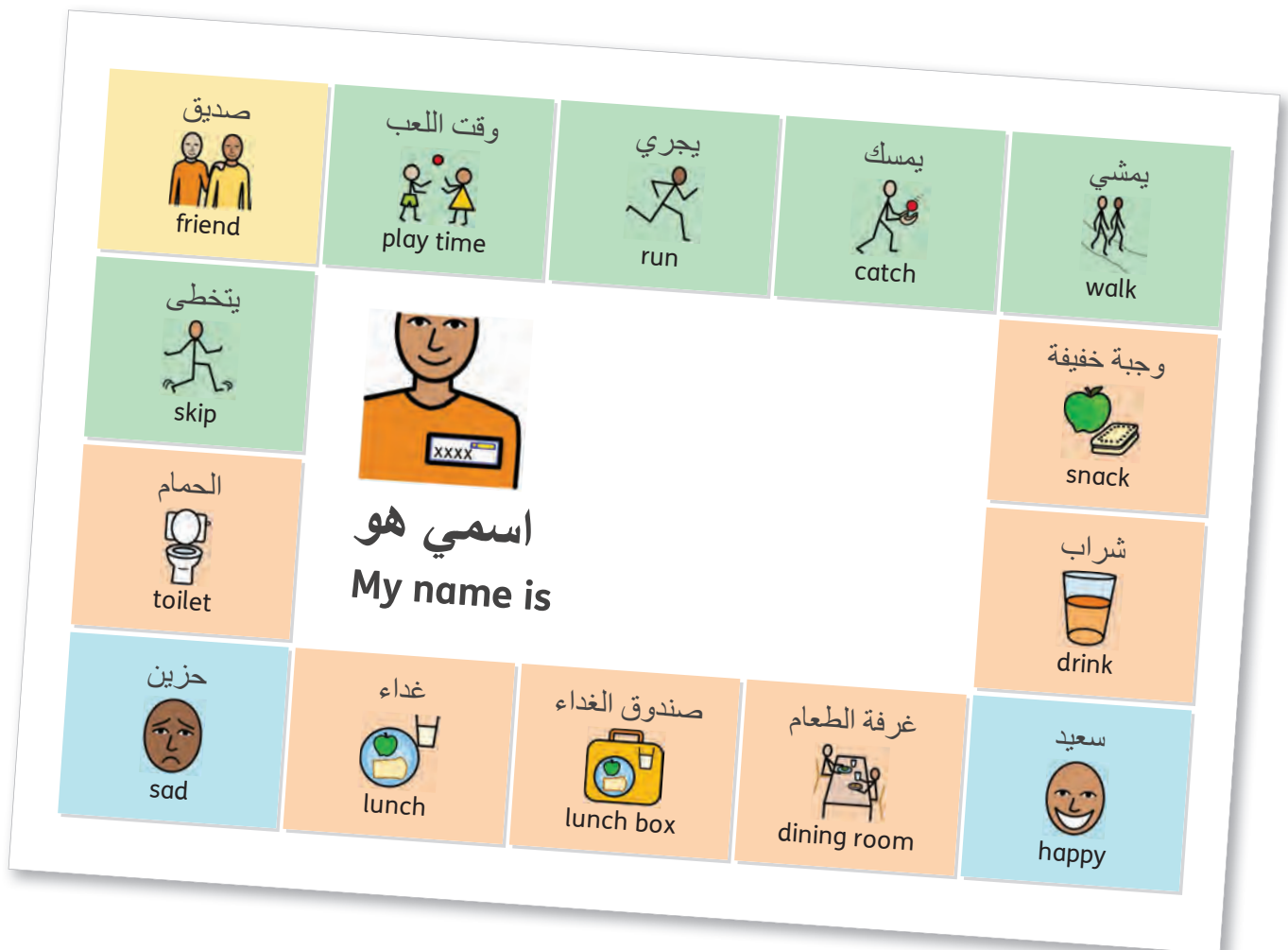
Orlaith O’Carroll, Inclusion Teacher, Charter Schools, UAE

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 in international schools



“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.”

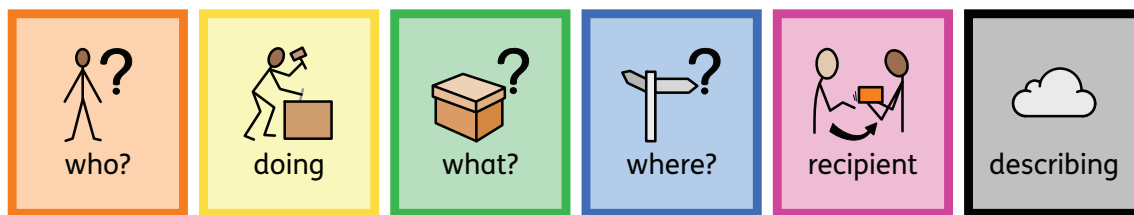
Laura Spargo, Education Consultant and former Head of Primary English

Key strategies to support children with EAL in international schools

Help children build sentence structure

Children with EAL have to think more carefully about how to construct a sentence than their native-speaking peers. As children progress through the

curriculum, this is a skill they need to develop for tasks such as essay writing, presenting a hypothesis, and contributing to group discussions.



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.
- Use signs and actions as well as symbols to embed new vocabulary.
- Allow children to work with a buddy who shares their first language.
- Encourage children to create their own vocabulary mats and storyboards.
- Help children understand sentence structure by colour-coding parts of a sentence.

“To support students’ language skills, I use a programme called [Colourful Semantics](#). This provides a way of colour coding different parts of a sentence. There is a colour for the subject, the object and the verb. If I say to a child ‘the girl is reading a book’, ‘girl’ would be in orange, ‘reading’ in yellow and ‘book’ in green. It works well when we use it together with symbols. As children make progress, you can use the colours and symbols to expand the sentences and introduce more complex structures.”

Orlaith O’Carroll, Inclusion Teacher, Charter Schools, UAE

Key strategies to support children with EAL in international schools



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 in international schools

Build independence in the classroom

A child with EAL who is confused by a classroom activity may feel reluctant to put their hand up and ask the teacher to repeat what they have said, or to ask what to do.

While it's important to encourage children to ask for help, it can also be reassuring

for a child to refer to a visual aid so they develop the confidence to tackle a task independently.

Teachers at [GEMS Winchester School in Dubai](#) use flipcharts with symbols to support their Year 1 to 3 pupils with EAL.

“Children can decode what a task is asking them to do without having to ask the teacher immediately. This fosters a more confident learning environment and encourages students to engage actively in their lessons.”

Charlotte Goode, Assistant Head of Primary, GEMS Winchester School, UAE

Nurture communication skills

Children need to develop their social communication skills in a classroom environment so they can work together, but also build friendships and

connections with their peers. One way you can get children communicating is by playing games which involve sharing information.



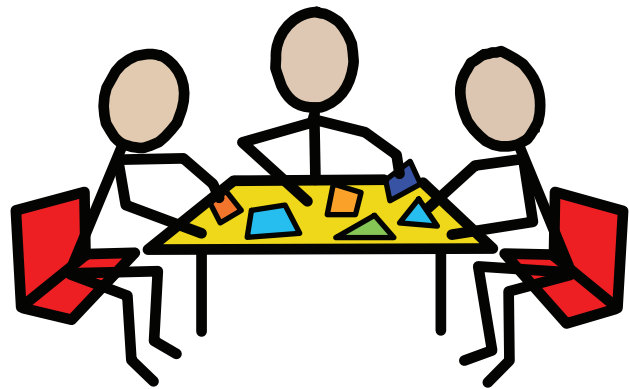
Key strategies to support children with EAL in international schools

“I use a group activity where only one child has a picture of a Lego model, and the rest of the group have to follow that child’s instructions in order to build the model that’s on the picture. The children have to say ‘which block do you need?’ or ‘I need the small red block next to the wall.’ Pre-verbal children can join in by pointing to the blocks, while more able children can use more complex structures. As the children get more confident, they approach the task with greater independence.”

Orlaith O’Carroll, Inclusion Teacher, Charter Schools, UAE

Encourage children to collaborate

As children learn to share ideas and collaborate on a task, they quickly become more confident members of the class. Give children a theme to talk about or ask them to make up a story together. This works best with a visual prompt such as a picture of an animal, a favourite toy, or a musical instrument.



trumpet



animals



fidget spinner



globe



doll



football

Key strategies to support children with EAL in international schools

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.
- Use games which involve children completing a task together.
- Encourage children to create stories together based on an object or image.



“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 former Head of Primary English

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 to 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.





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 fast, powerful, 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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