

Guidance notes: assessing children who are learning English as an additional language



This guidance is for local authority advisers, foundation stage profile moderators and all practitioners working with reception-age and year 1 children who are learning English as an additional language.

It aims to clarify existing information and give further support to practitioners who are assessing the attainment of these children for the foundation stage profile. It includes guidance on:

- conditions for learning and assessment
- supporting the development of the child's home language
- making accurate, truthful and reliable judgements
- the foundation stage profile assessment
- when knowledge of the child's home language is required
- how the foundation stage profile data is used
- transition to year 1.

The guidance focuses on the assessment of young children who are learning English. Their early learning situation is sometimes equated with that of children who have special educational needs. Practitioners should not assume that an inability to speak English is automatically a sign of special educational need. In fact, children who are encouraged to become fully bilingual are likely to have enhanced potential to achieve later in their schooling. There are some children, however, who do have special educational needs. This will be revealed through close observation and assessment, in partnership with parents and with other agencies and

professionals, for example speech and language therapists, and educational psychologists.

Guiding principles

The following principles underpin the foundation stage profile assessment of children who are learning English as an additional language.

- Language is central to our sense of identity and belonging in a community.
- Linguistic diversity is a strength that is recognised and valued.
- All early years provision and practice is planned with respect for each child's cultural background.
- Good practice in the observational assessment of children who are learning English is good practice for the assessment of all children.
- Assessment must distinguish between a child's English language acquisition and their development of knowledge and concepts across the six areas of learning, as outlined in the *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage*.¹
- Practitioners must develop a rounded picture of children's home language experiences and knowledge in order to plan appropriate learning.
- Children should have opportunities to develop and use their home language in their play and learning.

Conditions for learning and assessment

The *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage* clearly sets out the approach to learning and teaching that early years practitioners should adopt. Practitioners are provided with a framework for the curriculum, based on six areas of learning, which are:

- personal, social and emotional development
- communication, language and literacy
- mathematical development
- knowledge and understanding of the world
- physical development
- creative development.

These areas of learning are divided into scales and scale points, against which children's development is measured. The scales reflect the early learning goals and stepping stones set out in the curriculum guidance. Practitioners are

required to observe, reflect on and assess a child's development over their time in the reception year against each of these scales. (See figure 1 on page 5 for details of the scales and scale points.)

The curriculum guidance stresses that, 'Enabling children to learn should be based on knowing what children can do, identifying what comes next and knowing when it is timely to intervene and when to hold back'.²

The aim of this observational approach to assessment is to compile a truthful and accurate record of all children's progress to pass on to year 1 practitioners. The *Foundation stage profile handbook* emphasises the importance of observational assessment, stating, 'It reflects the key role of skilful and well-planned observations in providing reliable assessment information on young children'.

In settings, practitioners should observe children at play in self-initiated activities. This is because children's behaviour is less predictable and a greater variety of communication skills are likely to be observed when the child is involved in this type of action rather than in adult-directed play. Adult-directed play entails more narrowly focused tasks, which cover fewer aspects of learning.

When observing, the practitioner should note also the child's interests, motivation, feelings, confidence and perseverance, and do so in both self-initiated and adult-directed work. Practitioners need to note the child's typical, consistent and independent learning behaviours over time, to ensure that they can make objective and reliable judgements about the child's progress and attainment.

Supporting the development of the child's home language

All early years settings aim to make their learning environments as welcoming and accessible as possible for all children. To do this effectively for children who are learning English as an additional language, practitioners must try to find out as much as they can about the child's prior language experience. This will help with the new task of learning English by contextualising the child's previous experience.

Many children may already understand and/or speak more than one language or dialect and have done so from a very early age. They are likely to have grown up at home experiencing that language in a range of mediums, including letters, newspapers, videos, internet and TV programmes. They may also have older siblings who attend Saturday schools or community classes to learn or maintain their home language, or to be instructed in the community faith.

Consequently, when young children enter education settings they will be at different stages of learning English. Some are brought up to be bilingual from birth and may be able to communicate in more than one language to different family members. Some children will still be developing their home language, as well as starting to learn English in the early years

setting. And others may have limited opportunities to develop their home language – just as for some monolingual English children – because there is a lack of understanding in the home about the importance of early communication skills.

Practitioners may need to explain to parents that their child's home language development will help them learn English; that they will be making links from the language they know to the new one. Practitioners should also reassure parents that it is completely acceptable for their child to speak their home language in the setting as they tune in to new sounds, new words and ways of putting words together in English. A child learning English as an additional language has a lot to master and may become silent for a time. This silent period is a recognised feature of becoming bilingual.

Parents, as their child's first educators, may feel unable to help their child if they, too, are in the process of learning English. Their child's early years setting may be the first opportunity they have to find support and information about English education practice. Practitioners need to explain to these parents the value of young children's play, and how observing children over time in indoor and outdoor activities helps build a picture of what children know about, understand and can do. A child's non-verbal responses and gestures can say a lot about a child's development.

Practitioners should develop and nurture trusting relationships with parents. The home and setting need to work together to ensure children who are learning English receive all the support necessary to aid the settling-in process.

To contextualise the child's learning experience, it is important to find out what education he or she has already experienced elsewhere. Practitioners who learn and use some key words in the child's home language can reassure the child in their new surroundings. Bilingual support, where it is available, can make all the difference to a child. On entry to the setting, the child may be the only speaker of his/her home language and that language may be the only security the child has. This may also be true for parents learning English.

Practitioners are also responsible for supporting parents in finding out about the nature and accessibility of local childcare and education provision.

Settings need to be sensitive to the needs of families who may be refugees or asylum seekers, as these families may have histories of persecution, trauma, dislocation and isolation. Their children's development may have suffered and their responses to new environments and social situations may be very tentative and wary. Equally, different cultural conventions about behaviour, respect and gender roles may determine how a child responds to social situations and being part of an unfamiliar group. Settings need to be alert to the risk of misunderstandings and of seeing the child as not having any language because they cannot respond, as yet, in English.



Making accurate, truthful and reliable judgements

There are three aspects to the assessment of children who are learning English as an additional language and these are set out in the *Foundation stage profile handbook* on pages 117 and 118 as:

- development in their home language
- development across the six areas of learning assessed through their home language
- development of English.

All the scales in personal, social and emotional development, mathematical development, knowledge and understanding of the world, physical development, and creative development 'can be assessed through the medium of the home language'. This means that for assessment of these scales the child can speak his or her home language but the practitioner needs to know little or nothing of that language to make an accurate and reliable judgement of the child's development.

The first three scale points in all of the scales for communication, language and literacy can also be assessed in this way. But scale points 4 to 9 of the communication, language and literacy scales must be assessed in English. Practitioners will need bilingual assistance for these scales.

Practitioners should examine the foundation stage profile scales to understand how language dependent many of the early learning goals are. When assessing children over time it is important to look at how they develop their understanding and make progress, without expecting talk to give answers about what they know and can do. The process of acquiring English will take time. Children new to English need time to watch, explore, experiment, practise and repeat the new ways of communicating, and of thinking from their home language across into English. It helps for practitioners to recognise that a silent period is part of the process of acquiring a language and is not an unwillingness to speak. Children are gathering information about everything they see, hear, are interested in and want to try out. They are making sense of the situation they are in and how they can belong. How the child behaves

during the settling-in period can be a key starting point for a practitioner's observations.

Children in the foundation stage will also be developing competence in their home language. It is vital that the setting develops a trusting relationship with parents of these young learners so that as much information about the child's language and stage of learning development is shared from the start. This helps to inform planning for further learning.

Accurate and reliable observational assessment demands high-quality, culturally diverse and inclusive provision for all children. Practitioners need to observe children in self-initiated play in a learning environment that is exciting, visually irresistible and full of multisensory invitations to discover, explore, play, invent and create. The education provision should reflect the diversity of its community by using materials, activities and tasks that can offer meaningful and relevant links to children's home-language communities and cultures. Children's engagement with these materials will reveal their interests and abilities and give practitioners observation information to record against the range of profile scales.

The foundation stage profile assessment

Observational assessment

All the scales have some scale points that are focused on children's responses, such as 'communicates freely', 'speaks in a familiar group', 'expresses needs', 'initiates communication', 'uses language', 'describes shapes', 'uses everyday words'. All the scales in personal, social and emotional development, mathematical development, knowledge and understanding of the world, physical development and creative development can be assessed in the medium of the child's home language (see above).

Although the practitioner needs to know little or nothing of the child's home language, it is very important to consult parents when trying to make judgements about the child's interests and learning progress. To build up a shared picture of the child's progress, practitioners need information from a range of other contributors, such as support assistants, throughout the reception year.

The communication emphasis in the scales is on all learners being able and ready to talk about their feelings, what they are interested in, can do, or want to find out about. Practitioners need to be aware of the impact on children of their own communication behaviours, for example the way they listen and respond can make the difference between children feeling acknowledged and encouraged, and their feeling ignored.

For the child there is also a need to make sense of new routines and expectations – as an individual and as a social participant in a new setting. They will be asking themselves, 'Where can I fit in?'

Settings need to plan activities that provide children with opportunities to play and work collaboratively with peers

and/or adults who share the same language, and with monolingual English speakers who can offer good models of English speech. Children actively absorb the patterns of language in English as they are involved in events such as turn-taking games, physically active games outdoors, daily routines, circle time and role play. There should also be opportunities for children to engage in activities that do not depend solely on a knowledge of English for completion, and where they can participate in ways that reveal what they know and can do in the security of their home language. This could be when talking with a bilingual support assistant while working on a task in an area of learning such as mathematical development or knowledge and understanding of the world, or being paired with same-language peers on an adult-directed activity.

Practitioners need to observe how and in what situations these children can make sense of what is being said around them and then make successful choices about what they want to do. Observers can track this developing confidence while noting what may be different rates of English language acquisition with respect to expressive and receptive understanding and competence.

Assessment of education provision

In making assessment judgements about the progress of children over time, it is crucial also to evaluate the impact of the setting's education provision and teaching methods. Here are some key points to consider.

1. Are the home languages of children reflected in the displays that celebrate their multilingual identities and cultural experiences?
2. Do curriculum resources reflect a multinational perspective or are they Eurocentric in images and content, to the point of unwitting bias and exclusion?
3. Are the learning contexts and social groupings enabling or intimidating?
4. Are key words from the child's home language used to foster a sense of belonging and achievement in knowing more than one way of speaking?
5. Is the power of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic opportunity exploited in all areas of the foundation stage curriculum to benefit all learners?
6. Are all staff aware of and sensitive to the need for process time for children as they manage the new compositional challenges of thinking and talking in a new language with new vocabulary and grammar?
7. Are there activities planned that offer and extend children's knowledge of particular forms of English usage, for example descriptive language development when taking a visual walk with a camera, expressive language when playing shops or in dramatic replay of a story, or positional language while building with blocks or planks outdoors?
8. Do practitioners track (and use as evidence) children's developing oral competence in English by noting specific vocabulary and chunks of language the children are acquiring and using over time?
9. To avoid under-assessing a child in a particular area of learning, do practitioners consult and moderate with other early years colleagues in order to ensure accurate judgements?
10. Does the setting's assessment procedure take account of the cultural, religious and ethnic diversity of all its children including those learning English as an additional language, and ensure all parents' contributions are respected, valued and used?
11. Do practitioners plan activities that encompass children's communities' key places, festivals, holy days, special customs and observances?
12. Are all staff aware of what may be different cultural conventions in, and expectations of, education, play/work, behaviour, self-care, and independence for boys and girls, for families learning English?
13. Are the areas of learning planned with examples of other cultures' scripts, number systems and traditional stories so that learning activities are meaningful and inclusive for children?



When is knowledge of the child’s home language required?

As shown in figure 1, the majority of the scales do not require practitioners to have knowledge of a child’s home language to assess learning. Practitioners should always observe children over time in a range of contexts, including indoor and outdoor activities, in small peer-friendly pairs or groups, during child-initiated play and in home visits or meetings. Also, events that are part of the daily routine, such as snack and lunch times, beginnings and ends of the day, and special occasions that involve the local community, offer opportunities for observation and noting how children respond, cope and interact with their surroundings.

Assessment by observation over the reception year should build up a reliable picture of what these young learners understand, know about and can confidently do in different areas of the foundation stage curriculum. The whole

assessment process depends upon the quality of the learning environment. This includes the richness and relevance of the setting’s education provision, as well as any ethnic minority advisory service support available and the sharing of information and questions with parents. Settings should also have effective internal moderation opportunities. There should be planned time for early years staff to discuss assessment information and the provisional judgements they have made about the children’s development.

The three personal, social and emotional development scales (dispositions and attitudes, social development and emotional development) can, with two exceptions, be assessed by observing children over time in a range of contexts. These contexts include indoors and outdoors, small peer-friendly groupings, child-initiated play and home-setting meetings.

The two exceptions to this are emotional development point 2, where it is desirable for practitioners to have some

Figure 1: Language requirements for teachers assessing children who are learning English as an additional language

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Personal, social and emotional development	Disposition and attitudes	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue
	Social development	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue
	Emotional development	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Dark Grey	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue
Communication, language and literacy	Language for communication and thinking	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
	Linking sounds and letters	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
	Reading	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
	Writing	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Mathematical development	Numbers as labels and for counting	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue
	Calculating	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue
	Shape, space and measures	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue
Knowledge and understanding of the world	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Dark Grey	Dark Grey	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue
Physical development	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Dark Grey	Light Blue
Creative development	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue

- The assessment must take place in English
- A knowledge of the basic vocabulary of the child’s home language is required to make an assessment
- Fluency in the child’s home language is required to make an assessment
- Knowledge of the child’s home language is not required to make an assessment

functional vocabulary knowledge or bilingual support, and emotional development point 6, where fluency in the child's home language is essential, so the setting really needs bilingual/parent help.

For emotional development point 2, the phrase 'communicates freely' may be tricky as it could be that a child may be wary of talking about home and family. How does the setting's environment help the child to connect home and setting, and setting and the community? The resources and play scenarios available can offer ways to communicate without the requirement to talk. Also, how the setting creates links with the parents can make all the difference for the new child and smooth the transition process while the practitioner observes.

Bilingual help is required for emotional development point 6. The expectation is that a child has a developing respect for their own culture and beliefs and those of other people. This point links with knowledge and understanding of the world and expects some evidence of knowing about something. This will need particular opportunities, such as role play, cookery, celebrations and visits to special places/events that invite children to demonstrate some understanding of difference. Jude, for example, who made a collage with glitter and paint, said to the adult, 'It looks like Christmas at my Nan's house and mine, we've got a Christmas tree, have you?' (The adult replies, 'No'.) Jude then asks, 'Does everybody?' (The adult replies, 'No'.) Jude says, 'Maybe they have something else'.

A child who is not yet proficient in English will still be able to make connections and show an awareness of difference in their home language. But the practitioner will need to observe the child over time and raise any questions with the child's parents, and/or bilingual support assistants, to be confident about what the child does know and understand at his or her current level of development. Unlike Jude, the child may not talk or ask questions that reveal understanding and comparison. However, a practitioner's inability to communicate in the child's home language is no reason for under-assessment of the child's capabilities and capacities. It is an assessment challenge to create learning environments that will elicit children's knowing behaviours that can be observed and assessed. To do justice to all the children, it is sometimes necessary to have 'eyes in the back of our heads'.

The first three points of all the communication, language and literacy scales can be assessed in the child's home language, which does not have to be English. So, 'initiates communication' and 'talks activities through' can be in the child's home language. The important point is to observe when, how and why the child is communicating. Again, the setting's planned and spontaneous opportunities can have a powerful and stimulating effect. The sudden appearance of 'big teddy' stuck in a tree with a sign saying 'help!', or the long-awaited event of butterflies hatching can be the stimulus for talk and new words in English.

The important point in terms of assessment is to be ready to capture the significant moment, as all the children are engaged and involved in play and exploration.

Mathematical development can be wholly assessed using the child's home language, but as figure 1 shows, practitioners' knowledge of some key words in the child's home language would be helpful. Again, observation over time is the appropriate way to ensure there is contextualised, dated evidence to underpin the judgements for the profile.

Knowledge and understanding of the world may be considered the most problematic area to confidently assess, as it includes so many different subjects. The planning and provision list needs to focus on developing children's skills of observation and selection, their ability to distinguish similarities and differences, and to ask how and why questions. There is an unavoidable emphasis on talk. Therefore, to reliably assess a child's attainment, practitioners need to observe and then moderate their provisional judgements with colleagues, bilingual assistants, if available, and talk to parents where possible. And, as always, the learning environment has to offer the stimulating, exciting and challenging activities that children want to try. Settings should regularly audit the education they provide, to evaluate the range of multicultural resources available and to check what the early years foundation stage terms as the 'cultural spread' and relevance of that education provision to the communities of all children represented in the setting.

How the foundation stage profile data is used

To ensure the process of transition into year 1 is as smooth as possible, foundation stage practitioners and year 1 colleagues must have dedicated time together to review and discuss the outcomes of the foundation stage profile. They will need to interpret the significance of the different foundation stage profile scale points and how they relate to each child's achievement, stage of learning development and individual needs. Planning continuity for children who are learning English is no different from planning for monolingual children. Teaching approaches and provision must take account of foundation stage profile cohort outcomes (as specified in the *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage*) of the individual child's attainments, and identify strengths and areas of specific focus to sustain learning and an appropriate level of challenge.

The data collected during the foundation stage profile informs year 1 teaching strategies, curriculum planning, organisation of the learning environment and of appropriate resources that will help all children continue their learning journeys with confidence and enthusiasm.

For the children it is important to plan the next steps in their learning using the observation and evidence provided by the foundation stage profile. The outcomes of the foundation

stage profile may indicate that additional planning is needed to support a child in a particular area of learning. Examples of this may include aspects of linking sounds and letters in communication, language and literacy, or some of the tricky scale points in knowledge and understanding of the world. Observations that show a child beginning to pose how and why questions in English will give year 1 practitioners significant evidence of a key development in that child's use of English.

There will be foundation stage profile outcomes indicating that children, including some learning English as an additional language, have not attained any early learning goals in a particular scale. Year 1 practitioners need to understand why this is – whether it is because of the conditions for learning, length of time in the setting or difficulties in accessing the learning programme – to plan appropriate support. It is important to know what the assessments show that the child has achieved, and not to make deficit judgements – focusing on what children cannot do. This underlines the importance of regular documentation evidencing steps in achievement to show progress.

It is an acknowledged feature of young children's development that day-to-day behaviour can be very variable. The ability and confidence to relate to new people and to express feelings and ideas in a new language is a daunting task for anyone, adult or child. How settings value, care for and nurture all young children's learning is the most important focus of any assessment system.

Transition to year 1

The transition process involves moving from one environment and one set of relationships to another, with the potential for anxiety and uncertainty for both children and parents. For children, the change to the new situation in big school may result in a dip in confidence and sense of wellbeing – as they leave valued adults and sustaining peer relationships. There will be another period of settling in, and foundation stage settings have an important role to play in supporting the children and their parents through this process.

¹ From 2008, *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage* will be superseded by *Early years foundation stage*, and the foundation stage profile by the early years foundation stage profile – within which mathematical development will change to problem solving, reasoning and numeracy.

² *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage*, page 23

Further information about the foundation stage profile is available from:

National Assessment Agency
29 Bolton Street
London W1J 8BT
Tel: 08700 60 60 40
www.naa.org.uk/tests