

# An Evidence Based Guide to Autism and Bilingualism

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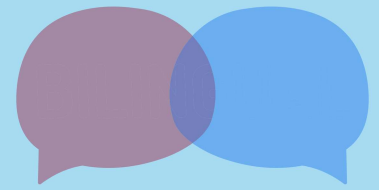
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# Foreword



The following practical guide for schools and parent carers came about as a result of the West Sussex Ethnic Minority and Traveller Education Service (EMTAS) and the Autism and Social Communication Team (ASCT) working with a number of children and young people across the county, identified as learning through EAL who had a diagnosis of autism or social communication difficulties.

Involvement with these children and young people stimulated a conversation about, and interest in, the intersection of these two aspects of their identity on the children and young people themselves, their families and the staff who work with them. The authors began to search for existing and readily available guidance on this topic for schools and families.

This initial search did not yield a great deal. A more extensive quest for research studies in this area followed, and the authors collaborated with Diana Seach, Principal Lecturer in Special Education at the University of Chichester and Helen Pullen, Speech and Language Therapist at the Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust to prepare this publication.

Consequently, the scope of the guidance was broadened to include autistic children and young people who are plurilingual (individuals who speak more than one language) as well as those who are learning through EAL.

We hope that you will find this guide informative and useful in your work with autistic children and young people who also speak more than one language.

# Introduction

According to statistics from the Department for Education (2020) on children and young people with Special Educational Needs in classrooms in England, in the last 5 years there has been a marked increase in the number of bilingual children on the autism spectrum. There are now over 20,000 children with autism who have a first language other than English.

Many autistic children and young people experience difficulties processing language and understanding social cues. It might seem logical therefore to assume that for autistic children it is best to 'stick to one language', and to advise parent carers and schools to focus on the use and development of one language only. In the UK this is most likely to be English.

However, there are many reasons why a child or young person's first language, if it is other than English, should be maintained and developed. For example, a first language is part of a child's identity, it contributes to a positive self-concept, it enables the child to maintain their cultural identity, to connect with their cultural heritage and their family's values and beliefs as well as helping to maintain wider family and community connections.

Maintaining first language has also been shown to support a child's intellectual development and their ability to make better progress learning English and it may in the future, enhance the child's employment prospects in the UK and/or their home country from which they or their family migrated.

*“It is part of who he is (his heritage) so understanding the language and culture is important.”*

Mother

*“It is important for him to be able to communicate with me and my relatives who speak no English.”*

Mother

**Part One** of this guide comprises key terms and definitions; a consideration of the intersection of autism and bilingualism; and a literature review of research about autistic children and young people who speak more than one language.

**Part Two** of the guide comprises practical examples of key strategies for supporting autistic children and young people who speak more than one language or who are learning through EAL.

This part of the guide has been developed from research, the lived experiences of parents and school staff, advisory teachers and speech and language therapists.

**Part Three** comprises appendices notably key points from the guidance as well as links and references to organisations and texts which may be of interest to you in your work with autistic children and young people who speak more than one language or who are learning through EAL.

# Part One

## Autism and Bilingualism

## Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism is a lifelong neurological difference that affects the way a person communicates with and relates to other people and the sensory world around them. ([www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk))

Autism refers to a broad range of conditions characterised by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviours, sensory processing differences, speech and nonverbal communication difficulties.

Autism is experienced differently by autistic individuals and some individuals prefer to understand their autism as an aspect of their identity and an aspect of their neurodiversity rather than a medical condition.

It is for this reason that many individuals will refer to themselves as 'autistic' rather than 'having autism' and in accordance with research by Kenny et al. (2015) 'autistic person' is the most preferred term. Terms such as 'being on the autism spectrum' or 'having an autism spectrum condition' are also used. It is important that practitioners use terms which reflect how the individual and their family prefer to be identified.

## Autism Diagnosis

Clinicians diagnosing autism use a variety of assessment and observation techniques. For a diagnosis of ASD they will identify:

- differences in social communication and interaction
- restricted repetitive behaviours and interests of varying levels and intensity
- sensory processing differences.

## Bilingualism

Bilingual refers to individuals who understand and/or use two or more languages to communicate at home and at school. This does not mean that they are completely fluent in both/all their languages. 'Bilingual' can encompass terms such as 'multilingual' and 'plurilingual'.

Some children are 'simultaneous bilinguals', i.e. they grow up learning and using more than one language before the age of three years. Use of both languages develop more or less simultaneously.

Many learners in the UK are 'sequential bilinguals', i.e. they are more or less fluent in their first language before they learn their second language (English) as they begin to access schooling. As children move through school the majority language (in this case English) may begin to dominate the child's linguistic repertoire, to the detriment of their first language. This is called 'subtractive bilingualism'.

## Biliteracy

The ability to read and write in two languages.

*Bilingualism is not a disorder, nor can it be used as a diagnostic label.*

## Community language

The language/s other than English used within the community.

*There is no evidence that bilingualism causes or contributes to a communication disorder.*

## First language (L1)

L1 is the term used to describe the first language/s a learner is exposed to as a small child.

## Home language

The language used most frequently in the home.

## Learning through English as an Additional Language (EAL)

Describes a learner whose first language is not English who is learning English as well as curriculum content in a UK school. These learners have already learnt one or more languages.

## Translanguaging

Refers to the use of the entire cultural and linguistic repertoire of both pupil and educator when learning. For more information, see Bell Foundation – a useful link can be found in the reference section.

## Minority Ethnic

The term 'minority ethnic' highlights the fact that everyone has an ethnicity, and the issues being referred to relate to minority groups in a majority White ethnic UK context. The term 'Black Asian Minority Ethnic' (BAME) is not used in this guidance as this categorisation does not adequately reflect the cultural variations and heritages of people who are 2nd and 3rd generation born in the UK, or who have migrated from many different countries to live in the UK.

A common misconception is that children from minority ethnic backgrounds are referred to as EAL learners. This terminology may be relevant for those children who are recent immigrants to the UK but for the majority of children they are growing up as simultaneous bilinguals, having access to more than one language in the early stages of their communication and language development.

*Learning through EAL is not a language disorder nor is it a special educational need.*



## The intersection of autism and bilingualism

### Social communication difficulties

An autistic child or young person is likely to have social communication difficulties across their cultural and bilingual experiences.

To identify suitable strategies schools should recognise any difficulties and put appropriate support in place. For our bilingual autistic children and young people this support may, at least in the early stages of acquisition of the mainstream school language (e.g. English), include support in at least two languages.

### Preference for routine and repetitive behaviours and sensory differences

Research studies have found that for autistic individuals, the unpredictability of the social and sensory world can contribute to anxiety.

This has been termed as 'Intolerance of Uncertainty', see Anxiety in Autism Guide (Gaigg, Crawford and Cottell, 2018).

To reduce anxiety, it may benefit bilingual learners if predictable and familiar cultural aspects are harnessed.

For example, a Social Story™ to reduce anxiety around change can be written in first language, linking pre-school experiences to school experiences, and explaining new and possibly unpredictable things.

Another example to help reduce intolerance of uncertainty might be explaining non-verbal cues and language nuances such as sarcasm, idioms and metaphors in their first language.

### Weak executive function, central coherence and social context

It is vital that schools do not automatically conclude that difficulties in understanding learning tasks or adult instructions are due to weak language comprehension on the part of autistic learners who are bilingual.

It may be that these learners in fact have poor executive function impacting on their ability to plan, organise and sequence what they need to do, often making them appear to be impulsive.

Alternatively, they may have weak central coherence and difficulties recognising social cues. In this case explicit bilingual support to develop their understanding and engagement with school life would be beneficial.

# What the research tells us about autism and bilingualism

*Dr Diana Seach, Principal Lecturer in Special Education, University of Chichester*

## Introduction

This review of the literature briefly considers a growing body of research evidence on autism and bilingualism that has identified how bilingual exposure for autistic children and young people can have a positive impact on their communication and language development. While much of the research on autism and bilingualism has originated in the US and Canada, the need to address this topic in UK schools has been emerging in recent years. This has led to practitioners and parents wanting guidance about how best to support a child or young person who has a language impairment or delay associated with a diagnosis of autism and is exposed to more than one language at school and in their home environment or community.

Invariably the literature cited has used the term 'bilingualism' to refer to individuals who understand and/or use two or more languages to communicate. It also recognises how many children are being educated in English and have home environments that are multilingual. Therefore, both terms are relevant within this discussion.

## Challenges and concerns about autism and bilingualism

With the development of both receptive and expressive language being central to a diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder, parents, educators and clinicians have expressed concerns that learning more than one language in infancy can be too challenging. As a consequence, many families either choose, or have been encouraged to adopt a monolingual approach so that their child can access education through an English-based curriculum and learn to 'fit in' socially with their non-autistic peers (Howard, Gibson and Katsos, 2019).

Hambly and Fombonne's (2012) research sought to gain more understanding of the impact of bilingualism on the language development in autistic children and young people by comparing their social abilities and language levels in bilingual and monolingual home environments. The results found that bilingually-exposed autistic children did not experience additional delays in language development compared to monolingually-exposed children. Autistic children showed capabilities of similar language achievements regardless of whether their environment was monolingual or bilingual.

They concluded from their research that the foundational skills for language learning did not produce additional vulnerabilities for bilingually-exposed children compared to those who were monolingual. It was acknowledged that the long-term impact of bilingual exposure could not be determined due to changes in families' life circumstances and the child's increasing access to English-speaking education that could influence the languages spoken at home.

## The importance of bilingualism for autistic children and young people

Similar case studies by Petersen, Marinova-Todd and Mirenda (2012) involving English-Chinese bilinguals and Valicenti-McDermott et al.'s (2012) research with English-Spanish children, also found no difference in language development between monolingually exposed and bilingually exposed autistic children. What these researchers found were distinct advantages for bilingual children compared to their monolingual peers that included having a larger vocabulary, a greater use of gestures to request objects and pretend play. Current research suggests that there are potential benefits to autistic children being in bilingual environments rather than concerns, as initially expressed by clinicians and education professionals, that being bilingual can impede language development (Park, 2014).

Additionally, research has been undertaken to highlight the importance of bilingualism in families for maintaining and enhancing social relationships and communication with family members. Kremer-Sadlik (2005) points out how the integration of language and socialisation are crucial for understanding the values, beliefs and norms for everyday life and that to suggest children do not use their home language could have a negative effect on the child's socialisation process. For many families, the benefits of living in a multilingual environment are seen as one of the key ways in which their autistic child learns about their cultural and religious heritage. Not only is this fundamental to an individual's sense of identity it is also crucial for helping the child or young person to develop a sense of belonging to their home and school community.

## Parental perceptions and decisions about bilingualism

The global movement of people to different countries, colonial influences and multilingual living within countries means that speaking two or more languages is the norm for nearly two thirds of the world's population (Yu, 2013). It is therefore more typical that children will be bilingually exposed rather than monolingual and as such parents need to be supported in the decisions they make about the languages they want their child with autism to be exposed to.

Howard, Gibson and Katsos' (2020) UK-based study with eight parents, identified three key factors which influenced parents' decisions whether to use a bilingual or monolingual approach in their home environment. Their findings were similar to previous research mentioned above in that all the parents valued bilingualism as an intrinsic part of the child's cultural identity even if they had chosen a monolingual, English-only approach at home, to support their child's learning through English at school. Another factor affecting the choice the parents made was related to the advice they received from practitioners.

Some of the parents had been advised to speak only English at home, even though they did not feel comfortable with this, while others were informed that speaking two languages would not delay their child's language development and that they should continue to be bilingual in the home. The third factor which parents considered was the consequences of the choice they made whether to be bi- or monolingual in their home environment. Crucially, the parents acknowledged that they were open to having a different opinion about whether to remain or become monolingual or bilingual as their children grew older and their family circumstances changed.

## School experiences of autistic learners who are bilingual

As previously highlighted there has been a significant gap in research on autism and bilingualism in education and with the growing numbers of autistic learners who are bilingual in our schools, there is now an imperative for further discussion and research on this topic. McCray and García (2016) suggest that one of the reasons for this dearth in research is the way in which multilingualism, ethnicity and diversity have been underrepresented in professional dialogues within special education. Therapeutic, medical and behavioural interventions for autistic pupils have to a large extent dominated educational practices and as such addressing the sociocultural needs of pupils and their families has been largely non-existent (Grinker, 2008; Pellicano, Dinsmore and Charman, 2014).

Addressing the intersections of autism, ethnicity and bilingualism, Howard, Katsos and Gibson (2019) undertook one of the first studies in the UK to focus on the school experiences of autistic pupils from minority ethnic families about being bilingual. Their research included 11 pupils age 7 -14 who attended both primary and secondary mainstream schools in different regions in the UK. The pupils expressed both positive and negative views about being bilingual and tended to compartmentalise their use of English in school, even with their peers who spoke the same 'native' language, and at home with parents, friends and other family members interacted using their home language.

The researchers did find that where there were more pupils in the school who spoke multiple languages, they were more comfortable with being bilingual and had more opportunities for social interaction whereas in settings where they were in the minority they preferred not to tell their peers that they spoke another language and felt less included in social interaction with peers. Some of the emotional challenges the pupils experienced in the classroom were similar to children who do not have autism and are learning through EAL. Anxiety brought about by uncertainty in what they were being asked to do and a dislike of being asked questions, was not always due to their autism, as was often assumed by their teachers.

## Implications for practitioners and future developments

It is widely understood that pupils who identified as being bilingual or who are learning English as an additional language would not be categorised as having a special educational need but would be entitled to additional language support where it is deemed relevant to support their language learning needs in the classroom (Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice, Department for Education, 2015). Research by Hart (2009) and Tan, Ware and Norwich (2017) has shown that one of the main challenges for educators is being able to distinguish between a learning disability or language impairment and bilingualism and that pedagogically, training and support for teachers remains inadequate.

Recognising that autistic pupils are a diverse group with language abilities across the spectrum, will be significant because they will have different starting points in terms of speaking, thinking, reading and writing in the languages they are exposed to. For special educators this is essential for informing the planning of pupils' individual learning needs as well as any additional language support they need. For early language learners, this may also include whether they require picture symbols and culturally relevant picture symbols in their home language.

In the same way that autism interventions require adaptation to the individual needs of the child, it is important to remember that children will be living in culturally and linguistically diverse communities and that no one approach to teaching language will be relevant for all children. Therefore, involving pupils, parents and family members in deciding on their language preferences will be fundamental to the progress pupils make across all subjects. As Wearmouth (2017) points out, educators should make use of the cultural and linguistic knowledge from family members about how different languages are used to enable them to adapt and make recommendations to support the value systems of the family.

In researching autism and bilingualism several authors (Cummins, 2009; West, 2010; Lindsay, 2011; Liasidou, 2013; Greenfield and Viesca, 2014; Howard et al., 2020) have concluded how future developments in this field of inclusive educational practice will require significant changes in policy and practice to meet the needs of pupils with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Not only should the classroom environment enable pupils to make meaningful connections between school and other social worlds, the curriculum needs to regard pupils' cultural heritages and multilingual skills as a valid resource for learning and teaching (Arzubiaga et al., 2008). This will require training for educators to overcome any uncertainty about teaching autistic pupils from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

To conclude, an examination of the research into bilingualism and autism has highlighted how there are many positive benefits for autistic pupils when they are bilingual which is not yet fully recognised by clinicians and educators. Increased collaboration and discussion between professionals and families has also been highlighted and that more qualitative research is needed in order to further understand the lived experience of autistic pupils who are multilingual and their families. In this way there is the potential for greater awareness of the ways in which autistic pupils who are bilingual, not only learn but also how locate themselves in their communities and the world in which they live, how they interpret their lives in multiple ways and create their sense of self and identity.

*A full version of this article is available from: [eprints.chi.ac.uk/id/eprint/5931/](https://eprints.chi.ac.uk/id/eprint/5931/)*

## Part Two

**Key strategies to support access to the curriculum for autistic children and young people who are bilingual or learning through EAL**



*“It was a very distressing time for me at the beginning but having someone speaking the same language and supporting me through that time really helped. She gave me information about autism in Bangla and in English.”*

Mother

When planning for autistic children and young people the teacher should consider how they may need to adapt the environment, their practice and the curriculum to overcome any sensory, social or processing demands which may impact on the autistic child’s emotional wellbeing and ability to engage with learning.

The first step in planning provision for any child or young person is to gather information using a variety of methods about their background, their interests, as well as their strengths and difficulties in order to fully understand their learning profile and their individual needs. In other words, to obtain a baseline that will inform provision planning and ongoing monitoring of impact. In Part Three there are useful links to assessments for autistic children and young people and those who are learning through EAL.

As every child is unique, we must take into account all that we know about the child or young person in order to plan and deliver suitable provision and we may need to be creative in our thinking about that provision. We may find it useful for instance to consider what we know about the child or young person’s personal interests as well as their personal learning style and learning preferences. We may need to combine specific strategies suitable for children and young people learning through EAL, with specific strategies suitable for autistic children and young people.

We should seek and consider the views of the child or young person and their family. As teachers we should ensure that we work collaboratively with parent carers to understand the needs of their children and how their needs can be met in school and at home.

We may also find it useful to consult specialist support services such as Autism and Social Communication Advisory Teacher Teams or Ethnic Minority Achievement Services.



## Key strategy

### Provide a safe and supportive environment

- Children learn best when they feel safe, secure and settled
- Consider possible sensory demands in the environment.

## What you can do to support children and young people who are autistic and bilingual/learning through EAL

- Recognise and provide support for social and emotional needs. Is the child or young person isolated? Are they making friends? Are they managing social communication with their peers?
- Ensure that the child feels a sense of belonging – to the school community, their class or tutor group
- Provide a **Buddy system** – particularly for new to school and new to English learners e.g. Young Interpreters, Autism Ambassadors
- Ensure that all staff have high expectations of all learners
- Ensure that the child experiences feelings of agency, i.e. they feel that they are making progress and have some control over their learning
- Employ classroom strategies that are suitable for children and young people learning through EAL
- Provide an inclusive curriculum that reflects multicultural viewpoints and includes knowledge that is relevant to the individual child or young person
- Show respect for child or young person's cultural identity
- Review curriculum content, resources and materials used in school – do they affirm the cultural identities of all children?
- Be sensitive to culturally specific non-verbal communication norms
- Complete a **sensory profile** to identify individual needs and appropriate resources/activities for sensory related work. A useful checklist is the West Sussex County Council 'Sensory Toolkit' (see online resources in reference section). The checklist can be used to create an individualised programme of sensory activities
- Consider the school environment and the adaptations that would meet the needs of a range of learners with sensory processing differences irrespective of their individual profiles. A checklist for auditing the school sensory environment is also available from West Sussex County Council.

## Key strategy

## What you can do to support children and young people who are autistic and bilingual/learning through EAL

### Making meaning clear:

#### a) Visual prompts and cues

- Curriculum made more accessible
  - Anxiety reduced
  - Cognitive demand remains high
  - Language demands reduced
  - Rich context for language in the classroom to support understanding
  - Language processing supported
  - Communication skills, collaborative skills and independence are developed
- **Pictures, videos, realia, demonstrations** (show something, show and describe how to do something or a concept), **visual timetables, task planners, frames such as substitution tables, speaking or writing frames that might include visual cues, cue cards for maths processes, graphic organisers, example texts, WAGOLLs** (what a good one looks like)
  - **Flashcards** can be used to consolidate vocabulary knowledge, but could also be used for example, to explain the sequence of a task in advance, to help learners describe the processes afterwards and to support them when writing about the task
  - Providing the learner with a **list of basic connectives** provides additional scaffolding for oral or written tasks
  - To support engagement with a **visual timetable**, consider making the learner responsible for removing the icons from the timetable as the day progresses. This will lower anxiety levels associated with autism and enable the pupil to predict what is coming next. Some pupils prefer a 'finished' envelope or box to put the icons in once the activity has been completed.
  - Ensure the visual timetable is appropriate for the pupil's understanding e.g. some learners manage best with '**Now and Next**' or '**Now, Next and Then**', while others can manage whole mornings or whole days.
  - Ensure the learner understands how the timetable works and match to the learners preferred style e.g. photos, symbols or words.
  - Use the visual timetable to explain any changes of routine to the learner in advance
  - Use **visual cues** to remind the learner of expected behaviours, classroom rules and routines for example, use symbols to indicate noise levels i.e. partner voices, group voices, classroom voice, and social voices
  - In consultation with the learner, provide a **symbol card** or an alternative means of indicating that they would like help
  - To reduce repetitive questioning or commenting during class discussions, give the pupil a set number of cards (**talk tokens**) to use each time they wish to contribute to the discussion. Alternatively, use talk tokens to encourage participation from pupils who are more reluctant to contribute
  - Ensure that staff regularly review visual supports and visual instructions and check that they are available for all activities. Learners may appear not to need this support or not to use it, but information supported visually will reduce anxiety and improve access to learning.

## Key strategy

### Making meaning clear:

#### b) Modelling and use of language

Adults and peers play a vital role in modelling and repeating appropriate language use, including:

- target vocabulary
- grammatically correct phrases
- task or subject specific language structures
- socially appropriate responses

## What you can do to support children and young people who are autistic and bilingual/learning through EAL

- Teach key vocabulary and phrases relevant to the task prior to the lesson and repeat and model them throughout the lesson
- Display key vocabulary (with visual cues where possible) and key phrases for the task or subject
- Use **speaking frames, sentence starters, sentence frames, signal words**, supported where possible by pictures or diagrams
- Incorporate **collaborative talking activities** into lessons to provide opportunities for practising target language and peer modelling
- Model and use '**think alouds**' when reading, describing what the reader is thinking and why
- **Model the writing process** to describe what you are doing and why when writing in a particular genre
- **Writing frames** provide a structure for writing. Include notes for each section as well as a list of key vocabulary, phrases or sentence starters for the task. Visual cues can also be included
- Gain attention by **cuing the learner** in using their name first so that they recognise the instruction applies to them
- **Allow additional time** for the child or young person to process verbal information and instructions (at least 10 seconds). Avoid repeating verbally within this time
- **Use explicit, concise language** when addressing the learner to enable them to process information more easily
- If repetition of the information or instruction is necessary, repeat verbatim
- **Use short simple instructions**, given in the order in which they should be followed. Check for understanding. Consider providing support to 'get started' and 'check in' later in the lesson
- Teach and use very **clear classroom routines**, e.g. for lining up, equipment checks, holding an object when it is their turn to talk, having a specific job at tidy up time
- **Do not insist on eye contact.** For autistic children and young people this can be uncomfortable and in extreme cases even painful. It may also be culturally inappropriate. Instead, agree a strategy with the learner and all staff on how they will indicate that they are listening.

## Key strategy

### Making meaning clear:

#### c) Connect to prior knowledge

New learning is supported and enhanced if children and young people can connect to and build on, their prior knowledge.

#### Connecting to prior knowledge via first language (L1) is an important principle of EAL pedagogy

Many learners will have well-developed oral language skills in their first language/s. Many will also have well developed literacy skills and this can be very useful when learning a new language and acquiring academic language. Learners, particularly if new to English, may find it easier initially to engage with new concepts in their first language.

#### Connecting to prior knowledge and supporting generalisation

Some autistic children and young people find it difficult to generalise their learning. It is important to support them to recognise the building blocks of their learning and to make the links.

## What you can do to support children and young people who are autistic and bilingual/learning through EAL

- Provide dual language **visual glossaries or organisers** and show how to use them. Encourage the learner to use them
- Provide and encourage access to **videos** explaining concepts in **Simple English** or L1
- Show how to access '**Simple Wikipedia**'
- Allow learner to **label** illustrations, graphs, charts in L1 and/or English, reporting back in English (in lessons and for homework)
- Allow learner to draft and organise work in L1 but provide the final copy in English
- Allow the learner to take notes in L1
- Allow the learner to create posters in L1 and English
- Allow the learner to complete project work in L1 but present it in English
- Plan **collaborative activities, grouping learners with same language peers** to discuss a topic, task or problem to solve. Learners work collaboratively together to produce a final piece of work in English
- To support the child or young person to make links with the same concept in a different context, point out explicitly if the concept is the same but the context is different, e.g. "We are adding, like we did yesterday with the cubes, but today we are adding with the Numicon."

## Key strategy

### Developing understanding of key vocabulary and concepts

A vital component in allowing access to learning and promoting the formation of positive peer relationships, is the growth of a child or young person's knowledge and understanding of key vocabulary and key concepts.

### Vocabulary, a key building block when learning a new language.

Knowing more words makes it easier to:

- understand what you hear and read
- express what you want to say when speaking or writing
- learn new words
- connect new words to words already known

A large vocabulary can raise confidence, improve achievement and support independence.

The key to success when learning new vocabulary is repeated exposure, perhaps up to 28 times in a meaningful context. This is needed before becoming fluent in its use.

Many autistic learners may require support with abstract and conceptual thinking, particularly concepts that are not directly related to concrete physical objects or experiences. It may require a creative and flexible approach to link what they do know to the concept being taught.

## What you can do to support children and young people who are autistic and bilingual/learning through EAL

- **Pre-teaching** as necessary in line with baseline assessments. Teach vocabulary and key phrases at the beginning of each topic, accompanied by visual cues wherever possible, 'having a sneaky peek' at what is coming next
- **Word mats** for key vocabulary for task or topic. Visual cues provide context, e.g. pictures or diagrams. Key phrases could also be included, displayed on the wall and on the table
- **Modelling and repeating** target vocabulary and phrases in class and in meaningful contexts, e.g. supported by visual cues, in sentences and in questions
- **Collaborative talking activities** provide a meaningful context in which to explore and practise using new language in a small group. They demand the active participation of learners as they think, discuss, problem solve or work together on a task and they support social interactions amongst peers
- **Scaffolding** the learning of key concepts, for example relating the concept to real life examples where possible such as mind mapping (including mind mapping prior knowledge of a topic or concept). Provide a pre-lesson practical experience of the concept. Provide exposure to visuals or films of the concept, possibly in first language
- **Speaking frames** and **Substitution Tables** provide visual support when speaking or writing about a task. They encourage the pupil to learn specific language structures and begin to use them independently, including socially appropriate phrases
- Encourage communication with a '**talk partner or trio**'. Choose learners who are good social language models
- Support learners to experience an application of the concept and then help them make the link to the concept. For example, a primary school autistic child had difficulty understanding the concept of following rules made by others. He was given responsibility for emptying the recycling bins in each classroom. When he became frustrated that children were not following the recycling rules and putting non-recyclable objects in the bins, staff were able to help him make the link to the need for everyone to follow rules.

## Key strategy

### Scaffold reading and writing tasks

'Scaffolding' learning means that the child or young person is supported by an 'expert' until they are able to complete a task independently or have acquired a specific skill. Over time that support is gradually reduced as the learner takes on more responsibility.

Scaffolding is fundamental to the learning of a new language and essential to the acquisition of reading and writing skills.

Scaffolding and adapting both lesson inputs and lesson tasks is often helpful to autistic children and young people who may have specific learning differences.

## What you can do to support children and young people who are autistic and bilingual/learning through EAL

- **Speaking Frames** (see previous page for full explanation)
- **For reading, connect to prior knowledge and 'Warm up the Text.'** Discuss clues to the meaning of the text before reading, e.g. What is the title? What do the pictures tell you? What do you know about..? Consider colour coding to link questions to sections of text.
- **Model reading for meaning skills, e.g., 'Reciprocal Teaching'**  
There are four stages to this strategy:
  - a) summarise text
  - b) clarify anything not understood
  - c) ask questions about the text
  - d) predict what will happen next
- **Follow text reading with DARTs (Directed Activities Related to Texts)**  
DARTs focus on engaging with the text and reading for meaning. Examples of DARTs include gap-filling, sequencing, labelling, completing a graphic organiser and colour coding
- When teaching genre writing or writing in subject registers consider the Five Writing stages as set out by Pauline Gibbons
  - i) 'build the knowledge base' about the topic.
  - ii) model and deconstruct text type as a whole class. Create an 'Experts Guide.'
  - iii) create text together. The teacher scribes for pupils, modelling the writing process and the specific text type by 'thinking aloud.'
  - iv) joint construction by pairs of pupils, using the Expert Guide and a writing frame.
  - v) independent writing supported by the 'Experts Guide' and a writing frame.
- **Writing frames** provide useful scaffolding when writing in specific genres and subject registers. Writing frames model how to organise the child or young person's ideas, the language structures needed for a specific genre, as well as ways to link sentences or paragraphs. Writing frames can incorporate visual cues, sentence starters, lists of key vocabulary as well as notes on what to include in each paragraph.
- **To motivate and engage learners** they could be asked to read or write about a topic which interests them, rather than expecting them to always work within the class topic. This may be more accessible for them if they have difficulty understanding a concept or an unfamiliar cultural experience.

## What you can do to support children and young people who are autistic and bilingual/learning through EAL

- **Provide a WAGOLL - What a Good One Looks Like.**  
WAGOLLs provide the child or young person with a clear idea of the expected outcome of a task before they begin work
- **Set clear goals** e.g. “Write three sentences on.....” rather than “Write about...”. Use a green dot to indicate where the writing will start and a red dot to show where it will end. In Maths lessons state the number of calculations that the child or young person needs to complete.
- Autistic learners can be resistant to writing. Writing involves a number of composite skills, from retrieving ideas and memories to fine motor skills. Component skills can be taught, practised and assessed discreetly rather than alongside text composition.
- Explore the **use of technology, a scribe and other alternative forms of recording** to enable the child or young person to record their learning without the burden of extended writing. Software such as Clicker, DocsPlus and Writing with Symbols can be particularly helpful.
- The use of an **individual place to work** with visual supports to develop independence. A range of visuals shows the learner what work they will be doing (a set of tasks or a picture/written list); how much work there is; how they know they have finished each element and what happens next (usually a preferred activity). Autism advisory teachers may provide additional advice regarding the use of **TEACCH strategies**.
- The **backward chaining** technique suits some autistic learners. A multi-step task is broken into steps. The learner begins with the step which completes the task and is then supported to work back through the component steps that lead to that final step. For example, for a story writing task, the learner would begin with writing how the story ends and then with support, work backwards to work out how the story plot led to that ending. The technique can be used for many different learning tasks with the learner completing more steps independently over time.
- Encourage social understanding around the idea that it is ‘okay to make mistakes and this is how we learn’. Support this learning with an individualised Social Story™. Further ideas and resources are available from the ELSA support website (see resources section).

## Key strategy

### Provide opportunities for peer social interaction when appropriate

Positive relationships with peers and adults support children and young people to feel safe, secure and have a sense of belonging.

Prosocial skills are important for collaborative learning and emotional wellbeing. For some children and young people these skills may need to be explicitly taught.

It is likely that autistic learners will have differences in their social understanding as will, some bilingual learners. Any support will need to be individualised.

## What you can do to support children and young people who are autistic and bilingual/learning through EAL

- **Participation in groups** with children and young people who have common experiences such as Young Interpreters, Autism Ambassadors
- Participation in groups with children and young people who have common interests e.g. computer/gaming clubs, after school clubs, sports clubs, scouting and guiding, drama, LEGO® club
- Ask children and young people to carry out **classroom or school jobs** with a peer, preferably jobs which necessitate social communication which may need to be modelled
- Include curriculum collaborative talking, practical activities and games in your topic plans. Plan for groups where learners work with good role models for language, play and social interactions. Adult support and modelling may be needed. You can find many curriculum-based collaborative talking activities and games on The Bell Foundation and Collaborative Learning websites (see resources section).
- **LEGO®-based therapy** (LeGoff et al., 2014) is an evidence-based approach that aims to develop social communication skills in autistic children and young people, such as sharing, turn-taking, following rules, using names and problem-solving. Training for schools is available from Autism and Social Communication Advisory Teacher Teams.



# Part Three

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## Appendices

## APPENDIX 1 - Autism Cognitive Theories

There are a number of psychological theories which can help us understand the ways autistic learners might experience the world and respond in the way that they do. These theories overlap and are not mutually exclusive. They can guide us on how to make adaptations to support autistic learners. It is important to consider that autistic learners are individuals and like all children and young people, will have different strengths and difficulties in relation to the features outlined in the theories below.

### Cognitive Theories

### Overview

#### Double Empathy

- A mutual challenge between autistic and non-autistic people in misunderstanding communication, intentions and motivations

#### Theory of Mind

- Develops from joint attention
- Involves understanding other people's thoughts, feelings, beliefs and experiences
- Includes the ability to take this understanding into account in your own actions

#### Executive Function

- The ability to plan, organise and sequence thoughts and actions
- The ability to control our impulses

#### Weak Central Coherence

- The tendency to focus on details, rather than the 'big picture'
- The impact this focus has on the person's ability to consider context

#### Context Blindness

- Challenge in processing or using all of the information from visual, auditory, historical and social contexts to make sense of experiences in the moment
- The tendency to miss the 'obvious'

#### Monotropism

- The tendency to focus attention on one thing at a time, with difficulty shifting attention and processing multiple stimuli which might support understanding

## APPENDIX 2- Examples of word mats, speaking and sentence frames, substitution tables, flashcards, writing frames

Word mats display key target vocabulary. Put them on the table, display them on the wall

Visual cues provide a meaningful context for the language being taught/ learnt. Adding first language (L1) to word mats can add an extra cue if the child is literate in L1. An alternative strategy is to send word mats home to be discussed in L1 with parents and carers.

**Word mat - verbs**

		
eating	drinking	walking
		
running	sitting	sleeping

**Physical geography word mat**

			
weather	forest	mountain	beach
			
soil	vegetation	river	ocean / sea
			
desert	marsh	fields	lake

Word mats can be made into flashcards and games, for example: Find the ... Turn over and say ... Pelmanism, Bingo

See reference section for sources of images used

For older learners add a definition, for example a maths vocabulary mat might look like this:



For more curriculum examples see: The Bell Foundation, geographical Association, TES

## Speaking and Sentence Frames - scaffold speaking and writing

Speaking and sentence frames provide visual cues for oral modelling, repetition, and practice of specific language chunks (including frequently used expressions) needed for a particular task/subject, e.g.

"I would play with \_\_\_ at the seaside"

The Romans invented these because ...


"A key distinction between \_ and \_ is that..."

We need\_ to make new cell membranes and for energy.

For more curriculum examples, see The Bell Foundation

## Substitution Tables

Substitution Tables scaffold speaking and writing, reinforcing, or extending language, targeting specific grammatical structures. Pictures add extra support.

Houses made of		Comparing houses made from different materials:			
	stronger	sticks and straw	sticks and straw		
	cheaper	stone	stone	houses made of	
	lighter	wattle and daub	wattle and daub	than	
	smokier	brick and timber	brick and timber		

What are Lady Macbeth and Macbeth thinking and doing?					
	reads the letter	thinks	her husband	politely.	
he	arrive at the castle	welcomes	kill Duncan	must kill Duncan.	
When				won't kill Duncan.	
she	arrives at the castle	is worried	Duncan and his sons	about what to do.	
they	talk together	talks to	his wife	must give him courage.	
		decide to	she	that night.	


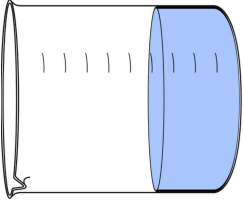

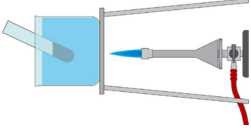
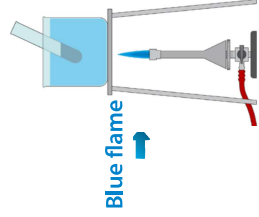
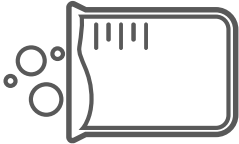

See reference section for sources of images used

For more information, see: The Bell Foundation, Hampshire EMTAS, ELTWell

## Flashcards

Flashcards can be used to consolidate vocabulary learning but as this example, based on a resource from The Bell Foundation, shows they can also support learners to:

- understand and verbalise the sequence of a task in advance
- help the learner to describe the process afterwards
- support writing about the task


<p><b>The experiment</b> To find the boiling point of water</p>	 <p>We want to find out...</p>	<p>Pour 100ml of water into a beaker:</p> 	<p>Place the beaker on a tripod and gauze:</p> 	<p>Turn on and light the Bunsen burner:</p> 	<p>Heat the water using a blue flame on the Bunsen burner:</p> 
<p>Observe the water until it boils:</p> 	<p>Measure the temperature with a thermometer:</p> 	<p>The boiling point of water is:</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 100px; width: 100%;"></div>	<p><b>Useful connectives:</b></p> <p>First of all we...</p> <p>Then we... / we then...</p> <p>After that...</p> <p>Next...</p> <p>Finally...</p>		


See reference section for sources of images used


## Writing frames


Writing frames scaffold writing, they model how to organise text and the vocabulary and language structures the learner needs to use when writing in a particular genre or subject register


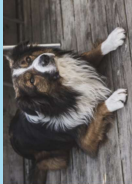
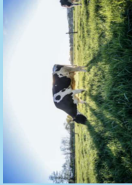






**At the farm**

I saw  \_\_\_\_\_

I heard  \_\_\_\_\_

I smelt  \_\_\_\_\_

I touched  \_\_\_\_\_

		
<b>crops</b>	<b>sheepdog</b>	<b>cows</b>
		
<b>sheep</b>	<b>grass</b>	<b>tractor</b>
		
<b>pigs</b>	<b>barn</b>	<b>chickens</b>

**Example Writing Frame, KS3 and KS4; Science Investigation,**

<b>Key investigation words/phrases:</b>	<b>Key topic words/phrases:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>plan to investigate</li> <li>variable</li> <li>prediction</li> <li>tested</li> <li>method</li> <li>fair test</li> <li>because</li> <li>evaluation, worked well, could be improved if...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li></li> </ul>
<b>Plan</b> I plan to find out if/why...	
<b>Fair test</b> To make sure it is a fair test I will..	
<b>Method</b> 1. First I... 2. Then I... 3. After that I... 4. Next I... 5. Finally I...	

<b>Safety</b> I had to take the following safety measures:	because:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li></li> <li></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li></li> <li></li> </ul>
<b>Results</b> This is what happened: (draw your results table here)	
<b>Conclusion</b> I found out that...	
This is because...	
<b>Evaluation</b> The investigation worked well / didn't work because...	
It could be improved if I...	

See reference section for sources of images used

## APPENDIX 3 - Useful Links

### Baseline Measures:

To gather information about the needs of an autistic child or young person, a range of checklists are available via the **WSCC Autism and Social Communication Team (ASCT) Wiki** -

<https://wiki.rixwiki.org/west-sussex-mmm/home/asc-team-wiki>

**AET AUTISM PROGRESSION FRAMEWORK** Published by Autism Education Trust. Available free of charge at: -

<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/shop/pf-shop/>

To gather information about the needs of a child or young person learning through EAL the following can be considered:

**West Sussex EMTAS Welcome Profile** - EYFS, primary and secondary versions available. Collates information about the background of the child and their family, identifying any significant health issues, providing clarity about first language/s, exploring whether any SEN issues have been identified previously, identifying any gaps in education. For more information contact: [emat@westsussex.gov.uk](mailto:emat@westsussex.gov.uk)

**The Bell Foundation EAL Assessment Framework** Primary and secondary versions. Assesses Proficiency in English. Particularly recommended for children and young people working within DfE Stages: A (new to English), B (Early Acquisition) and C (Developing Competence):

[bell-foundation.org.uk/eal-programme/eal-assessment-framework](http://bell-foundation.org.uk/eal-programme/eal-assessment-framework)

### **West Sussex EMTAS First Language Assessment Toolkit**

The assessment is administered in first language. It gathers detailed background information about education, language/s and health from parents and assesses pupil's general language abilities in first language. For more information contact: [emat@westsussex.gov.uk](mailto:emat@westsussex.gov.uk)

### Supporting Learning:

Bowler, D., Roestorf, A. and Sherwood, S. (2020) An Evidence Based Guide to Supporting Learning in Autism available at:

[tps://www.city.ac.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/565807/Supporting-Learning-in-Autistic-Individuals-A5-Booklet-spreads.pdf](https://www.city.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/565807/Supporting-Learning-in-Autistic-Individuals-A5-Booklet-spreads.pdf)

For resources and information on bilingualism and learning through English as an Additional Language see:

**The Bell Foundation website:** <https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/>

**The Bell Foundation Great Ideas page** - for information on key strategies and links to curriculum materials:

<https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/eal-programme/guidance/effective-teaching-of-eal-learners/great-ideas/>

**The Bell Foundation EAL Programme, Resources** - free ready to use curriculum-based resources with accompanying teachers notes to support EAL learners in class:

<https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/resources/programme/eal-programme/>

**Collaborative Learning** - curriculum-based collaborative talking and learning activities:

<https://www.collaborativelearning.org/>

**NALDIC** (National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum). A professional forum for teachers across the UK who teach bilingual children and young people and those learning through EAL:

<https://naldic.org.uk/>

**British Council Learn English kids** - Free online games, songs, stories and activities for children. Plus, articles for parent carers on supporting children learning English at home. The website is aimed at parent carers but many of the activities are suitable for use/adaptation in school: <https://learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org/>

**British Council Learn English Teens** - Free, fun ways for teenagers to improve reading, writing and listening practice, tips for exams, grammar and vocabulary exercises, games and videos, plus the opportunity to interact with other teenagers from around the world: <https://learnenglishteens.britishcouncil.org/>

**British Council Learn English for adults** - provides details of online courses, subscription courses, English for the workplace course, fun short activities to refresh or practise, fun mobile apps:  
<https://www.britishcouncil.org/english/adults>

For further resources please contact West Sussex Ethnic Minority Achievement Team: [emat@westsussex.gov.uk](mailto:emat@westsussex.gov.uk)

### Supporting Emotional Wellbeing:

Gaigg, S., Crawford, J. and Cottell, H. (2018) *An Evidence Based Guide to Anxiety in Autism* available at:  
[https://www.city.ac.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/466039/Anxiety-in-Autism-A5-guide.pdf](https://www.city.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/466039/Anxiety-in-Autism-A5-guide.pdf)

ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistants) at: <https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/>

### Supporting Inclusion:

**West Sussex County Council 'Tools for Schools' website** including an Inclusion Framework and an Ordinarily Available Inclusive Practice Guidance: <https://schools.local-offer.org/>

**To see how one school has implemented the Young Interpreters Scheme:**  
<https://schools.local-offer.org/inclusion/inclusion-awards/northgate-primary-school/>

**To see how a school has adapted to meet the sensory needs within their community:**  
<https://schools.local-offer.org/inclusion/inclusion-awards/our-lady-queen-of-heaven-catholic-primary-school/>

**WSCC Promoting Equality and Tackling Racism Guidance for West Sussex Schools:**  
<https://schools.local-offer.org/inclusion/targeted-inclusion-groups/ethnic-minority-groups/black-asian-and-minority-ethnic-bame/promoting-equality-tackling-racism-guidance-for-west-sussex-schools/>

### Parent Programmes and information

**EarlyBird Plus** is for parents whose child is between the ages of four and nine who has received a diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder:  
<https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/support-in-the-community/family-support>

**CUES (Coping with Uncertainty in Everyday Situations)** parent programme. An 8-week programme that provides parents of autistic children the strategies to increase tolerance to uncertainty in everyday situations in their children. It was devised by a team at Newcastle University led by Professor Jacqui Rodgers in partnership with parents - [Jacqui.rodgers@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Jacqui.rodgers@ncl.ac.uk)

**The Bell Foundation parent involvement page** A webinar discusses how schools can help parents to understand how to use home languages to support their child's learning and two guides for parents can be downloaded in 20 languages. Guide 1) Helping children learn. Guide 2) Key information about the English Education system (Primary and Secondary versions):  
<https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/eal-programme/guidance/parental-involvement/>



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*“This guide is a fantastic idea and superb work. The first language is fundamental for a child whether they are on the autism spectrum or typically developing. I encourage parents to use their first language with their children to expand their understanding of language and their ability to use the language. Exposure to English language through tv programmes and education settings then supports them to develop their English language skills. I employ this policy with my grandchildren and found that it is very effective in developing both languages”*

Dr Duraid Hussain, Consultant Community Paediatrician, Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust

*“We have high numbers of autistic children who are learning through EAL. This guide will be so useful to support our parents and teachers especially the practical strategies.”*

Sarah Stringer, Deputy Head (Inclusion), Northgate Primary School, Crawley

*“In the early days of my son’s development, I used to talk to him in both English and Tamil, but I was advised by health professionals not to as this would confuse him and explained the reason for him being non-verbal. I tried my best to reason with them but they wouldn’t listen. I ignored their advice and went with my gut feeling and used both languages along with signing. Now I can talk to him normally even without signing and he can still understand me. Using both languages has helped him massively with his anxiety when going on holiday as well as when he sees his relatives. This guide will help parents who find themselves in the same position as me.”*

Prema Kannappan, Mother and West Sussex Parent Carer Forum representative