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Module: ECEY5010

Word Count: 4032

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“What kind of research can be carried out in an Early Years Setting?”

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How do early years practitioners support language development in children with English as an Additional Language (EAL)?

Literature Review

Language development is a fundamental aspect of early childhood, shaping children's ability to communicate, build relationships and access learning opportunities (Toole, 2025). This is particularly significant for children with English as an Additional Language (EAL), who may experience additional barriers when developing communication skills in early years settings. The increasing prevalence of EAL learners highlights the importance of effective pedagogical approaches (The Bell Foundation, 2024). Clark (2017) identifies significant numbers of EAL learners in Welsh schools, with notable regional variation, demonstrating the growing linguistic diversity within education systems. This is supported by the Education Policy Institute (2018), which emphasises that EAL learners are not a homogeneous group and that educational outcomes vary significantly depending on English proficiency. Strand and Lindorff (2021) further argue that factors such as prior educational experiences, home language exposure and socioeconomic context can significantly influence language learning progression among EAL learners. Similarly, the Department for Education (2020) highlights that variations in English proficiency can significantly influence educational outcomes among EAL learners, reinforcing the need for responsive and differentiated support. Collectively, these sources indicate that EAL provision must be responsive to diverse learners' needs rather than applying uniform approaches across settings, as standardised educational models may overlook the complexity and variation within EAL learner experiences (Sutton, 2020; Education Policy Institute, 2018).

Research highlights that EAL learners benefit from responsive scaffolding strategies that support language acquisition through guided interaction, modelling and contextualised communication opportunities (Welcome, 2021). Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) explains that children learn most effectively when supported by more knowledgeable others, enabling them to achieve tasks beyond their independent capability (McArdle, 2024). Furthermore, Margolis (2020) discusses this concept in relation to scaffolding in teaching practice, highlighting how practitioners provide structured, temporary support within the ZPD to promote progression. Birth to 5 Matters (2021) further reinforces this perspective by emphasising the importance of responsive adult-child interaction, sustained shared thinking and play-based learning in supporting communication development.

Collectively these perspectives demonstrate that language acquisition is socially mediated and dependent on sustained interactions, rather than being developed through isolated or purely instructional processes. This highlights the central role of practitioners in facilitating language development through intentional interaction and responsive pedagogical support.

Policy and curriculum guidance consistently emphasise inclusive, language rich environments, although differences in implementation are evident across contexts. The Department for Education (2021) recommends strategies such as modelling language, using visual support and creating meaningful interaction opportunities to support EAL learners. Birth to 5 Matters (2021) similarly highlights the importance of valuing children's home language as a foundation for English language development and embedding communication within play-based learning. However, Sutton (2020) argues that headline attainment data obscure the complexity and diversity of EAL learners' experiences, suggesting that broad policy approaches may not reflect the varied linguistic, social and educational needs within practice. This is further supported by the Welsh Government (2015), which emphasises that effective EAL provision depends on capacity building, professional development and sustained investment in practitioner training. Similarly, Demie (2024) argues inconsistencies in national assessment systems, funding and specialist EAL support continue to create challenges for school attempting to meet the diverse needs of EAL learners effectively. Beatson *et al.*, (2022) additionally highlight that participation and inclusive educational provision are influenced by wider institutional and resource-related factors. Together, these sources suggest that while policy frameworks are broadly aligned in principle, effective inclusive provision depends not only upon policy intentions but on institutional capacity, practitioner support, workforce development and access to appropriate resources (Beatson *et al.*, 2022; Welsh Government, 2015; Demie, 2024).

Research evidence highlights a persistent gap between policy expectations and classroom practice. Andrew (2009) identifies a lack of coherent EAL pedagogy, suggesting that practitioner understanding, confidence and training vary significantly across educational settings. Arnot *et al.*, (2014) similarly report that while whole setting approaches can be effective in supporting EAL learners, their implementation is inconsistent and heavily dependent on contextual factors such as leadership, resources and staff expertise. The Education Policy Institute (2018) further develops this argument by emphasising that EAL learners experience different educational outcomes depending on English proficiency levels, reinforcing the need for differentiated and responsive support strategies. When these studies are considered together, they indicate that although effective strategies exist within policy and theory their application in practice is uneven and shaped by systemic and contextual variation.

A key factor influencing the effectiveness of EAL provision is practitioner knowledge, training and confidence. Andrews (2009) highlights that EAL is sometimes

misinterpreted or conflated with additional learning needs, which can lead to inappropriate or ineffective support strategies. The Welsh Government (2015) reinforces this by identifying practitioners training and capacity building as essential to improving consistency and quality in EAL provision across settings. Arnot *et al.* (2014) similarly emphasises that effective support depends on whole setting commitment rather than isolated practitioner effort. The Department for Education (2021) also highlights the importance of professional understanding in delivering inclusive and responsive practice, particularly in relation to scaffolding and language modelling. Collectively, these sources suggest that practitioner competence and institutional support structures are central determinants of effective EAL provision.

The literature also supports the use of qualitative approaches to explore EAL provision in depth. National University (2023) explains that qualitative research focuses on understanding experiences, meanings and behaviours through methods such as interviews and observations, rather than numerical data. This is consistent with Andrews (2009) who synthesises research evidence to identify key themes in EAL pedagogy, and Arnot *et al.*, (2014) who use mixed methods to explore practitioner experiences and classroom practice in real contexts. These approaches are particularly relevant to EAL research, as they allow for detailed exploration of how strategies are implemented and how practitioners interpret policy and theory in practice. Qualitative methods therefore provide insight into the complexity of real life EAL support, which cannot be fully captured through quantitative approaches alone.

Overall, the literature demonstrates strong agreement that children with EAL benefit from socially interactive, inclusive and scaffolded learning environments. Theoretical perspectives from Vygotsky (McArdle, 2024) and Margolis (2020) emphasise the importance of guided interaction in language development, while The Bell Foundation (2024) states the importance of effective pedagogy in accessing the language of the curriculum to learners with EAL. Furthermore, Birth to 5 Matters (2021) and the Department for Education (2021) reinforce the need for inclusive, play based and language rich practice. However, research evidence from Andrews (2009), Arnot *et al.*, (2014) the Welsh Government (2015) and the Education Policy Institute (2018) highlight significant inconsistencies in implementation, largely influenced by practitioner training, confidence and institutional capacity. When synthesised, these findings reveal a clear and persistent gap between theoretical and policy expectations and actual practice in early years settings. This gap provides a strong rationale for further research exploring how early years practitioners support EAL learners in practice and how these strategies are applied within real educational contexts.

Methodological Considerations

This research proposal explores how early years practitioners support children with EAL, with a particular focus on communication strategies, scaffolding, language

modelling and inclusive pedagogical practice within early years settings. The rationale for this focus is grounded in evidence that EAL learners represent a highly heterogeneous group whose educational outcomes are shaped by a range of linguistic, social and contextual factors rather than EAL status alone (Strand *et al.*, 2015; Lindorff *et al.*, 2025). Policy guidance also emphasises the need for inclusive and language rich environments to support equitable access to learning (Department for Education, 2021). This complexity necessitates a research design capable of capturing rich contextualised insights into practice rather than relying solely on numerical indicators.

The study adopts a qualitative research approach, which is considered most appropriate for exploring meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences within educational contexts. Qualitative research is widely understood as focusing on the “why” “how” of phenomena rather than measuring frequency or statistical patterns (BBC Bitesize, 2024; Teachers Institute, 2025). It enables an in-depth exploration of practitioner perspectives, classroom interactions and pedagogical decision-making processes. This aligns with the socially constructed nature of language learning, where development is shaped through interaction and communication with more knowledgeable others (Hussain, 2015; McArdle, 2024). In early years contexts, this is particularly relevant as children’s language acquisition is embedded within play-based and socially mediated experiences.

From an epistemological perspective, qualitative research aligns with interpretivist assumptions, where reality is viewed as multiple and socially constructed rather than fixed. This approach is therefore appropriate for examining EAL provision, as practitioner interpretations of language support strategies may vary significantly across settings (Ugwu and Hyginus, 2023). While quantitative research provides valuable large-scale insights into attainment and performance trends (Strand *et al.*, 2015; Whiteside *et al.*, 2017), it does not capture the complexity of classroom interaction or the nuanced decision-making processes of practitioners.

A qualitative case study research design is proposed to facilitate detailed investigation within a naturalistic early year setting. Case study approaches are widely used in education research as they enable holistic exploration of complex phenomena within real-life contexts (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998; Hammersley, 2023; Delve, 2024). This design allows for an in-depth examination of EAL support practices within a bounded system, such as a single setting or small number of settings, thereby enabling depth of analysis.

Non-participant classroom observations will be used as a primary method of data collection. Observations allow for the direct examinations of how practitioners implement EAL strategies in real time, including scaffolding, modelling of language and use of visual or contextual supports (Arnerich, 2020; Toole, 2025). However observational methods may be influenced by the Hawthorne Effect, whereby participants alter their behaviour due to awareness of being observed (Evans, 2014;

Zaleznik, 2019). This may result in temporarily enhanced or modified teaching practices that do not reflect typical behaviour. To mitigate this limitation, multiple observations over time are proposed to allow for habituation and more naturalistic data collection.

Semi-structured interviews with early years practitioners will also be conducted to gain insight into their experiences, beliefs and pedagogical reasoning. Interviews are widely recognised as a key qualitative method for generating rich, descriptive data (Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Hussain, 2015). The semi-structured format enables consistency across participants while allowing flexibility to explore emerging themes in greater depth. This is particularly important in EAL research, where practitioner understanding of language support strategies may differ significantly depending on training, experience and institutional context (Andrews, 2009; Arnott *et al.*, 2014).

However, interview data may be subject to limitations such as social desirability bias, where participants provide responses that reflect perceived expectations rather than actual practice. In addition, cognitive biases such as the halo effect may influence how practitioners evaluate their own effectiveness or the effectiveness of interventions (Behrmann, 2019; Westbury and King, 2024). These factors highlight the importance of critical interpretation of qualitative data.

A purposive sampling strategy will be employed to ensure participants have direct experience of working with EAL learners. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research as it enables the selection of information rich cases relevant to the research aims (Albanese, 2025; Cohen *et al.*, 2007). This approach aligns with qualitative research principles, which prioritises depth of understanding over representativeness (Ugwu and Hyginus, 2023). The proposed sample will consist of approximately five to ten early years practitioners within a single or small number of settings. This sample size is appropriate for achieving depth of understanding while maintaining feasibility within the scope of a case study design. However, findings will not be statistically generalised due to the small and context specific nature of the sample.

Both observational and interview methods carry methodological limitations. Observations may be affected by participant reactivity and researcher interpretation bias, where meaning is constructed rather than objectively recorded (Ugwu and Hyginus, 2023). In addition, the Hawthorne Effect suggests that individuals may alter their behaviour when they become aware of being observed, potentially impacting the authenticity of collected data (Zaleznik, 2019). However, observational methods remain valuable in early years research for capturing naturalistic practitioner-child interactions (Blewitt *et al.*, 2021). Interviews may be influenced by recall bias, selective memory and subjective interpretation of experiences, as participants construct accounts that may not fully reflect actual practice (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). Nevertheless, educator interviews provide important insight into professional beliefs and pedagogical decision making (Lara-Cinisomo *et al.*, 2025) Despite these

limitations, qualitative methods remain valuable for generating rich contextual insights into complex educational processes (Pandey, 2025).

To enhance the credibility of findings, methodological triangulation will be employed throughout the combination of observations and interviews. Triangulation is widely recognised as a strategy for strengthening validity and reliability in qualitative research by comparing multiple data sources (Carter *et al.*, 2014). This enables cross-verification of findings between observed practice and reported experiences, which is particularly important in educational research where practitioner perceptions may not always align with classroom reality. However, triangulation is not without limitations. Hammersley (2008) argues that different methods may produce different forms of knowledge rather than converging on single “truth”. This perspective is supported by Haydn (2019), who highlights that triangulation in educational research can reveal inconsistencies between data sources, reflecting the complexity of social contexts rather than methodological weakness. Therefore, discrepancies between findings should be critically interpreted rather than resolved, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of practice.

Rigour in qualitative research is achieved through coherence between research design, data collection and analysis alongside reflexivity and transparency in methodological decision-making (Maher, 2025). Researchers must remain aware of their influence on the research process and ensure that interpretations are clearly justified. Validity is enhanced through triangulation and careful design, while reliability is supported through consistent application of procedures (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). However, qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalisability; instead, it prioritises depth, meaning and contextual understanding (Hammersley, 2023).

Ethical considerations are central to educational research. These include informed consent, maintaining confidentiality and safeguarding participants throughout the research process (Lezotte *et al.*, 2021). Establishing trust between researchers and practitioners is essential to ensure authenticity of data and ethical integrity of the study.

Overall, the selected qualitative case study design, incorporating observations and semi-structured interviews, provides an appropriate framework for exploring how EAL learners are supported in early years settings. While limitations such as bias, reactivity and lack of generalisability exist, these are addressed through triangulation and rigorous methodological design (Carter *et al.*, 2014; Maher, 2025). The approach enables a detailed and contextualised understanding of practitioner practice, which is essential given the socially interactive nature of language development in early childhood education (McArdle, 2024).

Research highlights the increasing linguistic diversity within early years settings, which has significant implications for inclusive pedagogical practice. The Education Policy Institute (2024) and Lindorff *et al.*, (2025) emphasise that EAL learners are not

a homogeneous group, with variation in language acquisition rates, prior educational experiences and exposure to English in the home environment. This diversity suggests that a standardised approach to teaching is insufficient, particularly in early years contexts where foundational language development is critical. In response policy guidance instead stresses the importance of inclusive, language-rich environments that support equitable access to learning opportunities (Department for Education, 2021). However, Estyn (2021) notes that its evaluation of English language and literacy provision in Wales does not specially address learners with English as an Additional Language indicating that EAL may not be explicitly prioritised within broader literacy policy reviews. Furthermore, Foley *et al.*, (2018) highlight that initial teacher education programmes do not always provide sufficient preparation for supporting EAL learners contributing to variability in practitioner confidence and pedagogical effectiveness. These perspectives collectively indicate a need for adaptive pedagogical approaches that respond to individual learners needs, thereby justifying further qualitative exploration of practitioner experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are fundamental to this research due to its focus on early years practitioners and children with educational settings. Educational research involving young children requires heightened ethical sensitivity because participants may be vulnerable, unable to fully articulate discomfort and positioned within unequal power relationships (BERA, 2024; NSPCC, 2023; Robinson, 2024). Research ethics refers to the principles and standards that guide responsible conduct in research, ensuring integrity, respect, accountability and protection from harm (Resnik, 2024; Brooks *et al*, 2014; UWSTD, 2022). Within qualitative educational research, ethics is not limited to procedural approval but instead involves ongoing reflexive decision-making throughout the research process (Lyndon, 2023; Blackburn, 2015; Andrews, 2024). This is particularly relevant within this study because observations and semi-structured interviews will occur within naturalistic early years environments where practitioner interactions and child participation are socially embedded and context dependent.

The proposed study adopts a qualitative case study methodology using structured observations and semi-structured interviews to explore how practitioners support children with EAL. As qualitative methods involve direct interaction with participants and interpretations of lived experiences, ethical practice must remain central

throughout data collection and analysis (Pandey, 2025; Cohen, *et al*, 2007; Maher, 2025). The study aims to generate rich contextual understanding rather statistically generalisable findings; however, this depth of engagement increases ethical responsibility because participants may disclose sensitive information regarding professional practice, children's learning needs or institutional approaches to EAL provision. Ethical considerations therefore extend beyond formal procedures and require continuous attention to participant wellbeing, confidentiality and professional trust throughout the research process (BERA, 2024; Brooks *et al*, 2014; Teachers Institute, 2024).

Informed consent is a central ethical principle underpinning this study. Participants must voluntarily agree to participate with full understanding of the research purpose, procedures, risks and intended use of data before any research activities commence (BERA, 2024; Leeds Beckett University, 2020; Department for Education, 2023). Partitioners participating in interviews and observations will therefore receive a detailed participant information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, research methods, expected time commitment, confidentiality procedures, data storage arrangements and their right to withdraw without consequence. The information sheet will also explain how findings may be used within academic assessment and clarify that participation is entirely voluntary. Providing transparent information supports ethical openness and enables participants to make informed decisions regarding involvement (UWTSD, 2022; Resnik, 2024; BERA, 2024).

As observations will occur within early years environments involving children, additional ethical sensitivity is required regarding assent and ongoing participation. Although parental or guardian consent provides legal and institutional permission for children's involvement in research, ethical practise also requires recognition of children's ongoing assent and right to withdraw, ensuring participation is not determined solely through adult gatekeeping. (BERA, 2024; Department for Education, 2023; Robinson, 2024). Researchers must therefore remain attentive to both verbal and non-verbal indicators of discomfort, reluctance or disengagement throughout the research process, recognising that consent in early childhood contexts should be viewed as ongoing rather than a single procedural event and that children's wellbeing must remain prioritised throughout participation (Blackburn, 2015; Lyndon, 2023; NSPCC, 2023; NAEYC, 2025).

The principle of voluntary participation is particularly important within educational settings because power imbalances may unintentionally influence participants decisions to participate. Practitioners may feel pressure to participate due to institutional expectations, professional relationships, or concerns regarding how refusal may be perceived (Brooks *et al*, 2014; Teachers Institute, 2024; Andrews, 2024). To minimise this risk, recruitment procedures will emphasise that participation is optional and unrelated to professional evaluation or workplace performance. Participants will also be reminded that they may withdraw at any stage without needing to provide justification. This is especially important within qualitative case

study research where prolonged engagement between researcher and participant may create feelings of obligation or discomfort regarding withdrawal (BERA, 2024; Leeds Beckett University, 2020; Blackburn, 2015). Reinforcing voluntary participation throughout the research process supports ethical transparency and helps maintain trust between researcher and participant.

Confidentiality and anonymity are essential components of ethical educational research, particularly within small scale qualitative studies where participants or settings maybe identifiable despite anonymisation procedures (BERA, 2024, UWTSD, 2022; Brooks *et al*, 2014). As this study focuses on a small number of practitioners within specific early years settings, careful consideration must be given to protecting identities during data collection, transcription, analysis and reporting. Pseudonyms will therefore be used for all participants, children and educational settings. Identifying details including names of schools, locations or unique contextual characteristics will be removed from transcripts and written findings. Data will be securely stored and primarily accessible only to the researcher and where necessary the university for assessment purposes. However, participants retain rights under data protection legislation to request access to their personal data, seek correction of inaccuracies or withdraw consent prior to anonymised analysis (UK Government, 2018; BERA, 2024; UWTSD, 2022). Maintaining confidentiality is particularly important because practitioner interviews may involve discussion of professional challenges, institutional practices or perceived limitations in EAL support provisions (Andrews, 2024; Robinson, 2024; NSPCC, 2023).

Data protection procedures must comply with legal and institutional requirements. The study will adhere to the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (UK Government, 2018) and the Data Protection Act (DPA) (UK Government, 2025), which establish principles for lawful, fair and transparent data processing. Participants must understand how their information will be collected, stored, used and eventually destroyed. Audio recordings, observational notes and interview transcripts will therefore be securely stored on password protected devices and retained only for the period required by the university policy (UWTSD, 2022; Leeds Beckett University, 2020; BERA, 2024). Participants also retain rights under GDPR legislation including the right to access personal data before anonymised analysis is completed. Secure handling of data is necessary not only to ensure legal compliance but also to maintain participant trust and institutional integrity throughout the research process (Resnik, 2024; Teachers Institute, 2024; Brooks *et al*, 2014).

Risk reduction is another significant ethical responsibility within this study. Although the research is low risk compared to medical or clinical research, qualitative educational research may still create emotional, professional or reputational risks for participants, researchers and institutions (BERA, 2024; NSPCC, 2023; Brooks *et al*, 2014). Risks to participants may include anxiety regarding professional judgement, discomfort discussing workplace experiences or concerns regarding confidentiality. These risks will be mitigated through clear communication, voluntary participation,

anonymisation procedures and sensitive interviewing techniques. Interview questions will remain focused on professional experiences rather than personal matters and participants will not be pressured to answer questions they find uncomfortable. Conducting interviews respectfully and maintaining non-judgemental communication may help reduce emotional discomfort and support ethical rapport between researcher and participant (Teacher Institute, 2024; Robinson, 2024; Blackburn, 2015).

Risks also exist for the researcher. Qualitative research within educational settings may involve emotional labour, ethical dilemmas or professional tensions, particularly where researchers are familiar with the setting or participants (Andrews, 2024; Lyndon, 2023; Brooks *et al*, 2014). Observing practice or discussing challenges related to EAL provision may place researchers in difficult situations requiring careful professional judgement. Researcher bias and subjective interpretation also present methodological and ethical concerns because meaning is constructed through interpretation rather than objectively recorded (Maher, 2025; Pandey, 2025; Cohen *et al*, 2007). Reflexivity will therefore remain important throughout the research process. The researcher must remain aware of personal assumptions, avoid imposing judgment on participant practice and ensure that interpretations are grounded within collected data rather than personal beliefs or expectations.

Institutional risk must also be considered. Educational settings and universities may face reputational or ethical consequences if research is conducted irresponsibly, breaches confidentiality or fails to comply with safeguarding procedures (UWTSD, 2022; Leeds Beckett University, 2020; BERA, 2024). To minimise institutional risk, formal ethical approval will be obtained before commencing the study and all research activities will comply with university guidance regarding safeguarding, confidentiality and professional conduct. Any safeguarding concerns arising during the research process would be addressed in accordance with institutional and setting safeguarding policies. Maintaining professionalism throughout the study is essential to protecting both participants and institutions while ensuring public trust in educational research practices (Resnik, 2024; Department for Education, 2023; NSPCC, 2023).

Overall, ethical considerations are central to every stage of this qualitative case study exploring EAL support within early years settings. This study requires careful attention to informed consent, assent, confidentiality, data protection, safeguarding, voluntary participation and risk reduction to ensure research is conducted responsibly and respectfully. Ethical practice within educational research extends beyond procedural compliance and instead requires continuous reflexive judgement in response to complex and context specific situations (Lyndon, 2023; Blackburn, 2015; Brooks *et al*, 2014). By embedding ethical principles throughout the research design, the study aims to protect participant wellbeing while generating meaningful insights into practitioner experiences of supporting EAL learners within early childhood education settings.

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