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Teaching EAL/D Learners in Australian Classrooms

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Australia has always been a culturally and linguistically diverse place, and our modern nation comprises people from over 2000 different ethnic backgrounds. Many different languages are spoken in homes and communities across Australia and consequently many primary school students are learning **English as an additional language** or **dialect (EAL/D)**. This PETAA Paper outlines some of the recent trends in the theory and practice of EAL/D teaching and learning, offering relevant support for all classroom teachers to cater more effectively to EAL/D learners in their classes.

EAL/D is the educational acronym now used in Australia to refer to those students whose home language or first language (L1) is a language or dialect other than **Standard Australian English (SAE)** and who require additional support to develop proficiency in SAE, which is the variety of spoken and written formal English used in Australian schools. The new acronym (EAL/D) foregrounds the English language learning needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who speak an Aboriginal or Torres Strait creole, or a variety of Aboriginal English, as well as those who speak a traditional or heritage Indigenous language, and migrant and refugee students who speak an English-based creole, pidgin or dialect, as well as those who are learning English as a second or additional language (ESL/EAL).

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) has developed an English as an Additional Language or Dialect: Teacher Resource to support teachers to design and implement teaching programs in all learning areas to make content in the Australian Curriculum accessible for EAL/D learners. This substantial and useful resource consists of an Introduction and Overview, an EAL/D Learning Progression, Advice for Teachers of EAL/D Students and a Glossary of Terms. Additional materials developed for the Australian Curriculum to assist teachers include a selection of annotated EAL/D student work samples, and annotations to the learning area content descriptions which provide linguistic and cultural considerations and suggested teaching strategies for EAL/D learners. The link to this online resource is provided at the end of the article.

Who are EAL/D learners?

Approximately one in four students in Australian schools is learning English as a second or additional language or dialect. These learners come from diverse backgrounds and include children born in Australia, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and migrants, refugees and international students born overseas.

EAL/D learners also have diverse educational, linguistic and literacy backgrounds. Some have had formal schooling and might even have learnt English as a foreign language (EFL) in their country of origin; others have had little or no formal schooling or have experienced severely disrupted education. Some possess literacy skills

in their home language which are equivalent to the SAE literacy skills of their school-age peers in Australia; others have minimal or no literacy experiences in any language. Some have a degree of familiarity with written English (SAE) and good academic language skills, but need to develop oral English (SAE) and more informal social registers. Some have experienced emotional, psychological and/or physical trauma in their resettlement or transition to formal education which is liable to impact on their learning in Australian schools.

EAL/D learners can enter Australian primary schools at any age and at any time of the year. They are generally placed at the grade level appropriate for their age. They may live in metropolitan, regional, rural, remote or very remote areas in Australia, and in socio-economically advantaged or disadvantaged situations.

Identifying EAL/D learners

It is essential that teachers are familiar with the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their students. Teachers should seek to develop a classroom environment which values, utilises and extends the rich and diverse linguistic and cultural resources and heritages that all children bring to school. Inviting EAL/D learners (and all students) to share their cultural and linguistic knowledge and experiences will create an inclusive space for EAL/D learners in the educational environment and afford opportunities for deep learning and intercultural understanding for the entire class.

Completing a **sociolinguistic profile** (eg, birthplace, date of arrival in Australia, first language/s spoken, etc.) is a useful way for teachers to predict students' learning needs, and their English language learning needs, and can be an effective aid to planning. This profile can be completed at the beginning of the year, or when a new student arrives, and might be conducted via a whole class survey or a peer interview activity.

Further questioning will help to identify EAL/D learners and their specific linguistic and educational backgrounds. For example, students can be asked what languages they speak and hear in their interactions with different family members and acquaintances in home and community contexts. They can be asked to list the school/s they have attended previously, for how long, and what language/s they used at the school/s.

Particular care must be taken when identifying the language backgrounds of students who speak a creole, pidgin or alternate

variety of English as their home language. Currently, and particularly in communities where students speak a variety of Aboriginal English and/or an Aboriginal or Torres Strait creole as their home language, this language or language variety is unnamed or unidentified, and thus goes unrecognised by schools and educational authorities. It is assumed – incorrectly – that the student’s home language is ‘English’ (ie, SAE). These EAL/D learners, as a result, are often subjected to unsuitable instructional methodologies and inappropriate referrals for educational remediation.

EAL/D learners identified as having had limited or no previous exposure to Standard Australian English in a formal learning situation should be referred immediately to specialist EAL/D (or ESL) teachers, executive staff or consultants at the school or jurisdictional level for further assessment and support.

The importance of oral language development

In the early years especially, developing talking and listening is essential in supporting EAL/D learners’ development of literacy in Standard Australian English. **Protolanguage** is the term coined by the linguist Michael Halliday to describe the sounds and gestures used by infants to communicate their physical, emotional and social needs and engage with their immediate environment before they learn to speak recognisable language. All of us who have attempted to communicate in a foreign language know that our first point of learning is often similar to that of a young child who starts to use language by pointing then naming. Many children also go through a ‘silent period’ when learning their first language, and the same can happen when learning a second – just because an EAL/D learner is not speaking does not mean that attention is not being paid to the new language.

Before EAL/D learners have become skilful at decoding or writing words, they may have learnt a language or several languages or dialects. They bring to school a very valuable resource – their spoken language – as it represents their background experiences and demonstrates their language skills. Foregrounding and using students’ bilingualism and bidialectalism can be an effective way of developing the language awareness of all students in the classroom.

All teachers should permit and encourage EAL/D learners to use their first language (L1) in the classroom where appropriate.

First language maintenance (ie, the ongoing development of an EAL/D learner’s home language) is essential for the preservation and growth of students’ personal and cultural identities and their family relationships. As well, research has demonstrated the importance of students’ L1 both for learning a second language (L2), and for learning *in* and *through* L2. Using bilingual or bidialectal learning resources and activities, a bilingual or bidialectal teaching assistant, or a more able student from the same language or dialect background to explain concepts in the students’ home language are useful strategies for supporting EAL/D learners. When conducting research for an information report, for example, EAL/D learners might be permitted to seek out and use texts written in their home languages, and they should be encouraged to read widely in the languages and literatures of their home cultures as well as in SAE.

The thoughtful development of an oral language program can support all students including those who have not had rich encounters with literature and language outside the classroom. Talk in the classroom may be part of a process of learning or a reflection about learning and it is vital that teachers consider student learning as always including learning about language as well as about the subject matter of the discipline. For example, giving and listening to oral descriptions is an excellent starting point from which the teacher can provide support for students to move from one language or dialect to another by reference to familiar objects or situations or other shared subject matter. Teachers may also use this type of everyday activity to assist EAL/D learners to move along the **mode continuum** from spoken to written language.

It is important to provide EAL/D learners with authentic contexts for communicating using both ‘spoken-like’ and ‘written-like’ language. Developing an understanding that spoken and written language have different characteristics and that each can be used in particular contexts to achieve a purpose can influence the pedagogical choices teachers make in their classrooms. **Collaborative classrooms** are those in which students are given opportunities to reuse and reflect on language and where there is talk around texts in varying contexts. The type of interaction found in these classrooms is most valuable when supported by explicit discussion using **metalinguage** (language used to talk about language) which helps students see that language is a resource for making meaning.

English language teaching researchers use the metaphor of **scaffolding** to describe the relationship between language, learning and thinking in a collaborative classroom where students are supported to actively negotiate and construct meaning. In this sense, scaffolding is the temporary support provided by teachers and more able peers in the classroom to assist EAL/D learners and enable them to complete tasks and acquire new language skills.

Code-breaking instruction

Recent research suggests that fluent first language (L1) reading can both facilitate and interfere with second language (L2) reading. In this view reading is understood as language processing sub-skills (eg, decoding) that rely on ability to reflect on and manipulate language (eg, phonological awareness). A first

task of learning to read then, is to work out how the writing system maps the language. But while that task itself is shared across languages, details vary from language to language.

The writing system is one source of variation. There are three types of writing system: alphabetic – mapping print to **phonemes** (eg, English, Arabic); syllabic – mapping print to **syllables** (eg, Japanese *kana*); and morphosyllabic – mapping print to **syllable morphemes** (Chinese only). With an alphabetic writing system, the reader must map print to the smallest segments of sound (vowels or consonants). In contrast, with a syllabic system, they must map print to a larger phonological unit usually consisting of a vowel combined with one or more consonants.

The novice reader’s task is affected also by the use a language makes of the **graphemes** (smallest print units) of its writing system, that is, by **orthography**. Orthography is described as ‘shallow’ or ‘transparent’ when the sounds of the language can be retrieved reliably from print. Italian and Spanish are examples; their use of the letters of the Roman alphabet involves (near) one-to-one correspondence. In contrast, orthography is ‘deep’ or ‘opaque’ when retrieval of phonological information is less reliable. English is an example; its use of the letters of the Roman alphabet involves one-to-many grapheme-phoneme correspondences.

Researchers have found that phonological knowledge used by L1 readers facilitates L2 reading. This is not surprising. Aspects of phonological awareness (eg, awareness of syllables) can develop ‘naturally’ from experience of rhythmic language; they are independent of literacy instruction. This underscores the need to adjust classroom programs of phonological awareness to EAL/D learner need. For example, an older child in the Beginning English phase may not necessarily require phonological awareness activities identical to those provided in early years classrooms for English L1 readers. Assessment of learner need is crucial. Furthermore, ways might be found of drawing EAL/D learners’ L1 phonological awareness into the classroom or of helping the learners develop phonological awareness in their L1, for example, by encouraging parents to recite and sing with their children, clapping beats and accentuating rhymes.

A second transfer effect relevant to primary literacy instruction relates to ‘**language distance**’. Several studies show that, at given developmental points, English L2 reading is faster and more accurate for learners literate in alphabetic rather than

non-alphabetic L1 orthographies. This suggests that EAL/D learners require explicit instruction and ample opportunities to set or re-set reading skills for English. Primary teachers' expertise in codebreaking instruction is an asset in this regard; the challenge is to know the particularity of the reading needs of EAL/D learners.

Phonemic awareness may be one instructional need. Novice L2 readers need to learn to hear and manipulate the sounds of English. Moreover, readers of non-alphabetic languages may require awareness of the phoneme itself. Phonemic awareness activities used with novice English L1 readers may be useful: isolating sounds in words, blending sounds to form words, segmenting words into sounds and so forth. A second instructional need relates to **grapheme-phoneme correspondence**: EAL/D learners require instruction in the sound/symbol relationships of English. A third instructional need relates to the very opaque orthography of English: the learning of sight words, phonics rules, onset-rime, and syllabic and morphemic word identification strategies. Existing early years code-breaking programs may offer much to EAL/D readers in this regard; older novice readers of English L2 require similar opportunities. The aim is to develop fluent and automatic code breaking so that EAL/D learners can focus on comprehension – the usual goal of reading.

Vocabulary and comprehension in focus

It is quite possible to read aloud fluently in a new language with minimal comprehension: the problem for many EAL/D learners is not that they cannot decode or read the words on the page, but that they cannot comprehend them.

Vocabulary knowledge and comprehension are crucial in developing the ability to read meaningfully and to learn through reading, and research shows that there is a strong reciprocal relationship between the two. That is, vocabulary development is both an outcome of comprehension and a precursor to it, with word meanings making up as much as 70-80% of what learners understand from text. In fact, the proportion of new words in a text is the single most reliable predictor of its difficulty for learners. Therefore the relationship between vocabulary and comprehension is two-way and dynamic, with one proviso – lower primary learners rely on oral language and words they are familiar

with through speaking to scaffold their reading development, but as they progress, more and more vocabulary is learned from written text.

Students arrive at school with vastly different levels of vocabulary, due to their home backgrounds. EAL/D learners may arrive with minimal English vocabulary, and so the explicit teaching of vocabulary becomes critical, as it is the best predictor of both reading and listening comprehension across all years of schooling. If new words are not consistently taught and learned in all subject areas, then the problems EAL/D learners face are compounded, and their ongoing underachievement becomes more likely.

Direct instruction in vocabulary influences comprehension more than any other factor. Although wide reading can build word knowledge and also knowledge about the world, students need thoughtful and systematic instruction in key vocabulary. This requires careful planning by teachers. Direct instruction means that the new or difficult words in a text are first predicted by the teacher, and then activities are devised to define, practise and recycle the new vocabulary. For students to understand a word, at least three interrelated meaning-making systems come into play: **graphophonic** (knowledge of sound-letter relationships, ie, decoding), **semantic** (knowledge of the word meaning), and **syntactic** (knowledge of the word class or how the word fits into language structure). In proficient readers, these systems are deployed simultaneously.

Teachers should ensure that texts are comprehensible for students (ie, that they provide what is known as '**comprehensible input**'). If EAL/D learners cannot comprehend at the

literal level of understanding, they cannot progress to the deeper levels of critical, interpretive or creative meaning-making.

Research has demonstrated that for students to comprehend a text without assistance from the teacher, they must already know 98 per cent of the words. In the middle years, this requires a vocabulary of 8000 to 9000 words. For instruction, where the teacher scaffolds or supports the students' comprehension, 90-95 per cent coverage (existing word knowledge) is still required. This finding indicates that learners must reach much higher vocabulary sizes than thought before to read in class. If texts are harder than 90-95 per cent coverage, they will not work as instructional texts, and students will become frustrated or give up. This can be a real danger for EAL/D learners. Low-literacy EAL/D learners in particular require an explicit and continuing focus on building sight vocabulary and comprehension skills.

There are some time-worn but effective strategies for building in an explicit comprehension and vocabulary focus for EAL/D learners. Indeed, such literacy strategies work for all learners. Note that there is a difference between **receptive vocabulary** (ie, words students recognise) and **expressive vocabulary** (ie, words used in speaking or writing). Research indicates that students may need to encounter a new word up to 15 times to acquire it as part of their expressive vocabulary (hence the need for recycling). For direct or explicit instruction, teaching fewer words well is more effective than teaching many words in a cursory way. Teachers should also focus on high frequency words in texts rather than more obscure terminology.

That is, teach the words students are definitely going to encounter again in other contexts.

Teaching strategies which will help support the active learning of vocabulary and hence improved reading comprehension (and writing) include the following: word walls; mini flipbooks; designated vocabulary notebooks; class-generated glossaries (using computers for images where relevant); flashcards; vocabulary games (commercial or hand-made); spelling tests and competitions; fun homework activities on new words; word chains or word maps; and, of course, online vocabulary programs and activities. As a final suggestion, recent research on middle school EAL/D learners suggests that teachers sometimes have little precise idea of their students' vocabulary knowledge or levels of comprehension, and that progress in these areas is not a systematic focus nor systematically recorded. Simple diagnostic testing will provide a baseline for knowing where your EAL/D learners are in their word knowledge, and for developing a program that is linguistically responsive to their needs and their progress in language and literacy learning.

EAL/D assessment and reporting

All Australian states and territories have in place specialist EAL/D resources and curriculum frameworks that are used for planning and programming for EAL/D learners, and tracking, monitoring and reporting on their progress in learning Standard Australian English. Teachers of EAL/D learners should implement diagnostic assessments to identify where students are situated in terms of their level of English (SAE) language proficiency, their mastery of the academic language demands of each learning area and their knowledge of curriculum content. This information will provide a guide to where explicit instruction is required to ensure that EAL/D learners' specific needs are met, as well as the level of English language support required to help them access the curriculum across different learning areas.

The ACARA EAL/D Learning Progression comprises a compilation of the various scales documents and standards frameworks developed in Australia and overseas for EAL/D learners. It identifies four phases of English language learning, as follows:

- **Beginning English** – students with some print literacy in their first language. A subcategory, Limited Literacy Background, is included to describe the reading/viewing and writing behaviours typical of students with little or no experience of literacy in any language
- **Emerging English** – students who have a growing degree of print literacy and oral language competency with English
- **Developing English** – students who are further developing their knowledge of print literacy and oral language competency with English
- **Consolidating English** – students who have a sound knowledge of spoken and written English, including a growing competency with academic language.

A range of assessment data and strategies should inform teachers' judgments about EAL/D learners' progress. Formative and summative assessments should focus on students' skills in each of the language modes – listening, speaking, reading, viewing and writing – as well as on their knowledge and understanding of curriculum content.

Comprehensive information on EAL/D learners' progress can be gathered through a variety of integrated assessment strategies, including: formal, informal and impromptu speaking tasks (eg, oral reports and descriptions, debates, panel discussions, interviews, viva voce activities); observation of students'

oral interactions and participation in group work; listening comprehension activities; cloze tests; reading logs; analysis of student writing; learners' self-assessments; and the like.

It is important to note that EAL/D learners who do not meet age-related assessment benchmarks in literacy and numeracy, or who appear to achieve poorly when examined formally alongside their English-speaking peers, are not necessarily 'underperforming'. Rather, they are achieving at levels which are consistent with their current phase of English language learning. Developing **modified assessment strategies** that rely less on language and more on content knowledge can enable EAL/D learners at different phases of English language learning to demonstrate their understanding of curriculum content (eg, allowing a Beginning EAL/D learner to demonstrate understanding of an arithmetical function or scientific concept through a diagram or practical activity, or comprehension of a narrative through illustrations.)

Conclusion

EAL/D learners need targeted, systematic and explicit instruction based on their language needs and prior learning. Given an inclusive and supportive classroom environment, appropriate learning experiences and assessment practices, and the high expectations of their teachers, these students can and do achieve at the same level as their English-speaking peers. We hope that this paper and the suggestions for further reading below will assist teachers to identify and cater more effectively to the EAL/D learners in their classes.

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The *English as an Additional Language or Dialect: Teacher Resource* developed by ACARA for mainstream teachers to use with the Australian Curriculum can be downloaded from

http://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/student_diversity/eald_teacher_resource.html

You can find the contact details for your state or territory professional TESOL association on the Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) website at <http://www.tesol.org.au/About-ACTA>

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TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN MAINSTREAM CLASSES

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This PETAA title, released in 2012, addresses English language learning (ELL) pedagogical practices. The book is particularly useful for mainstream teachers who have limited experience working with EAL/D students. It considers general ELL (ESL, EAL/D) theory alongside some specific theories in the areas of oracy, reading and writing. Illustrated with authentic and recent student work samples, the book will also help teachers to plan an effective ELL program for the diverse needs of English language learners.

