

Phantom young English language learners: The shadowy presence of second language proficiency in (English medium) early childhood assessment¹

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This paper examines how English language learners (ELLs) remain shadowy figures in the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), a national early childhood development assessment, which since 2009 has been completed triennially by classroom teachers in all Australian jurisdictions for every child in their first year of schooling. It shows how ELLs elude clear identification and appropriate English as a Second/Additional language (L2) assessment because of the fundamentally monolingual conceptualisation of this tool. The AEDC provides the only set of education data at the national level for this young age group and has consequently become a “go to” measure for policy initiatives. However, young children in contemporary Australia are linguistically diverse and so semi-recognition of ELLs in an English only assessment tool is very concerning. Neither the definition of ELLs nor the wording of key assessment items gives classroom teachers sufficient guidance on how to respond for ELLs. The resulting AEDC data and associated reports easily drift towards deficit misinterpretations as natural L2 proficiency levels are muddled with global childhood development in communication and cognition. The paper makes recommendations for improving the quality and accuracy of AEDC data outputs for ELLs and for using the data for policy purposes.

Key words: early childhood education, standardised assessment, young English language learners, English language proficiency, school data

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The Australian educational context of standardised assessment data

Although English has no constitutional or legal status as the national language in Australia, it is frequently touted as such:

English, as our national language, connects us together and is an important unifying element of Australian society. English language proficiency is a key contributor to better educational and employment outcomes and social participation levels. (Department of Home Affairs, 2023)

In a similar fashion, the education system is geared to function on a default setting suited to mainstream classroom contexts that use English as the medium of instruction and assume English as a first language (L1) proficiency. Mainstream education data collected from monolingual teaching and assessment tools contains embedded English proficiency assumptions and so poses significant issues for linguistically diverse student cohorts. Such data does not reveal the disconnect between the L1 English classroom language expectations and English language learner (ELL)³ language repertoires. It ignores languages, thereby rendering Indigenous⁴ and overseas background students' L1s irrelevant, likewise their second language (L2) learner level of English. It takes a monolingual view, so that non-optimal performance of ELLs is not considered as a possible sign of having a full mother tongue and being in the process of learning English as an additional language. It assesses and reports below par performance in literacy, numeracy or other areas (assessed via the English language) in one-dimensional, deficit terms where the language dimension to the equation is absent.

In the Australian education domain, furthermore, there is little publicly available, language-oriented data pertaining to ELLs which would counteract this unfair

³ Throughout this article we use the term English language learner (ELL) to describe students who are learning English in addition to their L1(s). The currently favoured term in Australian education is English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) or English as an Additional Language (EAL). The focus of this article, the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), uses English as a Second Language (ESL).

⁴ "Indigenous" in this article refers with respectful intent to the two broad groups of First Nations in Australia, Aboriginal peoples from the mainland and islands outside of the Torres Strait, and Torres Strait Islanders.

monolingual lens on their educational learning and development. This is quite surprising as the education systems in all state and territory jurisdictions have L2 English proficiency assessment tools for school-aged students. Also, school enrolment forms collect information about language(s) spoken at home by the student and each parent/caregiver. These language data points are not, however, publicly reported and instead categories less pertinent to students' language strengths and language learning needs are employed in disaggregations of Australian education data. One such category is the ethno-cultural grouping "Indigenous", the only grouping of this kind to be disaggregated. It encompasses all First Nations students, who from a linguistic point of view constitute a highly heterogeneous grouping, with L1 English speakers as well as L2 English learners whose L1s include English-lexified creoles, other contact languages and/or traditional languages (Simpson & Wigglesworth, 2019). Another linguistically broad category is "Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE)": yes or no, the definition of which depends on the data set or report. For the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), LBOTE includes students who speak a language other than English themselves or whose parents/caregivers do, but is silent on the ELL status⁵ of these students and their level of L2 English language proficiency. In fact, this LBOTE has been dubbed a category of misrecognition because of its low education information value when its nomenclature seems to promise much more (Lingard et al, 2012). In contrast, the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), the focus of this study, has specifically engineered LBOTE to refer to ELLs, in an attempt to improve the educational meaningfulness of the category and the identification of this cohort which we discuss below.

When it comes to Australian education data, it is therefore fair to conclude that information about students' language background, ELL status and level of L2 English language proficiency data has been severely de-prioritised. It is also the case that Indigenous students have been excluded to a large extent from consideration as ELLs because ELL services have historically been oriented to incoming immigrant/refugee populations and they are also still sometimes mistakenly thought to be non-LBOTE on these grounds (Dixon & Angelo, 2014). Other born-in-Australia populations can also

⁵ In Australian schools, "ELL status" usually involves checking a box on a student record to indicate that she/he has been identified as an L2 English learner, often by means of demographic information. Ideally, this is followed up with an L2 English language assessment to ascertain proficiency levels in all macroskills.

be overlooked where ELL identification and assessment processes revolve around new arrivals and refugees, for example by focussing on eligible visa categories or years in Australia. Adding to the potential for misidentifying and overlooking Indigenous ELLs are the shifting language landscapes that have been caused by colonial invasion and occupation, which has given rise to new contact language varieties such as creoles, some not officially recognised or named. These pose methodological hurdles for collecting language background data which would flag speakers' potential ELL status and non-specialist teachers are known to require language awareness training in order to be able to assess these learners' language needs accurately (Angelo & Hudson, 2018; Hudson & Angelo, 2020).

In short, language background information and ELL proficiency data can and may be collected in states and territories for some students (typically immigrant and refugee students), but there is no national policy for identifying and assessing the full cohort of ELLs. The categories "Indigenous" and "LBOTE" are regularly used for disaggregating education data but they do not relate straightforwardly to ELLs or to students' own individual language backgrounds.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)⁶ is an English-based assessment tool which provides a national measurement for monitoring Australian children's development when they enter schooling. Since 2009, national AEDC assessment and data collection have been conducted triennially by classroom teachers via a lengthy questionnaire on each child in their first semester of school (around 5 years of age). Children are allocated a score in five domains (see Figure 1) to determine if they are developmentally on track, at risk or vulnerable (see Figure 2). The AEDC does not report individually, but at the level of community/school, region, state/territory or nationwide. Indigenous children are the only ethno-cultural group disaggregated.

The AEDC constitutes a very attractive data source for policy makers. It is the only source of early childhood education data with a nationwide reach. It is collected early

⁶ Initially, the AEDC was called the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI). The AEDC is still sometimes referred to as the Australian version of the Early Development Instrument (AvEDI or EDI).

in the first year of school, and so offers a data set with potential for monitoring child development at the start of schooling as well as a baseline from which to measure subsequent schooling performance. Furthermore, it provides over-time data which can be used to indicate improvement or otherwise. AEDC data has, for instance, been nominated in the recently “refreshed” national Indigenous policy, *Closing the Gap – in partnership*, as the tool to measure one of the 16 targeted outcomes, *Target 4: Children thrive in their early years* (Australian Government, n.d.). Similarly, the recently established Australian Education Research Organisation legitimises their new early childhood learning trajectories by reference to AEDC constructs (AERO, 2023, pp. 25-7) and AEDC data is employed for justifying calls for improvements or increases to provisions in early childhood education (e.g. The Front Project, 2022).

It is all the more concerning, then, that the conceptualisation of the AEDC is essentially monolingual and English only and, regardless, is applied to this young, linguistically diverse cohort. Age level, L1 English proficiency assumptions underpin all the assessment items, even though children from non-English speaking backgrounds have varying levels of L2 English proficiency. Granted, in its evolution, the AEDC has bolted on additional features, such as extra language background questions and clarifications, in an attempt to take account of ELLs. Even so, ELLs are still not consistently and accurately visible in this assessment tool. Neither the definitions of ELLs and English language proficiency, nor the wording of the questionnaire items gives teachers sufficient guidance on how to respond for ELLs. In fact, the way key questions are posed may be quite misleading.

It should be noted that “English language invisibility” is also a feature of other large-scale standardised tests and their reports on older Australian children, such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the Australian PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) (Angelo, 2013; Creagh, 2013; Macqueen et al., 2019).

In sum, the AEDC is seen as a reliable source of early childhood development data even for young ELL cohorts, a position which we will show is not appropriate. Furthermore, owing to its English L1 foundation, AEDC data obscures ELLs and their language learning needs for their teachers and could also encourage inappropriate interventions for ELL cohorts who are assessed as underachieving.

AEDC domain descriptions and domain development categories

In the AEDC, teachers provide demographic data on individual students in their first year of schooling and respond to questions (approximately 100) about each of their students over five domains: Physical health and wellbeing, Social competence, Emotional maturity, Language and cognitive skills (school based), and Communication skills and general knowledge (see Figure 1). The latter two domains are of particular relevance to young ELLs because these domains are largely English language dependent. Despite this, the links are not made between children's L2 English language abilities and their *apparent* level of communication, cognitive and learning development as gleaned by their teachers, nor about the knowledge children bring with them into the classroom.






Physical health and wellbeing	
	Children's physical readiness for the school day, physical independence and gross and fine motor skills.
Social competence	
	Children's overall social competence, responsibility and respect, approach to learning and readiness to explore new things.
Emotional maturity	
	Children's pro-social and helping behaviours and absence of anxious and fearful behaviour, aggressive behaviour and hyperactivity and inattention.
Language and cognitive skills (school-based)	
	Children's basic literacy, advanced literacy, basic numeracy, and interest in literacy, numeracy and memory.
Communication skills and general knowledge	
	Children's communication skills and general knowledge based on broad developmental competencies and skills.

Figure 1. AEDC domain descriptions (DESE, 2022a, p. 9)

On scores against each of the five AEDC domains, children fall into three AEDC developmental categories: *developmentally on track*, *developmentally at risk* or *developmentally vulnerable*, as shown in Figure 2. Clearly, if no link is made between

ELLs' level of L2 English proficiency and their performance in an English-based teaching and learning environment, these children will emerge with scores that describe them as not “on track” in their cognitive/communicative development, rather than as “on track” in their L2 English language learning but needing an educational environment that recognises and responds to their English language learning needs. Similarly, if cohorts are assessed as developmentally at risk or vulnerable, this will open the door to inappropriate interventions, perhaps in literacy or speech language pathology, as might be required for L1 English-speaking children with similar presentations. This is no moot point. For example, in AEDC data, “proficient in English” and “not proficient in English” are not reserved exclusively for L2 learners of English as readers might suppose. Both the L1 “English only” cohort and the “Language background other than English” cohort are disaggregated according to whether or not they are “proficient in English” (see Appendix 2). For L1 “English only” children “not proficient in English”, a first assumption might reasonably be a specific impairment in speech language or another related developmental area. In contrast, for “Language background other than English” children “not proficient in English”, a first assumption might reasonably be early L2 learners of English. These are two very different needs which are addressed in different ways. The AEDC fails to separate L2 language learning from other features of child development from the outset.

Developmentally on track	Children are considered to be developing well. As such, it is desirable to see the percentage of children who are ‘on track’ increase with each new AEDC collection cycle.
Developmentally at risk	Children are facing challenges in some aspects of their development. Changes in the percentage of children ‘at risk’ need to be considered alongside changes in the percentage of children on track and vulnerable. For example, a reduction in those who are developmentally vulnerable could coincide with an increase in those at risk which would signal an overall improvement. Alternatively, a reduction in those who are on track could coincide with an increase in those who are at risk which would signal an overall decline in development.
Developmentally vulnerable	Children are facing some significant challenges in their development. As such, it is desirable to see the percentage of children who are ‘vulnerable’ decrease with each new AEDC collection cycle.

Figure 2. AEDC summary indicators (DESE, 2022a, p. 9)

Taking account of ELLs: The issues

Despite the AEDC being a monolingual L1 English assessment, the AEDC *has* made a positive attempt to gather demographic data to identify ELLs and their proficiency within the young student population. For example, the AEDC (DESE, 2022a, p. 80) uses a modified LBOTE category, which attempts to address ELL status and proficiency (unlike the NAPLaN use of LBOTE) and intentionally includes Indigenous children as potentially LBOTE, pushing back on historical legacies of inappropriate exclusion:

Children are considered 'LBOTE' if they speak a language other than English at home, or if they speak English at home but are still considered to have ESL status. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who have LBOTE status are part of the LBOTE group. For example, it is possible for children to be both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and have LBOTE status.

The question that needs to be raised here, however, is: How are teachers guided to identify ELLs and their English proficiency in the first place? Although the AEDC intention is positive, the definitions for LBOTE, English as a Second Language (ESL) and Proficient in English are problematic (DESE, 2022a, pp.80-1, see Appendix 1 for full wordings):

- Children are LBOTE if they do not speak English at home or if they do speak English but have ESL status.
- Children have ESL status if English is not their first language and (a) the student needs additional instruction in English or (b) they have conversational English, but are not yet proficient in English.
- Children are proficient in English if they speak like an average monolingual and use English effectively, which involves conveying their message and needing to adhere only to basic grammatical conventions.

Teachers provide background information and observational responses about each child which are intended to establish if they speak a language other than English at home and are considered ELLs. However, the guidance offered in the AEDC definitions is unlikely to be very helpful to teachers. In the first instance, teachers might rely on enrolment data to know about students' home languages, but this is not always reliable

or easily accessible in the case of complex language shift situations. Furthermore, teachers may have had little or no ELL training in their professional preservice or in-service learning, and the availability of expert ELL services may be patchy or non-existent. How would a classroom teacher know if a student needs additional instruction in English, or has “conversational English”, but is “not yet proficient” in English? How would they (or anybody) interpret needing “to adhere only to basic grammatical conventions”?

We do not know the answers. What we do know is that in 2021, a significant proportion (26.8%) of Australian children in their first year of schooling were considered LBOTE by their teachers, which in the AEDC definition includes the notion that they are ELLs (DESE, 2022a, pp. 69-70; see also Appendix 2). A majority of these LBOTE students (23.7%) were, however considered proficient in English on the basis of their teachers answering *average* or *good/very good* to the question: “How would you rate this child’s ability to use language effectively in English?” (see the discussion of this item, Question B1, below). In our experience we would consider this result likely to be a considerable over-estimation of the L2 English proficiency levels of many young ELLs in their first semester of schooling.

Rating ELLs: Example items from the *Language and cognitive skills* domain

Against a systemic monolingual English perspective of Australian schooling and a well-intended but not particularly clear approach to ELLs in the AEDC demographic definitions, teachers are asked to rate their students’ abilities across the five domains. We will use some examples from Section B (Language and Cognitive Skills [school based]) to illustrate the lack of visibility of the language learning attributes and trajectories of ELLs as classroom learners in these assessment items. Teachers are asked to rate each individual student on their ability to use English, but they are given insufficient guidance or flexibility for fairly and accurately describing ELLs. The questions are illustrative of how the invisibility of L2 proficiency is woven throughout the tool so that there is no way to interpret items fruitfully for ELLs.

AEDC Question B1: Ability to use language effectively in English

Teachers are asked to answer “How would you rate this child’s ability to use language effectively in English?” using a three point scale, *poor/very poor*, *average*, *good/very good*, with additional options of *don’t know* and *not applicable*. See AEDC Data Dictionary (DESE, 2022b, p. 257).

Responses to this item are also referred to in the AEDC definition of English proficiency (DESE, 2022a, p.81). Responses of *average* or *good/very good* are taken to indicate that a child is proficient in English, while responses of *poor/very poor* are taken to indicate a child is not proficient in English. This constitutes the basis for AEDC data disaggregations by proficiency. In answering this question, teachers are instructed to specifically consider English language skills in scoring children’s ability to use “language effectively in English”, which is explicated as:

This question refers to the child’s use of the appropriate words and expressions at appropriate times, as well as the child’s contribution to conversations. (DESE, 2022a, p.81)

In the definition of proficiency, effective use is deemed as “use sufficient to convey the desired message”, while only basic grammatical concepts need to be adhered to, so long as the meaning is clear (see also Appendix 1).

This advice could misdirect a teacher about which students might have ELL learning needs, as the requirements for the child’s communicative contribution could be interpreted to encompass quite early levels of L2 English proficiency. ELLs’ language learning needs could be rendered a non-issue if children were observed to be using just some “appropriate” basic formulae “at appropriate times”, a sign to those informed about English L2 proficiency of a potentially very early level. Yet, these formulae could well convey “the desired message”. In such cases, based on the proffered AEDC guidance, their teacher’s judgement that they are proficient in English, could mean that additional L2 English instruction is not provided. Young ELLs would need to be able to do more than demonstrating this type of conversational contribution to be able to be independently learning across the curriculum through English.

Additionally, in the case of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with L1 English-lexified creoles and other contact languages, teachers might overlook their additional L2 English instruction needs, given the guidance. Scoring the effective use of English where only basic grammatical concepts need to be adhered to, so long as the meaning is clear, could seriously overestimate these learners' L2 English proficiency. Children's regular use of non-conventional grammatical structures should provide alerts as to their language backgrounds and ELL status, and not be ignored or glossed over. Since 2015, the AEDC has added extra questions specifically targeting teachers' assessment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' ability to use other languages (items B1a-d, AEDC Data Dictionary, DESE, 2022b, pp 258-260). This is a welcome move, but to the best of our knowledge this data has not been highlighted in reporting, or correlated within the AEDC to LBOTE students reported with and without English proficiency.

AEDC Question B2: Ability to listen in English

Teachers are asked to answer "How would you rate this child's ability to listen in English?" using the same scale as B1 (AEDC Data Dictionary, DESE, 2022b, p. 262). The only extra advice for this question that we have been able to locate instructs teachers to consider "the ability of the child to listen to English, without visual cues, for at least a few minutes" (AEDI National Support Centre, 2010, p. 19).

The cast of this question and the accompanying instructions could mislead teachers' identification and assessment of their ELL students and subsequently their teaching choices for these students. Understanding the task of L2 listening in classrooms where English is the medium of instruction requires the lens of L2 criteria, such as students' prior knowledge of the topic, the grammatical complexity involved, and the knowledge of what might seem age-appropriate vocabulary (e.g. *bee*, *hive*). Knowledge about children's listening ability that generalist classroom teachers bring with them typically derives from L1 English perspectives. Hence, their judgements about children's listening behaviours are based on factors like students' ability to pay attention and sit still, which are also implied by the question's reference to duration – "for at least a few minutes". ELLs can exhibit these behaviours, but they are not related to their L2 comprehension levels, on which ELLs' ability to engage in all classroom learning delivered via English depend.

AEDC Question B3: Ability to tell a story

Teachers are asked to answer “How would you rate this child’s ability to tell a story?” using the same scale as in item B1 above (AEDC Data Dictionary, DESE, 2022b, p. 263). Teachers are advised that this item refers to a child’s skill in telling a story s/he has heard before, using appropriate vocabulary and matching events with words.

Again, if classroom teachers are unsure of the attributes that would identify a child as an L2 English learner, this item does little to elucidate matters. It would not alert a teacher to a child’s ELL status and expected differences in their ability to tell a story in L2 English, depending on their level of English proficiency. At a very early L2 level children can use single words, or well-known “chunks” of language, but it is not clear how this would relate to “appropriate vocabulary” or “matching events with words”. The item makes no reference to the extent of the child’s comprehension of the story in the first place, nor the conditions by which they might become familiar with the story and its language – for example, a much-read, whole class big book with language activities – which are pivotal factors for ELLs. The instructions referring to children’s use of English language revolve around vocabulary and words, and the AEDC description of proficiency specifically only requires basic grammatical conventions. Learners with quite early levels of L2 English proficiency, including Indigenous students with L1 English-lexified creoles or Aboriginal Englishes, could conceivably meet these requirements. Teachers are not alerted to grammatical differences that would indicate ELL status and are not required to consider this in their responses.

AEDC data and the drift to deficit assessment of English language learners

Despite the problematic L1 constructs embedded in the AEDC, there have been some efforts to add caution in interpreting results for “linguistically diverse” students. For example, the AEDC has produced an AEDC and Language Diversity Fact Sheet (AEDC, 2019), which makes it clear that the AEDC is carried out in an English-speaking school setting; that strengths in first language and literacy skills children display at home or in other contexts have not been captured; and that, if a community has a higher proportion of children developmentally vulnerable in the language and cognitive skills

(school based) domain, first language and literacy skills have not been measured. The fact sheet exists on the AEDC website under resources for researchers. While this is commendable, this information is not front and centre in AEDC reports, so the lack of fit between the tool and ELLs is not clearly flagged. AEDC data is typically presented as bald facts with copious data sets (see Appendix 2) without upfront, visible warnings about the ill-suitedness of the questionnaire for ELLs, let alone whether ELLs and their L2 English proficiency are identified in the first place.

For any government department or organisation accessing this data in AEDC reports, it is rather difficult to avoid a deficit interpretation of LBOTE cohorts (including ELLs). It is not made clear to data users that the AEDC tool is unreliable for this cohort, as we have shown, because the questions do not allow for ELLs and their learning, and as the Language Diversity Fact Sheet admits, ELLs' language capabilities are unfairly represented.

The focus of each triennial AEDC reports varies, so the 2021 national report seems more focussed on improvement (comparison with previous cohorts). Consequently, the LBOTE section contains statements like this:

Despite good improvements since baseline⁷ children with a LBOTE are still 2.3 times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable in the Communication and general knowledge domain than children with an English only background (14.3 per cent compared with 6.2 per cent respectively). (DESEa, 2022, p. 36).

The 2018 national report seems more focussed on the effect of particular demographics on developmental vulnerability, which leads to comparative statements such as those summarised in Table 1.

⁷ 'baseline' refers to 2009, the first year in which the AEDC was conducted. It was then known as the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI).

Table 1. Sample comparative statements in AEDC 2018 national report (DET, 2019, p.33)

Demographic	Domain: Language and cognitive skills
Geographic location	Children living in very remote locations were more than 5 times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable than those in major cities.
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were nearly 4 times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable than non-Indigenous children.
Language Background Other Than English	LBOTE children not proficient in English were nearly 8 times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable than LBOTE children who were proficient in English.

For a TESOL informed readership, it is hardly ground-breaking news that ELLs not proficient in English might be assessed below L1 English speaker standards on their ability to use English in the classroom. Indeed, this would be the expectation in all the heavily English language mediated domains. How could it be otherwise? Yet the data on this group's developmental vulnerability in the domain of Communication and general knowledge is reported as newsworthy in the 2018 AEDC report, and without the acknowledgement that, of course, English proficiency is key.

LBOTE children not proficient in English were universally reported by teachers as developmentally vulnerable on this domain [Communication and general knowledge] (over 90 per cent), a pattern that has been consistent since baseline. (DET, 2019, p. 38)

AEDC data and reports are then harnessed in ways that position LBOTE cohorts in a poor light, rather than positively as L2 English language learners. An example of the drift to deficit assessment can be found in a report by The Front Project (2022). The *Supporting all children to thrive* report analyses the data from the 2021 AEDC report, highlighting inequality of access to high-quality early childhood education and care services across the country according to location and cultural background. The aim was to put “developmental vulnerability” on the political agenda, to argue for early childhood education (ECE) before school in the critical years from three to five. Fruitful as the work has the potential to be, it has the downside of highlighting “vulnerability according to language background”. That said, the Front Project adds qualifications to the analysis of the data by referring to how the rating of language ability depends on

how well the child understands the teacher; how the AEDC is conducted in an English speaking environment; and how there is no measurement of L1 speaking and literacy skills.

The data presented in The Front Project's report nevertheless does create a deficit picture. Of the minority of children from an LBOTE background (7610 out of 77, 539 LBOTE children in the AEDC) who were judged by their teachers as not proficient in English according to AEDC criteria, The Front Project's document proclaims that 90 percent were developmentally vulnerable in the Communication skills and general knowledge domain, and similarly 39.4 percent in the Language and cognitive skills domain. This report additionally points out that limited English might also present barriers to developing social and emotional skills and to a range of communications with children's teachers and peers (The Front Project, 2022, p. 31), see Figure 3.

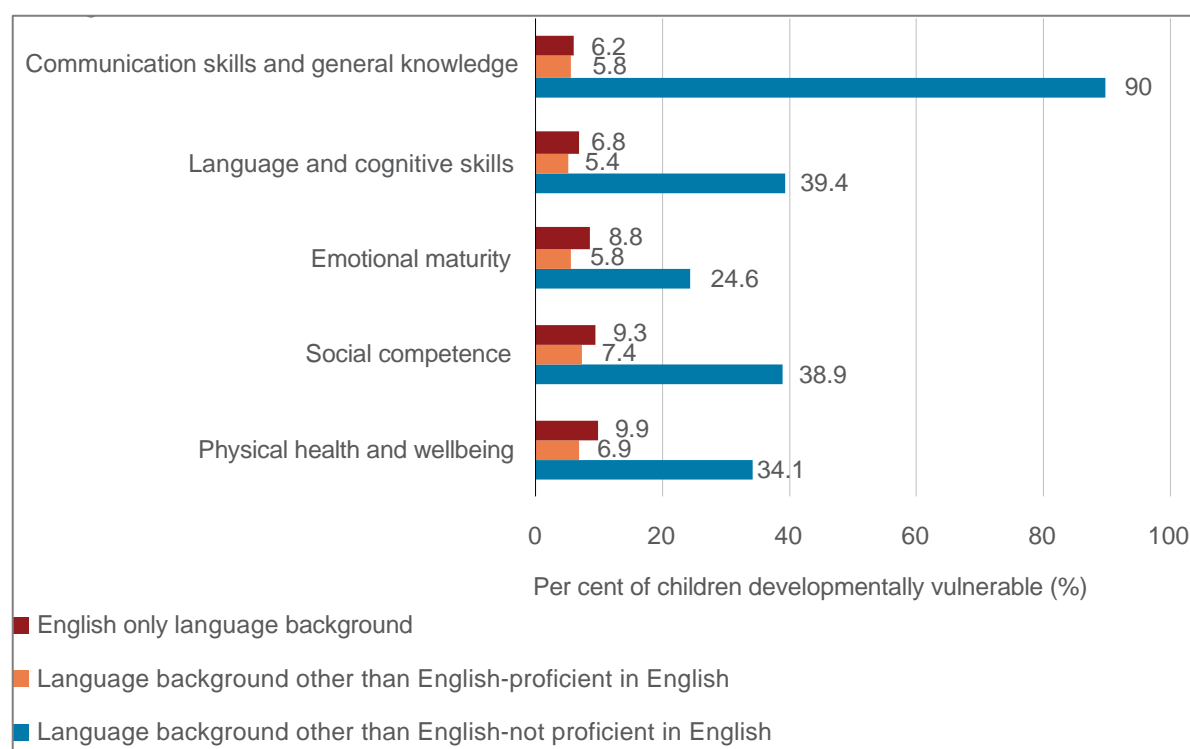


Figure 3. Vulnerability according to language background, 2021 (The Front Project, 2022, Figure 8)

Unfortunately, The Front Project's report includes a graphic representation of the AEDC domains with a description of what being "On track might look like..." and what being "Developmentally vulnerable might look like...". The use of graphics seems to be inspired by the AEDC icons (see Figure 1 above). The report utilises an athletic On track figure which contrasts with a slumping figure for the Developmentally vulnerable

description (see Figure 4 below). The description of the developmentally vulnerable student presents an alarmingly deficit depiction. In the case of a multilingual student on a pathway to learning English as an additional language, the communication skills and general knowledge strengths as displayed in a first language(s) are entirely absent, and the wording is behavioural and somewhat judgemental.

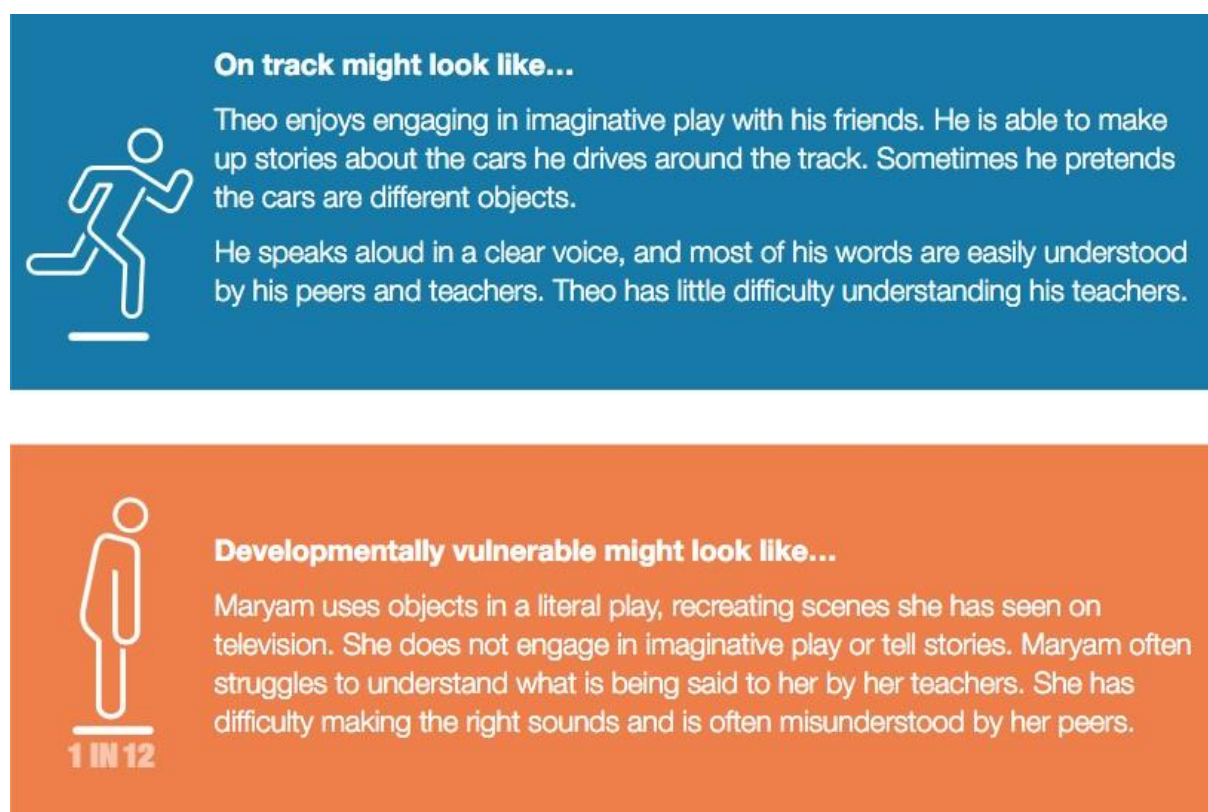


Figure 4. Communication skills and general knowledge depictions (The Front Project, 2022, p. 23).

A policy agenda for phantom ELLs

The evidence of the link between student achievement and English language proficiency level (see among others, Creagh, 2013; Strand & Lindorff, 2020) should be a basis for action in revising AEDC processes and reporting, and for research to balance the grim and potentially determinist portents about children’s educational futures, such as the AEDC’s predictive validity study (Gregory & Brinkman, 2014)⁸. In considering what “research shows” based on the AEDC study, The Front Project’s report discusses the impact of developmental vulnerability on children’s future

⁸ But see also a more possibly optimistic outlook in Larsen & Little (2023) on cumulative growth patterns.

educational lives. Although the discussion is aimed at advocacy for strengthening ECE opportunities, the AEDC data is accepted as a given, and the future of young children not proficient in English is made to seem extremely limited. The report asserts that half of the 22% (2021) of children who are developmentally vulnerable on starting school never catch up: In Grade 3, they will be a year behind peers on NAPLaN; in Grade 5, two years behind, less likely to finish school, and more likely to experience unemployment and suffer ill-health throughout their lives (p. 5). Moreover, the gaps and risks will be far greater if there is more than one risk factor (The Front Project, 2022, p. 5).

Perhaps, more studies such as the Larsen and Little (2023) study on cumulative growth patterns in NAPLaN may be undertaken and may balance studies such as the AEDC's predictive validity study (Gregory & Brinkman, 2014). What we do know is that young children can learn additional languages, and attention needs to be drawn to the language needs this cohort experiences in a predominantly English school setting. If the ELL cohort was made more highly visible in the reports of the AEDC, attention might be brought to providing sufficient guidance and tools for the identification and assessment of the English language proficiency of this cohort, which is presently missing. The alerts, footnotes and language diversity resource from the AEDC do not perform this function. What can be done to improve the quality, accuracy and usefulness of AEDC data outputs for ELLs and for using the data for policy purposes?

Assess ELLs' L2 English proficiency levels

An ELL data set should be a part of the AEDC data reports, so that the role of English language learning is positioned as important for educators, schools and policy makers. Their efforts will then be directed to support ELLs, rather than turning to other pedagogical approaches, such as literacy packages designed for L1 English speakers, where "language" is a missing factor (Dixon & Angelo, 2014). Creating an ELL data set would be a significant step towards revealing this otherwise phantom cohort of ELLs and bringing the cohort into clear focus.

All state and territory jurisdictions and schooling sectors have L2 English proficiency tools and assessment processes for the early years of schooling. These tools can be used to identify children and assess their level of proficiency. Language teachers all know

that there is a world of difference between a novice and a more advanced language learner. Importantly, L2 proficiency tools measure a range of levels. This nuance would improve on the current AEDC binary distinction between proficient or not. The tools require training for educators, but they provide evidence at an individual level of the English language support a child will need to be learning mainstream curriculum content via the English language. Children's L2 English language learning can also be supported and monitored with these tools as they progress through their schooling, thereby building an evidence base of English language learning. Collection and reporting of ELL data could even be a mandated requirement, up there with the requirement on schools to participate in the AEDC.

An ELL data set drawn from these L2 English proficiency tools could be used to disaggregate AEDC results (every three years). This is particularly important for the domains of Language and cognitive skills (school based) and Communication skills and general knowledge, which are highly mediated by English proficiency. An ELL data set would also give the AEDC the opportunity to report on significant and explanatory strength-based indicators. The children's status as competent multilinguals who are L2 learners of English would no longer be obfuscated and/or missing from reports. A clear ELL data set would furthermore counterbalance deficit interpretations of AEDC reports where L2 learners of English are depicted as broadly developmentally vulnerable, and are automatically included in assertions that developmentally vulnerable children will never catch up to their on track peers. Rather than augmenting these determinist views, consideration could then be given to policy support for building the capacity of schools and educators to support ELLs and their English language learning. Their L1 strengths should be promoted and L2 pedagogical approaches would enhance English language learning and improve access to the curriculum when English is used as the language of instruction.

Finally, an ELL data set would provide justification for modifying assessment item instructions to teachers. Currently, the position of L2 learners of English is very murky. If they were already assessed separately as L2 learners, then teachers could be given sensible contextual guidance. Thus, for item B1, should children's effective use of English be assessed on their use of familiarised language on a taught classroom topic, or casual discussions about their play, or social chats about what they did on the

weekend? Or should they provide an ELL student's assessed Speaking level and the name of the L2 English proficiency assessment tool? The AEDC assessment tool needs to make a clear link between the English language quotient of assessment items and ELLs' levels of English language proficiency, and to offer transparent advice to teachers for implementing this assessment tool with this cohort. It is only fair.

Promote children's L1s and multilingualism as a strength

The other side to reporting on L2 English language proficiency levels for the LBOTE cohort is to report on the actual languages these children already speak proficiently. Australian school enrolment forms already ask for the languages spoken by children and their parents/caregivers. Thus, just as with the L2 English proficiency assessment tools, the mechanism for collecting data on children's languages is already available. Reporting on the specific languages spoken by children focusses attention on their existing L1 language ability and foregrounds their L1 language(s) as a solid foundation and a strength. In contrast, the present practice of grouping children with an unspecified language background other than English merely sets them apart. Their L1 skills are effectively backgrounded, which also obscures the reason why many are L2 learners of English.

Including the language strengths of multilingual children and their families would be another significant step towards dispelling the monolingually induced, deficit interpretations of the LBOTE cohort. It also brings the ELL cohort into clearer visibility because it definitively distinguishes ELLs from L1 English-only students who are experiencing speech language delays: ELLs already speak one or more other languages at an age appropriate level and are in the process of adding English to their repertoire. It would also be in keeping with the AEDC's espoused move towards more positive, strength-based reporting in its most recent 2022 Report.

AEDC reports should make a concerted effort to discuss linguistic diversity – L1s and L2 English – overtly and as a strength. The problems associated with a monolingual orientation to education data are likely to affect an increasing number of students, schools and communities, as the proportion of the Australian population speaking languages other than English in the home has increased to nearly a quarter, according to the latest Census (ABS, 2022). As AEDC results are reported at school or community

level, it is currently possible that some communities and schools are positioned with large numbers of developmentally at risk/vulnerable students on account of their linguistically diverse populations. The goal of “improvement” (comparison over time) then becomes unjust as it is based on long term local demographics associated with high immigration areas or Indigenous communities and not on the child development characteristics supposedly measured.

Reporting equitably and fully on students’ L1s may require some awareness raising in schools as well as amongst community members. Given the Australian monolingual mindset (Clyne, 2005), peoples of non-English speaking backgrounds could be somewhat wary about stating which language(s) their children speak. With some Australian-born students such as Indigenous or immigrant/refugee background students whose families have experienced shifts in traditional/heritage language use, their language situations might be complicated. The goal of reporting students’ L1s may therefore require raising language awareness amongst teachers, and time for discussions with parents.

Conclusion

The AEDC is the only available national data set about Australian students’ development in their first year of schooling and as a result it is frequently used. It is nominated in various policy initiatives, including the flagship commonwealth policy for Indigenous people, Closing the Gap, because it is assumed to be a valid, reliable data source about all children, regardless of their backgrounds, at this important home to school juncture. But this is not straightforwardly the case.

Our study has shown that the AEDC questionnaire and the subsequent reporting of this data does not clearly and fairly represent the cohort of young students who are L2 learners of English. It is a monolingual, English only assessment tool based on underlying L1 English constructs which do not consistently hold for L2 learners. It does not transparently assess the L2 English proficiency of ELLs. Nor does it properly instruct teachers how to interpret items designed for L1 speakers of English when assessing L2 learners of English. Problematically, the AEDC reports give the (false) impression that the cohort of young ELLs is addressed because there are data disaggregations that seemingly do the job. We have illustrated how AEDC reports

couch their data as unassailable and unnuanced facts, which creates the conditions for readers to draw unhelpful and erroneous deficit interpretations about L2 learners of English. Most egregiously, L2 learners of English can be wrongfully positioned as being developmentally impaired, by dint of learning another language.

In view of the widespread use of AEDC data and the envisaged policy reliance on this data source, we call for the AEDC to be accountable for representing young linguistically diverse students fairly and accurately. In the first instance, the AEDC needs to correlate ELLs' level of L2 English proficiency, as assessed on a bespoke tool, with their AEDC assessment. The most important variable in an assessment conducted in the English language is how much English language a student knows. This joins the dots between AEDC data and the relevant school-based intervention, namely support for L2 English language learning. In addition, AEDC reports should take an active stance to counteract the inappropriate deficit positioning of ELLs by sending purposefully clear and positive messages about multilingualism and learning English as an additional language. Finally, we propose that the AEDC report on students' L1s. In our view this is a concrete way of acknowledging the language wealth of our young children and it makes students' home language talents tangible for schools. In these ways, the AEDC can help dispel the unfortunate monolingual mindset in Australian education data and lead the way into more reliable and fair assessment.

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Appendix 1

The following AEDC definitions for LBOTE, English as a Second Language (ESL) and Proficient in English are provided in the glossary of the AEDC National Report 2021 (DESEa, 2022, pp.80-1)

Language background other than English (LBOTE)

Children are considered 'LBOTE' if they speak a language other than English at home, or if they speak English at home but are still considered to have ESL status. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who have LBOTE status are part of the LBOTE group. For example, it is possible for children to be both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and have LBOTE status.

English as a Second Language (ESL)

Children are considered to have ESL status where English is not their first language and they need additional instruction in English; or where English is not their first language, they have conversational English, but are not yet proficient in English.

Proficient in English

Proficient in English refers to what is expected of the average monolingual English speaker in a similar phase of development. For the AEDC, children are considered proficient in English if teachers answered *average* or *good/very good* to the Australian version of the Early Development Instrument question: "How would you rate this child's ability to use language effectively in English?"

This question refers to the child's use of the appropriate words and expressions at appropriate times, as well as the child's contribution to conversations. Effective use is deemed as "use sufficient to convey the desired message". Only basic grammatical concepts need to be adhered to, so long as the meaning is clear. Teachers were asked specifically to consider English language skills.

Appendix 2

Demographic diversity categories related to language in AEDC data disaggregations from the first implementation in 2009 to the most recent triennial data collection year in 2021

Category	2009		2012		2015		2018		2021	
	n=261,147	%	n=289,973	%	n= 302,003	%	n=308,953	%	n=305,015	%
Indigenous Children	12,416	4.8	15,490	5.3	17,351	5.7	19,074	6.2	20,646	6.8
Born in another country	16,844	6.5	21,695	7.5	21,215	7.1	22,971	7.5	17,908	5.9
Children with English as L2	33,526	12.8	41,506	14.3	45,226	15.0	54,700	17.7	56,894	18.7
LBOTE – Total 1	46,967	18.0	55,489	19.1	64,881	21.5	78,298	25.3	81,885	26.8
• LBOTE – Not proficient in English	7,596	2.9	7,893	2.7	8,252	2.7	8,766	2.8	9,410	3.1
• LBOTE – Proficient in English	38,513	14.9	46,880	16.3	56,127	18.7	68,885	22.4	71,882	23.7

English Only – Total 2	214,180	82.0	234,484	80.9	237,122	78.5	230,655	74.7	223,130	73.2
• English Only – Not proficient in English	10,489	4.1	11,031	3.8	10,920	3.6	9,145	3.0	10,518	3.5
• English Only – Proficient in English	202,241	78.1	221,990	77.1	225,562	75.0	220,862	71.8	211,952	69.8

Source: DESE (2022a, pp. 60-70) Tables 23 & 24