

# **EAL/D or an additional need? A cycle of learning, teaching and assessment to discern if an EAL/D student has additional needs to learning English**

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Classroom teachers concerned with the academic or literacy progress of their English as an Additional Language/ Dialect (EAL/D) learners may ask the question: Does my EAL/D learner have additional needs to learning English? As young EAL/D learners are still in the process of learning English as well as developing their home language/s, deciding whether a student has a learning difficulty additional to English language learning needs can be difficult. A search of available information about assessment and identification of EAL/D learners with additional needs reveals information from a variety of sources and educational jurisdictions. These include EAL/D specialists and researchers as well as from the areas of Speech Pathology and Psychology. Approaches to assessment and identification vary with the different fields of expertise offering different perspectives. This has led to a tension in schools with teachers wanting a quick definitive answer to whether a student has an additional need to learning English and what must be done to remedy the situation. This report describes a cycle of teaching, learning and assessment that offers a response to this dilemma. It involves planning for language growth, rather than for a deficit, and monitoring the everyday teaching and learning of the classroom for the learner in question before referring onto another professional.

**Key words:** EAL/D learners, additional needs, learning difficulties/disabilities, assessment, English language learning proficiency scales

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## **Introduction: The educational context**

The cycle of teaching, learning and assessment described in this report offers an alternative to the immediate use of standardised testing with English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) learners when they are suspected of having an additional need to learning English. It is an EAL/D classroom-based assessment tool to identify, teach, wait, and see. Information for the assessment procedure is gained from the teaching and learning in class, which occurs as part of the classroom teacher's everyday teaching within the curriculum. Referred to as Formative Assessment or Assessment for Learning, it is defined as, "the practice of gathering and interpreting information about student learning as it is happening in the classroom involving a variety of methods. Using formative assessment helps you know where students are at in their learning so that you can adapt your teaching to meet their needs." (AERO, n.d.). Keeping a comprehensive record of the teaching and learning that occurs, along with a record of how a learner responds to effective teaching, in the form of a Personalised Learning Plan that focuses on language growth, rather than teaching to a deficit, is central to the cycle. Assessment of language growth is measured over time using an EAL/D proficiency tool specifically designed for measuring English language growth for EAL/D learners.

Assessment practices that are suitable for bilingual or multilingual learners are well documented within the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), (Genesee, 1994; Hall et al., 2001; McKay, 2007). They emphasise the difference between assessment for monolingual English language speakers and for those developing more than one language. However, many classroom teachers are not aware that assessments of second language English language proficiency are available for measuring an EAL/D student's English language acquisition. Through my experience as a specialist EAL/D teacher and advisor, I have found that compulsory system monitoring tools and assessments in writing and reading development (that are designed for native English speakers with system benchmarks) do not take into account that a student is still in the process of learning English. Without considering these two factors, teacher judgements about an EAL/D student's progress can become skewed in the belief that the student has a deficit in learning rather than an English language learning need.

Students identified as requiring help in learning English are supported by specialist English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) teachers and/or classroom teachers in both mainstream classroom settings and in separate small group instruction. Like classroom teachers in all other educational settings, they are dedicated to the learning and development of their young learners and become concerned when a student is not progressing in literacy, specifically in the areas of reading and writing. Reading and writing progress is assessed by the classroom teacher with results recorded in system databases. When an English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) student is not making progress as expected according to system benchmarks in reading and writing, then, problematically, the student can be subject to the same testing and assessment processes as their monolingual peers to determine learning difficulty or disability. If an EAL/D teacher is available to advise the teacher, there is less likelihood of immediate referral to other professionals and the cycle to discern if an EAL/D learner has additional needs to learning English will be followed.

Specialist EAL/D teachers in both primary and secondary schools use EAL/D scales that have been developed specifically for measuring an EAL/D learner's progress in learning the English language. Such scales take into account that another language, at least one, is also at work, alongside the English language being learned in addition. They have an understanding that an EAL/D learner has English language learning needs and will generally take longer to achieve the system benchmarks. In Queensland, the NLLIA ESL Bandscales have been in use since 1995 and administered mainly by EAL/D specialists. A more recent ACARA EAL/D Progression, first published in 2011, is designed to be used throughout Australia primarily by classroom teachers.

Both scales outline that learning English takes time and that slower than expected progress in reading and writing does not necessarily mean that EAL/D learners have an additional need to learn English. Recent Australian research about the time required to learn academic English has been established to be beyond five years, as in five to seven years (Gibbons & Cummins, 2002), seven to eight years (Hammond & Miller, 2015), and seven to ten years (Windle & Miller, 2012). See also Creagh et al (2019).

## The issue

In spite of both EAL/D scales being easily accessible, classroom teachers generally rely solely on the system assessments and benchmarks in reading and writing designed for first language (L1) learners to make judgements about the progress and the achievement of EAL/D learners. Assessment tools commonly used in Australian Education systems to monitor reading and writing in schools are a combination of standardised reading testing products and system designed literacy monitoring tools designed for L1 English speakers. Two standardised tests of reading generally used are PM Benchmarks and PAT-R (Progressive Achievement Test in Reading). Both reading testing products are based on unseen texts, with EAL/D students disadvantaged because they have little or no previous knowledge of the context or language used.

Rubrics and writing criteria assessments are also commonly used in schools and provide a more finely grained analysis of a learner's writing. They are similar to the Australian National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) writing assessments (ACARA, NAPLAN, 2023) with individual student writing samples used to make criteria-based judgements around purpose and audience, language features, conventions of language, text and sentence structure on a scale. They are useful for analysing student writing and can pinpoint the areas needed for improvement. However, the danger lies in comparing the EAL/D learners results with L1 English speaking learners' results and thus finding the EAL/D learners in deficit, rather than finding that they are still acquiring those skills in English.

Both reading and writing assessment tools designed for L1 English speakers provide a snapshot of achievement in English literacy and can potentially measure progress in reading and writing over time. They are useful as tools that can help to build a picture of EAL/D learners and how they are achieving in literacy at school, but should not be considered the sum total of information about EAL/D learners' acquisition of literacy and language. For those EAL/D students seemingly not progressing in reading and writing according to these assessment tools, there can be a perception that something is wrong with the student, rather than the reality that the student has not yet acquired the English language skills required for the reading and writing tasks in the English language.

Along with the practice of teachers using literacy assessment tools normed on an English-speaking population, other professionals such as guidance officers or speech pathologists may use standardised tests from their specific field to determine whether EAL/D students have a learning difficulty or disability. Commonly administered tests, designed for native English speakers and administered to EAL/D learners suspected of a learning difficulty or disability, include the CELF (Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals), which determines and describe the presence of a language disorder, or the UNIT (Universal Nonverbal Intelligence Test). As these tests are not normed on EAL/D learners and do not take into account the linguistic and cultural differences of multilingual learners, such tests can give a “false positive” or “false negative” result leading to a misdiagnosis (Hall et al., 2001). We also know that EAL/D learners are as likely to have a learning difficulty or disability as any other student. The issue is whether the assessments administered to EAL/D learners are fair and EAL/D-informed, as very little consideration is given to the difference between L1 and L2 speakers: EAL/D learners are learning literacy skills and understandings at the same time they are learning English.

McKay (2006) describes how high stakes decisions about EAL/D learners can be based largely on the results of standardised assessments and argues that it should be formative decisions on the basis of classroom assessment that guide student learning and inform teaching. She advocates for effective assessment to be tied to the principles of learning adopted within the curriculum in which the children are learning. If the underlying pedagogic principles of assessment and learning are not aligned, this indicates a serious problem with the assessment procedures being used. The special characteristics of young EAL/D learner, specifically their growth, literacy and vulnerability must be considered. Children need experiences that help them to succeed, to feel good about themselves and that lack of positive self-concept can cause a child to feel worthless. When young children are assessed, it is important that they experience an overall success and a sense of progression.

There are many reasons why schools seek the help of other professionals in determining whether an EAL/D student has an additional need to learning English. Foremost is the understanding that schools have a legal obligation to ensure that students with disability are able to access and participate in education on the same

basis as students without a disability (Education Services Australia, 2022). For schools to be able to access financial support for students with disabilities, a process of validation which includes testing using a standardised test is deemed necessary. Standardised tests such as the speech language tests used by speech pathologists and intelligence tests used by guidance officers are highly valued as a definitive authority for providing accurate data on whether a student has a disability or not. However, there is widespread acknowledgement from producers of such tests, and acknowledgement from teachers and other professionals, that standardised tests are not reliable as an indicator of a bilingual child's abilities, particularly when the child is a new immigrant. This has led to questions and a lack of agreement among system professionals about how long an EAL/D student has been learning English before they can be assessed using a standardised test. It is well documented within the EAL/D section of the ACARA Australian curriculum documents (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2011), that EAL/D students can take many years to learn English to the same extent as their native English-speaking peers and that there is a great deal of variation between learners in how quickly they learn a second language (see Clarke, 2009). In spite of this, there is still a prevailing perception that if an EAL/D student cannot read or write to the same standard as other students it is regarded as a deficit in learning rather than an English language learning need.

The issue of whether an EAL/D learner is still in the process of learning English or has an additional need is a key TESOL assessment issue not only in Australia, but internationally. TESOL experts and education jurisdictions from several countries have documented their protocols or processes for identification of EAL/D learners with additional needs (e.g. Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008; The Bell Foundation, n.d.). All stress the importance that students should not be assessed as having learning disabilities 1. on the basis of performance or behaviours that reflect a process of language acquisition or acculturation, or 2. a lack of prior opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills being tested. Additionally, they advise that standardised tests be used with discretion.

## The solution

To better support teachers and other professionals in their understanding of EAL/D learners' language needs, and so that teachers know when to refer onto another professional, a cycle of teaching, learning and assessment which enables assessment of an EAL/D learner in the classroom was developed. This procedure of discernment using learning and teaching for assessment data was based on the work of Deryn Hall et al. (2001). The cycle also draws on the work of Lyn Sharratt and Michael Fullan (2012) for the strategy meeting which they describe as Review and Response. The strategy meeting is an important place to start as it shifts the focus from "What is wrong with the student?" to "How can I change my teaching to better support the EAL/D learner?".

Central to the cycle is the creation of a Personalised Learning Plan for the EAL/D learner focusing on the English language learning and literacy that occurs in the classroom. Documentation of language growth is made from teaching and learning within the classroom with planned teaching and learning, and tasks focusing on positive language growth.

Figure 1 outlines the cycle, which begins with a strategy meeting, where discussion occurs with knowledgeable others, such as an EAL/D teacher, curriculum specialist or another teacher in the school with a knowledge of effective pedagogy to support EAL/D learners. They suggest new teaching strategies that the teacher has not yet tried to progress the student's learning. The teacher chooses one strategy from those suggested. The different teaching strategy must focus on language acquisition as well as literacy. If the strategy is successful and the EAL/D learner makes progress, the teacher continues to use the strategy and might have another meeting to seek ideas for more ways to support the EAL/D learners language growth. The fact that the learner is now making progress is good evidence that there is unlikely to be an additional need to learning English. The teacher continues to monitor the EAL/D learner's progress.

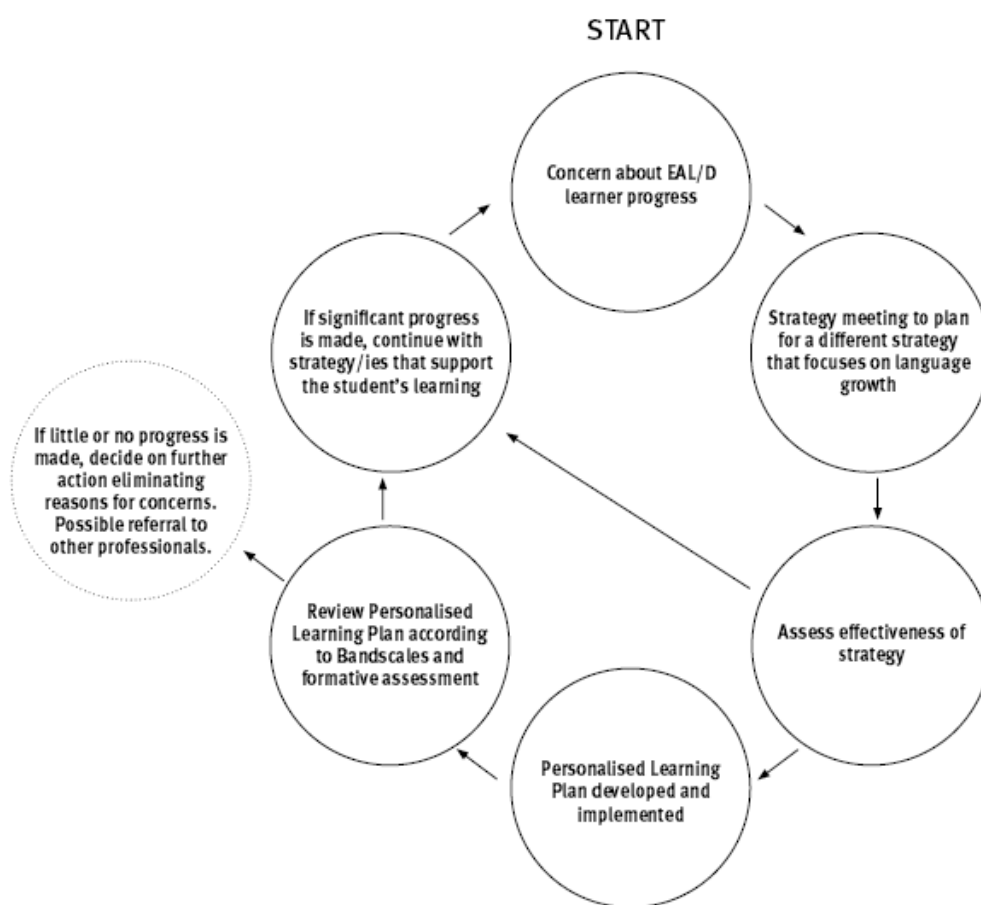
If there are still doubts about whether there is an additional need to learning English, a more comprehensive Personalised Learning Plan is developed which plans for three levels of support – good classroom practice, good EAL/D language support and an understanding of what the EAL/D learners' language proficiency needs are for

support/or what level of support is needed for the EAL/D learner's level of proficiency. The NLLIA Bandscales are used to identify what the child can and cannot do, to set goals and identify strategies that will support the goals that provide language growth in English.

English language growth is monitored through everyday learning and teaching in the classroom. Learning behaviours are observed, work samples collected and anecdotal notes made. If positive language growth is made, the proposed non-EAL/D intervention/referral to other professionals such as a guidance officer or speech pathologist is delayed, and a new teaching plan is made. Indications that a student requires EAL/D support usually emerge from formative assessment that classroom teachers are able to undertake. Teachers who use varied approaches to performance assessment will usually recognise when students are having difficulty with language-dependent activities.

After one or two school terms, progress is reviewed and a decision is made as to whether the student is to be referred on to other professionals. The evaluation of contextual and purposeful learning tasks provides information to place students on the NLLIA Bandscales. The cycle is repeated and Bandscales levels are reviewed half yearly and the student's progress is monitored through the Bandscales over time. If the student is still of concern, they can be referred on to other professionals, such as a guidance officer or speech pathologist.





**Figure 1.** Barker, B. (2023) A cycle of learning, teaching and assessment to discern if an EAL/D student has additional needs to learning English

## Implementation challenges

Time is a critical element in decision making at schools, and standardised testing via L1 English literacy tools or those used by health and psychology professionals provides a quick result, often with a veneer of scientific trustworthiness. While teachers have good intentions, a desire for a fast result so that “early intervention” can take place and students can receive remedial support is common. EAL/D learners may take a long time to develop English to a proficiency level matching their native-speaking peers and, as with any area of learning, no two students will be exactly the same. Classroom teachers may not be aware of the various factors impacting on how EAL/D learners develop their English language skills (such as first language literacy background), so EAL/D learners are often compared to other students, and their lack of comparable progress is cited as evidence of learning difficulty. EAL/D specialists, however, know

that the process of acquiring English is not a linear process and how this can appear to vary enormously for two apparently similar students.

Along with the time-investment to plan, implement and review, there is a lack of agreement among teachers and other professionals about how long it is reasonable to wait to assess an EAL/D learner with a standardised test, such as a cognitive assessment or a speech pathology test.

There is now less EAL/D expertise for support of EAL/D learners and their teachers available, a trend that is apparent across Australia (ACTA, 2022). For the cycle to work effectively, EAL/D expert input is required so that the focus is on language growth with language learnt in a meaningful context, rather than on working on a deficit. The absence of EAL/D expertise can mean that classroom teachers turn to other professionals for support and advice with EAL/D learners. As a result, the Personalised Learning Plan could focus on remedial literacy strategies, rather than on teaching strategies supportive of language learning.

EAL/D experts know that EAL/D learners do not necessarily have experiences in their first language that match a successful monolingual English-speaking student of the same age, in an English-medium classroom. EAL/D learners who have not experienced formal schooling and literacy in their L1 are in a less favourable position to learn their second language in a classroom setting whilst learning across the whole curriculum. With less classroom conceptual and linguistic development, they have fewer pre-existing cognitive and linguistic pegs on which to hang all the new school learning. Teachers and other professionals can construe this as a learning difficulty unless time is spent finding out about the learner.

### **Discussion/conclusion**

EAL/D experts know that progress in English language is related to varying factors including: first language print literacy background; time spent learning English; timely and supportive English language teaching ; previous educational experience; the amount of exposure to English in a range of contexts and for a range of purposes; the learner's age and attitude to English and being a user of English; the learner's experiences at school and at home and effectiveness of classroom support. But all this

practical knowledge is not necessarily at mainstream classroom teachers' fingertips. The cycle provides sufficient space for EAL/D expert advice to reach teachers, creating a fairer, more supported situation for the EAL/D learner and their teacher.

However, the effective implementation of the cycle is reliant on teachers understanding these factors. It is better still that they have access to an EAL/D specialist with whom they can discuss the learner's progress. This reduces the likelihood of comparison to other students and concentrating on the progression on learning at their own individual rate.

One welcome effect of the cycle outlined here, then, is that it raises the visibility of EAL/D learning for classroom teachers and enhances their awareness. More effective classroom support is provided for EAL/D learners through the use of this cycle. Following the cycle is also effective in providing a way for teachers to better understand their EAL/D learners' needs and the difference between EAL/D language learning and literacy. Teachers can be assisted with implementing more effective, on-going strategies for language growth. Through the development of an effective (i.e., EAL/D-informed, targeted) personalised learning plan, teachers are able to observe the benefits of specialised EAL/D responses and thus better understand their learners and the nature of second language acquisition.

Effective, high-quality EAL/D delivery takes account of the following realities: EAL/D students learn English better when there is a meaningful and purposeful context for communication, and a holistic approach to instruction is used. The EAL/D support delivered constantly by the classroom teacher meets these criteria: embedding EAL/D support in curriculum delivery and enabling the EAL/D learner to engage better with the curriculum. This sends a powerful message to EAL/D learners - they can be confident that their teacher knows them and recognises their language learning situation.

Following the cycle, with consistent recording of student learning through classroom observation and formative assessment, can provide comprehensive information about EAL/D learners without the need for standardised L1 English literacy and/or L1 special needs testing. Improved teacher understanding and practice provides the support for the necessary progress required to show that the students' perceived

difficulties were part of the language learning process, rather than a learning difficulty. The documentation in the personalised learning plan shows the student's ability to learn, while actively supporting their on-going language development. Most importantly, the EAL/D learner is given time and the opportunity to develop their English language in a targeted way through planning and implementation of teaching that is specifically for language growth rather than working on fixing deficits. Keeping to the cycle also gives time for teachers to wait and see before referring EAL/D students to other professionals.

Follow up with individual EAL/D learners who have been referred onto other professionals will be enhanced by the comprehensive record of the teaching and learning that occurs for the EAL/D learner in the cycle. The record will provide a useful, evidence based and informative document from which to proceed with further consultation and investigation.

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