

# ASSESSING STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS – THE E.A.L. CONTINUUM



By: Glenda McGrath &  
Katherine Roberts

*Glenda McGrath is an experienced EAL and English teacher at North Geelong Secondary College*

*Katherine Roberts is a Network Literacy Teacher, Middle Years Literacy and Numeracy Support Initiative*

EAL learners are often far from homogenous. The challenge for many teachers is that they can have such diverse backgrounds with a broad range of learning needs. For example, EAL students may:

- be from a refugee background with significant trauma and disrupted schooling
- be from a refugee background with age-equivalent schooling
- have migrated to Australia with or without their families
- be born in Australia or overseas
- have some, little or no exposure to English
- be international students in various living situations with or without adult support.

Whilst students who require EAL support are a broader group, and by definition include international students, for funding purposes EAL students are defined as students who:

- come from a language background other than English
- speak a language other than English at home as their main language
- have been enrolled in an Australian school for less than five years
- attract Student Resource Package (SRP) funding (Department of Education and Training, 2019c).

In addition to learning the English language, EAL learners also need to gain a new cultural understanding and may also need to learn how the Australian school system works. As a teacher, you provide an essential role in bridging this gap.

## Knowing your EAL learners

Consider the following scenario:

*Annie was a meticulous and hard-working graduate teacher who had a small group of EAL students experiencing difficulty accessing the material in her Year 7 maths class. In an attempt to differentiate learning, she sat the EAL students together and provided them with primary level worksheets around basic maths skills. What she didn't realise was that two of these students had age-equivalent education in Iran; another had excelled in a missionary school in Jakarta and had achieved the equivalent of year 9; and only one of the four students had interrupted schooling with very limited basic numeracy skills.*

This is an example of a teacher who misconstrued English language difficulties as academic deficiencies. It is a case that illustrates the importance of knowing your students and understanding that there is wide diversity within a group of EAL learners. It also illustrates how important it is for a school to ensure they have the expertise to collect, interpret and disseminate information to help inform teaching and learning practices in the school.

Knowing your EAL students, through collation of data and relevant personal information, will not only help you form positive relationships but will enable you to provide more effective instruction.

Your school should be able to provide you with:

- information gathered during the enrolment interview, which may include languages spoken at home, school attendance and learning in the country of origin, literacy in first and/or other languages, previous experience of learning and using English, length of time in Australia, and previous experience of formal schooling in Australia. The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA; n.d.) has recently developed a [Diagnostic Interview resource](#) to assist with the collection of this information
- transition reports from ELCs/ELs, which may include initial assessment documents, student work samples, and records of progress
- past assessment of student progress through the EAL Developmental Continuum or the new EAL Curriculum Achievement Standards

Had Annie, in the scenario above, been equipped with this information she would have been better equipped to tailor her teaching and learning to the students' individual content knowledge and language needs.

## Assessing EAL learners

Using the [EAL Companion to AusVELS \(DET, 2019a\)](#), EAL students are currently assessed on the modes of Speaking and Listening, Reading, and Writing. There are progression points along the scale, which represent beginning, progressing towards and at the standard. There are different standards used for primary and secondary students (see table below). The Department of Education and Training (2019b)

website outlines each of the standards with progression profiles of student learners and progression points. There are work samples to assist with assessment levels.

Primary EAL standards	Secondary EAL standards
<a href="#">Lower Primary (Years P-2)</a> – A1, A2	<a href="#">Secondary (Years 7-10)</a> – S1, S2, S3, S4
<a href="#">Middle/Upper (Years 3-6)</a> – BL, B1, B2, B3	

### EAL Developmental Continuum

EAL students in English classes should receive tailored tasks that create appropriate opportunities for language learning and teachers should report on students using the [EAL Developmental Continuum \(DET, 2019b\)](#). Once an EAL student has reached the ‘at standard’ level of their respective A, B or S stage in all three modes of Speaking and Listening, Reading and Viewing and Writing, they can be transferred to the Victorian Curriculum F-10 English for assessment and reporting purposes. (DET, 2018).

EAL students in other subject areas should receive tailored tasks or an individual program until they have reached the approximate language levels of their peers. Up until this point, they are not required to be assessed using the Victorian Curriculum. The students’ EAL or English teacher should be able to guide teachers as to whether or not their language skills are at this level. For further advice on how to assess these students, please refer to the [Assessment and Reporting Advice for EAL students](#) and the [Tools to Enhance Assessment Literacy \(TEAL\)](#) resources.

It is important to note that in 2020 there will be a revised EAL curriculum and there are no longer progression points in the current draft of this document. The achievement standards in the new EAL curriculum align closely with the current model. Details of the new EAL curriculum can be found [here](#) (DET, 2019d).

## Catering for the needs of the EAL learner in your classroom

*“Learning to teach English while simultaneously teaching grade-level appropriate content is indeed difficult, demanding and intricate work, but... necessary.”*

*(Jiménez & Rose, 2010, p. 407)*

A successful EAL program is one that provides assistance for students through the three stages of language support: arrival, transition and full immersion. Like Pearson and Gallagher’s (1983) Gradual Release Model on a whole school level, students in each of these stages progress from highly supported learning in an English Language Centre to more independent learning in the mainstream classroom.

Teachers must recognise that a student’s assessments against the EAL Developmental Continuum or the new EAL Curriculum Achievement Standards are indicative of English language proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking and listening and are not indicative of a student’s academic knowledge and capability.

Set out below are five strategies you can use to support the learning of the EAL learner in your classroom.

*1. Give students as many opportunities as possible to develop, discuss and demonstrate their knowledge, and use new language.*

When starting a new topic, students could be given the chance to research and discuss the concepts in their first language (L1). In addition, students should always be provided with the key vocabulary or technical language to discuss and ask clarifying questions. It is not desirable to give students an inexhaustible list of words to learn. The teacher needs to be clear about what vocabulary is important and incorporate this into the learning task. Students need to be given the opportunity to use the new vocabulary in the lesson.

Teaching strategies for EAL students are helpful strategies for teaching any student. Ways of scaffolding and giving EAL students opportunities to practice language, whilst at the same time teaching the content of the subject area include:

- dictogloss
- running dictation
- cloze activities
- matching sentences
- note-taking
- annotating
- unjumbling text strips
- rephrasing
- barrier activities

For further information about these [activities](#), please refer to the Department of Education and Training (2017).

*2. All tasks (and the language required for them) should be made explicit, modelled and carefully scaffolded.*

As with any learner, the important language around the task or topic needs to be prioritised. As students are learning, it is key that they are taught specific language in context. It is not always the level of sophistication that is important, it may be metalanguage or even some of the simple verbs or prepositions commonly used for the quality task. For example, when completing a measurement task in a primary mathematics class, it may be ensuring students understand ‘from’ and ‘to.’ Likewise, in a secondary mathematics class, this same language will be equally important when a student is working out the ‘angle of depression’ from one place to another.

In Science when writing a practical report, teachers need to make explicit that the grammatical structure of some of the sentences is imperative and must start with a verb (for example: pour, stir, extract, place, heat, combine and label)

Jiménez and Rose (2010) offer the suggestion that each lesson should have a learning intention as well as an explicit language focus.

Here are some examples we have put together to illustrate this idea.

Learning Intention	Language Focus
To learn how to write the <u>results section</u> of a science report (group construction followed by independent writing task)	Use the past tense form of the verb in this section of your report. <i>The salt <u>melted</u> the ice cube.</i> <i>The matchstick <u>lifted</u> the ice cube.</i> <i>melt &gt; <u>melted</u></i> <i>lift &gt; <u>lifted</u></i>

Learning Intention	Language Focus
To compare and contrast two texts, 'The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time' and 'Black Balloon' (discussion followed by writing task)	Language to describe similarities: <i>Likewise,...</i> <i>Similarly,...</i> <i>Along the same lines,...</i> <i>In the same way,...</i>  _____ and _____ both show _____. <i>Likewise, both are _____.</i> <i>Similarly, _____ and _____ are _____.</i>  Language to describe differences: <i>In contrast...</i> <i>On the other hand...</i> <i>...whereas...</i> <i>Conversely...</i>

Learning Intention:	Language Focus:
To confidently explain the difference between the northern and southern attitudes to race, during the Civil War (class discussion)	Functional language for interrupting politely: <i>Can I add something?</i> <i>Can I jump in for a second?</i> <i>Sorry to interrupt but...</i> <i>(After accidentally interrupting someone) Sorry, go ahead...</i> <i>(After being interrupted) Excuse me, you didn't let me finish...</i>

### 3. Consider the context

Consideration needs to be given to the material being presented to the students to determine if there are cultural or knowledge-based assumptions that may not be accessible to some EAL students.

- Does the material you are providing have idioms, slang, or ideas that would be unfamiliar to the students?
- Does it assume knowledge the students may never have been exposed to?
- Are there graphs or visual data and information that assumes students know how to read and interpret this data?
- Could the material you are presenting be offensive to someone from another culture?

If the material could potentially be offensive or may cause trauma then alternatives might need to be found. When this is not possible (i.e. it is part of VCE coursework or deeply embedded in the curriculum) it may be necessary to let students and/or parents know of the sensitive nature of the material in advance. They may be given the opportunity to withdraw for a short period of class time if absolutely necessary. If you are fortunate enough to have access to Multicultural Education Aides, they may be able to assist with advice for the teacher and support for the students.

### 4. Use the EAL Continuum to inform your teaching practice and differentiate tasks accordingly

As stated earlier, collecting as much information and assessment data about the student as possible enables the teacher to plan for learning activities that engage and challenge all students in the classroom. For EAL students this often means differentiating tasks. This does not necessarily mean providing students with completely different work; but it may mean adapting the task. Below is an example of how a mainstream English teacher may differentiate a task for students at various levels on the EAL developmental continuum.

Students were given the following analytical essay topic: *The relationship with Big Brother is the only one that will survive in George Orwell's 1984. Discuss.*

Suggested activities for low-literacy EAL students (around S1):

- a task that involves matching characters to statements about relationships in the novel
- sentence starters may be given where students are required to use some targeted key vocabulary in their response
- a template of a modelled paragraph can be given where students fill in the gaps or finish sentences.

Suggested activities for students progressing towards S2 on the Developmental Continuum:

- a series of questions, cloze exercises or sentence starters to complete
- use these sentence starters to create an introduction to the essay.

By the time students are progressing towards S3 on the Developmental Continuum, they are almost working at the level of their peers. However, even at this stage, they will require high support and modelling.

5. Think about ways you can scaffold speaking and listening opportunities in the same way that you would scaffold reading and writing activities. Give students as many opportunities to practice speaking as possible.

It is important to consider what opportunities you are providing for all of the modes, speaking, listening, reading and writing.

A survey of 67 EAL students across years 7–12 at a secondary school in Victoria (2018) showed some interesting and quite concerning responses.

*Speaking:* 40 per cent said they spoke English for less than an hour a day, 14 per cent rarely spoke English at all and 10 per cent said they have never spoken English in class.

*Listening:* 41 per cent said they had difficulty understanding what their teachers were saying, with most indicating that their teachers spoke too fast. 27 per cent said they had difficulty understanding videos they were shown in class.

Ways to encourage speaking and listening include:

- prediction activities using pictures, graphs, photographs and headings
- pre-teaching key vocabulary and practicing pronunciation
- providing sentence starters and common phrases/functional language that students can use to form questions and participate in discussions
- 'chunking' listening into more manageable sections
- providing the opportunity to listen to materials more than once, building up from 'gist' listening to listening for meaning
- giving students time to research the topics in their first language to enhance listening and teach concepts
- encouraging students to explain key concepts or knowledge to each other using the relevant subject vocabulary.

## A key takeaway

It is essential that you know your EAL students well by collecting available information, including their assessments on the EAL Developmental Continuum, maintaining ongoing records of their work and providing feedback to them on their learning. Remember, EAL students come from a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences that may impact on their learning. We must always be mindful of this and ensure that students feel safe and supported in the classroom. Having a comprehensive profile enables you to design quality tasks that are accessible and challenging and that addresses the needs of individual students. Having EAL students in your class is an enriching experience. As their teacher, you have the potential to help a student gain a sense of belonging and increase their opportunities for success in their new life.

## Discussion with your mentor

Ongoing conversations with your mentor will enable you to develop confidence in your skills as an inclusive teacher meeting the needs of all students. Consider the following questions as discussion starters:

- What further information do I need about my EAL learners to ensure that I'm catering to their needs?
- Are there any gaps in my knowledge about how to plan for and assess EAL learners? How can I increase my understanding?
- What strategies mentioned in the article could I incorporate into my practice to help me cater for EAL learners?
- How familiar am I with the new EAL continuum? View and discuss this together.

## References

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