The English language learner and second language development: Essential background knowledge for classroom teachers

Sally Robinson-Kooi, an experienced teacher of English as an Additional Language, provides information that can help teachers to understand what students whose first language is not English may or may not be understanding in class.

The multicultural nature of student populations in Australian schools means that most schools will have students who are from non-English speaking backgrounds. Reviews of empirical literature have revealed that little attention has been given to developing pre-service classroom teacher knowledge regarding their understanding of second language (L2) learning or the developmental process of acquiring a new language. This knowledge is important to enable teachers to develop an informed teaching and learning program for English language learners (ELLs) (Geva, Xi, Massey-Garrison, & Mak, 2019; Rosenman & Madelaine, 2012; Villegas, SaizdeLaMora, Martin & Mills, 2018).

The aim of this article is to provide mainstream classroom teachers with a succinct summary of background knowledge associated with second language (L2) development. It provides a foundation for (a) understanding the learning progression of ELLs; (b) identifying those who may also be at risk of developing learning difficulties; and (c) distinguishing between behaviour 'problems' and common student behaviours associated with the challenges of learning another language.

English language learners in Australian schools

In Australia, ELLs are also referred to as English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) students and come from a range of diverse cultural backgrounds. Students may have been born in Australia or overseas; they may have had schooling in their first language (L1) equivalent to their age peer in Australia; they may have had limited or no literacy instruction in their L1; or they may have excellent literacy skills in their L1 and other languages or dialects. In addition, they may come from advantaged or disadvantaged socioeconomic settings. A detailed description of the diverse multicultural backgrounds of these students is provided in *English as an Additional Language or Dialect teacher resource: EAL/D overview and advice* (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2014).

Unlike native English speakers, EALD students are simultaneously learning how to speak, read and write in a new language, English, whilst also studying the academic content. In 2018 The Education Forum conducted a special review of empirical literature on preparing pre-service mainstream teachers to teach ELL students in today's linguistically diverse classrooms (Villegas, SaizdeLaMora, Martin & Mills, 2018). The most important finding that emerged was that to be linguistically responsive to English language learners (ELLs), "mainstream teachers need some knowledge of second language development – knowledge that provides a foundation for understanding ELLs and designing instruction for them" (Villegas et al., 2018, p. 151).

When newly arrived EALD students enter an Australian school, they are usually placed in an age-appropriate year level. However, it is important to note that their learning and life experiences may not compare with their proficiency in English. For example, a student entering Year 8 at an early phase of English language development may already have covered the learning area content in their home country and language for that year level in mathematics, but they may not have sufficient English proficiency to understand the teacher's explanation of it or to demonstrate their previously acquired knowledge.

The EALD learning progression

All teachers benefit from having a deep understanding of the processes involved in acquiring another language, a progression which usually takes approximately seven years from the commencement of instruction with EALD support. Salend and Salinas (2003) emphasized that acquiring and using a new language requires

enormous effort and has a profound effect on a student's behaviour and education outcomes. They categorised the stages of learning an L2 as comprising the following periods: reproduction or silent period; telegraphic or early production period; interlanguage period; expansion period; enrichment period; and independent learning period. The ACARA EALD student learning progression (ACARA, 2011) contains a similar four-phase developmental sequence of English language learning for students in Australian schools. The complete document is available to download from the ACARA website. An outline of the following four phases follows.

Beginning English

The student rarely initiates/participates verbally, may be silent, and uses gestures and/or drawings. Later the student uses two or three words in simple present or past tense utterances. A subcategory, *Limited Literacy Background*, describes behaviours typical of students with little or no experience of literacy in any language.

Emerging English

Students benefit from using L1 with peers and adults. They use short familiar phrases, and intonation and stress to gain meaning. In addition, they increase the use of English subject specific vocabulary, use simple past and present tense sentences, and common irregular verbs.

Developing English

The student's everyday vocabulary expands, and more subject specific vocabulary develops. They may sound quite fluent, may self-correct simple oral and written language and may use L1 to plan a text.

Consolidating English

The student has a sound knowledge of spoken and written English and good oral fluency but continues to need assistance for demanding academic reading and writing tasks. (ACARA, 2011).

It is important to be mindful that the transition between developing and consolidating English (described above) is a critical time because by now the student has developed Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills [BICS] (Cummins, 2000) and will often sound quite fluent. A common misunderstanding is that "once L2 speakers can communicate with their peers, they should be able to learn like their peers" (Geva, et. al., 2019, p. 142). However, if they no longer receive targeted EALD support, they can become what is known as 'entrenched second phase' language learners. This means that without support it can result in a student misunderstanding new concepts, such as unfamiliar subject specific vocabulary or grammatical structures, and hinder the development of their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency [CALP] (Cummins, 2000). Continued EALD support is necessary to sustain their learning of academic content in all subjects as they progress through their schooling.

During this four-phase learning progression it is important to be aware that the effects of cognitive load, social adjustments, and stress often result in behaviours that can be mistaken for a learning difficulty. Lack of oral language is not a learning difficulty, nor does it mean the student has 'no language'. Therefore, gathering as much data as possible before the student commences school is an important step in building a profile of where they are at in their L1 literacy learning.

Gathering background data

I have found that in many schools, apart from recording the main language spoken at home, little background data on EALD students is collected. Also, some schools fail to identify those non-English speaking background students born in Australia as actually being EALD students. Some such students may come to school having limited basic interpersonal communication skills in English and they may be mistakenly identified as having a learning difficulty due to poor oral English. The situation becomes more complex if parents feel they should say they only speak English at home and do not reveal other languages that may be used.

An important step when conducting an interview with the parents/guardians is to build a student profile, which may require the presence of an interpreter. The following guide questions may be used to collect information regarding the student's general progress in school, their L1 literacy development, home languages, cultural values, and any known health issues.

- **Time**: How long has the student been in Australia?
- **Schooling**: Where was it and how long were they in school? What were the outcomes? Have there been any interruptions in schooling? What are the student and family attitudes towards school? What was the previous language of instruction?
- **Home**: What language/s or dialects are spoken at home? What language is used when playing with peers? When did the student start to speak? Are they quiet or outgoing at home?
- **Culture**: What language/s does the student use in informal/formal situations with adults? How does the family interact with the English-speaking mainstream community?
- **Health**: Are they any medical issues, physical or emotional problems? (Geva, Massey-Garrison, & Mak, 2019; Salend & Salinas, 2003).

This information will help to identify any difficulties in the student's L1 development as well as any other underlying factors, such as trauma or lack of formal schooling. The information will also help to establish who needs to be involved in the EALD student's literacy program and whether there may be any underlying learning difficulties.

Common behaviours which may be observed when EALD students are learning English

The following behaviours, some of which may be viewed as 'disruptive', are common and usually associated with the stress involved when learning a new language in a school setting. Students may:

- go through a 'silent period' where there is little or no verbal communication. This can be mistaken for a lack in cognitive processes, apathy, or reticence (Salend & Salinas, 2003)
- experience culture shock, feel anxious or ill
- have a short attention span affecting working memory
- struggle with writing systems, for example, direction of print differences (Geva et. al., 2019)
- display lethargy and isolate from peers
- display disruptive behaviour due to misunderstandings associated with unfamiliar school routines or lack of previous schooling
- exhibit 'inappropriate' responses such as shouting or laughing due to cultural confusions (Salend & Salinas, 2003).

Some factors may point to the EALD student also having a learning difficulty.

For example, if the student is making very limited progress despite receiving explicit and structured EALD teaching this may signify difficulties beyond L2 learning. Students may:

- exhibit continuous difficulties decoding regular letter and sound patterns, phonemic awareness, and phonological skills in L2 (Geva et al., 2019)
- have an oral language deficit in the L1
- older students may have a deficit in reading and spelling in the L1 and L2 (Geva et al., 2019)
- have difficulty in transferring basic skills from one task to another
- exhibit poor organisation skills
- have poor basic mathematical concepts in L1
- demonstrate a continued lack of concentration
- have continued psychological issues (Salend & Salinas, 2003).

Cracking the code: Features of the first and target language

For teachers to foresee and understand the difficulties an ELL is most likely to encounter during their English literacy developmental progress, it is important to be familiar with features of the student's first language (Swan & Smith, 2012). This includes being familiar with the phonological differences between the student's first language and dialects, differences in writing systems, and cultural issues such as degrees of formality during class and student/teacher interactions.

Learning to read English requires students to crack the workings of the English language code. All writing systems are a code for spoken languages, and phonemes absent in the native language need to be explicitly taught alongside concentrated vocabulary instruction (Low & Siegel, 2009). Therefore, having knowledge about the similarities and differences between English and the student's native language is important. To illustrate how the code varies across languages, look at the word *peach* written in English, French, Mandarin and Arabic (see Figure 1). French and English both have writing systems that are alphabetic, that is, they represent individual spoken sounds. The Chinese system is logographic which represents both sounds and meaning, whilst Arabic has an abjad alphabetic writing system which mainly represents consonants with a few vowels.

Despite these variations in orthography, Low and Siegel (2009) found that EALD students from other language backgrounds, including those with very different writing systems to English, are quite able to learn to spell simultaneously with learning to read. Quality instruction, which builds on previously taught concepts and prior knowledge and is explicit, systematic, and sequential, is the key to success.

The acquisition of reading and spelling skills in English requires the mastery of two processes: "a phonological process based on the awareness of sounds in spoken words and an orthographic process based on the visual pattterns of the writing system " (Low and Seigel, 2009, p. 291). In Australia, the most popular EALD teaching methods are usually based on whole-language or constructivist approaches. Unfortunately, many students, including ELLs do not sufficiently develop English language skills this way. Explicit instruction emphasising phonological knowledge and the structure of English is seen as superior. Rowe (2006) summarised findings on effective teaching practices for EALD students with and without learning difficulties and found that, when introducing new skills, constructivist approaches can compound a disadvantage. This means that if there is insufficient explicit teaching followed by repeated practising, the student is unlikely to master the skill.

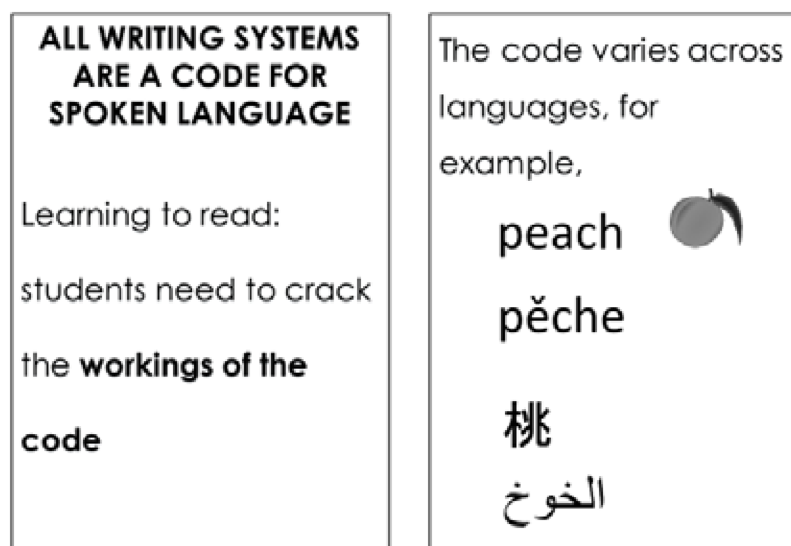

Figure 1. Example of the writing system code: English, French, Mandarin and Arabic

Identification, assessment, and intervention strategies

Rosenman and Madelaine (2012) investigated the identification, assessment and intervention strategies used to predict the best literacy achievement in young EALD students. They found that, whilst the knowledge of identification, assessment, and intervention strategies to identify at risk students who are native speakers of English is extensive, this is not the case for EALD students. These students are often classified as at-risk or as having a disability due to limited oral language proficiency. The literature, however, suggests that limited oral language proficiency is not a good predictor of reading ability and such a classification may be misleading and detrimental to the EALD student.

Other researchers (Cummins, 2000; Low & Siegel, 2009; Geva et al., 2019) found a relationship between literacy achievement in L1 skills that impacts on achievement in L2 literacy development. They suggest that if a student has strong literacy skills in the L1 it is likely to transfer to their L2 learning.

The following research findings from the Rosenman and Madelaine study (2012) can assist teachers to identify students who may either have poor literacy skills due to limited English language proficiency or those who may (also) have a learning difficulty. First, oral language proficiency was found to be an unreliable measure, especially for kindergarten students whose reading was subsequently found to be on a par with native speakers in later grades, regardless of their oral skills in the early years. "Overcoming the

hurdles of learning to read seemed to be attributed to the role that high quality, systematic, and explicit instruction played in arriving at these outcomes" (p. 29). Second, there were some concerns in the use of standardised or adapted published assessments and screening tools regarding their cultural suitability and a student's understanding of the content presented. As many of these assessments were conducted as a single assessment, Rosenman and Madelaine emphasised the importance of using ongoing formative assessments and monitoring to track student progress. Third, they found that teachers need to develop a comprehensive "knowledge about language, literacy, child development and individual differences that may impact on learning to read" (p. 30) and suggest that professional development should include phonological processing skills, oral language, vocabulary and reading comprehension – all of which should be taught explicitly.

Rosenman and Madelaine warn against both an early classification of a student being at risk or conversely adopting a 'wait and see' approach. They recommend that, irrespective of a student's limited oral English, the use of screening comprising "phonological awareness, alphabetic knowledge, print awareness and rapid naming in English" (p. 31) appear to be reliable in detecting students who are likely to benefit from explicit literacy instruction which targets the *specific* area of difficulty, rather than immediate special education intervention.

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These findings are consistent with recent research (Geva et. al., 2019) centred on ELLs in the US, Canada, Australia, and the UK which highlighted reading development of typical and atypical L2 learners. The researchers found that phonological awareness, rapid automatized naming, and working memory assessments can reliably predict later reading fluency and comprehension. ELLs in lower primary school are quite able to acquire reading skills similar to their native speaking peers despite having limited oral skills. By Year 4, however, when texts become more "cognitively demanding" (p. 117) the ELL's oral language skills appear to be the best indicator of reading fluency and comprehension.

Conclusion

It is important that mainstream teachers have a knowledge and understanding of the developmental process involved in acquiring a new language. This knowledge is essential because it provides a foundation to understand the phases involved in the English language learning progression, and to distinguish between 'problem' behaviours and those commonly associated with the challenges of learning another language.

It is also important that teachers are familiar with the linguistic similarities and differences between the student's first language and English as this underpins the development of an informed explicit teaching and learning program. In addition, researchers have warned against classifying early primary school ELL students as having a learning difficulty due to their limited oral English language skills.

Researchers have found an assessment procedure that includes phonological awareness and alphabetic knowledge, followed by ongoing formative assessments that monitor student progress, to be the most effective methods in identifying those ELL students who may also be at risk.

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