

Working with **children**

English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as an Additional Language (EAL)



Supporting teachers, leadership teams and professionals in primary and junior secondary schools

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www.psych4schools.com.au

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Freelance editor: Kerry Nagle

In-house editor: Christine Evely

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Children with English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as an Additional Language (EAL)

Children who are new arrivals into Australia with English as a Second Language (ESL) face a number of challenges at school. For some of these children, the challenges relate to the stress that arises from cultural and language differences. As a result, these children may experience a range of emotions including frustration, loneliness, anger, resentment, anxiety and depression.

It is generally agreed that three years of English instruction is sufficient time for the development of proficient use of English, though older children may take slightly longer.

While children from a non-English-speaking background or who have English as a second language may experience a number of challenges, most will make successful transitions with adequate support.

Impact of English language difficulties

Children with English language difficulties may present with one or more of the following behaviours in the classroom:

- **Being quiet.** Often these children present as quiet in the classroom because of difficulty with correctly comprehending words, spoken English instructions or dialogue, and fear that they may do or say the wrong thing. Most ESL students have a 'silent period' for a number of weeks, or even months, as they make the adjustment from their first language to English.
- **Challenging behaviours.** Children with ESL can become frustrated and exhibit challenging behaviors as a result of their limited ability to express themselves effectively.
- **High levels of anxiety.** High levels of anxiety may be experienced because of fears about being judged negatively by teachers and peers, and apprehension around communication and language competency. These children tend to become anxious when they are asked to read aloud or answer questions in class, when they are completing written tasks, and during tests when instructions are given verbally to the whole class.

Impact of cultural differences

In addition to language differences, children with ESL may have a cultural background of social, educational, and behavioural norms and protocols that are different from Australian norms. These differences can create both social and behavioural issues. Lack of language fluency and knowledge of accepted social behaviours can make it difficult to make friends and interact appropriately with teachers. For example, in some cultures it is considered rude for children to look adults in the eye, or to look anyone of the opposite sex in the eye. Other children may worry about answering questions incorrectly as in their culture it causes the teacher to 'lose face'. Some children may be used to a strict educational setting where teachers are detached and learning tasks are rigid and teacher-directed. In addition, some children with ESL may look physically different to their classmates, and this can accentuate feelings of difference and loneliness.



Impact of possible trauma and interrupted learning

Some of these children may have been exposed to war-related trauma or even torture. It is important that the teacher is aware of any refugee children in their class, or children who have had refugee-like experiences to ensure that appropriate planning and additional assistance can be implemented. See the Psych4Schools ebooklet on '*Children from refugee backgrounds*' as it becomes available on the website.

Be mindful that some children may have experienced significant disruption to their schooling and formal learning opportunities due to war in their country or living in refugee camps.



Strategies to support the child with English as a Second Language (ESL)

- **Attend ESL professional development sessions.** There are many ESL workshops, seminars and professional training sessions to support teachers working with children with ESL. Contact your local school department to enquire about training through professional associations.
- **Develop an inclusive approach.** Help each child in the room to feel welcome and part of a shared community of learning. Focus some units of work and inquiry-based learning projects around the different cultures and backgrounds of class members.
- **Where possible, gain a clear assessment of the child's learning ability,** as lack of English should not be confused with a learning difficulty. If there is a learning difficulty, it will be apparent in both languages. Some parents may be tempted to blame any learning delay on the child's lack of facility with English.

Giving instructions

- **When speaking with or giving instructions** to a child in the beginning stages of learning English, use the following behaviours.
 - **Face the child and speak slowly and clearly.** Ensure you have the child's attention and they can see you as you speak. It can be useful to say the child's name to gain their attention. However it is important not to embarrass the child.
 - **Allow adequate pauses between instructions.** The child may need adequate silent time to internally translate (comprehend) what has been said and to formulate a response in English. The duration of time required will depend on the language abilities of the child.
 - **Break long instructions into simple parts.** Use short sentences and avoid using complex concepts, such as 'before' or 'after'. For example, 'Get your lunch now' rather than 'After you finish your maths and before the bell rings, get your lunch from your bag.'
 - **Use body language, gestures, or pictures.** For example, if telling the child to take out their handwriting or mathematics text book and turn to page 15, physically pick up the book, open it to the page and show this to the class while giving the instruction.
- **After giving instructions, check that the child has understood** and is able to begin the task.
 - **Do not force the child to speak** if they are reluctant or unsure.
 - **Assist vocabulary development by linking key words with pictures.**
 - **Encourage the child to speak** as they become more confident with English.

Use best classroom practice to support learning

- **Use visual supports** such as pictures, gestures and short films when teaching new concepts.
- **Read often to the class.** Use dramatic intonation and gesture when reading to the class. Encourage children to participate in shared-book activities, provide smaller versions of big books for children to take home and encourage children to predict unknown words in texts using syntactical, semantic and grapho-phonetic cues.



- **List or highlight key words and instructions** for tasks or homework on the whiteboard or a handout.
- **Provide sufficient scaffolding and support** to enable the child to begin and complete tasks.
- **Draw on previous knowledge and experiences.** Use key words and concepts that the child is familiar with to reduce the mental load when teaching new concepts. It can be helpful to teach key words. Do not assume the child's knowledge is limited.
- **Teach some difficult concepts or key numeracy and literacy concepts in both languages.** Work with the child's parents or another child or adult who speaks their language to teach difficult or key concepts in the first language, alongside teaching them in English. Using two languages can help to clarify the new concept being learnt.
- **Facilitate daily oral language opportunities,** preferably with visual supports, as a whole class or in small groups with a teacher's aide/assistant, or with older students. As little as 15 minutes of daily intensive oral language work can make a significant difference in supporting and assisting the child. Focus on meaningful and relevant oral language activities. Provide opportunities for students to practice correct pronunciation of English words without attempting to change the child's accent.
- **Display meaningful and relevant environmental print.** The use of labels, instructions, word lists and sentences can provide reference points for spelling commonly used words.
- **Provide meaningful and authentic activities.** For example, make class books based on excursions and camps, display group projects presenting Country Fire Authority bushfire advice for staying safe in summer periods.
- **Provide phonics instruction around everyday meaningful objects** to build word attack skills. Many English words are reasonably phonetically regular. Use phonic and other word attack skills to build a sight vocabulary around everyday words (and objects). Knowing that some 50 per cent of words can be sounded out can be a reassuring way of gaining familiarity with English as a written language.
- **Develop learning routines with clear outcomes** based on interest and repetition to reduce frustration.
- **Broaden vocabulary through direct experience.** The Language Experience Approach is based on the premise that 'what I see I can talk about. What I talk about I can draw and write about. And what I can draw and write about I can read.' Facilitate direct experiences about which the child can talk, draw, write and read.
- **Modify homework and classroom work.** For the child with limited English, it can be helpful to assign work with a reduced language demand. For example, assigning number and symbol numeracy work rather than word-based mathematical sentences, or questions using simple language and pictures. This may also help the child's parents to assist their child and connect with the child's learning.

Develop social skills and increase self-efficacy

- **Don't assume the child knows social rules and protocols.** It is unlikely that a child is being deliberately rude or breaking rules. Remember that the child may come from a cultural background with different social norms and expectations—for example, some communities do not expect young children to say 'please' or 'thank you' when requesting something. In some



cultures, it is not considered rude for children to speak over each other or to interrupt when someone else is speaking. Talk to the child individually and explicitly state what is expected at school and why. Ask the child about their cultural rules and how these are similar to or different from here. Use multicultural websites and talk to the child's family to gain knowledge about the child's cultural norms.

- **Use social skills stories** to help the child to develop skills for specific contexts. The child can often have difficulty generalising what they have learnt in one setting, such as in the classroom, to other situations, such as the playground. Social stories are stories that teach children new social skills and assist them to understand the perspective and motivations of other people in particular situations. These stories can be created to suit the specific needs of the child. For more information about social stories see <http://www.thegraycenter.org/>.
- **Provide the child with conversation starters** to assist with social interactions. Useful conversation starters include:
 - asking to join in a game: 'The game looks fun. Can I join in please?'
 - asking another child about their interests: 'What's your favourite TV show?'
 - asking to share or borrow another child's belongings: 'I forgot my scissors. May I use yours when you have finished please?'
- **Worksheets, cartoons or other visuals** can be used to teach the child how to initiate conversations appropriately, or to continue a conversation once it has begun. Social communication and social skills workbooks available from special education shops.
- **Organise a 'buddy' for the child.** Choose a few responsible children to be buddies. Designate one or two buddies for different activities. For example, one or two buddies for classroom work, another for lunchtime, and another for specialist programs or electives. Explain the role of a 'buddy' to the children, emphasizing their roles and responsibilities. For example 'You are going to be responsible for helping Theo with maths. You will help him by making sure he knows what we are working on, or finding the right page in the text book.' If possible find a buddy who speaks the same language as the child.
- **Provide 'down time' for the child.** Find out what the child likes doing and allow them to engage in this activity, especially following intensive spoken English language sessions. For example, let the child draw or work on the computer following the literacy block and circle time if you notice they are looking tired or overwhelmed.
- **Find another person at the school who speaks the same language as the child** if possible. This may be a teacher, classmate or child in another grade, or an appropriate member of the wider school community who can be a regular contact person for the child. Where possible, connect the child's family with another school family from the same cultural background. Encourage an emphasis on balanced use of English language, rather than the child speaking only in their first language.
- **Develop cultural ambassadors at school.** Appoint the oldest students in the school from different cultures as ambassadors and welcoming people.
- **Enrol the child in additional school programs.** You will need parent permission. For example, the child might attend the 'Early Birds Reading Program' before school once a week, an oral language program during class time one afternoon a week or school choir or sports group after school.



Resources

- **Aussie Educator** a total education page for Australia. Extensive range of ESL materials and resources from all Australian States and Territories.
<http://www.aussieeducator.org.au/education/specificareas/esl.html>
- **Where's English?** (Computer software) 2001, Department Education and Early Childhood Development. There is a range of suitable primary ESL materials on this following site.
<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/esl/resources/pubprimesl.htm>

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