



AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF TESOL ASSOCIATIONS

Submission

Productivity Commission

Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care

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Executive Summary

The Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) is committed to strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for all young children whose caregivers speak languages other than English, and who are consequently learning English in addition to their home and family languages. These children are located in urban, regional, rural and remote communities across Australia. They come from linguistically, culturally and socio-economically diverse communities, and include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and migrant and refugee families.

This submission advances three proposals that will improve the quality and effectiveness of ECEC in serving the children and families for whom we specifically advocate but, just as importantly, the whole Australian society and economy.

First, high quality, strength based ECEC requires policy guidance that supports:

- ECEC providers and teachers to work with and meet the needs of children and families/carers who are speakers of language other than English, including First Nations children and their families/carers
- children to learn English as an Additional Language and/or Dialect (EAL/D) in ECEC settings, while actively maintaining and developing their first language as the base for learning English and to ensure continued growth in their social and cognitive skills.

Second, new data sets are required that:

- describe the different languages used in children's homes, and how they are maintained and developed, so as to understand and build from the knowledge that multilingual children bring to ECEC settings
- underpin and support the development of EAL/D curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and resources and approaches that are in line with and elaborate on the EYLF 2.0 (AGDE, 2022) framework.

Third, developing a workforce equipped to meet the needs of children who speak languages other than English and who are learning English as their additional language or dialect requires:

- upskilling EC educators, through accredited courses and ongoing professional learning, that provide the essential knowledge and skills for sound evidence based EAL/D approaches
- creating multiple pathways to gain early childhood education qualifications would harness the skills of the workforce with a language background other than English in ECEC.

1 Introduction

The Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care.

The Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) is the peak body representing State and Territory associations of educators dedicated to furthering the learning of English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D). Association members include EAL/D teachers, consultants, curriculum developers, teacher educators, other academics and researchers in school and preschool, tertiary, adult migrant, vocational education and training (VET) and community education settings. ACTA is committed to strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for all young children whose caregivers speak languages other than English and who are consequently learning English in addition to their home and family languages.

ACTA advocates for the rights of children and families to maintain their languages and to be supported in learning English, in addition to their other languages, not as a replacement for them. We support the maintenance of Australia's rich "language wealth" in the speakers of First Nations and overseas languages, young and old. In particular, ACTA acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and acknowledges the role of early childhood education in recognising and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in advancing reconciliation. The attached Early Childhood Education Principles document presents ACTA's proposals for improving home language development and EAL/D provision in the Australian early childhood sector catering for children from birth to five years of age.

ECEC programs for children are located in urban, regional, rural and remote communities across Australia. Children who participate in ECEC are thus from linguistically, culturally and socio-economically diverse communities, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, migrant and refugee groups, and communities from varying socio-economic backgrounds. EAL/D learners are represented in all of these groupings and bring with them a variety of cultures, language backgrounds, experiences, and levels of EAL/D proficiency.

ACTA members believe that Australia should harness our shared linguistic diversity and multilingual resources, encouraging all children to learn and use home and community languages, while at the same time adding to their English communication skills. In so doing, the Commonwealth Government would advance its commitment to the current lead policy in Indigenous affairs, the Closing the Gap Agreement, by supporting First Nations children who are speakers of diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages to thrive in their early years and beyond.

An inclusive and strengths-based strategy would enable ECEC settings to reflect and nurture children's diversity. It is about every child accessing, participating meaningfully in, and experiencing positive outcomes from ECEC programs. Inclusion is important as it nurtures children's sense of identity, and their confidence in themselves as effective learners, as they take their first steps into education contexts outside their family/caregivers. Intentionally catering for diversity enhances children's experiences in high quality ECEC.

The submission will engage with four key areas:

- 1 Affordability of, and access to, quality ECEC services that meet the needs of families and children.
- 2 Developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children, including preparation for school.
- 3 Outcomes for children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, First Nations children and families, and children and families experiencing disability.
- 4 ECEC sector workforce requirements and the capacity to meet these requirements within current Commonwealth, state and territory initiatives.

2 Affordability of, and access to, high quality ECEC services that meet the needs of families and children

More needs to be done to ensure that every child has access to high quality ECEC, regardless of their geographical location or household income, and linguistic and cultural background. Supporting participation in high-quality ECEC is associated with positive transitions to school, in turn contributing to improved outcomes for learners, families, communities and society.

ACTA, in its ECE Principles (ACTA, 2023), expands on Early Childhood Australia's (ECA) four core recommendations for operating ECE services, focusing on all EAL/D children, including Indigenous EAL/D learners.¹ ACTA's four core considerations are:

- **Access:** Many families/carers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds with EAL/D learners, including Indigenous EAL/D learners, face accessibility issues, including those living in remote, rural and regional areas as well as those in capital cities.
- **Affordability:** Many families/carers from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds with children who are EAL/D learners cannot afford to access ECE. This includes newly arrived refugee families/carers who receive limited access to free childcare.
- **Inclusion and Reducing Vulnerability:** Along with ECA, ACTA believes there needs to be substantial investment in inclusion support and capacity building to respond to increasing demand and pressures on EC educators and teachers. This is a critical issue for young children and their families/carers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds with EAL/D learners, including Indigenous EAL/D learners.
- **Stability:** A substantial number of workforce initiatives exist, including recently released training subsidies for qualifications and professional learning. These need to be applied to cater for the needs of EAL/D children and their families/carers, including Indigenous EAL/D learners. This training could be made available to Early Childhood employers and trainees (See section 4 below re ECEC sector workforce requirements).

¹ <https://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au>

Improving families' access to quality ECEC entails understanding and providing for children's and families' language repertoires – the languages they are already learning and using. To achieve this, data is urgently needed on the home languages (including Indigenous languages) used in communities, and parents' levels of literacy and education in these languages as well as in English. Accessible information about local ECEC services, the value of participation in formal ECEC for children's transition to school and ECEC-related government and community initiatives should be available in all key languages within a community alongside free translation and interpreting services.

ECEC policy should include guidance for working with children and families with EAL/D. Specifically, evidence-based guidelines are needed for ECEC services to help children learn and maintain their home languages alongside English. It is also important to recognise, build on and celebrate multilingualism as a resource of the ECEC workforce (see section 4 on the workforce below). Educators who speak languages other than English could be trained and incentivised to support children who share these home languages, as well as children who only speak English to learn other languages spoken in their communities. Indigenous and migrant families and language communities welcome and actively seek out ECEC services that respect their languages and cultures and recognise and build on their children's language strengths (McLeod et al., 2014; Verdon et al., 2014). Valuing languages from an early age fosters social inclusion, celebrates linguistic diversity and assists with maintaining Australia's language riches, which are also important for education and the economy. A positive orientation to language learning is a plus: the skills are transferable to other languages and learning areas.

ECEC services should be required and supported to:

- collect information about the language background of and languages spoken by children, families and staff
- explain their approach to supporting children's and families' languages and children's learning of English as an additional language or dialect
- provide practical handover material to parents/schools to assist with children's ongoing language support.

Achieving this requires that solid policy guidance be given. An example is the work of *English Language Learning for Indigenous Children* (ELLIC) in the area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC.

When developing accessible programs, we need to meet the needs of EAL/D families in a transparent and professionally relevant manner, so that these multilingual children learn English while maintaining strong development in their first language, ensuring continued growth in their social and cognitive skills.

3 Developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children, including preparation for school

As a key Learning Outcome within the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia V2.0 (AGDE, 2022), communication is crucial to services providing early education and care to young children across the country. ACTA finds that in many Early Childhood policy

documents ‘language/s’ tend to be subsumed under the term ‘culture’. We strongly believe that language needs to be made visible in developing an Early Years Strategy. While ‘culture’ includes knowledges, beliefs and practices, ‘language/s’ are both distinct and fundamental for learning and communication between generations and both within and across diverse communities.

It is important that the educational developmental outcomes for Australian children are construed inclusively and supportively, from birth through to preparation for and during the years of school. For many children and their families, ECEC offers the first experience of a learning environment outside the home/family circles. This experience should be a positive one, orienting children and their family to future education. Advice is urgently needed for supporting learning English as an Additional Language in ECEC, since most schooling in Australia is delivered through the medium of English.

ECEC centres should be able to provide:

- useful language background information
- English proficiency observations to assist transition into school
- accurate on-enrolment language information to ensure undisrupted English language learning and first language support.

In a context where there is very little evidence regarding young children’s language/s development, such ECEC procedures could contribute to building a data set about development early in a child’s life. This data would provide evidence of the language backgrounds and abilities of children in ECEC settings in Australia.

4 Outcomes for children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, First Nations children and families, and children and families experiencing disability

Language considerations can play a crucial role in encouraging the participation of many vulnerable and /or disadvantaged groups and promoting successful outcomes for children.

Language data, guidance and policy is sorely lacking in the ECEC sector. Addressing this gap is crucial to the government’s ability to improve and support outcomes for children who are speakers of languages other than English. Estimates are that children in this group (including First Nations children) may amount to 25% of the total ECEC population. In terms of ‘what works and for whom’, the AEDC, for example, acknowledges that it does not adequately portray the skills and abilities of children with limited English-as-a-second-language proficiency and whose first language and literacy skills have not been accounted for (AEDC 2015). Data about EAL/D children’s results in a range of government assessment measures need to be interpreted with caution, including the results of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC).

The importance of the Commonwealth government in supporting processes and studies to measure outcomes for Indigenous children cannot be overstated. We note that the formation of a new Preschool Outcomes Measure Ministerial Expert Advisory Group to address these issues and are pleased that it includes ACTA representation.

Policy support is needed to address the lack of evidence about the types of languages learning that occurs in many children's homes, and to understand the knowledge that EAL/D children have. In remote Indigenous contexts, the children's multilingual strengths and paths of development are only beginning to be investigated. This has serious implications for early childhood education because educators do not have a solid understanding about children's home languages contexts, and the languages skills they bring to early childhood settings. They are therefore unable to identify and meet the children's learning needs. This needs to be remedied by policy supporting empirical research.

Policy needs to prioritise systematic collection of new data sets to:

- improve knowledge about children's language backgrounds (see Appendix A for a way to collect data)
- differentiate the early stages of first language development in home languages from EAL/D learning.

Policy also needs to build on the new data and other evidence based EAL/D approaches to:

- develop resources, tools and training for an early childhood EAL/D approach to assessment for learning, which incorporates assessing children's home language abilities in the relevant settings (cf. McLeod et al., 2016)
- develop curriculum, pedagogy and assessment materials that align with and elaborate on the EYLF 2.0 (AGDE, 2022) framework for EAL/D learners.

ACTA contends that high quality ECEC would lead to improving and/or supporting strong outcomes for children and families who are speakers of languages other than English and who are experiencing vulnerability/disadvantage.

An ECEC setting that supports English language needs to:

- provide initial English language learning experiences for children of language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE)
- foster additive multilingualism, that is, positive orientations to speaking home languages and to learning English
- encourage smooth transition to school for children from LBOTE through supportive, contextualised learning opportunities (e.g. routines, activity stations)
- assemble a language profile for the transition into school.

An ECEC setting that supports children and families who are speakers of other languages provides services in these languages (for example, with targeted recruitment of staff who share the key languages other than English spoken in a given community, in both remote and urban settings; planned in-language sessions). This will:

- build children's and families' confidence in education settings outside the family,
- acknowledge language diversity, including maintenance of home languages, as a valuable personal, community and national resource, and

- support children's identities as important for well-being and future resilience and a positive transition into school.

First Nations peoples across Australia value the cultural, country and community connections provided by their traditional languages, with many now reviving their languages while some are still spoken strongly by children in some remote areas. ECEC is well-placed to establish relationships with local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities to support their aspirations for their language and offer young children this learning opportunity.

Given the gaps in the data and current deficit-oriented assumptions about languages other than English, ACTA suggests that the Productivity Commission might consider adopting strength-based language such as ‘inclusion’ and ‘equity’ in preference to such terms as ‘vulnerability’ and ‘disadvantage’.

5 ECEC sector workforce requirements and the capacity to meet these requirements within current Commonwealth, state and territory initiatives.

Professional Learning is extremely limited for working with children who have English as an additional language and/or dialect. This can lead to a predominance of teaching through English-only ECEC programs. These programs can be difficult to access for all EAL/D learners, especially for Indigenous language speaking children living in communities where the Indigenous first language is the *lingua franca* or the local way of speaking across several communities.

ACTA argues that supporting and providing opportunities for upgrading qualifications and creating opportunities for ongoing professional learning for the ECEC workforce, including those who use languages other than English, deserves serious consideration. Early childhood educators are from a diversity of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Data is required about the cultural, social and linguistic capital that this diverse workforce brings to the sector, to make sure it is developed further and used. It is important that governments assist this diverse workforce to engage with professional learning that supports and encourages using their language/s as a resource, so they in turn can support and encourage children to use their home language/s. The use of multiple languages in the early childhood setting helps develop the language ecology of the ECEC community and normalises bi/multilingualism.

Research shows that young children develop through language/s and cultural practices they learn within their families. Starting ‘school’ earlier through the majority language English may interrupt this process unless ECEC contexts engage with the linguistic and cultural diversity of the children. Employment of speakers of children’s languages in support roles can address the intergenerational interruption of this process.

Although relevant to all language backgrounds other than English communities, First Nations people need to be given equal opportunities to use their languages and have their languages recognised as valuable assets from which young children learn. An issue is that ECEC in remote communities, in past times, was the domain of local staff; and now accreditation requirements serve as a barrier for people for whom English proficiency or English literacy is not equivalent to speakers who have English as their first language.

Upskilling EC educators with essential knowledge and skills for a sound evidence based EAL/D approach is required. Currently, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) needs to be included in accreditation requirements, and educators' professional learning in TESOL needs strengthening. The creation of multiple pathways to gain early childhood education qualifications would harness the skills of the workforce with a language background other than English in ECEC. Example pathways include language certification with introductory ECEC TAFE courses, and on-the-job training and mentoring to achieve competencies and practicum support in rural and remote communities.

References

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Appendix A: Practical Solutions to the Data Gap on Children’s Language Backgrounds

From a language/s perspective, the current ECE strategy needs strengthening. Data in the ECE sector has generally overlooked children’s and family/caregiver language backgrounds. These data could provide guidance for best practice for very young EAL/D learners in ECE settings.

**FIGURE 1:
RECOGNISING CHILDREN’S LANGUAGES BACKGROUNDS –
SAMPLE RECOMMENDED DATA COLLECTION TOOL²**

Language name (or description, e.g. where it is spoken, with whom)	Spoken as a mother tongue Yes/No?	Learned as an additional language		Used how often?
		<i>Can say almost anything</i>	<i>Know a few words</i>	
<i>Standard Australian English</i>				

FOR FIRST NATIONS IDENTIFYING CHILDREN

<i>Traditional Indigenous Languages</i> Name?				
<i>New Indigenous contact Languages</i> Name?				
<i>Indigenised English</i> Name?				

FOR CHILDREN WITH OVERSEAS LANGUAGE BACKGROUNDS

<i>Language</i>				
<i>Language</i>				
<i>Language</i>				

² Adapted from Angelo et al (2022: 84) Learning (in) indigenous languages: Common ground, diverse pathways. OECD Education Working Papers, No. 278. <https://doi.org/10.1787/e80ad1d4-en>

**FIGURE 2:
RECOGNITION AND CATERING FOR A CHILD'S LANGUAGES³**

Child's languages	How is each language recognised and catered for?
<p><i>Which language(s) does the child speak as a mother tongue/first language?</i> Name(s)?</p>	
<p><i>Which language(s) does the child connect with culturally? (e.g. language of place, of heritage)</i> Name(s)?</p>	
<p><i>Which language(s) is the child learning as additional/second languages?</i> Name(s)?</p>	

³ Adapted from Angelo et al (2022: 85) Learning (in) indigenous languages: Common ground, diverse pathways. OECD Education Working Papers, No. 278. <https://doi.org/10.1787/e80ad1d4-en>