



SYNTHETIC PHONICS AND EAL/D LEARNERS

Key Points from the ACTA Position Paper

This fact sheet summarises the key findings and recommendations of the Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) Position Paper on synthetic phonics and learners of English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D).

It is intended to support policy makers, consultants, school principals, teachers and other educators in considering the issues raised by synthetic phonics approaches for speakers of languages other than English who are learning to read English.

1. WHO ARE EAL/D LEARNERS?

EAL/D learners are students for whom English is an additional language or dialect – their second, third, or fourth language. They include:

- First Nations students who speak first/traditional, new languages and/or possibly some Aboriginal varieties of English¹
- newly arrived migrants and refugees from non-English speaking backgrounds
- students born in Australia whose home language is not English
- International students with strong literacy in another language but limited spoken English.

By “EAL/D learner”, we mean a person learning English from the starting point of a first or home language or language variety (L1) with linguistic systems that are recognisably and substantively different in phonology, syntax and semantics.

ACTA estimates there are approximately three-quarters of a million EAL/D learners in Australian schools – a figure that has grown since 2021. EAL/D learners are not a marginal group: diversity is the norm in contemporary Australian classrooms. However, policy documents and resources, such as the 2025-2034 *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement* and the Literacy Hub, continue to describe these learners as “vulnerable,” “disadvantaged” or “struggling”, thereby entrenching structural inequities and inappropriate provision.

EAL/D learners vary greatly in their previous schooling, their literacy in their first language (L1), and their spoken English proficiency. Some have age-equivalent schooling and strong literacy in another language; others may have had very limited access to formal education.

¹ Definitions and terms are based on: Angelo, D., O'Shannessy, C., Simpson, J., Kral, I., Smith, H., & Browne, E. (2019). Well-Being & Indigenous Language Ecologies (WILE): A Strengths-Based Approach. Literature Review for the National Indigenous Languages Report. The Australian National University. <http://hdl.handle.net/1885/186414>; Tudor-Smith, G., Williams, P., & Meakins, F. (2024). Bina: First Nations languages, old and new. La Trobe University Press. Also in Queensland Government (no date). Aboriginal languages and Torres Strait Islander languages statement. <https://education.qld.gov.au/student/Documents/aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-languages-statement.pdf>

ACTA identifies three broad learner profiles that require different approaches:

Learner profile	Approach to Teaching Reading English
1. Literate in L1 or another language	Build on existing literacy knowledge. Focus on developing oral English, particularly vocabulary, and mapping English phonics onto an already-established understanding of how writing works. Older learners may have strong academic content knowledge and literacy in another language.
2. Minimal or no prior literacy	Requires simultaneous development of oral English and foundational literacy concepts. Need sustained specialist support.
3. Older learners (i.e. entering in Year 3 to senior secondary).	Can belong to Group 1 or Group 2. Phonics instruction must be age-appropriate in content and material and not conflate English language development with a reading deficit. An older EAL/D learner beginning to read English is not the same as a young English-speaking child at the same "reading level" — age, cognitive maturity, English proficiency, previous schooling and existing literacy are separate variables

Key Point: A student's age, first language, schooling history and English proficiency level must be taken as essential starting points for teaching reading in English.

2. WHAT IS SYNTHETIC PHONICS?

Synthetic phonics (also called systematic synthetic phonics, or SSP) teaches learners to convert graphemes (written letters or letter clusters) into phonemes (sounds) and to blend these sounds to produce words. Teaching moves from the smallest units – individual letters and sounds – towards full words. Programs typically prescribe a sequence, which is often scripted, and before introducing new content, dictate “mastery” of learning. The approach was initially designed for young English-speaking children learning literacy at the beginning of formal schooling.

ACTA endorses the following principles that underpin synthetic phonics:

- English sound-symbol relationships should be explicitly taught
- these relationships should be taught systematically and **extensively** practised in meaningful contexts
- teaching should progress from simpler to more complex patterns.

However, ACTA has identified several practices in synthetic phonics approaches that are not well suited to EAL/D learners, as outlined in sections 3 – 9 below.

The separation of “decoding” from accessing and understanding meaning

In synthetic phonics, “decoding” means applying grapheme-phoneme correspondences to identify or say a word, often by sounding out and blending. The danger here is that understanding and making meaning is seen as separate or deferrable.

In everyday English, to decode something means **to discover or gain its meaning**. ACTA uses “decoding” in this broader sense. Decoding is accessing and understanding meaning from written words and texts through the coordinated use of orthographic, phonological, morphological, grammatical and semantic knowledge.

ACTA sees understanding and making meaning(s) as integral to all aspects of learning to read, including learning sound-symbol relationships.

ACTA endorses the teaching of sound-symbol correspondences in learning to read English, among the many strategies that should be taught and learned. We do not endorse the teaching of “decoding” – *however defined* or interpreted – independently from understanding and making meaning. If a learner does not understand what they sound out or say as a sequence of words, they are producing sounds. They are not reading. The focus on accurate production of grapheme-phoneme correspondences that is divorced from meaning and context is what we call “barking at print”.

3. DIFFERENT SOUND SYSTEMS: A CRUCIAL STARTING POINT

Every language has its own sound system (phonology). By the age of five, most children have fully internalised the phonological system of their first language. In reading English aloud, EAL/D learners are likely to deploy the L1 system until their listening and speaking in English is well established. So when EAL/D learners struggle to produce (and sometimes hear) certain English sounds, this may well not indicate a reading difficulty or cognitive deficit – it reflects systematic differences between languages.

What this means in practice

EAL/D learners can often correctly recognise and comprehend the meaning of a written word before they can produce it with English pronunciation. A learner who mispronounces a word may well be reading it accurately.

Reading *aloud* in English is an unreliable and invalid test of an EAL/D learner's ability to decode an English word. When assessing how an EAL/D learner says a word, consider their phase of English language development to determine whether the miscue is a pronunciation challenge before deciding that it may be a decoding error. EAL/D learners:

- may not yet have learned to pronounce English phonemes that do not exist in L1 (e.g. 'th' sounds or /w/)
- may not yet have learned to make distinctions between certain English phonemes that are absent in the L1 (e.g. /l/ vs /r/ does not exist in Japanese; /b/ vs /v/ does not exist in Arabic)
- may use phonotactic rules about which sounds can or cannot appear at the start, middle or end of words (e.g. Spanish does not permit words beginning with /s/ followed by a consonant cluster, so 'street' may be pronounced 'estreet')
- may not use the English allophonic rules that require variations to the same phoneme in different positions in a word (e.g. /p/ /t/ and /k/ must be accompanied by a little puff of air when in first position in a word but not in other positions; English vowels must be lengthened before voiced consonants). If the variation is absent, English speakers may "hear" a different phoneme (e.g. "pin" can be heard as "bin"; "bad" can be heard as "bat").

Key Point: When an EAL/D learner mispronounces an English word, check first whether the sound exists in their first language – this is a pronunciation challenge, not a decoding error. It is important to provide low-stakes opportunities to check whether or not the learner understands the word.

4. THE CENTRAL ROLE OF ORAL ENGLISH AND VOCABULARY

Children learning to read in their first language begin school already knowing thousands of words and having extensive control of the sound system and grammar of that language. Their task is essentially to map familiar spoken words onto written symbols.

EAL/D learners face a fundamentally different task: they are simultaneously learning spoken English and learning to read it. This has important consequences for phonics instruction:

- Oral English (listening and speaking) and vocabulary development must be taught explicitly, systematically and concurrently with phonics – oral English cannot be assumed to be established as it is with mother tongue English speakers.
- Instruction and decoding practice must be based on words that EAL/D learners know and understand.
- EAL/D learners require multiple exposures to new English words – oral and written; learning these words requires support from visuals, gestures, realia and, most importantly, use in meaningful contexts.
- Reading aloud to learners while they follow the text is a valuable strategy at all ages and proficiency levels.
- Learners need to understand, from the outset, that English vowels in unstressed syllables are often reduced to a neutral 'schwa' sound (/ə/); learning this rule is based on building their oral English and reading or hearing words in meaningful contexts; it cannot be learned by sounding out letters.

5. THE ROLE OF MEANING IN LEARNING TO READ

Reading is gaining meaning from written language. ACTA's position is that comprehension should be integral to learning to read English from the very beginning – not treated as a later step that follows once sound-symbol relationships skills are 'secure'.

As reading develops, learners establish connections between known and new words and their meanings, spelling, and pronunciation. Words are stored in memory through these interconnected representations rather

than through their visual form alone. A meaning must become associated with a word for it to be fully established in the mental lexicon, although the meaning does not necessarily have to be known beforehand: encountering a written word while learning it can help establish both its pronunciation and its meaning. With exposure and practice, reading words becomes increasingly automatic as spelling, pronunciation and meaning become securely connected.

Some synthetic phonics approaches recommend removing meaning-based supports (such as pictures, context and grammar) from early reading tasks, so that learners (supposedly) must rely solely on sounding out letters. This approach is inappropriate for EAL/D learners.

- Using context to work out what an unfamiliar word means is an essential reading skill. For EAL/D learners, who meet many words they do not yet know, it is one of the main ways vocabulary grows through reading, once learners know nearly all the surrounding words. Context also lets any reader check that a word they have decoded makes sense. Disallowing these strategies in reading instruction disadvantages EAL/D learners who are relying on their growing knowledge of English to identify written words. ACTA does not endorse an interpretation of “decoding” that forbids learners from using context and meaning.
- The priority for EAL/D learners is to develop their vocabulary as quickly and extensively as possible. Research is clear that new words are best learned in meaning-rich contexts with multiple exposures across different formats of texts seen, heard and read.
- Using context should be explicitly practised to support gaining and cementing phonics knowledge, not withheld.

Key Point: ACTA endorses an integrated approach that teaches phoneme-grapheme relationships within contexts that are simultaneously building vocabulary, grammar and discourse knowledge, and, above all, that are meaningful to learners and grounded in concrete experiences.

6. USING PSEUDO-WORDS IS NOT APPROPRIATE FOR EAL/D LEARNERS

The pronunciation of words like “wind” or “tear” rely on prior knowledge of the word and/or a meaningful context to indicate pronunciation. So most synthetic phonics programs use pseudo-words (nonsense words such as 'blit', 'mep', 'snop') to assess, and sometimes teach, decoding in isolation from word knowledge. Using pseudo-words to assess native English speakers’ decoding skills supposedly checks their ability to match graphemes to phonemes independently of vocabulary knowledge.

For EAL/D learners, using pseudo-words for assessment and/or teaching is inappropriate because:

- learners are still building their English vocabulary; they cannot yet reliably distinguish a nonsense word from an unfamiliar real word; using nonsense words for instruction imposes an unnecessary and wasteful cognitive load; using nonsense words for assessment is invalid and unreliable because it is impossible to know what the data shows.
- because English grapheme-phoneme relationships are problematic, there is likely to be more than one plausible way of saying a nonsense word. So assessments with only one correct answer are invalid and unreliable. Decoding rules that are taught for pseudo-words may not actually apply to real English words. Teaching through nonsense words can mislead learners about the numerous English words that cannot be pronounced by sounding out phonemes or phoneme “blends”.
- for learners with no prior print literacy, learning to read through the introduction of nonsense words is especially counterproductive. These learners need to learn how print represents meaning – nonsense words contradict this fundamental concept.

Key Point: ACTA does not endorse the use of pseudo-words in teaching or assessing EAL/D learners.

7. DECODABLE TEXTS: QUESTIONABLE VALUE FOR EAL/D LEARNERS

Decodable readers are texts constructed entirely from previously taught phonics patterns. They are widely used in synthetic phonics programs to give learners practice in applying what they have learned. Decodable texts may have value for young native English speakers who can recognise the constrained language as deliberate and may be amused by the content.

For EAL/D learners, a text can be phonically decodable but linguistically and/or culturally inaccessible because of unfamiliar or alien content, assumed background knowledge and content regarding, for example, urban settings and/or family and community life.

Developing phonics skills using only or mostly decodable texts is not the most effective support for EAL/D learners.

- Decodable texts often contain unusual or unnatural English and childish content (e.g. Pat taps a hat; Pat bats a pan).
- EAL/D learners need maximal exposure to authentic English as appropriate to their age and cultural and community context, including when practising decoding.
- The vocabulary in decodable texts is driven by phonics sequences, not by frequency or usefulness to learners. Practising decoding with them has limited if any value, and does nothing to extend the learner's English.
- Decodable texts are inappropriate for older learners, because their content is generally childish and alienating.
- Phonic skills can and should be practised through enjoyable and engaging strategies that extend the learner's exposure to English in different contexts and genres, for example, through songs, games, drama techniques (all easily locatable online) and following a text read aloud by a competent reader or teacher.

Key Point: EAL/D learners need to practise decoding with written and spoken texts that are age-appropriate, matched to their overall proficiency in L1 and English, and that provide authentic, meaningful and enjoyable English that supports literacy development, motivation and interest.

8. TAKING ACCOUNT OF AGE AND PRIOR SCHOOLING

Synthetic phonics programs are designed primarily for young children beginning formal schooling in English. They generally do not account for the fact that EAL/D learners may enter Australian schools at any age, with widely varying schooling histories. Resources differentiate learners according to reading skill, not schooling history or L1 proficiency. Resources for older learners do not distinguish between those requiring literacy remediation, those with peer-equivalent schooling and are acquiring English, and those also developing familiarity with formal schooling and print practices.

Key Point: Currently available literacy learning resources are generally inappropriate for older EAL/D learners, especially those with limited previous schooling and L1 literacy. The Literacy Hub should prioritise development of new resources and collation of existing materials for these learners.

9. THE YEAR 1 PHONICS CHECK AND EAL/D LEARNERS

Year 1 Phonics Checks, now adopted across Australian jurisdictions, require students to read aloud a list of 40 real and pseudo-words. Results below a given threshold are used to identify students as 'struggling readers'.²

ACTA has significant concerns about the validity of these Checks for EAL/D learners. The core issue is that the Check methodology conflates *saying* a word with *reading* a word. A learner may read and understand a word accurately, i.e. derive the correct meaning from the printed word, while pronouncing it using first-language phonological patterns. Learning English pronunciation is a separate learning challenge from learning to decode English words.

Specifically:

- Pronunciation differences that reflect first-language phonological patterns will be recorded as decoding errors, even when they are not.

² <https://www.literacyhub.edu.au/plan-teach-and-assess/year-1-phonics-check/>

- Consonant substitutions, vowel differences, dropped final consonants and reduced consonant clusters are liable to be assessed as evidence of decoding problems, when, in fact, they are all systematic, predictable features of EAL/D learners' spoken English.
- The use of pseudo-words achieves no useful diagnostic information: nonsense words and unfamiliar real English words are indistinguishable and present the same decoding problem for EAL/D learners; their pronunciation of both will be shaped by their first-language sound system and/or exposure to other English words; they provide no useful information about a learner's decoding ability.
- The Literacy Hub Phonics Check provides no guidance on interpreting results in the light of a learner's L1, English proficiency level or amount of exposure to spoken English; nor do some jurisdictions.

ACTA's position is that Phonics Checks should not be used as a measure of reading proficiency for EAL/D learners in the Beginning, Emerging and possibly Developing phases on the ACARA EAL/D Learning Progression or similar assessment tools. Where they are administered, results must be interpreted alongside EAL/D proficiency data, oral language assessments and classroom observation.

Key Point: A low score on the Literacy Hub Phonics Check (and adaptations of it) is not a reliable indicator of reading difficulty for an EAL/D learner. Valid and reliable evidence is required that takes into account features of the learner's L1 and level of English proficiency.

10. WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO: PRACTICAL PRINCIPLES

The following principles reflect the recommendations in the ACTA position paper. They can inform classroom practice regardless of the resource used.

Know your learners

- Document each EAL/D learner's first language(s), schooling history, and literacy background.
- Use a recognised EAL/D proficiency measure (e.g. the ACARA EAL/D Learning Progression) to locate learners and inform teaching targets.
- Find out key features of your learners' first language(s) that may affect English phonology – your EAL/D specialist teacher, jurisdictional consultant, and relevant professional development resources should be able to assist with this. If you cannot locate this information, don't stay silent – request its development as a priority.

Value the learner's first language

- A student's first language is an asset, not a barrier. Avoid treating it as a source of interference or difficulty. Respect it by finding out about it.
- Where possible, encourage learners to draw on their first-language knowledge to build understanding.
- Where possible, use and advocate for bilingual approaches, and seek professional development in their use.
- Familiarise yourself with – and request professional development in – using translanguageing approaches that allow learners to draw from their full linguistic repertoire, and support engagement and meaning-making.
- Insist on being supported to develop linguistically accurate knowledge about the phonology and grammar of the learner's L1.

Build oral English and vocabulary alongside phonics teaching

- Pre-teach and revisit vocabulary from meaningful texts before, during, and after all reading activities.
- Provide meaningful, repeated exposure to new words in oral and written forms.
- Use visuals, gestures, objects, songs, games and real-life experiences to support comprehension of word meanings.
- Read aloud to learners regularly while they follow the text and ask questions to support meaning-making.

Teach phonics in meaningful contexts

- Connect phonics instruction to words learners already know or are actively learning.
- Always include meaning support (pictures, context, grammar, direct experience) in reading activities for EAL/D learners, including those beginning reading in English.
- Use authentic and age-appropriate texts appropriate to the learner's English proficiency level.

- Never rely solely on decodable readers for practising decoding, much less independent reading.
- Teach learners to develop multiple strategies for identifying words: sounding out, whole word recognition, using morphology, and considering context and grammar to work out what a word might be and what it means.

Interpret assessment results carefully

- Do not treat mispronunciation as a decoding error without investigating its cause.
- Use a simple diagnostic: say the word yourself and ask the learner to repeat it. If they can do so, the issue is most likely pronunciation, not decoding.
- Do not use pseudo-words in either teaching or formal assessment with EAL/D learners.
- If administering mandatory phonics checks, supplement your observations and results with EAL/D-specific assessment data.

11. IMPLICATIONS FOR LITERACY POLICY & PROVISION

The evidence presented in ACTA Position Paper has direct implications for those who design, mandate and resource literacy policy, curriculum and assessment for Australian schools.

EAL/D learners must be visible in policy from the outset

Current Commonwealth and some State/Territory educational policies and provision, including for literacy, assume monolingual English-speaking learners are the “norm” in Australian classrooms.

However, EAL/D learners are a substantial component of the school population – numbering approximately three-quarters of a million. The evidence cited in support of favoured approaches to teaching phonics routinely ignores long-standing and well-established research into learning English as an additional language or dialect. EAL/D learners are therefore consistently and inequitably positioned as a peripheral or “vulnerable” sub-group whose learning needs are to be addressed through tokenistic “cultural responsiveness” and/or misplaced remedial interventions.

Educational equity principles demand that *linguistic* diversity is treated in policy-making and provision for Australian schools as a fundamental, mainstream and explicitly considered starting point.

Mandating a single literacy approach is inequitable for EAL/D learners

Mandating synthetic phonics as the universal route to reading English does not adequately account for the different starting points of EAL/D learners. A policy framework that applies a uniform instructional sequence and assessment tool to all learners – irrespective of first language, prior schooling, age or English proficiency – will not produce equitable outcomes.

Jurisdictions should ensure that literacy approaches include:

- explicit, resourced and easily accessible EAL/D-specific adaptations embedded in phonics guidance – not as optional add-ons or links to separate websites
- advice on how a recognised EAL/D learning progression (such as the ACARA EAL/D Learning Progression) should be used alongside, and prior to, any phonics-based assessment
- clear guidance on how to interpret phonics data in the context of EAL/D proficiency levels
- accurate advice prepared by experts in linguistics on the implications of L1 phonology and grammar for English literacy teaching and assessment, and frequently updated information on the language backgrounds of EAL/D learners in Australian schools.

Phonics Checks require re-thinking for EAL/D learners

As exemplified on the Australian Literacy Hub, Year 1 Phonics Checks are not valid or reliable measures of EAL/D learners’ proficiency in decoding English words, much less their overall literacy.

Jurisdictions should:

- exempt or defer Checks for learners assessed as Beginning and Emerging on the ACARA EAL/D Learning Progression or recognised assessment framework
- require that any Phonics Check results for EAL/D learners be recorded and interpreted alongside EAL/D-specific assessment data, oral language assessments and classroom observation
- commission the development of valid and reliable basic literacy assessments that are appropriate for EAL/D learners.

Teacher education, teacher employment practices and professional learning must address EAL/D needs

One-off professional development sessions and downloadable information sheets are not sufficient to equip teachers to adapt mandated phonics programs for EAL/D learners.

Jurisdictions and schools should be publicly accountable for their use of the Low English Proficiency loading and its outcomes, including in supporting EAL/D-appropriate phonics teaching.

The Commonwealth should:

- require initial teacher education programs to include linguistically valid content on phonological systems, cross-language comparisons and EAL/D literacy development
- ensure that specialist EAL/D qualifications contain mandatory, in-depth treatment of these areas as *appropriate for Australian educational settings* in increasing depth from certificate to postgraduate level
- require explicit, publicly available reporting by all jurisdictions on learners' English proficiency levels, use of the Low English Proficiency loading and resulting English language outcomes.

Jurisdictions, in collaboration with the Commonwealth, should:

- provide sustained, face-to-face professional development for all classroom teachers on EAL/D-appropriate literacy pedagogy – not just optional online modules
- provide regularly updated accurate information on the linguistic features of the languages spoken by EAL/D learner groups currently attending Australian schools and their implications for literacy pedagogy
- reverse the current loss of EAL/D specialist expertise in schools by prioritising support for teachers to gain or upgrade TESOL qualifications relevant to the Australian context
- require schools to report separately, transparently and in the public domain on their use of the Low English Proficiency loading, including employment of teachers with TESOL qualifications.

Provision for First Nations EAL/D learners in remote contexts requires urgent attention

Bilingual and two-way literacy programs have a substantive, well-established evidence base, especially in the Northern Territory. For the approximately 30,000 First Nations students in remote communities where English is encountered almost exclusively at school, the Commonwealth in collaboration with States and the Northern Territory should prioritise the strengthening and extension of bilingual programs, research into their effectiveness and how to improve them, and the commissioning of resources for teachers of speakers of new languages and Aboriginal Englishes. The use of mandated programs such as Read Write Inc. should be independently reviewed for their appropriacy and effectiveness for First Nations EAL/D contexts, especially in remote communities, and alternatives pursued.

The Australian Literacy Hub should be strengthened

The Literacy Hub is an important national resource but its current treatment of EAL/D needs is peripheral rather than embedded and clearly accessible. The Commonwealth, in collaboration with jurisdictions, should upgrade the Hub to:

- embed EAL/D-specific guidance within – not separate from – its core phonics instruction pages, and supplementary information and advice through clear and easily accessible links
- provide detailed, accurate, language-specific phonological guidance for teachers
- include explicit guidance on translanguaging strategies and the positive use of learners' first languages
- develop and publish valid EAL/D literacy assessment tools as an alternative or complement to the current Phonics Check.

Key Point: Equitable literacy policies for EAL/D learners require more than supplementing programs designed for native English speakers. Policy architecture and provision must treat EAL/D learning needs as fundamental — in curriculum design, assessment, teacher preparation and pedagogic resources.

About this fact sheet

This fact sheet is based on the ACTA Position Paper: Synthetic Phonics and EAL/D Learners in Australian Schools. The full Position Paper contains detailed analysis, a review of six widely used phonics programs, an item-by-item analysis of the Year 1 Phonics Check, appendices on English phonology, translanguaging and the Australian Literacy Hub, and a comprehensive reference list. Feedback welcome: write to convenor@tesol.org.au
ACTA – Australian Council of TESOL Associations | acta.edu.au.
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