



ACTA POSITION PAPER

Synthetic Phonics

Issues for Learners & Teachers of English as an Additional Language/Dialect

01/10/2026

Feedback welcome: write to convenor@tesol.org.au

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Terminology & Definitions

The following definitions and brief explanations clarify how key terms are used in this paper. Where terms have multiple meanings or may be used differently in the literature, these definitions reflect ACTA's intended meaning in this context. The terms are grouped thematically.

EAL/D LEARNERS

EAL/D: English as an additional language or dialect.

EAL/D learners: students who are learning English in Australian schools from the starting point of a first language or language variety (i.e. a mother tongue / home language / dominant language – henceforth L1) with a recognisable substantively different linguistic system (including phonology, syntax and semantics) from English.

L1 (first language): The learner's mother tongue, home language or dominant language, which for EAL/D learners provides the linguistic starting point for learning English.

POLICIES

Educational equity: recognising and responding to the different linguistic, cultural and educational circumstances that shape how students learn, in contrast to providing all learners with the same standardised instruction.

Residualisation: The policy practice of designing educational provision around an assumed mainstream learner and only subsequently considering learners whose needs differ from that assumption.

LANGUAGES

Standard Australian English (SAE): the variety of spoken and written English language in Australia used in more formal settings, such as for official or public purposes, and recorded in dictionaries, style guides and grammars. It is the variety of English required for educational purposes, used in Australian government, media and law, and described in the Australian Curriculum: English.

See also footnote 42.

First Nations languages

First/Traditional languages: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages traditionally spoken before colonisation. They are most commonly spoken in remote communities where English is largely confined to school and official contexts.

New languages: Languages that have developed through contact between one or more Traditional Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander languages and English and/or other languages. They include creoles such as Yumplatok (Torres Strait Islander Creole) and Kriol.

Aboriginal English: sometimes called Aboriginal Englishes or Blackfulla English. These varieties of English differ in systematic ways from SAE, just as SAE and American English differ but can be more or less understood by speakers of SAE. According to many established scholars, Aboriginal English is best understood not as hundreds of unrelated local dialects, but as a single pan-Aboriginal dialect continuum and lingua franca with regional varieties. The evidence suggests that while Aboriginal English displays local differences, it possesses sufficient shared grammatical, semantic, pragmatic and sociocultural features across Australia to justify recognition as one identifiable language variety.

Language ecology: the particular configuration of First/traditional languages, new languages, Aboriginal English, and Standard Australian English that characterises the learner's family and community. The National Indigenous Languages Report (Dinku et al., 2020), drawing on the Well-being and Indigenous Language Ecologies framework, emphasises that these configurations vary substantially across Australia. Language background therefore cannot be adequately represented by a simple opposition between an Indigenous language and English, or between "first language" and "second language".

LINGUISTIC CONCEPTS

Phoneme: the smallest contrastive unit in the sound system of a language that distinguishes meaning between words.

Grapheme: the smallest distinctive unit in the writing system of a language that represents one or more phonemes.

Morpheme: the smallest unit of language that carries meaning or grammatical function. It may be a complete word or part of a word.

Phonotactic rules: the language-specific rules governing how phonemes may be combined and positioned within words.

Alphabetic writing system: a writing system in which phonemes are represented by letters or combinations of letters (graphemes).

Phonetic writing system: a writing system in which graphemes closely correspond to the language's phonemes.

Probabilistic writing system: a writing system in which relationships between phonemes and graphemes are complex and often irregular, so that sound-letter correspondences are governed by probabilities rather than consistent one-to-one mappings.

Schwa: the neutral central vowel (/ə/) commonly used in unstressed syllables in English.

EARLY LITERACY PEDAGOGICAL CONCEPTS

Reading: understanding the meanings conveyed by written language.

Learning to read: learning how written language conveys meaning.

Decoding: gaining meaning from the symbols representing words and texts. Decoding is an integrated process of identifying and understanding written words through the coordinated and iterative use of orthographic, phonological, morphological, grammatical and semantic knowledge. For EAL/D learners, decoding also draws simultaneously on knowledge of their first language(s) and their developing English.

Phonics: the relationships between the phonemes of a language and the graphemes used to represent them in writing. In this paper, the term does not refer to a method of teaching decoding.

Synthetic phonics: an approach to teaching decoding that systematically builds knowledge from the smallest units of spoken and written language – phonemes and graphemes – introduced in a carefully planned sequence.

Analytic phonics: an approach that begins with whole words learners already know and analyses their sound and spelling patterns, with words presented in meaningful contexts and grouped according to shared patterns.

Mastery learning: an approach that require teachers to follow a script or sequence that excludes other reading strategies until a given phoneme-grapheme relationship is mastered.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
ACTA	Australian Council of TESOL Associations
AERO	Australian Education Research Organisation
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EAL/D	English as an Additional Language or Dialect
LBOTE	Language background other than English
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program
NSRA	National School Reform Agreement
NT	Northern Territory
PLD	Promoting Literacy Development
RWI	Read Write Inc
SP	Synthetic Phonics
SSP	Systematic Synthetic Phonics
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

Executive Summary

The 2025–2034 *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement* has made synthetic phonics a central feature of Australian early literacy policy. Commonwealth school funding is now tied to jurisdictions administering Year 1 Phonics Checks based on synthetic phonics. The online Australian Literacy and Numeracy Hub promotes this approach. State and Territory education authorities have mandated teaching approaches described as “systematic synthetic phonics” and “explicit instruction”, together with phonics checks, while funded intervention initiatives use synthetic phonics programs and resources.

This ACTA Position Paper examines the implications of synthetic phonics approaches for English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) learners in Australian schools. It aims to support educators, administrators and policymakers in understanding the issues raised by this approach.

ACTA unequivocally supports the systematic and explicit teaching of English sound-symbol relationships to EAL/D learners. Central to our position is the premise that literacy policy – like all educational policy – should recognise diversity as a core characteristic of Australian society, including in our schools. The learning needs of a linguistically, culturally, cognitively, physically and otherwise diverse school population must be a foundational concern of education policy and practice.

The approximately 20 per cent of EAL/D learners in our schools are a major contributor to this diversity. They include First Nations students who speak traditional Australian languages, Kriol and Aboriginal Englishes; children and young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds; and international students.

The central concern of this Position Paper is the current policy assumption that the synthetic phonics approach early literacy learning is an appropriate approach to reading English for *all* students. But EAL/D learners cannot be assumed to have the spoken English, vocabulary, grammar and phonological knowledge that young English-mother-tongue learners bring to learning literacy. EAL/D learners may be of any age and are learning the English language, not just how it is represented in writing. A literacy policy that assumes tuition should be essentially the same for all (maybe with a few minor adjustments) fails to recognise a fundamental difference in what learners are bringing to the learning process.

Our analysis of six widely used synthetic phonics programs and resources – Letters and Sounds, Read Write Inc., Jolly Phonics, the MultiLit suite, Sounds-Write and PLD – shows precisely how this current policy assumption is problematic. Across the resources, grapheme–phoneme relationships are taught assuming substantial familiarity with spoken English. Although some resources include oral English and vocabulary activities in separate components, none addresses EAL/D learners’ needs by systematically integrating oral English development with learning to read English. They provide teachers with little or no guidance on cross-linguistic phonological transfer. They fail to positively utilise learners’ first languages through bilingual or translanguaging approaches. Nor do they take account of the significant diversity among EAL/D learners – in age, linguistic background, prior schooling, existing literacy, and familiarity with English.

The synthetic-phonics interpretation of “decoding” exemplifies this failure to consider the needs of English language learners. In common English usage, “decoding” refers to *discovering or accessing the meaning* of encoded information. In regard to literacy, ACTA understands decoding as accessing and understanding the meaning of written words and texts. Synthetic phonics uses the term differently. In the six resources we analysed, “decoding” refers to learning grapheme-phoneme correspondences and how to blend sounds by saying words aloud. This interpretation defers or displaces any reference to the learner’s accessing and understanding meaning. It conflates saying a word with reading it.

The focus on converting written symbols into English sounds embodies a **monolingual English perspective**. It ignores the fact that it is possible to read words and texts without knowing how they sound – as occurs, for example, with non-English speakers who can read English without knowing how it sounds or with students learning to read Latin, Old Norse or Egyptian hieroglyphs with minimal or no certainty of how these languages sounded.

The narrowed technical synthetic phonics interpretation of “decoding” is largely inconsequential for those who already know spoken English. But it matters for EAL/D learners – learning what an English word means is fundamental to learning to read it. ACTA supports systematic and explicit phonics teaching but insists it is tied to understanding and making meaning(s) in a program that systematically integrates spoken and written English, and learning its vocabulary, grammar, morphology and discourse patterns. Disconnected from making meaning, producing a sequence of English sounds to match a set of graphemes is “barking at print”.

Recognising diversity is the starting point for inclusive and equitable education policy. For EAL/D learners, equity demands that their starting points for learning is acknowledged and that their learning needs are met by EAL/D-informed teaching, resources and teachers.

Recommendations

ACTA's recommendations are grouped thematically below. They have been developed in the context of the content in the body of the paper and should be interpreted in that context. The relevant section on which each recommendation is based is listed under each set of Recommendations.

Acknowledging EAL/D learners

- 1) EAL/D learners' L1 and other languages, and schooling and literacy history should be routinely documented by schools and should be used to inform literacy teaching and assessment at all Year levels.

Section 2.2: Who are EAL/D learners?

First Nations EAL/D learners

- 2) The forthcoming First Nations Education Policy¹ should:
 - a. make the strengthening and extension of bilingual, two-way programs for First Nations EAL/D learners a priority recommendation
 - b. recommend the commissioning of resources for teachers with First Nations speakers' of First/traditional and new Indigenous languages and Aboriginal Englishes, including guidance in teaching basic literacy.
- 3) Phonics teaching, assessment and teacher resources should explicitly recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Kriols and Aboriginal Englishes as systematic linguistic systems.

Section 2.2 : Who are EAL/D learners?

Section 4.2.1: Learning to read in the mother tongue.

Teaching EAL/D learners reading and writing in English

- 4) The explicit and systematic teaching of the English phonic system must occur in contexts that are meaning-rich and maximally supportive of expanding learners' vocabulary.
- 5) As appropriate to the learner's age, previous schooling and the language ecology of the learner's home and school environment, teaching English phonics should be part of a systematic and integrated approach to developing the learner's command of oral English (listening and speaking), including expanding and consolidating the learner's English vocabulary.
- 6) Writing should be integrated with oral English development (speaking and listening), gaining control of English grammar, expanding vocabulary, reading for enjoyment and personal expression.

Section 4.2: Starting points for reading English.

Section 4.3: Decoding written English.

Section 5.8: The approach to writing in the six resources.

Teacher education

- 7) The accreditation of initial teaching qualifications should require the inclusion of linguistically valid phonological content, including cross-language comparisons, in their literacy learning components.
- 8) This content should be mandatory in all specialist EAL/D qualifications and taught in increasing depth from certificate to post-graduate degree level.

Section 4.1: Sounds systems differ – Implications for EAL/D learners.

Teacher professional development

- 9) It should be standard, routine practice for jurisdictions to provide and update teachers with:
 - c. accurate advice on the nature of phonemic systems in general and, wherever possible, relevant features of the phonological systems of the EAL/D learners they currently teach

¹ <https://www.education.gov.au/first-nations-education-policy>

- d. face-to-face professional development in:
- e. EAL/D-informed use and adaption of commercially produced resources for teaching literacy
- f. how to investigate why an EAL/D learner is challenged in hearing and producing particular English phonemes, and distinguishing between them
- g. appropriate and enjoyable listening activities in distinguishing English phonemes in meaningful contexts (e.g. age-appropriate games and rhymes)
- h. strategies for teaching English pronunciation, stress, rhythm and intonation.

Section 4: Teaching EAL/D learners to read in English: Key issues.

Commercial Synthetic Phonics resources

- 10) Decodable texts should never constitute the sole resource for independent reading or even decoding practice. All reading material should expose learners to authentic and meaningful English as appropriate to their overall English proficiency and maturity. Enjoyable and meaningful forms of practice are possible and desirable, for example, puzzles and games, songs and rhymes, various drama techniques, and reading following a text as it is read aloud.
- 11) Pseudo-words should not be used in teaching English phonics to EAL/D learners or assessing their decoding skills. For learners with no prior literacy, teaching and assessing using pseudo-words should be regarded as violating their fundamental rights to informed educational practice.

Sections 4.3, 5.6 and 5.7: Pseudo-words and Decodable readers

Phonics Checks and EAL/D learners

- 12) Phonics assessment data for EAL/D learners should always be interpreted with reference to accurate cross-linguistic phonology regarding the learner's L1, the learner's overall English proficiency level and amount of their exposure to spoken English in their local community.
- 13) The Literacy Hub Phonics Check should be reviewed by reputable, highly qualified linguists with expertise in phonology who are tasked to produce valid and reliable measures for both mother tongue English speakers and EAL/D learners, including learners with literacy in a language other than English.
- 14) EAL/D learners who are assessed as in the *Beginning* and *Emerging Phases* on the ACARA English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) Learning Progression or other State assessments used for EAL/D learners should **not** be assessed against phonics checks based on synthetic phonics principles. Their English literacy proficiency should be documented against EAL/D-specific assessment tools.

The Literacy Hub

- 15) The Literacy Hub should be urgently developed by one or more experts in second language development, English phonology, EAL/D pedagogy and assessment to include:
 - a. **an EAL/D Literacy Pathways section** detailing:
 - i. key EAL/D learner profiles (First Nations, new arrivals, long-term EAL/D, limited schooling) with specific reference to literacy in English
 - ii. implications for pacing, grouping and assessment in EAL/D learners' command of English phonics
 - iii. links between phonics and oral English development.
 - b. guidance on **potential L1–English phonological differences**, i.e. short, practical guidance explaining:
 - i. why some English sounds and clusters are difficult for many EAL/D learners;
 - ii. how L1 phonology influences how words might be heard and/or read aloud;
 - iii. how to interpret phonics assessment data in the light of language background.
This should be framed as interpretive guidance, not as a requirement for teachers to master multiple languages.
 - c. **embedded translanguaging examples**, i.e. worked examples showing how teachers can:
 - i. use home languages to explain vocabulary or concepts;
 - ii. compare sound systems informally;

- iii. encourage bilingual meaning-making during shared reading.
- d. information and advice for **teachers with First Nations students** on:
 - i. understanding and appreciating First/traditional languages, new Indigenous languages (such as Kriol and Yumplatok/Torres Strait Creole) and Aboriginal English as culturally and communicatively valued and valuable, and linguistically systematic, valid and distinctive
 - ii. how phonics instruction may interact differently with these sound systems
 - iii. culturally and linguistically responsive approaches for teaching phonics where these languages are commonly used and in remote communities where English is a foreign language.
- e. **clear links and pathways** to this material on the Hub home page.

Section 4.1: Sound systems differ

Section 5: the six resources and EAL/D learning needs.

Section 6: Mandatory phonics checks.

16) The Literacy Hub should be resourced to develop two longer-term projects:

- i. to provide teachers of **older EAL/D learners with limited/disrupted/minimal/no previous formal education** with resources (created or links to existing resources) for teaching EAL/D-informed basic literacy
- j. to develop English literacy learning resources with pedagogy that is responsive to **First Nations EAL/D learners** who may speak an Aboriginal language, Torres Strait Islander language, a contemporary language such as Aboriginal English, Yumplatok (Torres Strait Creole), Kriol or other named or unnamed language varieties.

Section 2.2: Who are EAL/D learners?

Section 4.2.1: EAL/D learners with minimal/no literacy in any language.

Section .6: Mandatory phonics checks.

1. Introduction

Proficiency in reading and writing in English is fundamental for all students in Australian schools. The Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA)² unequivocally endorses the systematic and explicit teaching of the English language system to English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) learners, including the sound-symbol relationships that underpin English texts.

1.1 Synthetic phonics – the current policy focus

Teaching early literacy using “synthetic phonics” approaches has dominated literacy teaching and assessment in schools in England for well over a decade (Ewing, 2018). In Australia, the 2025-2034 *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement* – through which the Commonwealth is funding Australian schools for the ten years – has given prime position to synthetic phonics approaches, in what the Education Minister described as “the evidence-based reforms our schools need” (Clare, 2024).

The Commonwealth is promoting synthetic phonics approaches through school funding conditional on administration of Year One phonics checks based on these principles. It also funds the on-line Australian Literacy and Numeracy Hub that promotes a synthetic phonics approach (see Appendix B).

State and Territory education authorities are responsible for actual policies on curriculum and assessment, and have mandated the teaching of “systematic synthetic phonics”, the associated pedagogy of “explicit instruction”, and use of phonics checks. They are also funding intervention initiatives using synthetic phonics programs and resources. Many Catholic education authorities have also adopted policies emphasising systematic synthetic phonics, explicit instruction and structured literacy. Most jurisdictions do not mandate specific commercial phonics programs across all their schools, instead prescribing instructional principles within which schools choose resources. Expensive, commercially produced resources – consisting of detailed, comprehensive, visually appealing packages, including teacher scripts – have been widely marketed to schools and sometimes regions (Creagh et al. 2023).³

Following in England’s footsteps, Australian school authorities have effectively made synthetic phonics “the only possible policy solution to learning to read” (Bradbury & Wyse, 2025: 4). ACTA is concerned that EAL/D learning needs have little place in this current policy trend. Our concern is well supported. Ahn and Sangster (2026: 229) point out that “systematic reviews of science of reading-aligned approaches note that little attention has been given to how phonological and linguistic differences influence oral language and phonics development (Odo, 2021).”⁴

1.2 Synthetic phonics and the “science of reading”

Synthetic phonics approaches are generally promoted in the context of “the science of reading”. The “science of reading” encompasses a variety of both broad and more specific claims regarding literacy pedagogy and research.⁵ For example, some American material for EAL learners aligns itself with recommendations with “the science of reading” but not necessarily synthetic phonics. A “Joint Statement” by an influential group of American EAL educators interprets “the science of reading” to be:

... a comprehensive body of knowledge. This knowledge should be embraced and applied to inform instruction, complemented by understanding and addressing the social, linguistic, and cultural factors that impact students. Furthermore, it is important to identify practices that are implemented in schools under the name of the science of reading that do not align with the scientific evidence of how English learner/emergent bilingual students (ELs/EBs) learn to read. (The Reading League & National Committee for Effective Literacy, 2023)

ACTA endorses these principles.

To maintain clarity, this paper is focused specifically on synthetic phonics and not on interpretations of the “science of reading” more generally. For what we understand by “synthetic phonics”, please see section 3.4 below.

² ACTA is the peak Council of State and Territory professional associations in Australia for teachers of English to speakers of other languages in all sectors (adult, schools, tertiary, and early childhood). <https://tesol.org.au/>. This paper was initiated and developed by the ACTA Indigenous EAL/D and Schools Consultancy Groups, consisting of EAL teachers, managers, consultants and researchers from around Australia.

³ This paper reports on a national survey of EAL/D teachers and discusses how increased reliance on commercially produced resources, including for literacy learning – driven in part by school autonomy over budgets – may not align with effective language-learning practices and could impact specialist teachers’ professional roles. See also Bradbury & Wise (2025).

⁴ For a teacher-friendly version of this paper, go to: <https://www.llen.online/blog/the-elephant-in-the-phonics-room-rethinking-phonics-in-diverse-classrooms-author?rq=the%20elephant%20in%20the%20phonics%20classroom>

⁵ For an analysis of the current focus on “learning science”, see Sawyer et al. (2025) and Elzy-Palmer (2025).

1.3 ACTA position paper: focus

In this paper, we focus on six sets of resources which exemplify synthetic phonics approaches and which are in widespread use in Australian schools, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of Synthetic Phonics resources used in Government and Catholic jurisdictions⁶

PROGRAM	GOVERNMENT SCHOOL JURISDICTIONS (documented use)	CATHOLIC JURISDICTIONS (documented use)
Letters and Sounds	Historical use in NSW, VIC, WA and some other jurisdictions; no current state/territory mandate.	Historical use in some dioceses; largely replaced by commercial SSP programs.
Read Write Inc.	NSW, VIC, QLD, WA, SA, TAS, ACT, NT (school-level adoption; not mandated as a named program).	Widely used across Catholic education systems nationally, including Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, Canberra–Goulburn and many regional dioceses.
Jolly Phonics	NSW, VIC, QLD, WA, SA, TAS, ACT, NT (school choice; not mandated).	Widely used across Catholic primary schools nationally.
MultiLit suite (including InitialLit, MiniLit, MacqLit)	NSW, VIC, QLD, WA, SA, TAS, ACT, NT (extensive use; particularly strong in government literacy intervention programs).	Widely used across Catholic systems nationally as both a whole-class and intervention program.
Sounds-Write	WA (recognised by the Department of Education); growing adoption in NSW, VIC, QLD, SA, ACT and NT; school-level adoption rather than mandate.	Growing adoption in Catholic systems including Adelaide, Canberra–Goulburn and a number of Victorian and NSW dioceses.
Promoting Literacy Development	Strong use in WA, SA, QLD and VIC; growing use in NSW; some use in ACT, TAS and NT.	Strong use in WA Catholic Education; common in SA, QLD and Victorian Catholic schools; also used elsewhere.

The evidence for our analysis comes from publications, website information and ChatGPT searches of the six sets of resources.⁷

Table 2 provides an overview of these resources' stated target group(s), main components, assumed mode of use and attention given to EAL/D development.

Table 2: Target groups, components, mode of use and place of EAL/D development in the selected six Synthetic Phonics resources

PROGRAM / RESOURCE	STATED TARGET LEARNER GROUP(S)	WHAT THE RESOURCE CONSISTS OF	PRIMARY USE	ATTENTION TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT (EAL/D) IN INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN
Letters and Sounds	Foundation and early primary children learning to read English.	Six-phase progression for systematic synthetic phonics; grapheme-phoneme sequence; teaching guidance; suggested activities; review and assessment guidance. Schools select supplementary resources.	Whole-class beginning literacy.	None. Designed primarily around typical first-language English literacy development. Assumes learners can access phonics instruction through English and does not provide a systematic framework for developing English oral language, vocabulary or grammar alongside literacy instruction.

⁶ The borderline between system mandates and school choice is fuzzy. For example, Read, Write Inc. was the recommended (as distinct from mandated) resource for the Education Department's "common mandated teaching and learning program" for remote schools in its Indigenous Education Strategy 2015-2024. Implementation was monitored through teacher and principal performance management protocols, school Operating Plans and school reviews. By 2018–19 more than 600 educators had been trained to deliver Read Write Inc. across 66 schools (*Annual Report 2018–19*, p. 52), and by 2019–20 the Department reported the framework in use in 96 schools (*Annual Report 2019–20*, p. 13). The Strategy ended in 2024 and implementation guidelines were revised in 2025. (Northern Territory Department of Education, *RWI Phonics Implementation: Northern Territory Guide*, version 2, 2025; *RWI Fresh Start Implementation: Northern Territory Guide*, 2024). The program "remains in departmental use" rather than a policy recommendation. We have no detailed information on other jurisdictions.

⁷ The commercial nature of programs includes a price barrier to outsiders that prevent our in-dept scrutiny and verification of information that we have obtained using ChatGPT. Sources used by ChatGPT to verify this information are:

- Australian Government and state/territory education department literacy guidance
- published school case studies and school websites documenting program adoption.
- official websites of MultiLit, Sounds-Write, Ruth Miskin Literacy, Jolly Learning and PLD, including Australian training providers and partner schools.

Catholic and independent school literacy documentation where program adoption is publicly identified.

We have also looked at the Literacy Hub (funded by the Australian Government): <https://www.literacyhub.edu.au/>. See also [Information-Sheet-2-Examples-of-High-Quality-Evidence-based-Phonics-Programs-Updated-July-2020.pdf](#).

We welcome corrections based on authoritative evidence.

PROGRAM / RESOURCE	STATED TARGET LEARNER GROUP(S)	WHAT THE RESOURCE CONSISTS OF	PRIMARY USE	ATTENTION TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT (EAL/D) IN INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN
Read Write Inc. (RWI)	Foundation and primary learners; struggling readers; older struggling readers through <i>Fresh Start</i> .	Structured daily lessons; teacher manuals; scripted routines; Speed Sounds; blending; spelling and writing activities; decodable readers; assessment materials; intervention programs.	Whole-class instruction and intervention.	Limited. Includes some oral language and vocabulary activities to support reading development, but English language development is not the organising principle of instruction. The program is designed primarily around literacy acquisition for learners with sufficient English proficiency to engage with phonics instruction.
Jolly Phonics	Early years, Foundation and primary learners of English.	Structured synthetic phonics programme including letter-sound actions, songs, stories, workbooks, decodable readers, digital resources and assessment materials.	Whole-class beginning literacy.	Limited. Uses songs, stories and classroom activities that may support oral language development, but does not provide a systematic approach to developing English vocabulary, grammar and oral proficiency for learners acquiring English as an additional language.
MultiLit suite	Beginning readers; struggling readers in primary, secondary and adult education; learners with oral language difficulties (including through <i>LanguageLift</i>).	Suite of literacy and language programs including <i>InitialLit</i> , <i>MiniLit Sage</i> , <i>MacqLit</i> , <i>LanguageLift</i> , Reading Tutor Program, comprehension resources and assessment tools.	Whole-class instruction and targeted intervention.	Partial. The suite includes components that explicitly address oral language development, particularly <i>LanguageLift</i> . However, across the suite, English language development is generally positioned as supporting literacy acquisition rather than as an integrated foundation of literacy instruction for learners acquiring English.
Sounds-Write	Beginning readers; struggling readers; older learners requiring literacy intervention.	Structured linguistic phonics programme comprising teacher training, carefully sequenced lessons, word and sentence activities, decodable readers, spelling resources and assessments.	Whole-class instruction and targeted intervention.	Limited. Provides highly explicit teaching of phoneme-grapheme relationships and the structure of English orthography. However, English language development is assumed rather than systematically developed, with limited explicit attention to vocabulary, grammar or oral language growth for EAL/D learners.
Promoting Literacy Development (PLD)	Foundation and primary learners; children with literacy and/or oral language needs, including EAL/D learners.	Suite of structured literacy programs and resources including phonological awareness, phonics, oral language, vocabulary, grammar, morphology, reading, spelling and assessment materials.	Whole-class instruction and targeted intervention.	Most explicit among the resources reviewed. PLD identifies EAL/D learners as a distinct user group and includes explicit oral language, vocabulary and grammar resources alongside literacy instruction. However, its framework is primarily informed by structured literacy and speech pathology perspectives rather than a comprehensive second-language acquisition framework.

Further detail on these resources is provided in Appendix A (Table 17) re country of origin, developer(s) and copyright owner, the commercial basis of each resource, together with a further breakdown of what each resource includes (Table 18).

The extent to which these resources attend to learners simultaneously developing English and literacy varies. However, even the resources with the greatest attention to oral language are primarily designed within a literacy/structured framework, as distinct from a second/additional-language development framework. In section 5 below, we detail how these resources consider EAL/D development.

1.4 ACTA position paper: audience

The paper's intended audience is education policy makers and administrators, school principals and senior managers, literacy advisors and consultants to schools, teacher educators and classroom teachers in Australian schools.⁸

Feedback we received on an earlier draft has made clear that various jurisdictions and individuals are working to mitigate, modify, adapt, supplement and extend mandated synthetic phonics approaches in the light of some of

⁸ Linguists may find some of our terminology problematic (e.g. "sounds"), which we accept. Our aim has been to avoid terminology and distinctions that may be unfamiliar to our intended audience.

the issues we identify below.⁹ We note that Literacy Hub is also addressing these issues to some extent (see Appendix B). ACTA endorses this work. We also recognise that literacy pedagogy occurs in the context of other curriculum areas, strands and school supports that may address silences in synthetic phonics resources.

We suggest that the most constructive way to interpret this paper is as presenting important issues, principles and cautions to be considered regarding the use of synthetic phonics pedagogy with EAL/D learners. To the extent that readers of this position paper are addressing the concerns we raise, we hope that they see it as support for their work.

However, insofar as that EAL/D-specific advice exists, the question remains: *what sustained and coherent training and support are teachers receiving that will allow them to adapt currently mandated programs in an EAL/D-informed way?* One-off professional development sessions and centrally available information booklets, including the Literacy Hub (see section 5.1 and Appendix B), are insufficient. Without sustained, face-to-face EAL/D-focussed teachers – and therefore their students – are structurally marginalised and residualised (see section 2.2.2).

This paper is organised as follows. The following section (section 2) outlines our understanding of the key concepts that underpin our position on synthetic phonics. Section 3 describes three main instructional approaches that feature in discussions of synthetic phonics (“whole language”, “analytic phonics” and “synthetic phonics”) and indicate ACTA takes from each of them. We then elaborate on specific implications for EAL/D learners who are learning to read English (section 4). Section 5 presents a detailed analysis of the extent to which EAL/D learning needs are considered in the six resources we have reviewed. Finally, we explain our position on mandatory synthetic phonics-based checks (section 6).

2. Some Basic Concepts

This section outlines our interpretation of three key concepts, viz.:

- 1) **Linguistic concepts – *English sounds and their written form.***
- 2) **Learners – *who are EAL/D learners in Australian schools?***
- 3) **Reading – *what is reading and what is learning to read?***

From section 3 onwards, we explore these concepts as they apply specifically to pedagogy and assessment for EAL/D learners.

2.1 Basic linguistic concepts

2.1.1 What is meant by “phonics” in this paper?

For the purposes of this paper, we interpret “phonics” to mean how the phonemes of a language relate to the written symbols (called “graphemes”) used to represent the language in its spoken form.

By “phonics”, we do **not** mean a **method of teaching** decoding.¹⁰

As already stated, ACTA unequivocally endorses the need for EAL/D learners to gain fluency in English phonics, that is, learning to decode English graphemes as part of learning to read English. Our concerns relate to specific methods for teaching and assessing these skills, and their underlying assumptions.

⁹ ACTA held an online joint meeting of our Indigenous EAL/D and Schools Consultancy Groups on 21 October 2024, prior to which draft version 4 of this paper was circulated. We had 56 acceptances, 49 attendees, approximately 7 apologies, and 45 people in break out groups. The meeting included teachers, consultants and a small number of teacher educators, with a cross-section from Government, Catholic and Independent sectors in every state and territory.

¹⁰ Our definition of “phonics” accords with the online NSW Department of Education statement at <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/curriculum/literacy-and-numeracy/teaching-and-learning-resources/literacy/effective-reading-in-the-early-years-of-school/phonics>. We recognise that, along with some published material and programs, some participants in October meeting on draft 4 of this paper interpret “phonics” as a **method of teaching** how to decode the English alphabet. For example:

Phonics is a method of teaching children to read and spell by explicitly teaching students the relationships between letters or letter combinations (also called “graphemes”) and speech sounds (“phonemes”). (Parrila et al., 2024)

We have no objection to this interpretation. However, here we have chosen a broader meaning with the aim of facilitating key distinctions as clearly and simply as we can.

2.1.2 Phonemes, allophones and the sound system of a language

PHONEMES

A **phoneme** “is the smallest contrastive unit in the sound system of a language, capable of distinguishing meaning between words” (Crystal, 2008). It is a sound that is heard to change the meaning of a word. For example, English speakers hear “pin” and “bin” as different words with different meanings because they learn to perceive /p/ and /b/ as different sounds – that is, /p/ and /b/ are separate English phonemes. Other languages may or may not make this same distinction. If the sound system of the language does not distinguish between /p/ and /b/, its speakers will not easily hear the difference between “pin” and “bin” in spoken English or be able to pronounce this distinction.¹¹ (For a list of the symbols we use to represent English phonemes, see Appendix C.)

A phoneme itself is not meaningful. But the *contrast* between phonemes signals a difference in word meaning. Phonemes and the meanings conveyed by the spoken language are therefore inextricably connected. This linguistic fact underpins ACTA’s position that literacy learning should never be disconnected from meaningful language. We elaborate on various implications for EAL/D learners in sections 2.3, 4.1, 4.3, 5.5 and 5.7 below.

ALLOPHONES

Importantly, a phoneme is not always pronounced as exactly the same sound. Languages have rules that influence how phonemes are produced in different contexts, such as at the beginning or end of a word or next to other particular sounds. These predictable variations in pronunciation are called **allophones**. Because allophonic patterns differ across languages, learners may perceive and produce the sounds of a new language differently from native speakers, as we elaborate in section 4.1. This phenomenon also has crucial implications for assessing EAL/D learners’ decoding (see section 6 and Appendix M).

STRESS, RHYTHM AND INTONATION

The sound system of a language extends well beyond its phonemic system. Stress, rhythmic and intonation patterns are crucial to understanding and speaking the language, conveying crucial semantic and grammatical information. These features may or may not be represented in how the language is written. English stress and intonation patterns significantly impact how words are spoken and understood but they are rarely reflected in writing. Consider, for example, the different meanings of **OBject** (as in “an unknown object in the sky”) and **object** (as in “I object to what you’re saying”); also **RE-fuse** (= garbage) versus **refuse** (= say no).

2.1.3 Graphemes

A **grapheme** is “the minimal distinctive unit in the writing system of a language.” (Crystal, 2008). Different languages have different graphemic systems.

ALPHABETIC WRITING SYSTEMS

Many languages, including English, have **alphabetic** writing systems in which the language’s phonemes are represented by **letters** or letter combinations.

Alphabetic systems vary from one language to another in regard to:

- their graphemes (i.e. the actual letters)
- whether all or only some of the language’s phonemes are represented by graphemes (letters)
- the extent to which phonemes are reliably indicated by graphemes (letters), and vice versa.

English uses a so-called **Latin** alphabet. Some other languages use the Latin alphabet; others do not. Although a language may use the same Latin alphabet as English does, the letters may *or may not* represent the same sounds.

NON-ALPHABETIC SYSTEMS

Some languages do not use letters and alphabets for writing.

For example, Chinese has a **logographic** writing system. Chinese written symbols (characters) directly represent **meanings** (strictly speaking “units of meaning” i.e. **morphemes**). Many Chinese characters also include clues to some phonemes but you cannot predict a phoneme from a character.

¹¹ One of the writers of this paper taught in PNG. The metal container in her classroom used for rubbish was frequently labelled “rubbish pin”.

For further information on how different languages represent spoken language in writing, see Appendix D.

2.1.4 Morphemes

A **morpheme** is the smallest unit of language that *has a meaning or grammatical function*.¹² It may be a word on its own (e.g. *book*) or part of a word (e.g. *un-*, *-ed*, *-s*). A morpheme cannot be divided into smaller units that still carry meaning (Crystal, 2008). Morphemes are one element in the grammar and semantic (i.e. meaning) system of a language.

The concepts above are summarised in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Phonemes, morphemes and graphemes

LEVEL OF LANGUAGE	UNIT	FUNCTION
Phonology (sound system)	Phoneme	Distinguishes words.
Morphology (grammar/meaning)	Morpheme	Carries meaning or grammatical information.
Orthography (writing system)	Grapheme	Represents units of a writing system.

2.1.5 English graphemes and phonemes

Many languages have graphemic systems that closely align with their phonemic systems. These languages are commonly said to have *phonetic writing systems*. They include Finnish, Turkish, Dinka, Italian, Spanish and Serbo-Croatian (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian & Montenegrin).¹³ Phonetic writing systems are likewise typical of languages that developed writing systems from the nineteenth century onwards, including Australian Indigenous languages. The closeness between phonemes and writing may also reflect attempts at spelling reform. In these languages, learning the relationship between letters and sounds is relatively straightforward.

Although English uses a Latin alphabetic writing system, it is the least phonetic of all Latin alphabet systems (Aro & Wimmer, 2003; Seymour et al., 2003; Borleffs et al., 2017; Miller, 2019). This is the result of the long and layered history of English over many centuries. The writing system reflects early Anglo-Saxon grammatical and vocabulary features and the languages spoken by the invading groups from northern Europe, Rome and Normandy, which subsequently conquered and settled in England, and changed English dramatically. Internally driven sound changes have also played a role in English spellings.

English and its spellings slowly stabilised with the widespread use of the printing press, the growth of printed media (books and newspapers) and the expansion of schooling. This rich history is embodied in how English words are spoken and written today. For example, long vowels are often spelt with an “r” spelling that is *not* sounded in Australian (and British) English, as, for example, the word “hard” /ha:d/, but that *is* sounded in many American varieties.¹⁴

Modern English has 44 phonemes represented in an alphabet of only 26 graphemes (letters). There are between 200 and 1000 variations in how English sounds map onto letters and vice versa. For example:

- **The same grapheme can represent different English phonemes.** Thus, the “oo” spelling in *moon* does not represent the same sound/phoneme as “oo” in *book*. The “th” spelling in *that* does not represent the same sound/phoneme as the “th” in *bath*. The letters *ch* may be sounded /tʃ/ (as in *chin*), /ʃ/ (as in *chef* and *machine*) or /k/ (as in *chemist*). The correct pronunciation of *ch* in these words cannot be determined by sounding out *c* and *h*. More and different knowledge is needed to say these words correctly.
- Likewise, the same combination of graphemes can represent different phonemes in different words. For example, *sew/threw*, *snow/how*, *toe/canoe*, *go/do*, *though/through*, *boat/broad*.
- **Conversely, different graphemes can represent the same phoneme.** For example, the long /o/ phoneme (“oh”) has different graphemes in *sew*, *snow*, *toe*, *go*, *though*, *boat*.

¹² A morpheme is meaningful in its own right; the perceived contrast between phonemes creates a difference in meanings, but a phoneme itself is not meaningful.

¹³ Languages with less close relationships but which are still relatively predictable are German, Portuguese, and Modern Greek.

¹⁴ This spelling results from a sound change called **r-loss** or **non-rhoticity**. Beginning in southern England around the eighteenth century, speakers gradually stopped pronouncing /r/ after vowels unless another vowel followed. Australian English inherited this pronunciation pattern from nineteenth-century British English. (Crystal, 2019; Cox, 2012). A modern example of sound change is the dramatic shift in vowels in New Zealand English in the second half of the 20th Century.

How phonemes relate to graphemes is complex, probabilistic and often irregular. No cast-iron phonemic or graphemic rules can predict these matches.

2.1.6 English morphemes and graphemes

Morphemes are essential to understanding words but the spellings of English morphemes often do not reflect how they sound. If English had a purely phonetic writing system, we would probably write “jumped” as *jumt*, “bagged” as *bagd* and “wanted” as *wantid*. This would be phonetically accurate but destroy grammatical and semantic information. Sounding the “ed” in these words (but not in *need*) requires recognising it is the regular past tense morpheme and segmenting the word according to the correct morpho-phonemic rule (verb stem + *-ed*). For the implications of this point for EAL/D learners, see section 4.1.

2.2 Who are EAL/D learners?

The term ‘English as an Additional Language’ (EAL) is the recent and commonly accepted term to describe English language learning by speakers of other languages in Australian school settings.¹⁵ “Additional” indicates that English may be a learner’s second, third or fourth language. The “D” is often included (as in “EAL/D”) to reference various forms of English that differ from Standard Australian English.¹⁶

The focus of this paper is students who are learning English in Australian schools from the starting point of a **language or variety (i.e. a mother tongue/ home language/ dominant language – henceforth “L1”) with a recognisably and substantively different linguistic system (phonology, syntax and semantics) from English.**

2.2.1 Main EAL/D learner groups

EAL/D learners in Australian schools are diverse. We distinguish four main EAL/D groups and indicate further significant differences within these groups.

1. EAL/D learners may be **speakers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, including First/traditional, and new Indigenous languages**, including creoles such as Yumplatok (Torres Strait Islander Creole) and Kriol.¹⁷

Speakers of **traditional languages** are likely to live in remote communities where English is not the primary language of everyday communication – it is largely confined to use in school and various official contexts.¹⁸ Here English is effectively a foreign language.

¹⁵ The question of how long it takes migrant- and refugee-background EAL learners to achieve academically in a second language has been extensively researched. Recent Australian research (Creagh, 2023; Lu et al., 2025) concurs with research from USA, Canada and the UK (Collier, 2014; Strand & Lindorff, 2020) showing a range of variables impacting time taken. For a recent American study, see: Zhang & Winke (2025). Learners starting school in Year 1 in Australia typically take all primary school to achieve at the same level as their English mother tongue peers. Those entering between Year 3 and Year 5 can reach parity within two to four years of arrival. Older learners entering school between Year 5 and Year 7 take much longer. Variability occurs because EAL learners are heterogeneous with different language skills and prior education experiences (e.g., Briguglio, 2000; Briguglio & Watson, 2014; Hessel & Strand, 2021; Mistry & Sood, 2020; Strand & Lindorff, 2020). Some older students with advanced English gained in formal schooling overseas, but with little exposure to colloquial English and Australian culture, may out-perform English mother-tongue students in formal reading and writing but struggle with the supposedly “simpler” linguistic features involved in informal tasks and the more culturally-embedded genres used in the early schooling, such as informal letter-writing. Other learners might have developed quite sophisticated proficiency and/or literacy skills in languages other than English, but know no English. Home environments that support literacy in the mother tongue vary considerably, as does the availability and quality of EAL support in schools.

¹⁶ **Standard Australian English** is the variety of spoken and written English language in Australia used in more formal settings, such as for official or public purposes, and recorded in dictionaries, style guides and grammars. It is the variety of English required for educational purposes, used in Australian government, media and law, and described in the Australian Curriculum: English. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], n.d.)

¹⁷ In describing languages spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, we have largely adopted the guidelines 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>. These are reprinted in Appendix E. Those guidelines are drawn from the following definitive sources:

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.

¹⁸ An ACTA-compiled investigation estimated there were about 27,329 Indigenous EAL/D learners enrolled in Australian Government and Catholic schools. Our figures are approximations based on Census data and ACTA estimates, because clear information is not in the public domain. https://tesol.org.au/how-many-english-as-an-additional-language-or-dialect-eal-d-learners-are-there-in-australian-schools/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

See also [National Indigenous Languages Report | Office for the Arts](#), p. 17.

New languages have arisen from contact between one or more Traditional Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Language, and English and/or other languages.¹⁹ They may be dominant in remote communities but also spoken in more urbanised settings.

Migration and relocation in Australian towns, cities and regions are increasing linguistic diversity, which includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

We note that, for First Nations students, it is important not to assume a single linguistic starting point. The relevant question is the learner's **language ecology**, that is, the particular configuration of languages that characterises the learner's family and community. These may include any combination of traditional and new languages, creoles, Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English. The National Indigenous Languages Report (Dinku et al., 2020), drawing on the *Well-being and Indigenous Language Ecologies* framework, emphasises that these configurations vary substantially across Australia. (Re Aboriginal English, see section 4.2.1).

2. EAL/D learners may also be **immigrants and refugees** from non-English speaking countries.

NEW ARRIVALS

New arrivals enter Australian schooling at *all* ages up to late teens.

These learners may or may not have gained Australian age-equivalent literacy and schooling outside Australia.

If these learners reside in major cities, they may or may not spend time in an Intensive English Unit. Those in outer suburbs and regional areas are less likely to have accessed this provision.

These learners may have some familiarity with spoken but not written English or vice versa.

These learners may include students from Pacific Islands who speak languages such as Samoan or Tongan, or creole languages such as Tok Pisin (Papua New Guinea), Pijin (Solomon Islands) and Bislama (Vanuatu).

LEARNERS BORN IN AUSTRALIA

EAL/D learners born in Australia may enter schooling with a home language as their dominant or sole language. They may or may not have had exposure to some English through siblings, other family members and the media, which may or may not be standard Australian English. Some of these learners also spend various periods in non-English speaking countries. These learners may match mother-tongue English peers in reading undemanding texts in the early years but experience challenges from mid-primary onwards as English demands increase.

Migrant/refugee-background learners born in Australia may or may not be identified for EAL support.

3. EAL learners include “**international**” / **fee-paying overseas students** from non-English speaking countries.

They are likely to have good literacy skills in the language of schooling in their own country, which may or may not be their mother tongue.

They may have some proficiency in reading English but little or no spoken English.

4. EAL learners may be **deaf and hard-of-hearing** children and children of deaf and hard-of-hearing adults for whom Australian Sign language (Auslan) is their dominant or only language. ACTA has no expertise in pedagogy for the deaf and hard-of-hearing. We hope what follows assists that specialist area but this paper does not address it.

¹⁹ From Angelo et al.:

Some of these New Indigenous Languages are widespread like Kriol and Yumplatok/Torres Strait Creole, others are more local like Yarrie Lingo, Light Warlpiri or Lockhart River Creole. While awareness and acceptance of Kriol and Yumplatok/Torres Strait Creole as full and proper languages have been growing for over four decades, recognition of other New Languages is often very recent and in many cases still developing. (p. 13)

Recommendation: Acknowledging EAL/D learners

- 1) EAL/D learners' L1 and other languages, and schooling and literacy history should be routinely documented by schools and should inform literacy teaching and assessment at all Year levels.

In section 4, we elaborate on key implications of these factors for literacy pedagogy.

2.2.2 EAL/D learners should not be residualised in policy-making

At the national level, we do not know how many EAL/D learners are in Australian schools, much less their English proficiency levels. In this respect, they are invisible.²⁰

The proxy for EAL/D learners for national policy purposes – based, for example, on NAPLAN or annual school census data – is *Language Background other than English (LBOTE)* combined with socio-economic indicators. ACTA has long campaigned against this inaccurate approach to EAL/D learning needs, because it incorporates monolingual English speakers and fluent bilinguals from bilingual English/other language households (see Rose et al. 2020).²¹ However, LBOTE data does tell us that, within the LBOTE category, EAL/D learners are predominantly in underfunded government schools (see Appendix F, Table 20). In regard to resourcing, along with their fellow public-school students, they are left behind.

State/Territory/system jurisdictions use different methods of calculating EAL/D numbers and proficiency levels. These data are rarely in the public domain. A lack of data on EAL/D proficiency levels that can be publicly scrutinised contributes to neglecting these learners and their learning needs.

In 2021, using the data we could find, ACTA estimated that approximately three quarters of a million EAL/D learners were in Australian schools.²² This number has certainly risen post-COVID. The size of this population means that EAL/D learners cannot and should not be ignored or considered as marginal or extra to so-called “mainstream” educational concerns, including in approaches to literacy learning (Burnett et al. 2019).

Diversity is the norm in 21st Century Australian schools. Policy should not designate one group of learners as the “mainstream” and treat all others as exceptions. Learning needs that are foreseeable, numerous and educationally significant should be identified from the outset in policy-making, not residualised through broad proxy categories or addressed as afterthoughts. By “residualised”, we mean the practice of designing educational provision around an assumed mainstream learner and only subsequently considering learners whose needs differ from that assumption. Policy-making and mandated literacy pedagogies must assume as ***their starting point*** a school population that is inherently diverse in language, culture, race, gender identity and cognitive and physical ability.

Equity does not mean treating all groups the same. Reviewing thirty-six peer-reviewed studies on the science of reading, Elzy-Palmer et al. (2025) argue that educational equity is too often reduced to providing all learners with the same standardised instruction, rather than recognising the different linguistic, cultural and educational circumstances that shape how students learn. They conclude that equity has been “reduced to ensuring access and creating opportunities for standardized reading instruction, rather than interrogating the systems and structures that shape literacy outcomes and expanding the inclusion of literacies and languages and the meaningful voices of historically minoritized groups” (p. 21).

²⁰ For a recent definitive account of how EAL/D learners have been erased from mainstream concerns, see Michell (2025).

²¹ For recent ACTA submissions, see:

<https://tesol.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ACTA-Submission-to-Senate-Education-Inquiry-into-the-Better-Fairer-Schools-Bill.pdf>

<https://tesol.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ACTA-Response-to-the-Better-Fairer-Consultation-Review-31-July-2023.pdf>

<https://tesol.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/ACTA-submission-Productivity-Commission-NSRA-review-final.pdf>

²² A 2021 ACTA report collating data from Commonwealth Department of Education and Training and available state and territory education system annual reports indicated that, in 2019, 15.4 per cent (n. 601,046) of the total Australian non-Indigenous student population were English language learners. The great majority were enrolled in government schools. In 2018-19, a total of 560,616 EAL/D learners consisted of:

- approximately 13,576 new arrivals
- 334,389 EAL learners in mainstream classrooms
- an estimated 27,329 Indigenous EAL learners, and
- 185,322 international students.

In the Catholic education sector, some 14,066 EAL/D migrant-background learners, plus 40,430 international students, were in mainstream classrooms.

Post-pandemic immigration makes plausible a prediction of over 800,000 school children requiring EAL support by 2026.

Response to Senate Estimates Question on Notice, SQ19-130

<https://tesol.org.au/how-many-english-as-an-additional-language-or-dialect-eal-d-learners-are-there-in-australian-schools/>

ABS Censuses 2006, 2016.

See also Preston (2018).

ACTA shares this concern. Education policies are failing to address the needs of more than three-quarters of a million EAL/D learners or, at best, are subsuming these learners within broad and partially misdirected categories, such as "disadvantaged", "vulnerable" or "culturally diverse".²³ ACTA is unimpressed by the current trend in referencing "culturally responsive curriculum and teaching",²⁴ which is silent regarding EAL/D learners' rights and distinctive needs for linguistically-informed pedagogy. The one-size-fits-all approach to literacy in *2025-2034 Better and Fairer Schools Agreement* is gravely disappointing.

2.3 Reading and learning to read English

ACTA defines reading as *understanding the meaning conveyed by/in written language*.

Learning to read is learning how written language conveys meanings.

It is possible to read in a language without knowing its phonemic system. As seen earlier (section 2.1), reading and writing Chinese requires decoding characters that bear little or no relation to how the language is spoken. People read texts in so-called "dead" languages such as Latin and ancient Greek without knowing how they sounded. Newly arrived English language learners in Australian schools with high levels of English literacy from their schooling may have little or no knowledge of how English sounds.

This fact has significant implications for assessing EAL/D learners' basic literacy (see section 6 and Appendix M).

In the Australian school context, learning to read English requires developing a range of strategies to decipher the meaning of written English words and texts. These strategies certainly include relating graphemes to phonemes, i.e. "sounding out". But, as we explore in section 4.2 below, the research tells us that other strategies are equally important and that they are learned and used in complementary and overlapping ways, not a strict sequence. Most importantly, the links that hold a word in memory are grounded in its meaning.

ACTA endorses approaches to teaching reading that develop all the strategies skilled readers use to decipher meaning from texts. ACTA does not support teaching reading in English as the conversion of graphemes into English phonemes, or vice versa, when this is divorced from understanding the meaning of what is read. In sections 4 and 5, we elaborate on what this means for EAL/D learners (see also Exley et al. 2026).

3. Approaches to teaching phonics

3.1 ACTA's approach

As stated in this paper's introduction, ACTA wholeheartedly supports the systematic teaching of sound-written symbol relationships.

A crucial distinction is between *whether* this important aspect of reading should be taught and various mandates and positions on *how* to teach it (Ahn & Sangster, 2026: 232). Regarding "how", ACTA avoids endorsing labelled pedagogic "methods" or approaches, including literacy in English.

In evaluating claims for different pedagogic methods, we consider:

THEORY

- what theoretical and pedagogic principles are explicated and/or assumed by the approach?
- are these principles grounded in solid, comprehensive and well-established theories of and knowledge about learning and language development?

EVIDENCE

- does the supporting evidence for the approach distinguish between various contexts and learners, and explicitly include EAL/D learners?

PEDAGOGY

- do the proposed teaching strategies and techniques follow from well-grounded theoretical and pedagogic principles?

REFLEXIVENESS

- are those advocating for this approach or method open to questioning, scrutiny of the approach, and responses based on lived experience of teachers and learners?

²³ For a comprehensive analysis of educational policies that residualise the fundamental diversity in Australian schools, including linguistic diversity, go to https://www.barbaraprestonresearch.com.au/social_justice.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com See also Elzy-Palmer et al. (2025).

²⁴ For the most recent example at the time of writing, see the First Nations Education Policy Discussion Paper: <https://www.education.gov.au/first-nations-education-policy>

For ACTA, a fundamental principle is that diversity should be regarded as the norm in Australian society, including its schools (see section 2.2 above). We are therefore sceptical of **any** pedagogic approach that claims universal success, claims or assumes it suits all learners, ignores different learning contexts and prescribes a single, fixed, strict and failsafe pathway to success in learning.

We discount advocacy for approaches that rest on simplistic descriptions and dichotomies – most notably in the current context, advocacy for synthetic phonics contrasted with “whole language” approaches (see section 3.2 below).

ACTA deplores the fact that literacy pedagogy and policies continue to be dogged by inflated claims and counterclaims, where one approach is seen as “a positive force” and alternatives “are maligned, creating a binary ... that hugely oversimplifies the position on both sides” (Bradbury & Wyse, 2025: 11). Oppositional claims about reading pedagogy can be traced as far back as the 16th Century (Ahn & Sangster, 2026: 231).²⁵ ACTA believes that this type of discussion does not serve the teaching profession well.

ACTA recognises that specific approaches to teaching literacy, as with all pedagogy, are never used in classrooms in isolation from the complementary and/or modifying knowledge and skills that comprise the holistic practice of teaching – that is, actual teachers working with actual learners in actual classrooms from one day to the next.²⁶ Skilled and knowledgeable teachers develop effective classroom practices that can and do draw from approaches based on conflicting principles and theories (Exley et al. 2025).²⁷

For this reason, ACTA (2015) considers initial teacher education and ongoing professional development essential, *conditional on* it building teacher professionalism that is grounded in the evaluative principles just described, and that encourages:

- diverse teaching techniques and strategies
- a willingness to try out and evaluate new ideas

and, most importantly,

- attentiveness, skill and empathy in responding to learners and context.

The main demarcation lines in current debates on literacy distinguish between “whole language” approaches, “synthetic” phonics and, to a lesser extent, “analytic” phonics.²⁸ It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the claims, counter claims, principles, evidence and practical experiences in descriptions of these approaches, all of which are vulnerable to the criticisms above. Our focus here is synthetic phonics. In the remainder of this section, we outline some distinguishing features of these three approaches as depicted in advocacy for synthetic phonics. We also summarise what ACTA takes from these approaches.

3.2 Whole language approaches

The literature advocating synthetic phonics routinely positions itself as in opposition to “whole language” approaches. This advocacy frequently describes the latter’s deficiencies in terms such as “whole word reading is a myth...the brain does not use the whole word shape” and “the unjustified Whole Language assumption that learning to read is essentially equivalent to learning to speak, and will develop as effortlessly as did speech”.²⁹ These characterisations of whole language approaches are simplistic and focussed on extreme examples.

Advocates for synthetic phonics sometimes go further, treating concerns about synthetic phonics as support for whole language approaches, or even as opposition to explicit or systematic instruction.

²⁵ Timothy Shanahan, who is often cited as a leading researcher in support of claims for synthetic phonics, has a folksy historical perspective on these oppositions:

Reading instruction over my career has tended to follow a pendulum. As interest swings one way or the other, instructional practice gets twisted out of shape.

<https://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/blog/what-do-you-think-of-phonics-first-or-phonics-only-in-the-primary-grades>

²⁶ This simple insight is from a literature that explores the relationship between theory and practice, and the notion that practice always exceeds theory. See, for example Bourdieu (1977), Schön (1983), and Schatzki (1996).

²⁷ For a helpful example of how a British school worked through issues in the implementation of synthetic phonics, see Stanyard & Ranson, (2021).

²⁸ The current focus on teaching phonics is not new. See: <https://foundationforlearningandliteracy.info/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Phonics-is-not-new-Fact-Check-May.pdf>

²⁹ Hempenstall (n.d.). This point is elaborated with reference to Goodman (1986):

The model also assumes that reading (and writing) are natural parts of the same language process which enables the development of speech. Learning to read and write would be just as effortless and universal if the tasks were made as meaningful as is learning to talk. While the vast majority of children learn to speak with reasonable facility, a sizeable proportion of children do not learn to read well. One can recognize the principle of naturally unfolding development in Goodman's (1986) explanation for the disparity in ease of acquisition between speaking and reading. According to Goodman, reading problems occur through the breaking down of what is naturally a wholistic process into subskills to be learned and synthesized.

Applied to ACTA's position on teaching phonics, these criticisms are misrepresentations. We have always critiqued assumptions that learning English, including learning to read in English, is "effortless". Our advocacy has consistently centred on EAL/D learners' need for explicit, systematic, linguistically and culturally informed pedagogies, including in literacy learning.

Where ACTA aligns with so-called "whole language" approaches is in taking **meaningful language use** as foundational to learning, including learning English and to read English. This position reflects mainstream EAL/D research and pedagogy since the late 1970s, when our field rejected the behaviorist/structuralist approaches that had dominated post-War, American-influenced language teaching (Krashen, 1982; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Hall & Verplaetse, 2000).

3.3 "Analytic" approaches

Descriptions of "analytic" approaches to literacy learning by both its advocates and critics characterise them as moving from the "whole" to the "part" (e.g. Glazzard, 2017).³⁰ Teaching starts from complete words that students already know. Words are also encountered in context (experiential, pictorial, linguistic etc) to support comprehension. Words with similar patterns and blends are grouped (e.g., *cat*, *bat*, *hat*). Students are guided to notice recurring letter-sound correspondences and patterns, and are taught to recognise and generalize phonic rules from these sets. As explained on one website:

students are encouraged to identify familiar words or patterns in text and then analyse the phonetic elements that make up those words. In other words, it emphasizes the use of context clues and sight words to support word recognition
.....³¹

An analytic instructional approach may also look at the morphemes (the meaning components) within the word. For example:

*For each grade level, use the bases students know and add on a variety of prefixes and suffixes to expand on those bases. For example, students in K-2 might explore words unlike and unhappy, and older students might explore words like unorganized [sic] and unimaginable.*³²

Advocates for synthetic phonics frequently cite research evidence that shows synthetic phonics to be superior to analytic phonics approaches, for example Buckingham's (2020) meta-analysis, which has been highly influential in Australian policy-making.³³ Some reports can be biased and emotive.³⁴ For a relatively objective summary comparison of analytic and synthetic approaches, including their respective strengths and weaknesses, see [Analytic Phonics vs Synthetic Phonics | Advanced Learning Centre](#).³⁵

The quotes above describe two fundamental principles that ACTA endorses in regard to literacy pedagogy for EAL/D learners:

- phonics teaching should be based on words learners know, and their use in familiar and understood contexts
- learners should be encouraged and taught to use multiple linguistic and contextual strategies to decode words and work out the meanings of unfamiliar words.

ACTA endorses these two principles and the possibilities they encompass. For example, these principles support integrating phonics teaching with English speaking and listening skills, pronunciation and vocabulary, which we see as fundamental to EAL/D pedagogy (see Ventriglia-Navarette & Moylan, 2025). They accommodate teaching

³⁰ See also, for example, [The Analytic Method of Teaching Phonics](#); [Phonics Approaches for Developing Analytical Readers - rtlenglish.com](#); [What is Analytic Phonics? - A Simple Explanation \(2025\)](#); [Words Their Way | Multisensory & Personalized Phonics Practice](#); [Phonics Program for Analogy Based Decoding | Free Sample by Just Ask Judy](#); [The Analytic Method of Teaching Phonics](#)

³¹ [Analytic Phonics vs Synthetic Phonics | Advanced Learning Centre](#)

For an American example of advice that is step-by-step "how to do it", go to [The Analytic Method of Teaching Phonics](#)
For a UK example that claims suitability for older learners, go to [The Analytic Method of Teaching Phonics](#)

³² [Morphology Scope and Sequence](#)

³³ Buckingham founded *Five From Five* in 2016 as part of the Centre for Independent Studis. It was acquired by Multilit in 2019 and transferred to The Academy for the Science of Instruction in 2025. <https://fivefromfive.com.au/about-five-from-five/> : <https://scienceofinstruction.com.au/>

³⁴ For example:

Traditionally, children were taught to read using 'analytic phonics'. This method has children 'analysing a word', taking clues from recognition of the whole word, the initial sound and the context. This is a hit and miss approach which encouraged guessing as a first reading strategy! It is therefore no surprise that in the USA, Australia and the UK there are significant numbers of children failing to learn to read as well as they should; 38%, 20% and 20% respectively! Synthetic Phonics on the other hand, involves no guessing! It is the synthesising, or blending of phonemes (sounds) to make a word, enabling children to read.

https://www.getreadingright.com.au/analytic-phonics-vs-synthetic-phonics/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

³⁵ See also [Analytic vs. Synthetic Phonics - What is the difference? Which one is better for your child? - Learning Reading Hub](#)

learners with diverse educational backgrounds and ages. They open the door to explicit, systematic phonics instruction across subjects such as maths, science, and daily classroom vocabulary.

3.4 Synthetic phonics

The Multitit website explains the teaching/learning process as follows:

With systematic synthetic phonics (SSP), teachers build up phonic knowledge from the smallest sub-word units — phonemes and graphemes. Phonemes and graphemes are taught in a carefully planned sequence, usually beginning with a selection of vowels and consonants that can be used to make numerous simple words, for example a, m, s, t, i, p. The exact number of letters is not important — not so few that it is difficult to make words, but not so many that it overloads working memory. In SSP, the processes of blending (“What word do these sounds make when we put them together: mmm-aaa-p?”), and segmenting (“Sound out this word for me: sit”) are taught early and intensively. New graphemes are introduced cumulatively and quickly with regular revision, practice and formative assessment — this is the systematic element. Common digraphs (two letters that make one sound) such as /sh/ are often introduced early in the sequence to allow children to read a wide variety of words as quickly as possible. Instruction is explicit, meaning that children are first directly taught the letters and sounds, which are then embedded in the context of meaningful words and sentences.³⁶

Different synthetic phonics programs prescribe somewhat different sequences for teaching these relationships. *Letters and Sounds* introduces s, a, t, p, i, n as the first graphemes, whilst *Read Write Inc* begins with m, a, s, d. Empirical evidence is lacking regarding the effectiveness of teaching grapheme/phoneme relationships in any particular sequence (Mesmer, 2019; Cochrane & Brooks, 2022).

Synthetic phonics focuses on the process of converting and combining graphemes (letters) into phonemes that make up a word, and vice versa. This process is termed “decoding”. Skills in decoding are demonstrated by the learner saying a word. Decoding is contrasted with “guessing”.

For example, the *Letters and Sounds* website states:

It is essential not to use other strategies to work out words (including ... guessing words, deducing meaning from pictures, grammar, context clues or whole word recognition).³⁷

From the *Sounds Right* website:

We don’t encourage guessing, looking at pictures, or using context to try and work out what a word is.³⁸

See section 4.3 below for ACTA’s different understanding of “decoding”.

ACTA endorses the following principles advanced by advocates for synthetic phonics:

- English phoneme-grapheme relationships should be explicitly taught
- these relationships should be taught systematically and extensively practised
- a teaching sequence should progress from the simple to the more complex.

We also endorse a notion of “systematic” that includes fostering teachers’ understandings of literacy and language development. We support whole-school endeavours to develop common, accurate, evidence-informed and explicit language for describing educational goals, student learning outcomes, linguistic concepts and pedagogic strategies for teaching English as an additional language or dialect, including English phonics.

However, ACTA finds the synthetic phonics approaches exemplified in the materials we have examined overly restrictive – especially in various practical interpretations of “explicit”, “systematic” and “decoding”.

We do not endorse the following practices associated with synthetic phonics shown in Table 4.

³⁶ Multitit - Five from Five. Research Brief 2. Systematic Synthetic Phonics.

See also the Five From Five website:

Instruction is systematic and sequential, building up from the simplest and most common GPCs (grapheme-phoneme correspondences) to more complex and less common GPCs. Synthetic doesn’t mean unnatural or fake, synthetic refers to synthesising or combining separate elements (GPCs) to form a coherent whole (words). The sequence in synthetic phonics is carefully planned to minimise confusion and to achieve decoding quickly. Students learn to link graphemes to phonemes and vice versa, and blend (synthesise) these sounds together to read words. They learn to segment words into the separate speech sounds and link these to the appropriate GPCs for spelling. Blending and segmenting are introduced early.

<https://fivefromfive.com.au/phonics-teaching/approaches-to-phonics-instruction/>

³⁷ https://lettersandsoundsphonics.com/about?utm_source=chatgpt.com

From the Sounds Right website [Our Pedagogy - Sounds-Write](#):

We don’t encourage guessing, looking at pictures, or using context to try and work out what a word is.

³⁸ [Our Pedagogy - Sounds-Write](#)

Table 4: ACTA's position regarding various practices associated with synthetic phonics³⁹

PRACTICES ASSOCIATED WITH SYNTHETIC PHONICS APPROACHES	ACTA'S POSITION
"Systematic" is interpreted to mean that phoneme-grapheme relationships must be taught in a prescribed sequence.	We support planning and sequencing content for teaching and practice. However, a teacher might choose a particular sequence of phoneme/grapheme relationships for systematic focus that responds to context and accords with broader reading goals. By context, we mean, for example, variables such as learners' ages, extent of familiarity with spoken English and literacy needs (see sections 2.2, 4.1 and 5.5).
"Decoding" is interpreted to mean matching graphemes (or grapheme clusters) to phonemes without reference to other skills or knowledge.	ACTA does not endorse teaching EAL/D learners to rely solely or primarily on sounding out letters (or "blends") to read English words, because it is inefficient and unreliable (see sections 2.1, 4.3, 5.5 & 5.6). "Decoding" written English is a complex, co-ordinated process (see section 4.3). ACTA supports the explicit, systematic and staged teaching of multiple decoding strategies in developing early phonic and other literacy skills. Explicit and systematic teaching includes building and practising skills both separately and in concert but never privileging one above the other. We endorse this statement of principle by the American National Committee for Effective Literacy: <i>In a comprehensive approach, all of these components are important. Each supports the others. No component alone constitutes a reasonable reading or literacy approach. Altogether, it is the integration of all of the elements, the coherence and alignment of the approach over years, and the responsiveness of instruction to student need that add up to effectiveness for English learners</i> (National Committee for Effective Literacy [NCEL], 2022).
"Decoding" and "systematic" are interpreted to require teachers to discourage learners from guessing a word or relying on contextual cues.	The dichotomy between "guessing" and "decoding" is false (see section 4.3). <i>Guessing</i> is a misleading and deprecatory synonym for <i>predicting</i> , which is an essential reading skill. Using context to work out what an unfamiliar word means is an essential reading skill. A key reading strategy is "fast mapping", that is, predicting a word's meaning from context (including the reader's existing content knowledge, and syntactic, semantic, discourse, pragmatic or visual clues) and modifying that prediction on the basis of further information that might come equally from any of these same sources (Cain & Oakhill, 2011; Nation, 2001). Guessing does not preclude attention to learning phoneme-grapheme relationships and can be used as an entry-point to understanding them. For EAL/D learners, who meet many words they do not yet know, guessing is one of the main ways vocabulary grows through reading, once they know nearly all the surrounding words (Nation, 2001; Cain, Oakhill & Lemmon, 2004). Context also lets any reader check that a word they have decoded makes sense (Ehri, 2014, pp. 7-8).
"Decoding" and "systematic" are interpreted to mean that word meanings can be excluded in teaching and assessing phonic skills.	ACTA does not endorse using pseudo-words for teaching or assessing phonic skills with EAL/D learners. A basic principle is that <i>all</i> teaching and learning in <i>all</i> areas of schooling should rest on the meaningful use of language. Excluding meaning from literacy teaching techniques excludes the fundamental rationale for decoding and learning to decode written language. (See sections 2.3, 4.3, 5.6 and 6).
"Systematic" and "explicit" are interpreted to require teacher scripts and "mastery learning".	ACTA does not endorse "mastery learning" and teacher scripts if they require teachers to follow a sequence that excludes other reading strategies until a given phoneme-grapheme relationship is mastered. We are appalled by reports from at least one jurisdiction that the requirement to use teacher scripts is preventing teachers from answering student questions. ACTA endorses careful lesson planning, including lessons that sequence content in a systematic way. Essential to delivering well-planned lessons is a knowledgeable, well-trained teacher whose planning includes predicting possible learner responses and who can flexibly acknowledge and build from what happens in her classroom (see section 3.1). Student questions are invaluable teaching moments. Unexpected and seemingly "incorrect" answers and interpretations are opportunities for the teacher to probe the learner's thinking. Rather than correcting a learner or repeating a teaching point, as is advised in some scripts, a more productive strategy is to ask or seek to find out "Why did you say that?", and to use the learner's understanding as a stepping off point for targeted teaching. (See also Exley, B. et al. 2025.) Of course, knowledgeable and well-trained teachers can use teacher scripts to assist lesson planning. Our objection is to their rigidity and their potential to support "tick and flick" teaching and assessments of student learning.
"Decoding" is interpreted to mean that learners' ability to read a word should be assessed by them <i>saying</i> words aloud.	This assessment technique conflates <i>saying</i> a word with <i>reading</i> a word. It is entirely possible to read and understand English words and texts without knowing how English words sound (see section 2.1). The EAL/D learner may be a fluent reader (or even a beginner reader) but not have the spoken English to say a word correctly. When learners use their L1 phonemic systems to say printed English words, their pronunciation is open to be assessed as misreadings. For this reason, currently mandated Phonics Checks are invalid and unreliable if used with EAL/D learners (see section 6 and Appendix M).

3.5 Concluding observations

Both synthetic and analytic approaches claim to teach phonics systematically and explicitly. Both have also appropriated the adjectives "systematic" and "explicit" to imply each approach is its sole exemplar. In fact, explicit, systematic teaching can occur using many approaches to teaching literacy, including whole language approaches.

³⁹ Not all approaches adopt all these practices. For details, see section 5.

Synthetic phonics programs currently dominate early literacy teaching. The large investments entailed in the purchase of commercial packages can motivate *post hoc* claims for their effectiveness. Recent research suggests that “claims of ‘transformational’ school reading improvement using these programs are premature” (Milne, 2025; Foundation for Learning & Literacy, 2021). Such claims should be treated with caution.

In comparison, descriptions of analytic approaches and programs are less numerous, harder to locate, and tend to be less comprehensive and visually attractive.

ACTA endorses the warnings by some researchers that what “works” for young English-speaking literacy learners should not be assumed to apply EAL/D learners (de Jong & Herrera, 2024).⁴⁰ To our knowledge, and irrespective of the claims for *any* approach, research has yet to systematically and comprehensively investigate the effectiveness of available commercial literacy packages with EAL/D learners (Shanahan, 2025, Brooks, 2022, Burnett et al, 2020).

4. Teaching EAL/D learners to read in English: Key issues

4.1 Sound systems differ

Elaborating on the basic concepts outlined in section 2.1, here we explore the implications of learning to read English when the starting point is a different sound system.

By age five, children have developed comprehensive phonological systems in their first language unless they have specific developmental or physical issues such as hearing impairment. Just as native English speakers have in English, EAL/D learners command a defined inventory of L1 phonemes; they can understand and produce the contrasts that signal meaning; and they have implicit knowledge of the rules governing sound combinations and the stress and syllable patterns in words and connected speech.

When EAL/D learners do not hear or produce certain English sounds, this does not indicate deafness, speech defects, a lack of phonemic awareness or inability to decode written text.⁴¹ Rather, learners are applying their existing linguistic knowledge to a new language with different rules. Their L1 system shapes how English sounds are perceived, spoken and mapped to and from print.

Teachers of EAL/D learners need to understand how sound systems can differ across languages and how these differences can play out for their learners. Knowledge about English phonology is essential for systematic, explicit teaching of all four macro-skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), providing enjoyable and productive practice opportunities, and undertaking accurate assessments.

Here are some phonological basics that all teachers and assessors of EAL/D learners should understand. We note that the Year 1 Phonics Check exemplified on the Literacy Hub reflects profound ignorance of these basics (see section 6 and Appendix M).

4.1.1 Learners are encountering new phonemes

Every language contains unique phonemes that are absent from other languages. English sounds like /w/ and the “th” sounds are rare globally, while the click consonants common in Southern and East African languages do not exist in English. Modern Standard Arabic does not have the English /p/ sound (as in “pin”). Some languages do not have diphthongs (e.g. Spanish, Finnish and Māori), that is, a phoneme made by the tongue moving from one position to another.⁴²

⁴⁰ De Jong and Herrera (2024) state:

Caution is needed to ensure that recommendations from native speaker studies are not uncritically extrapolated to what works for students learning to read in English as an additional language. A recent joint statement by the Reading League and NCEL underscores the importance of explicitly addressing English learners (ELs) when considering implications for policy and practice. Educators and policy makers must ask what we know about teaching reading to ELs based on studies that have been designed to specifically examine how ELs learn to read in English as an additional language. We can then talk in an informed way about what practices work for ELs/EBs and to what extent these align with and/or diverge from what we do for native English speakers.

⁴¹ For a report on EAL/D learners with additional needs, see Cassidy, S. (2024). *Dorothy and Brian Wilson Churchill Fellowship to explore impactful and equitable processes to support the learning of refugee-background students* [Churchill Fellowship report]. The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust. Retrieved from <https://www.churchilltrust.com.au/project/dorothy-and-brian-wilson-churchill-fellowship-to-explore-impactful-and-equitable-processes-to-support-the-learning-of-refugee-background-students/>
The report is based on visiting the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland to learn how systems there identify and respond to the intersecting needs of English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners who may have additional learning needs. The findings aim to inform systemic changes and practical strategies that can be applied in Australian educational contexts to better support this diverse group of learners.

⁴² Note: a diphthong is **not** two vowels combined. It is a single sound. See Appendix C and footnote 67.

When EAL/D learners say an English phoneme incorrectly in reading a word aloud, they may be able to read and understand the word perfectly but simply not have this phoneme in their L1. Teachers and assessors should investigate whether this sound exists in the learner's first language and in what position in a word (see phonotactic rules below). A useful diagnostic is for the teacher/assessor to say a word containing this sound and ask the learner to repeat the word.

Take-out: EAL/D learners can often recognize new phonemes represented in written form before being able to say them.

4.1.2 Learners are encountering new phonemic distinctions

Languages distinguish between sounds differently. English differentiates between /ʃ/ (= “sh” as in “ship”) and /s/ (as in “sip”) to make meaning. Many other languages (e.g. Dinka, Karen, Spanish and Chinese) do not use this distinction. In English, /b/ is distinguished from /v/ (to make, for example, the different words “bowel” and “vowel”), while Arabic has one sound between these two. Japanese has a phoneme that is between how English speakers say /l/ and /r/.

Where a phonemic distinction between closely articulated sounds occurs in a given language, speakers of other languages have difficulty in hearing and pronouncing these phonemes. For example, Mandarin Chinese contrasts three similar sibilant consonants that English does not distinguish. English learners of Chinese often have difficulty perceiving and producing these consonants. Conversely, many English language learners have difficulty hearing and producing the difference between /w/ and /v/, or /t/ and the “th” sound /θ/.

Take-out: EAL/D learners may understand what two different English graphemes represent long before they can hear or produce the phonemic distinction between them. The fact that learners cannot hear the difference between some English phonemes does not mean they are deaf. The fact that they pronounce two different graphemes the same way does not mean they cannot read and understand the meanings that these graphemes signify in English.

4.1.3 Learners are encountering different phonotactic rules and allophonic variations

Languages impose specific rules (termed “**phonotactic rules**”) about phoneme placement and combinations within words. Japanese permits /n/ only as a word final consonant, while Chinese allows /n/ and /ŋ/ (= “ng” as in “sing”) only in word final position. Spanish prohibits words beginning with /s/ followed by consonant clusters. Conversely, English does not permit /ŋ/ as the first sound in a word.

When EAL/D learners encounter phonemes in positions forbidden by their first language, they often add vowels: “street” becomes /æstri:t/ or “desk” becomes /desku/. This can affect morphological markers like -ed verb endings or plural /s/ sounds.

Take-out: dropped consonant endings when reading words aloud do not necessarily indicate comprehension failure.

English allophonic variation presents a similar challenge for learners. That is, the same phoneme is pronounced differently in different positions in the word. For example, in English the /p/ in “pin” differs from the /p/ in “nip”: in initial word position the /p/ must be followed by a little puff of air (termed “aspiration”); this is absent in word final position in connected speech. This rule also applies to /t/ and /k/. Many other languages do not have this particular variation. Nor do some varieties of Aboriginal English (Malcolm & Sharifian, 2002; Malcolm et al. 1999). When learners pronounce /p/, /t/ and /k/ without aspiration in initial word position, English speakers are likely to mishear them as their voiced counterparts (/b/, /d/, /g/) and misunderstand the speaker's meaning.

Most English speakers, including teachers, are unaware of allophonic variation, yet non-native speakers often hear it clearly and wonder why spelling does not represent it. Demonstrating phoneme/grapheme relationships with isolated phonemes is unlikely to help reading or pronunciation.

Take-out: Explicit teaching and accurate assessment require teachers and assessors to understand English allophonic rules.

4.1.4 Learners are encountering new stress and intonation patterns

Stress and intonation have a major impact on how native speakers of any language understand what is said. This is rarely represented in writing.

Most notably in English, the vowels in unstressed syllables are often pronounced as a neutral central vowel, symbolised /ə/ and known as “schwa”. For example, the vowel in the first syllable of “tomato” and the last syllable of “department” is /ə/.

Many English native speakers, including teachers, are unaware of this fact. They think they hear the full vowel but that is not what they and others actually say. Some English speakers, including teachers, describe using schwa as lazy pronunciation. But its correct use is crucial to understanding and speaking English by both native speakers and EAL/D learners.

Learning where the stress falls in multisyllabic words cannot be done by sounding out individual phonemes, because unstressed syllables will frequently include schwa. This has important implications for teaching and assessment: If the learner says a full vowel where schwa is required, an assessor may hear a different word.

Take-out: When learners are taught to “sound out” all the graphemes that represent English vowels as “full” vowels, it is quite difficult to unlearn and is commonly a hindrance to being understood.

4.1.5 English accents

English graphemes represent English phonemes irrespective of English regional and international accents (Melchers et al. 2026; Nelson et al. 2020). Cockney and Northern English speakers pronounce “bath” as “barf” (=ba:f/) or “baff” and not with the standard “th” (/θ/) sound taught in phonics programs, yet they understand the grapheme-phoneme relationship. Similarly, Irish English speakers may pronounce “th” as /t/, while American English pronounces /r/ in “hard” where Australian English does not.

Phonics programs normally teach one pronunciation for each phoneme or cluster. The phonics programs we reviewed do not reference English accents. To our knowledge, none provide advice on how teachers should respond to different varieties of English pronunciation, including First Nations varieties and Pasifika creoles. (See also sections 2.2 and 4.2.1).

ACTA endorses teaching General Australian English pronunciation to migrant-background EAL/D learners for use in formal situations.⁴³ For an extensive and nuanced analysis of this issue, see Ahn and Sangster (2026).

Take-out: Teachers should take care in how they teach and convey particular judgements about accents. They would be assisted by professional development about language variation, diversity and how these relate to identity.⁴⁴ Differences from General Australian English should not be treated as errors, evidence of inadequate English or an inability to switch in formal contexts.

4.2 Starting points for learning to read English

Learning to read in one’s mother tongue and learning to read in a new language have different starting points. The linguistic, literacy and educational resources that learners bring to the task must be identified rather than assumed.

4.2.1 Learning to read in the mother tongue

When learners begin formal reading instruction in a language in which they are already orally proficient, usually their first language/mother tongue, they possess substantial linguistic knowledge.

Because English spelling is probabilistic rather than fully transparent (see section 2.1.5), learning to read English is not straightforward. Even for mother tongue speakers, it is more demanding than learning to read languages with more consistent spelling systems. It involves building a complex system of connections between spoken

⁴³ Australian English pronunciation (as distinct from grammar) is recognised as falling into three broad types:

VARIETY	TYPICAL CONTEXT	PRONUNCIATION TRAITS
Broad Australian	Strongly local, informal	Distinctive vowels; “stereotypical Aussie”
General Australian	Most common, media, urban	Neutral, standard
Cultivated Australian	Formal, older	Closer to British RP
Ethnocultural / Aboriginal English	Cultural communities	Subtle phonetic variation

⁴⁴ Ahn and Sangster (2026: 236) state:

Phonics training should explicitly address phonological variation across Englishes so teachers can respond with confidence to the diversity of speech in their classrooms. Teachers require an awareness of how English phonemes vary across regional, national, and global varieties, as well as an understanding that accurate decoding may be realised differently across accents and that such variation does not necessarily signal a decoding deficit. Teacher preparation can incorporate real-world examples demonstrating that decoding may remain accurate even when spoken output differs from a given institutional or policy preferred pronunciation model. ...

These patterns are systematic, yet teachers and teacher education programmes operating in contexts where SP is promoted through policy often receive little guidance on how to interpret such variation. Without such guidance, students’ decoding may be incorrectly judged when their oral production is compared against a single pronunciation model. Crucially, the purpose of phonics is to support reading development and GP knowledge, not to promote accent conformity. Teacher preparation should therefore emphasise that pronunciation variation is a normal and systematic feature of English and does not necessarily indicate inaccurate decoding.

English, written forms and meaning. Sounding out a word in part or whole is important for mother tongue English speakers when encountering unfamiliar words in print, but it is not the whole of reading.

English mother-tongue children in Australia typically begin school with implicit knowledge of English phonology, including its phonemic and syllabic patterns, together with its syntax, word order, inflections, grammatical morphemes and vocabulary (Werker & Tees, 1984; Harris, J., 1994; Maye, Werker & Gerken, 2002; Kuhl 2004; Kuhl et al. 2008; So & Best, 2010; Snow. 2020).⁴⁵ Their existing linguistic knowledge supports the development of phonemic awareness and helps them interpret and self-correct what they encounter in print. For example, they are likely to know how syllables are conventionally organised in words such as “*mo / tel*” (not *mot / el*), “*some*” (not *so / me*) and “*oth / er*” (not *ot / her*). Their knowledge of English enables them to recognise and interpret pronunciations that do not follow simple grapheme-phoneme correspondences, such as “*of*” /ov/, “*dogs*” /dogz/ and “*soften*” /sɒfən/.

Vocabulary knowledge is critically related to phonemic awareness, word reading and comprehension. It also helps learners recognise and interpret words whose pronunciation does not follow simple grapheme–phoneme correspondences. Typically, a 5-year-old native English speaker beginning school has a vocabulary of about 4,000-5,000 word families and a receptive vocabulary of approximately 10,000-14,500 word families (where a word family includes a base word and basic derived forms) (Biemiller, 2005; Huttenlocher et al., 1991; Lightbown & Spada, 2021; Nation et al., 1997; Nation, 2006; Shipley & McAfee, 2015). Longitudinal research suggests that school-age English mother-tongue children add roughly 3,000-4,000 word families annually, although vocabulary development varies considerably according to socioeconomic and experiential factors (Graves, 2006; Kim, 2017; Stahl & Nagy, 2006; White et al., 1990).

All readers draw on phonological, morphological, grammatical and contextual knowledge to interpret and confirm meanings. About 80% of English words are multimorphemic, making knowledge of morphology increasingly important beyond the early years as academic literacy demands (Levesque et al., 2021). By Year 5, children may encounter approximately 27 new words a day that cannot be read or spelled through phonological processing alone (Mann & Singson, 2003). Each new school year also requires substantial vocabulary growth (Sedita, 2005).

For children who already speak English, the initial task is principally to learn how their spoken language is represented in writing: **early reading involves mapping print onto an already-known language**. 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 (Ehri, 2005, 2014, 2020; Perfetti & Hart, 2002). With exposure and practice, reading words becomes increasingly automatic as spelling, pronunciation and meaning become securely connected.

4.2.2 First Nations learners: bilingual/two-way literacy learning, Aboriginal English and linguistic diversity

It is well-established that literacy is most effectively learned in a language in which learners are orally fluent, typically the mother tongue, home language or L1 (Ball, 2011; Campbell Collaboration, 2023; Cummins, 2000; Heugh et al., 2006; Jhingran, 2019; Owusu Addo, Awortwi, & Osei Bonsu, 2020; Piper & Miksic, 2011; RESEP, 2026; RTI International, 2019; UNESCO, 2016, 2019; World Bank, 2005; Ximenes, 2025.)⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Prosody learning begins in the womb. From ChatGPT (14/10/2025):

The foetal auditory system is functional in late pregnancy (third trimester), and fetuses are exposed to filtered speech (mother's voice and prosodic contours) through the maternal tissues. Multiple experimental paradigms (newborn preference tests, foetal heart-rate/ultrasound responses, and controlled prenatal exposure experiments) show fetuses/newborns recognize maternal voice, passages or melodies heard prenatally, and discriminate rhythmic/intonational properties of language. Collectively, these results support that learning of stress/intonation/rhythm begins in utero.

See also DeCasper & Spence (1986); DeCasper & Fifer (1980); Mehler et al. (1988); Moon et al. (1993). Hepper (1991); Vouloumanos, & Waxman (2017).

⁴⁶ Cummins, J. (2000) presents theory and evidence that strong first-language skills support second-language academic achievement and cognitive transfer.

Heugh, K., et al. (2006) documents that mother-tongue and bilingual programs improve literacy outcomes compared to immediate instruction in a foreign language.

Thomas, W. P., & Collier, V. P. (2002) is a landmark longitudinal study showing that students in strong bilingual/mother-tongue-based programs outperform English-only immersion students in K–12 academic achievement.

UNESCO (2016) provides Global evidence that early education in the mother tongue improves comprehension, reduces dropout rates, and boosts learning outcomes.

World Bank (2005) policy brief demonstrates that mother-tongue instruction increases enrolment, reduces repetition/dropout, and improves primary literacy.

Equity principles demand that First Nations EAL/D learners in communities where English is effectively a foreign language should be offered the same advantage available to English mother-tongue literacy learners: the opportunity to learn initial literacy in the language they speak and understand.

This principle informed the development of bilingual approaches to literacy learning in many countries, including bilingual programs developed in remote Indigenous community schools in Australia during the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the Northern Territory. Evidence for their success has been documented (e.g. Devlin et al., 2017). The subsequent shift to English-only literacy learning followed a political crisis, rather than a demonstrated failure of bilingual education (Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, 2007). Underfunded remnants of bilingual approaches remain in nine Northern Territory schools.⁴⁷

Bilingual/two-way approaches are generally not feasible in urban schools with mixed language-background populations. Recent work on translanguaging, however, points to multiple ways in which learners' languages can be incorporated in specialist EAL/D and mainstream classrooms, including in the teaching of initial literacy.⁴⁸

A single linguistic starting point must not be assumed for First Nations students, including students who are not EAL/D learners. This is particularly important for speakers of Aboriginal English.

Aboriginal English is an established and systematic variety of English spoken by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It has distinctive phonological, grammatical, lexical and pragmatic features and is not uniform across Australia. It displays regional and community variation and exists within diverse multilingual ecologies that may also include traditional languages, creoles and varieties of Standard Australian English (Angelo et al., 2019; Eades, 2013; Kaldor & Malcolm, 1982; Malcolm & Kosciielecki, 1997; Malcolm, 2018; Rodriguez Louro, 2016).

Aboriginal English may be a primary home language for some students; for others, it may coexist with one or more traditional languages, creoles or varieties of Standard Australian English. It exists within diverse multilingual ecologies (Angelo et al. 2019). Differences from Standard Australian English are not evidence of linguistic deficiency. Aboriginal English pronunciations, grammar and vocabulary should be recognised and respected in the same way as other English accents and varieties (see section 4.1.5).

The appropriate educational response is to identify and build on the linguistic resources learners bring to school, while explicitly teaching the features of Standard Australian English that learners need for educational success (Angelo et al. 2022; Steele, et al. 2025). Effective literacy teaching must distinguish linguistic difference from linguistic deficit.

This issue is also relevant to the use of standardised pronunciation models in phonics teaching. Ahn and Sangster (2026) argue that phonics instruction is likely to rely on a single socially privileged pronunciation model, potentially evaluating students and teachers according to how closely their oral output aligns with that model rather than according to their underlying knowledge of grapheme–phoneme relationships. Such assumptions are not linguistically inevitable; they are historically and culturally inherited and may reinforce linguistic inequality. This insight has implications for the increasing linguistically diverse teaching force, and the contribution of both migrant-background and Indigenous teachers and Assistant teachers.⁴⁹

Recognising and supporting the place of Indigenous languages, Kriols and Aboriginal Englishes in students' (and teachers') linguistic repertoire is not an alternative to teaching Standard Australian English. It follows the principle of understanding what learners already know and enabling them to add to, rather than replace, their existing linguistic resources.

⁴⁷ See Problem 4 in the ATEsol NT supplementary submission to the 2021 Adult Literacy Inquiry: <https://atesolnt.org.au/advocacy-atesol-nt-submission-to-adult-literacy-inquiry/>

⁴⁸ The Reference list below includes a separate section on translanguaging.

⁴⁹ Anh & Sangster point out:

In Western Australia, applications are accepted from internationally trained teachers in the U.K., Ireland, Canada, and South Africa, contexts where GPCs may look and sound different from those in Standard Australian English (Department of Education WA, n.d.). ... Teachers with "accents" face additional challenges. Some teachers may feel pressured to align their pronunciation with perceived standard forms when modelling phonemes, even when such modifications may be unnecessary or counterproductive. Expecting teachers to suppress their linguistic identities for the sake of conformity perpetuates the ideology of a single legitimate version of English sounds and may undermine both inclusivity and linguistic authenticity in the classroom. Crucially, such expectations are not required in supporting the development of decoding skills but instead uphold pronunciation norms unrelated to the core instructional goal of phonics, namely, to support reading (p. 235).

Recommendations: First Nations EAL/D learners

- 2) The forthcoming First Nations Education Policy⁵⁰ should:
 - a. make the strengthening and extension of bilingual, two-way programs for First Nations EAL/D learners a priority recommendation
 - b. recommend the commissioning of resources for teachers with First Nations speakers' of First/traditional and new Indigenous languages and Aboriginal Englishes, including guidance in teaching basic literacy.
- 3) Phonics teaching, assessment and teacher resources should explicitly recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Kriols and Aboriginal Englishes as systematic linguistic systems.

See also Appendix B, recommendations 12 and 13.

4.2.2 EAL/D learners with literacy in their mother tongue or the language of previous schooling

EAL/D learners who have gained literacy in their mother tongue or the language of previous schooling bring substantial knowledge about literacy to the task of reading English. Second-language reading research has shown that EAL/D readers inevitably draw upon multiple linguistic and cognitive resources as they read (Bakhshalinezhad et al., 2015; McKeown & Gentilucci, 2007; Pattapong, 2022; Thu & Truong, 2022).⁵¹ In reading English, they draw on what they know from their first and possibly other languages. They know that writing represents language, that print has direction, that words have boundaries and that phonemes relate to graphemes. They bring strategic reading behaviours such as monitoring meaning and rereading. They can see cross-linguistic similarities and differences.

These learners are therefore **not new to reading; they are new to English**. Their principal additional task is to develop the English language knowledge that enables them to apply their existing literacy knowledge to English print. This includes English phonology, vocabulary, morphology, syntax and discourse, together with awareness of relevant differences between English and their other languages. It follows that speaking and listening in English requires systematic and explicit attention alongside the development of literacy skills.

Phonics instruction cannot be separated from the development of the English language knowledge that gives written forms meaning. EAL/D pedagogy consequently emphasises *message abundance*: providing multiple, complementary sources of meaning through visuals, gestures, real objects, demonstrations, repetition and contextual support (Gibbons, 2015). Such supports help learners connect spoken and written English with meaning and strengthen vocabulary learning and phonological representations.

A phonics approach that prioritises only one component of the English writing system – the sequence of graphemes and their relationship to individual phonemes through letter-by-letter sounding out – is therefore insufficient for EAL/D learners. They need systematic and explicit instruction in phonics **concurrent with** the vocabulary, morphology, grammar, discourse and cross-linguistic knowledge required to interpret what they are reading.

4.2.3 EAL/D learners with minimal/no literacy in any language

EAL/D learners who have not developed literacy in any language face a different challenge. They do not have a prior literacy schema from which to draw and are simultaneously learning a new language and learning how to read.

This double load requires them to learn English sounds, phoneme segmentation, vocabulary, grammar, discourse patterns and meanings while also learning how these are represented in writing. They are also learning the conventions and practices of formal education, including how to participate in classroom learning and how to learn within a school context.

EAL/D learners with little or no previous exposure to literacy, at whatever age, are likely to benefit most from gaining literacy through their home language. Where this is not possible, they may not demonstrate age-normed literacy skills. This should not be interpreted as evidence of cognitive deficit. Such learners require time and specialist EAL/D teaching that develops oral English in conjunction with carefully staged exposure to written English.

⁵⁰ <https://www.education.gov.au/first-nations-education-policy>

⁵¹ For further details on the contents of these references, see Appendix H.

Recommendations following from section 4

Teaching EAL/D learners reading and writing in English

- 4) The explicit and systematic teaching of the English phonic system must occur in contexts that are meaning-rich and maximally supportive of expanding learners' vocabulary.
- 5) As appropriate to the learner's age, previous schooling and the language ecology of the learner's home and school environment, teaching English phonics should be part of a systematic and integrated approach to developing the learner's command of oral English (listening and speaking), including expanding and consolidating the learner's English vocabulary.
- 6) Writing should be integrated with oral English development (speaking and listening), gaining control of English grammar, expanding vocabulary, reading for enjoyment and personal expression.

Teacher education

- 7) The accreditation of initial teaching qualifications should require the inclusion of linguistically valid phonological content, including cross-language comparisons, in their literacy learning components.
- 8) This content should be mandatory in all specialist EAL/D qualifications and taught in increasing depth from certificate to post-graduate degree level.

Teacher professional development

- 9) It should be standard, routine practice for jurisdictions to provide and update teachers with:
 - a. accurate advice on the nature of phonemic systems in general and, wherever possible, relevant features of the phonological systems of the EAL/D learners they currently teach
 - b. face-to-face professional development in:
 - c. EAL/D-informed use and adaption of commercially produced resources for teaching literacy
 - d. how to investigate why an EAL/D learner is challenged in hearing and producing particular English phonemes, and distinguishing between them
 - e. appropriate and enjoyable listening activities in distinguishing English phonemes in meaningful contexts (e.g. age-appropriate games and rhymes)
 - f. strategies for teaching English pronunciation, stress, rhythm and intonation.

5. To what extent do the six synthetic phonics resources take account of EAL/D learning needs?

5.1 Overview

In published advocacy and resource packages for synthetic phonics, the key distinctions are between fluent, developing and struggling readers. Reference to EAL/D learners varies as follows:

- (i) EAL/D learners are not mentioned.
- (ii) The resource is claimed to work for everyone including EAL/D learners, but there is little or no EAL/D-related advice to teachers or explicit EAL/D consideration.
- (iii) The package includes supplementary resources for parents of EAL/D learners, for example, advice about synthetic phonics and/or dual language readers for parents to read with their children. It includes little or no explicit EAL/D provision or EAL/D-related advice to teachers.
- (iv) Some explicit attention is given to EAL/D learners. This ranges from alerting teachers to place EAL/D learners "in the correct group", to short FAQs re EAL-specific needs, to weblinks to more comprehensive advice.
- (v) It is claimed that the literacy resources include meeting EAL/D learners' needs.

When acknowledged, EAL/D learners are routinely located within the "struggling" group.

Regarding the six resources we reviewed, Table 6 details provision for EAL/D learners (and elaborates on section 1.3, Table 2 above).

Table 5: Inclusion of EAL/D learning needs in the six reviewed resources

PROGRAM	CLAIMS RE EAL/D LEARNERS	NOTES
Letters and Sounds	Claims to work equally for all learners; provides a link to general advice on awareness from the UK Department for Education.	Does not frame EAL learners as a distinct pedagogical group. Early guidance documents state that phonics teaching “benefits all children, including those learning EAL”, but provide no EAL/D-specific adaptations, no guidance on L1, oral English development or interrupted schooling.
Read Write Inc. (RWI)	Claims that it supports “all children to learn to read”, including children who are new to English.	Mentions EAL learners in FAQs, blogs and guidance materials. Emphasis is on placing EAL learners in the “correct phonics group” based on decoding ability, with reassurance that phonics is effective for them. Includes some acknowledgement of oral language and vocabulary needs through vocabulary teaching, oral rehearsal and visual scaffolding. However, there is no separate EAL/D instructional pathway or systematic integration of second-language acquisition principles.
Jolly Phonics	Claims that its preparatory <i>Jolly English</i> program is designed for children learning English as an additional or second language, introducing English through vocabulary, songs, stories and activities that develop listening and speaking skills alongside preparation for phonics.	Provides more explicit acknowledgement of children learning English than many phonics programs. Visual supports, repetition, songs and stories may assist learners acquiring English; however, these generally support access to phonics instruction rather than constitute a systematic English language development program. Includes parent guidance, translated materials and advice for families using English as an additional language.
MultiLit suite	Claims to include all learners and to provide evidence-based programs addressing the needs of struggling readers, including EAL/D learners.	EAL/D learners are acknowledged within the broader category of learners requiring literacy support. The <i>LanguageLift</i> component specifically targets oral language development for students with language and literacy needs, including EAL/D learners. It identifies EAL/D learners as users where English exposure is sufficient (e.g., learners with 12 months or more exposure to English). Within the broader MultiLit suite, EAL/D learners are often conceptualised through a literacy intervention lens, with oral English development treated as a support for literacy acquisition rather than as an integrated second-language learning process.
Promoting Literacy Development	Demonstrates explicit attention to EAL/D learners and identifies them as a group requiring consideration in literacy planning.	Explicitly acknowledges EAL/D learners in guidance and professional learning. Advises teachers to consider oral language development, English exposure and vocabulary knowledge. Situates phonics within a broader framework including literacy, movement, motor development and oral language. States that students who can read in their first language may achieve stronger outcomes when learning to read in English. Provides links to broader EAL resources (e.g., August & Shanahan, 2010; National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2008). However, EAL/D is sometimes discussed alongside oral language delay or literacy difficulty rather than fully conceptualised as linguistic diversity, and the approach stops short of a comprehensive second-language acquisition pedagogy.
Sounds-Write	Claims that the program is suitable for all learners, including learners with English as an additional language. Provided materials emphasise that the program is effective for learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds because it teaches the structure of the English writing system explicitly and systematically.	Acknowledges that learners may come from diverse language backgrounds and that explicit teaching of the English sound-spelling system can support access to literacy. However, EAL/D learners are not generally treated as a distinct pedagogical group requiring a tailored pathway. The instructional design focuses on phonological awareness, phoneme-grapheme knowledge, decoding and spelling rather than systematic development of English oral language, vocabulary and grammar. Any additional English language support is assumed to occur alongside the phonics program rather than being integrated into it.

Irrespective of claims to include EAL/D learning needs, all six programs assume a single teaching and learning pathway to proficient literacy in English. All adopt an implicit English mother tongue learner model. To a greater or lesser degree, they assume that learners:

- understand spoken classroom English
- speak general Australian English (see footnote 41)
- have phonological awareness grounded in English
- know the words they are decoding and their meanings
- recognise and have basic control of sentence structure and grammatical meaning
- can draw on meaning, grammar and English prosody to support decoding.

None of these six resources accords with the principle of taking linguistic diversity as the foundational starting point for provision. Reference EAL/D learners is incidental, inconsistent, incomplete, hard to find or accessed separately or through links to separate websites with general information. None incorporates resources and advice to teachers that systematically and comprehensively alerts them to and advises how to address EAL/D learning needs. In this sense, EAL/D needs are marginalised.

The most comprehensive supplementary EAL/D advice that is available to Australian teachers can be found at the Australian Literacy Hub.⁵² Even so, its treatment of EAL/D learning needs is peripheral rather than embedded within mainstream phonics guidance. For example, finding EAL/D-related advice and resources is difficult: their existence is not indicated on the homepage or any of the main links from it. (See Appendix B for further details on the Hub and our recommendations for improving it.) We have no information on whether and how practising teachers can and do access the Literacy Hub or the support they receive in utilising it (see above section 1.4).

We have discovered a range of programs that claim to be specifically designed to teach phonics to EAL/D learners (see Appendix I). With the exception of Jolly Phonics, included in our review, these programs do not appear to be used in Australia to any extent or at all, so we have not explored whether and how they provide quality resources that address the issues raised in this paper. An American resource we commend to teachers can be found at [21025-NCEL-Literacy-Model-FINAL.pdf](#); an excellent, teacher-friendly summary of basic principles is at <https://www.readingrockets.org/topics/about-reading/articles/what-does-research-tell-us-about-teaching-reading-english-language>

In what follows, we outline our specific EAL/D-related concerns regarding the six resources we have reviewed. Our concerns relate to their approach to:

- the learner's L1
- the L1 phonological system
- the learner's age and educational background
- oral English, vocabulary development and meaning-making
- decoding
- pseudo-words
- decodable readers
- writing.

Appendix J provides a resource-by-resource summary of how each separate resource/package responds to the criteria above.

5.2 The learner's L1:

To what extent do the six synthetic phonics resources assist teachers to utilise the learner's L1?

Synthetic phonics programs rarely, if ever, direct teachers to the resources EAL/D learners bring to learning to read English. Where the reviewed resources acknowledge the existence of EAL/D learners, it is largely in terms that imply deficits.

As outlined in section 4.2, the most productive approach to the learner's L1 is to gain literacy through that language. Translanguaging – if adopted as a comprehensive pedagogical stance and embedded in the curriculum -- can also integrate full linguistic repertoires (home + school languages) in ways that support meaning-making, motivation, identity and ultimately literacy (reading & writing). Our reference list contains a separate section on translanguaging.

Table 7 below outlines each of the six resources' approach to the learner's L1, including use of bilingual and translanguaging pedagogies.

⁵² The Hub provides curriculum-aligned teaching materials, professional learning and assessment tools, including Year 1 phonics and early-years numeracy checks. For training resources and video demonstrations, go to <https://www.literacyhub.edu.au/plan-teach-and-assess/year-1-phonics-check/conduct/>

Table 6: Approach to utilising the learner's L1 in the six resources

PROGRAM	PROVIDES GUIDANCE ON CONSIDERING L1	PROVIDES GUIDANCE ON USING L1 PRODUCTIVELY	REFERS TO BILINGUAL / TWO-WAY TEACHING	REFERS TO TRANSLANGUAGING TECHNIQUES / RESOURCES
Letters & Sounds	Limited; acknowledges that children learning English as an additional language may have different starting points and that first-language experience may influence English acquisition.	Minimal; focus remains on developing knowledge of English phoneme-grapheme relationships. No systematic guidance on using learners' existing languages as instructional resources.	Not explicitly mentioned.	Not mentioned.
Read Write Inc. (RWI)	Some acknowledgement that learners new to English may require vocabulary support and that teachers should consider language background.	Limited; guidance focuses primarily on supporting access through English (e.g., vocabulary teaching, oral rehearsal, visual supports and modelling). Little explicit use of learners' first languages as learning resources.	Not explicitly mentioned.	Not mentioned as an instructional framework. Some practices (e.g., discussion, oral rehearsal and use of learners' existing knowledge) may be compatible with translanguaging principles, but translanguaging is not explicitly referenced.
Jolly Phonics	Moderate; recognises that children learning English as an additional language require support in developing English vocabulary and listening skills.	Limited; encourages linking vocabulary, stories and classroom themes to children's experiences, but provides little explicit guidance on using L1 as a systematic instructional resource.	Not explicitly mentioned.	Not mentioned.
MultiLit suite	Moderate; acknowledges that learners' language backgrounds may influence literacy development and that first-language literacy knowledge can support English literacy acquisition.	Some explicit strategies within parts of the suite, particularly the separate <i>LanguageLift</i> , including use of learners' language knowledge, vocabulary connections and awareness of language transfer.	Limited; primarily focused on literacy intervention rather than bilingual or two-way education models.	Not explicitly referenced as a pedagogical framework, although some strategies (such as drawing on learners' existing linguistic knowledge) may align with translanguaging principles.
Sounds-Write	Limited to moderate; acknowledges that learners come from diverse language backgrounds and that teachers may need to consider differences between English and learners' other languages when teaching the sound system.	Some guidance through comparison of sounds and language structures, particularly where teachers use learners' existing phonological knowledge to support understanding of English phoneme-grapheme relationships. However, the focus remains on English orthographic learning rather than bilingual pedagogy.	No explicit reference.	Not explicitly mentioned, although some flexible use of learners' linguistic knowledge may be compatible with translanguaging approaches.
Promoting Literacy Development	Moderate; explicitly recognises EAL/D learners and advises teachers to consider English exposure, oral language development and the influence of learners' first languages on literacy learning.	Some explicit acknowledgement that knowledge of a first language can support English literacy development, including reference to stronger outcomes for learners who can already read in their first language. However, guidance focuses primarily on supporting English literacy rather than systematically incorporating L1 as an instructional medium.	Not explicitly mentioned. PLD does not position itself as a bilingual or two-way teaching framework.	Not explicitly referenced. Some recommendations to draw on learners' language knowledge and experiences may align with aspects of translanguaging, but the framework is not based on translanguaging theory.

Although several of these resources acknowledge learners' linguistic backgrounds, they generally conceptualise L1 as a background influence or source of learner knowledge as distinct from actively integrating use of L1 into literacy instruction.

ACTA's position is that a much more through-going and positive approach to the learner's L1 is required. If teachers are to go beyond the tokenistic acknowledgement of linguistic diversity, they require significant professional development (see section 1.4). The Australian Literacy Hub could also play a positive role in providing detailed guidance on embedding positive approaches to L1 knowledge in phonics teaching. See Appendix B.

The implicit English mother tongue learner model, and consequent positioning of EAL/D learning within a deficit framework, plays out in ways we now detail.

5.3 Phonology: To what extent do the six synthetic phonics resources take account of the learner's existing phonological knowledge?

We are not aware of **any** approach to teaching phonics (whole language, analytic or synthetic) that assists teachers to consider the sound systems EAL/D learners bring to reading in English.

The resources we reviewed bear out Ahn and Sangster's observation (2026: 237) that "mainstream phonics materials still assume a monolingual English phonemic inventory and a single model of pronunciation". None of these resources explicitly reference learners' first-language phonemic systems or provide structured guidance on cross-linguistic phonological transfer, as can be seen in Table 8.

Table 7: Attention to L1 phonology in the six programs

PROGRAM	EXPLICIT REFERENCE TO L1 PHONEMIC SYSTEM?	HOW L1 PHONOLOGY IS TREATED (IF AT ALL)	OVERALL INCLUSION OF L1 PHONOLOGY
Letters and Sounds	No explicit contrastive phonology.	General EAL/D guidance acknowledges that some children may not have experience of English sounds, but the phonics sequence and instructional content are based exclusively on the English phonological system. No systematic attention or alerts given to the relationship between English phonology and learners' L1 phonological systems.	Minimal / indirect
Read Write Inc.	No.	Assumes phonics instruction can be applied universally. EAL/D learners are generally considered in terms of English proficiency and literacy skills (specifically re grapheme-phoneme relationships) rather than through analysis of how their L1 phonology may influence perception or production of English sounds.	None
Jolly Phonics	No explicit reference to L1 phonemic systems.	Designed to support children learning English, including those with little or no English. Uses actions, visuals, stories and vocabulary support to make English sounds accessible, but does not explicitly alert or guide teachers to considering learners' existing phonological systems.	Implicit only
MultiLit suite (including LanguageLift)	No explicit reference to L1 phonemic systems.	Focuses primarily on developing English oral language and literacy skills. While some components acknowledge learners' language backgrounds, there is limited attention to differences between English and learners' L1 sound systems or to contrastive phonological analysis. Accent, dialect and L1 phonological differences are addressed by Partnership Consultants as they arise.	None / minimal
Sounds-Write	Limited / no systematic reference to L1 phonemic systems.	Recognises that learners come from diverse linguistic backgrounds and that teachers may need to consider differences in speech sounds when teaching English phoneme-grapheme correspondences. However, the instructional sequence is based on the English sound system and does not provide structured contrastive phonological advice or approach to L1 backgrounds.	Limited / indirect
Promoting Literacy Development	No explicit reference to L1 phonemic systems.	Acknowledges linguistic diversity and the importance of oral language development for EAL/D learners. However, its phonological awareness and phonics frameworks are centred on English, with little guidance on comparing or leveraging differences between English and learners' L1 phonologies.	Minimal / indirect

Overall, phonics instruction in these resources is consistently presented as English-only and linguistically neutral. Sounds-Write arguably comes closest to recognising that phonological differences matter, because it is highly explicit about the structure of the English sound system. However, phonemic awareness is assumed to transfer uniformly across languages.

Consequently, English phonemes are taught with no reference to their presence or absence in learners' L1s. Predictable challenges (e.g. /θ/, consonant clusters, final consonants) are not anticipated. Teachers are not alerted to predictable patterns in how EAL/D learners might say English words aloud. They are not given diagnostic prompts, much less advised to leverage L1 phonological knowledge as a resource. There is no consistent requirement to align phonics instruction with the EAL/D learning progressions, learners' language histories or recognised dialectal systems (e.g. Aboriginal English, Kriol). Pronunciation differences are seen to indicate decoding difficulty and to require fidelity to a fixed English phonics sequence.

When phonics assessments are interpreted with no reference to learners' L1, they are liable to be identified as "at risk" or "vulnerable" readers, and positioned as delayed or deficient, not multilingual learners acquiring an

additional phonological system. Deviations from mother tongue English pronunciations are viewed as deficits.⁵³ For instance, advice for Urdu-speaking Arya in a Literacy Hub Phonics Check training video identifies her as a “struggling decoder.”⁵⁴ It does not advise checking Arya’s ability to *distinguish* relevant English phonemes (in this case, hear them) from *saying* them. Its long list of “missing sound-letter correspondences” does not invite any investigation of possible Urdu influences, much less the implications for teaching. There is no inquiry into Arya’s literacy in Urdu or how it might support her learning. It is simply assumed that mispronouncing words is misreading them. We elaborate further on the mandatory Phonics Check in section 6 and Appendix M.

All teachers working with EAL/D learners require professional development that includes information on the predictable and systematic nature of transfer from L1 to English phonology (Anthony, 2009; Bialystok et al. 2005; Koda, 2007). See 4.1 above and Appendix B for further recommendations regarding the Australian Literacy Hub.

5.4 **Learner age & educational profile:** **To what extent do the six synthetic phonics resources take account of the EAL/D learner’s age, maturity and previous educational background?**

Literacy policies and published synthetic phonics programs routinely assume the literacy learner is either a young child beginning formal schooling or an older learner with reading deficits.

None of the reviewed programs explicitly and systematically account for the fact that EAL/D learners can be any age when they enter Australian schools, and that age, cognitive maturity and language proficiency are independent variables in learning to read English. None are designed with variability in prior schooling as a core design parameter. Rather, these programs differentiate learners according to reading skill, not schooling history. Where age and previous schooling is recognised, older EAL/D learners are usually framed as requiring remediation, not English language development. (See sections 2.2 and 4.1).

Table 9 below summarises the approach to older EAL/D learners in the resources we reviewed.

Table 8: Attention to older learners and their previous schooling

PROGRAM	ATTENTION TO OLDER LEARNERS	ATTENTION TO PREVIOUS SCHOOLING
Letters & Sounds	Designed primarily for Foundation-Year 2 learners. Progression and activities assume young children beginning literacy development. Does not explicitly recognise that EAL/D learners may be older beginners. Although phases are theoretically not age-dependent, materials and activities are designed around early childhood contexts and may be inappropriate or disengaging for older learners.	Assumes familiarity with classroom routines, books and print. Limited consideration of learners with interrupted or minimal schooling. Implications for minimally schooled EAL/D learners: phases assume existing print concepts (e.g., directionality, concepts of words and sentences); task demands may extend beyond decoding and require familiarity with classroom literacy practices.
Read Write Inc. (RWI)	Designed primarily for early primary learners, although <i>Fresh Start</i> and other adaptations address older struggling readers. Older EAL/D learners are generally positioned as learners requiring literacy catch-up rather than as learners simultaneously acquiring English. Assumes oral English is sufficiently developed to support participation. Risks conflating English language learning needs with literacy delay.	Some acknowledgement of learners requiring catch-up literacy. Structured routines may support learners unfamiliar with classroom expectations. However, previous schooling experience is not a major organising principle. The approach does not systematically distinguish between interrupted schooling, limited English exposure and literacy difficulty. Classroom behaviours, print concepts and schooling conventions are largely assumed.
Jolly Phonics	Designed for young children, including children learning English as an additional language. Uses songs, actions and playful routines suited to early years contexts. Provides limited guidance for adolescents or adults. Materials may be inappropriate or disengaging for older beginner learners unless substantially adapted.	No explicit recognition of varied schooling histories. Assumes early childhood-style learning environments and familiarity with classroom routines. Actions and songs may support engagement and memory, but foundational print concepts and school literacy practices are generally assumed rather than systematically taught.

⁵³ <https://www.literacyhub.edu.au/professional-learning/implementing-a-systematic-synthetic-phonics-approach/assessment-and-intervention-for-an-ssp-approach/>

⁵⁴ The 2026 version of the training video has deleted this example. There are now no obvious EAL/D learners included. However, Student 2 in the shorter version is noted by the assessor as saying “leg” for the pseudo-word “lig”. Careful attention to her pronunciation of /i/ and /e/ in other examples suggests that she may have an L1 vowel somewhere between these two front vowels. Irrespective of this question, the training video fails to alert teachers to the existence of alternative sound systems.

PROGRAM	ATTENTION TO OLDER LEARNERS	ATTENTION TO PREVIOUS SCHOOLING
MultiLit suite	Explicitly includes older learners and adults through programs such as <i>MacqLit</i> , <i>the Reading Tutor Program</i> , <i>Word Attack Skills – Extension & reinforced Reading</i> . Strong focus on remediation and structured intervention. However, older EAL/D learners are generally conceptualised within a struggling-reader framework rather than differentiated according to whether difficulties arise from English acquisition, interrupted schooling or literacy disability.	Designed primarily for learners who have experienced schooling but have not developed expected literacy skills. Lists EAL/D learners among its target groups, specifying that they “should be able to use English socially” (MultiLit, MacqLit program comparison and Frequently Asked Questions). Does not systematically distinguish between: (a) English language acquisition; (b) interrupted or limited schooling; and (c) reading difficulty/disability. For learners with minimal prior schooling, program pacing and task demands may exceed familiarity with print, classroom routines and literacy practices. Published evaluations of MacqLit were conducted with primary-aged students, and none reports results for EAL/D learners (MultiLit, MacqLit research summary, 2024).
Sounds-Write	Designed primarily for beginning readers and struggling readers across age groups and is used in both early years and intervention contexts. Unlike some early-years programs, its explicit phonics structure can be applied with older learners. However, older EAL/D learners are generally positioned as learners requiring literacy intervention rather than as older beginners with developing English language and literacy needs. Does not provide a distinct pathway for adolescent or adult EAL/D learners with limited English.	The highly explicit teaching sequence may support learners who lack confidence with English orthography and the structure of written English. However, previous schooling experience is not a central feature of the instructional design. There is limited guidance for learners with interrupted or minimal schooling, including development of print concepts, classroom literacy behaviours and familiarity with schooling practices.
Promoting Literacy Development	Primarily designed for early years and primary learners but has a stronger language-development orientation than many phonics programs. Less tightly tied to chronological age and acknowledges variation in oral English development. Can be adapted across ages in principle, although resources are primarily marketed for younger learners. Recognises differences in language experience but generally frames these within English language development rather than multilingualism.	Does not explicitly address learners with minimal or interrupted schooling. Strong oral language focus may support learners new to schooling; however, school literacy practices, print concepts and classroom routines are not systematically unpacked as separate instructional needs.

These resources were designed for children who are beginning school and already speak the language they are learning to read. Five of the six resources – *Letters and Sounds*, *Jolly Phonics*, PLD for Foundation and early primary and *Read Write Inc.*’s core program – describe their target group as ages five to nine. *Sounds-Write* is presented as usable across age groups but publishes no age-adapted readers. All resources deliver instruction through routines developed for early years classrooms with pacing assuming the first years of school. Decodable readers are sequenced to match as is their content. These design features assume a learner who already speaks English and has several years in which to work through the sequence.

Where older learners are provided for, it is through separate catch-up programs. *Sounds-Write* is more age-flexible than programs designed exclusively for early childhood because its phonics sequence can be delivered to older learners. *Read Write Inc.*’s “Fresh Start” and MultiLit’s *MacqLit*. “Fresh Start” teaches the same “speed sounds” as for younger learners in the same order and with the same routines. What changes for older learners is the pace, reading material, a “grown-up look and feel” and assumed learning, for example, about outer space, Pompeii or Shakespeare plays (NT Department of Education, *RWI Fresh Start Implementation: Northern Territory Guide*, 2023, p. 8).

The issue for EAL/D learners is not only age. None of these resources explicitly distinguish between older students requiring literacy remediation, those with peer-equivalent schooling and are acquiring English, those also developing familiarity with formal schooling and print practices, and those who do not live in urban environments. Where readers refer to content alien to the learner’s experience, they impose cognitive and cultural burdens rather than simplifying the learning task.⁵⁵

These resources do not assist schools to place older EAL/D learners appropriately, interpret progress data accurately or use age-appropriate resources to teach English literacy, including phonics. Learners with limited prior schooling are at risk of experiencing cognitive overload (simultaneously learning English + print + school practices). Those with peer-equivalent schooling are at risk of being misidentified as low-ability readers.

⁵⁵ This issue is particularly relevant to Indigenous EAL/D in remote communities. The suitability of *read Write Inc* was raised in the NT Legislative Assembly in 2018, when Yingiya Mark Guyula, the Member for Nhulunbuy, questioned the use of this UK-developed program and content including “foreign concepts such as snow and mittens” for children living in Yolŋu-language communities. The Education Department replied that *Read Write Inc.* was “in standard Australian English” (Estimates Committee, 19 June 2018, p. 99).

The most obvious site for remedying this significant gap is the Australian Literacy Hub. Please see Appendix B.

5.5 Oral English, vocabulary and meaning-making: To what extent do the six synthetic phonics resources explicitly develop oral English, vocabulary and meaning-making?

In the resources we reviewed, proficiency in understanding and using spoken English is largely assumed, not taught. Spoken English development is not a focus – it simply serves phonics accuracy. Accordingly, most resources treat vocabulary as peripheral rather than as core instructional content.

The place of oral English and vocabulary in the reviewed resources is summarised in Table 10.

Table 9: Attention to developing oral English, particularly vocabulary development

PROGRAM	ATTENTION TO ORAL ENGLISH OVERALL	ATTENTION TO VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT
Letters and Sounds	Oral work is primarily focused on phonological awareness and articulation of sounds rather than broader language meaning. Attention to sentence-level oral English development is minimal and unsystematic.	Incidental. Assumes that words used in examples and decodable texts are accessible to learners. Provides no explicit vocabulary selection, sequencing or teaching framework. Word choice is largely determined by phonics progression rather than communicative usefulness or language development needs.
Read Write Inc.	Form-focused rather than language-development focused. Highly routinised oral rehearsal of phonemes, words and sentences. Oral English is used mainly to support pronunciation, decoding and fluency. Limited focus on expressive language, extended oral interaction or spontaneous speech development.	Controlled vocabulary is used within decodable texts. Some explanation of word meanings occurs, but vocabulary development is not generally organised as a cumulative, assessed strand. Vocabulary supports reading comprehension rather than functioning within a systematic English language development program.
Jolly Phonics	Strong emphasis on oral articulation of phonemes. Songs, actions and stories encourage participation and memory. Oral language beyond single words, patterned phrases and classroom language is less systematically developed.	Vocabulary is introduced through songs, stories and thematic activities. These may support word learning, particularly for younger learners, but vocabulary development is not generally systematically sequenced, assessed or explicitly connected to semantic networks. Cultural and linguistic assumptions are embedded in some vocabulary choices and texts.
MultiLit suite	Oral reading, repetition and teacher modelling feature strongly. Oral English is used mainly to support accurate reading, fluency and comprehension. Some programs within the suite, particularly <i>LanguageLift</i> , provide explicit oral language development, but this varies across the suite.	Variable across the suite. Some explicit vocabulary teaching occurs, particularly within language-focused components. However, in the core literacy programs vocabulary is often closely linked to reading development, word recognition and comprehension rather than being part of a comprehensive oral vocabulary development sequence.
Sounds-Write	Highly explicit attention to spoken sounds and oral articulation in relation to literacy learning. Oral language is used primarily to support phonological awareness, phoneme identification, segmenting, blending and manipulation of sounds. Less emphasis on broader oral English development, extended discourse, sentence construction or conversational language.	Limited and literacy-driven. Vocabulary is introduced primarily through the words selected for phonics teaching, decoding practice and sentence work. Some discussion of word meaning occurs but there is no systematic oral vocabulary development strand. Word selection is primarily determined by phonics concepts rather than English language development priorities.
Promoting Literacy Development	Explicit focus on oral language development. Includes attention to sentence structure, oral expression, narrative and descriptive language. Oral language is treated as a core instructional goal rather than simply a support for decoding.	Systematic vocabulary teaching. Emphasises vocabulary development through approaches including Tier 1 and Tier 2 vocabulary, semantic categories, word relationships and use of words in sentences and texts.

With the exception of PLD, none of these resources explicitly position spoken English and vocabulary development as central components of literacy instruction.

We note, however, that the Australian Literacy Hub includes resources specifically related to oral English development.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ **Oral language development (video & information page)** – links to a video and supporting material about oral language skills and their connection to reading: https://www.literacyhub.edu.au/search/oral-language-development-video/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

This resource is aimed at *teachers and families* and discusses how oral language supports literacy development in early years.

Student learning support (incl. EAL/D guidance) – outlines strategies including continuing oral language development through rich conversations, listening to texts and role-play: https://www.literacyhub.edu.au/plan-teach-and-assess/student-learning-support/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

The Q&A training video on “Assessment and intervention for SSP” explains the need to develop oral English but includes the following problematic claim, which lacks supporting evidence:

For ACTA, vocabulary acquisition should be a central literacy objective (see section 4.1).

Consistent with their interpretation of decoding, several of these resources seek to minimise contextual cues – including pictures and surrounding text – during early decoding activities, so that learners attend primarily to grapheme-phoneme correspondences. The synthetic phonics principle that decoding (in this interpretation) should precede comprehension is explained by the former Department for Education in England as follows:

a programme should promote the use of phonics as the route to reading unknown words, before any subsequent comprehension strategies are applied. (cited in Bradbury & Wyse, 2025, p. 8).

On this principle, controlling linguistic input is designed to prevent learners from contextual guessing (see section 3.4, Table 4).

Table 11 summarises how the six reviewed resources position meaning within beginning reading instruction.

Table 10: Positioning of meaning in the six reviewed resources

PROGRAM	APPROACH TO MEANING
Letters and Sounds	Prioritises word-level decoding and the phonics sequence. Meaning and comprehension are introduced progressively but are secondary to accurate recognition of phoneme-grapheme relationships. Vocabulary knowledge is largely assumed.
Read Write Inc. (RWI)	Prioritises phoneme-grapheme relationships, blending and fluency. Includes comprehension discussion and some vocabulary explanation.
Jolly Phonics	Early instruction concentrates on phoneme-grapheme learning. Stories and actions provide context, but vocabulary development is largely incidental to phonics instruction.
MultiLit suite	Emphasises accurate phoneme-grapheme relationships and fluency. Comprehension and vocabulary is addressed from the beginning, not after decoding skills are acquired. In InitialLit (F-2), storybooks are used to develop English. For older students, the Reinforced Reading component provides exposure to natural language skills and also helps to build background knowledge and develop comprehension.
Sounds-Write	Integrates meaning through words, sentences and texts, but the primary instructional emphasis is understanding and applying the English alphabetic code. Vocabulary development is supportive rather than a central instructional strand.
Promoting Literacy Development	Positions oral language, vocabulary, comprehension and phoneme-grapheme relationships as integrated components of literacy development. Meaning is treated as an instructional goal from the outset rather than as a later consequence of understanding phoneme-grapheme relationships.

Across the reviewed resources, understanding meaning is generally positioned as incidental to successful decoding, not as an equal instructional starting point. The principal emphasis is acquisition of the alphabetic code. PLD differs in giving oral language, vocabulary and meaning a more central role.

For ACTA, understanding and making meaning are not optional supports but essential to learning the English writing system (see sections 2.3 & 4.3). We do not support teaching English grapheme-phoneme correspondences as though they can be learned independently of vocabulary, spoken English and comprehension. Nor do we support treating “decoding” as independent of the linguistic and cognitive processes involved in accessing the meaning of words and reading more generally, such as predicting, questioning, summarising, making connections and constructing meaning. (See sections 2.3, 3.4, 4 and 6).

ACTA’s position is that phonics instruction for EAL/D learners must be embedded within rich and enjoyable English language learning. New vocabulary should be encountered repeatedly in meaningful oral and written contexts, and supported by visuals, gestures, real-life experiences and explicit discussions of meaning. Learners should be encouraged to draw on knowledge of their first language(s), including similarities and differences between English and their existing linguistic systems (see sections 5.1 and 5.2). Rather than attempting to minimise contextual support, effective EAL/D pedagogy deliberately mobilises the learner’s full linguistic repertoire to promote reading in English.

... the decoding part and the encoding, the reading and spelling is really important because in systematic synthetic phonics, because they're building from the smallest parts of language and building up, it's really important for students who don't have English as their first language because it cracks the code for them and it just builds their knowledge of English incrementally. It unlocks the language and all its mysteries for them. <https://www.literacyhub.edu.au/search/assessment-and-intervention-for-ssp-q-a-webinar/>

5.6 Pseudo-words: What is the role of pseudo-words in the six synthetic phonics resources?

Most resources use pseudo-words (or non-words) in teaching and/or assessment to isolate decoding (as defined by synthetic phonics) from word recognition.⁵⁷ In assessment, the aim is to gain a “pure” measure of phonics mastery (see section 6). Some programs, for example Read, Write Inc, recommend practising decoding pseudo-words every day.

Table 12 below outlines the approach to pseudo-words in the reviewed resources.

Table 11: Use of pseudo-words in the six reviewed resources

PROGRAM	USE OF PSEUDO-WORDS	EAL/D CONSIDERATIONS
Letters and Sounds	Used for blending practice and assessment of phoneme-grapheme relationships independent of memorised words.	Does not address the possibility that unfamiliar real words and pseudo-words will present the same challenge for learners with limited English vocabulary.
Read Write Inc	Uses “alien words” to assess command of taught grapheme-phoneme correspondences.	Assumes pseudo-word pronunciation provides a clean measure of phonics knowledge; does not explicitly consider the interaction between English vocabulary knowledge and pseudo-word performance for EAL/D learners.
Jolly Phonics	Used mainly in blending activities.	Limited consideration of whether invented words assist or confuse learners still developing English meaning systems.
MultiLit suite	Used in some assessment and diagnostic contexts to measure phonological recoding ability to ensure students can generalise their skills to unknown words.	Limited discussion of how pseudo-word tasks may interact with English language proficiency.
Sounds-Write	Used to assess application of the code.	Limited discussion of how pseudo-word tasks function for learners whose English vocabulary and phonological representations are still developing.
Promoting Literacy development	Not used.	Focuses on meaningful language, vocabulary and literacy development.

For English mother tongue literacy learners, the task is to relate the phonological system they already control to decoding English graphemes (section 4.1). They know how English sounds differentiate meanings in the context of their repertoire of English words and grammatical structures. They can interpret nonsense words within this framework. They may find it fun to decode a word and discover it has no meaning.

Like English mother tongue students, EAL/D learners come to English literacy with an established phonological system in their first and maybe other languages. Their task is to acquire *another* way of using sounds to make meaning. They gain nothing from encountering non-existent words and learning rules which may or may not apply to real English words. Consider your frustration if you were taught to read French through practising with non-existent French words.

ACTA does not endorse a focus on English phoneme-grapheme correspondences independent of oral language and vocabulary development, and therefore we do not support the use of pseudo-words. Practising with pseudo-words is an unnecessary burden on the EAL/D learner’s cognitive load. It is misleading and time-wasting. We regard assessment that disregards comprehension, including saying pseudo-words, as misguided. For EAL/D students who are encountering print for the first time, the priority is to learn what print *does* – that it conveys meaning and is a representation of spoken language. Using techniques that are arguably confusing, misleading and time-wasting is perverse and potentially unethical.

5.7 Decodable readers: What role do decodable readers have in the six synthetic phonics resources and how to they respond to EAL/D learning needs?

On the principles just described, synthetic phonics instruction includes students practising grapheme/phoneme correspondences by reading “decodable” texts independently. These readers consist primarily of grapheme-phoneme correspondences have been taught but include with a small number of unavoidable irregular words (Castles, Rastle & Nation, 2018; ACARA, Australian Curriculum v9, English glossary).

⁵⁷ The Australian Literacy Hub does not recommend using pseudo-words in teaching.

Approaches differ in advising that students read these texts only or that they are just one independent reading resource among others. Table 13 summarises this continuum in the reviewed resources.

Table 12: Role of decodable readers in the six reviewed programs.

RESOURCE	ROLE OF DECODABLE READERS IN INDEPENDENT READING
Read Write Inc.	Very strong emphasis on exclusive use of decodable readers matched to the taught code.
Sounds-Write	Very strong emphasis on exclusive use of decodable readers matched to the taught code.
Letters and Sounds	Strong emphasis on exclusive use of decodable readers in the early stages.
MultiLit suite	Strong emphasis , although authentic literature also has a structured role in classroom teaching. Decodable texts used more in the early years; a supportive emphasis in later years. Teachers encouraged to move away from decodables as soon as students are ready.
Jolly Phonics	Moderate emphasis: decodable readers are preferred but use of other reading resources is somewhat more flexible.
Promoting Literacy Development	Supportive emphasis: decodable readers are one important resource within a broader language and literacy framework.

Please see Appendix K for further details on the role of decodable readers in these six resources.⁵⁸

For young English mother tongue students, the limited syntax and vocabulary in decodable readers can allow for focussed practice on taught grapheme-phoneme relationships. The restricted patterns in some sentences may be amusing.⁵⁹ These students are not learning English from these texts. Students' everyday spoken English provides a counter-balance and context for interpreting the restricted language.

A beginning English learner needs *more* exposure to meaningful English, not less. The priority is exposure to vocabulary used in authentic contexts, grammatical structures and discourse patterns. Independent reading is key to how learners encounter, practise and extend their vocabulary, grammar, collocations, discourse patterns and knowledge of the world. Consequently, ACTA does not endorse restricting learners' early independent reading to decodable texts, especially if readers consist of inauthentic English.

A key issue for EAL/D learners is the appropriacy of decodable readers *vis à vis* the learner's age and educational background (see sections 2.2, 4.2 and 5.4), as detailed in Table 14.

Table 13: Decodable readers' responsiveness to EAL/D learner age and previous schooling

RESOURCE	ARE DECODABLE READERS ADAPTED FOR OLDER LEARNERS?	TAKES ACCOUNT OF PREVIOUS SCHOOLING OR EAL/D?
Letters and Sounds	No. The guidance and associated decodable readers are designed for beginning readers in the early years of primary school.	No. The materials assume typical early childhood schooling experiences and do not adapt content for older beginners, adolescents, or learners with interrupted schooling.
Jolly Phonics	No. The decodable readers are explicitly marketed as providing "the best start for children just starting to read" and are aimed at young children. (jollyeducation.com.au)	No. There is no evidence that the decodable readers are adapted for older beginners or for learners with interrupted schooling. Although Jolly English supports learners of English, the readers themselves remain early-childhood oriented. (jollylearning.com)
Promoting Literacy Development (PLD)	No dedicated age-adapted decodable reader series identified. PLD's emphasis is on broader oral language and literacy teaching rather than developing a specialised set of adolescent decodable readers.	Partly. PLD explicitly acknowledges differences in oral language and includes EAL/D guidance, but no evidence that its decodable reading materials are specifically adapted for older beginners or learners with interrupted schooling.

⁵⁸ The Australian Literacy Hub does not recommend that beginner readers are only exposed to decodable texts.

⁵⁹ We are unable to access decodable reader content in the reviewed resources. Open sources exemplify our concerns with inauthentic content, such as:

Pat taps a hat.

Pat bats a pan.

https://anyflip.com/qbpud/whoj/basic?utm_source=chatgpt.com

RESOURCE	ARE DECODABLE READERS ADAPTED FOR OLDER LEARNERS?	TAKES ACCOUNT OF PREVIOUS SCHOOLING OR EAL/D?
Read Write Inc.	Partly. The standard Phonics programme is for ages 5–9. However, <i>Fresh Start</i> provides decodable readers with a "grown-up look and feel" and age-appropriate topics for struggling readers aged approximately 9–13 (and Years 6–9 in Australia).	Partly. Fresh Start adapts the presentation and interest level of texts for older learners. It is designed as a literacy catch-up program. Its publisher names students learning English as an additional language and students who have missed schooling among its target groups but describes no change to the sequence for them: <i>Fresh Start</i> teaches the same "speed sounds" as Read Write Inc. Phonics, at a much faster pace.
MultiLit suite⁶⁰	Partly. Programs such as <i>MacqLit</i> are designed for older struggling readers, and the accompanying texts are more age-appropriate than infant readers.	Limited. The adaptation is primarily for older learners who are behind in reading. There is little evidence that the decodable texts themselves are designed around the experiences of newly arrived EAL/D learners or learners with interrupted schooling.
Sounds-Write	Limited evidence. Sounds-Write is used successfully with older struggling readers and intervention groups, but no evidence that its published decodable readers are specifically rewritten with adolescent themes or age-appropriate contexts comparable to <i>Fresh Start</i> .	No explicit evidence. No published guidance indicating that the decodable readers are adapted for EAL/D learners' previous schooling, interrupted education or multilingual backgrounds.

Most of the decodable readers in the reviewed resources implicitly assume that the beginning reader is five or six years old, entering school for the first time, and learning to read in the language they already speak. However, *Fresh Start* and *MacqLit* modify appearance and interest level for chronological age and reading difficulty. Neither modifies the instructional sequence.

For EAL/D learners entering Australian schools beyond the early years, currently available decodable texts are unnecessarily restrictive and mostly infantile. Learners are liable to be alienated, even offended, by texts that assume they are five years old. None of these resources appear to adapt their content to cater for learners with interrupted/minimal/no prior formal schooling, who are learning literacy, English, learning-how-to-learn and the culture of formal schooling.

ACTA does not endorse the exclusive use of decodable readers for independent reading by EAL/D learners. For older learners, we do not endorse using any texts with content more suitable for five-year old school beginners. Independent reading material should be selected in line with the learner's maturity and English proficiency. For EAL/D learners of all ages and educational backgrounds, we support extensive, guided and independent use of texts other than decodable readers, such as age-appropriate simplified readers. AI can be used judiciously to create and adapt reading texts for different age and English proficiency levels. Our recommended strategies for practising decoding (according to our preferred definition, and including learning sound-symbol relationships) prioritise games and puzzles, songs and rhymes, diverse drama techniques, teachers and fellow-students reading aloud while learners follow the text.⁶¹

5.8 Writing: To what extent does the approach to writing in the six resources take account of EAL/D learning needs?

Synthetic phonics approaches generally include teaching writing. From an EAL/D learning perspective, the key issue is the kind of writing prioritised in early stages. That is:

- is the role of writing primarily to demonstrate encoding sound-symbol relationships?
or
- is writing also treated as a means of developing English vocabulary, grammar, sentence construction and communicative competence?

Table 15 summarises the place of writing in the reviewed programs.

⁶⁰ The InitialWrite program will be published in late 2026. Targets writing instruction in the first 3 years of school; strong focus on discourse-level oral language that incorporates the development of vocabulary and grammar.

⁶¹ Excellent resources can be found at: <https://atesolact.org.au/event/you-can-do-it-switch-on-with-song-carmel-davies/>
<https://atesolact.org.au/event/teaching-eal-through-drama-a-workshop-jodie-whitehurst/>
<https://atesolact.org.au/event/teaching-language-through-drama/>

Table 14: Approach to writing in the six reviewed programs

PROGRAM	WRITING FOCUS	APPROACH
Letters and Sounds	Letter formation, spelling, simple words and sentences.	Writing activities generally mirror the phonics progression. Early writing is closely linked to taught grapheme-phoneme correspondences, with sentence complexity constrained by available phonics knowledge.
Read Write Inc.	Structured sentence writing, spelling and composition linked to taught phonics.	Highly scaffolded approach using modelled sentences, oral rehearsal and supported composition. Early writing is constrained by the phonics knowledge taught, with increasing independence as the code expands.
Jolly Phonics	Letter formation, spelling of taught words, captions and simple written sentences.	Multisensory approach links sounds, actions, letters and writing. Early writing is generally constrained by the taught sounds and vocabulary introduced through the program.
MultiLit suite (including InitialLit, MiniLit, MacqLit)	Encoding, spelling, dictation, sentence construction and written responses.	Writing is closely connected to phonics and encoding practice. Early writing commonly uses controlled words and sentences to reinforce taught sound-letter relationships, with broader composition introduced progressively.
Sounds-Write	Encoding, spelling, sentence writing and application of phoneme-grapheme knowledge.	Writing is tightly integrated with the conceptual understanding of the English writing system. Learners practise segmenting spoken words and representing sounds with spellings they have been taught. Early writing is therefore constrained by available code knowledge, although sentence-level writing is incorporated as learners progress.
Promoting Literacy Development	Meaningful sentence construction, narrative writing, vocabulary use and application of phonics and spelling knowledge.	Writing is situated within broader language and literacy development. Phonics and spelling are taught explicitly but are applied within meaningful language contexts rather than being the sole organising principle of early writing.

Letters and Sounds, RWI, MultiLit and Sounds-Write all position early writing primarily as an opportunity to apply the alphabetic code: encoding, spelling and sentence construction using taught patterns. PLD differs in placing greater emphasis on writing as language production: developing ideas, vocabulary, sentence structures and meaning alongside code knowledge.

Research has long established reading and writing as symbiotic processes that inform each other (Shanahan & Lomax, 1986). The act of writing itself plays an important role in developing phonic knowledge, allowing learners to develop their phonic knowledge through application (Boryga, 2023).

ACTA endorses teaching decoding, as we interpret it (section 4.3) in the context of the development of vocabulary, sentence construction and writing to express meaning(s).

Recommendations: Commercial Synthetic Phonics resources

Please see recommendations 4 – 9 at the end of section 4. These apply to and have implications for the resources just reviewed. In addition:

- 9) Decodable texts should never constitute the sole resource for independent reading or even decoding practice. All reading material should expose learners to authentic and meaningful English as appropriate to their overall English proficiency and maturity. Enjoyable and meaningful forms of practice are possible and desirable, for example, puzzles and games, songs and rhymes, various drama techniques, and reading following a text as it is read aloud.
- 10) Pseudo-words should not be used in teaching English phonics to EAL/D learners or assessing their decoding skills. For learners with no prior literacy, teaching and assessing using pseudo-words should be regarded as violating their fundamental rights to informed educational practice.

See also Appendix B and recommendations 12 and 13 regarding the Literacy Hub.

6. Mandatory phonics checks

6.1 Synthetic phonics enforced

Commonwealth schools funding for the next ten years is conditional on jurisdictions administering phonics checks to Year One students (section 1.1). Authorities stress that the check is “not a test of comprehension, nor

a measure of reading proficiency.”⁶² Appendix L details checks used in State and Territory Government schools. All checks are derived from the UK Phonics Screening Check. (Standards and Testing Agency, 2026).⁶³

This requirement reflects a broader shift in education “towards ever more assessment and measurement in a process of datafication” (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017). The synthetic phonics approach to “decoding” is attractive because it elevates the isolatable, restricted and easily measurable skill of learning particular sets of phoneme-grapheme relationships that can be tested:

... children can show progress at regular intervals, as well as be tested through the national statutory assessment.
(Bradbury & Wyse, 2025, p. 16)

Jurisdictions vary slightly in their use of phonics checks (see Appendix L for details).⁶⁴ They are supported by a Commonwealth-funded on-line Literacy Hub, which offers an approved Phonics Check, together with curriculum-aligned teaching materials and professional learning.⁶⁵ The Check is based on the UK version and follows synthetic phonics principles. The website provides extensive advice and resources for teachers and administrators in analysing and reporting on Check data for individual students, whole classes and schools:

The data you collect from the Year 1 Phonics Check gives valuable information to ensure targeted learning can be in place for your students. To make the most of your data, follow these steps:

- *Run individual student and group reports through the Phonics Check platform.*
- *Analyse report data to look for patterns in strengths and areas of need.*
- *Respond to your results by planning next steps for individuals and groups.*

In short, the washback effect of funding conditional on phonics checks, supported by the Literacy Hub, is to instal synthetic phonics as the dominant approach to early literacy instruction in Australian schools. It is an exemplary case of “curricular imposition as a broader institutional condition”, whereby teaching is “reorganised around mandated testing and grant-based reform”, in which “teachers find themselves positioned less as facilitators of meaningful learning and more as implementors of standardised content” (Calisa et al. 2026, pp. 26-27).

ACTA is deeply concerned at the de-skilling and de-professionalising of teachers inherent in these currently mandated approaches to phonics instruction.

6.2 Four significant problems

The following analysis of the Literacy Hub Phonics Check is based on the Hub's open-access component and the sample test for the 2020-23 Phonics Check (henceforth the “sample Check”). The actual Check is understandably log-in protected and therefore inaccessible to ACTA.

The Check is designed to be administered to Year 1 or Year 2 students, and older readers seen to be “struggling”. Individual students, sitting beside a teacher, read aloud a list of 20 “real” and 20 “pseudo-words” words. Students whose scores fall below the stated threshold are flagged as “struggling readers”. Teachers record ‘got it’ or ‘not yet’ for each response, and record the errors and types of errors where relevant, to inform analysis of the results. They can also record overall observations that may affect results.

The [Phonics Check administration guide](#) advises that the principal or school leader, with advice from the teacher, should decide if it is not appropriate for a student to participate in the check. Students who have no understanding of grapheme–phoneme correspondences, including students recently arrived in Australia from a non-English speaking background, should not be included in the check.

ACTA has identified at least five significant problems exemplified in the sample Check.

⁶² Written advice from the Australian Government Department of Education in response to a previous draft of this paper.

⁶³ Regarding EAL/D learners, the UK guidance for teachers says:

*pupils with limited fluency in English **may be excluded from the check**, and pupils who have recently moved to England and are unable to understand letters and sounds in English **should not take the check**.*

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/key-stage-1-phonics-screening-check-administration-guidance>

⁶⁴ SA, NSW, and Victoria have implemented mandated checks in government schools, while Queensland, WA, the NT and some sectors retain flexibility in assessment choice. The ACT Strong Foundations initiative has embedded phonics checks within a broader literacy strategy rather than purely adopting the national tool.

⁶⁵ <https://www.literacyhub.edu.au/plan-teach-and-assess/year-1-phonics-check/conduct/>

1) *Lack of transparency*

Our analysis is necessarily confined to the 2020-23 sample version of the Check. Sample Checks are no longer accessible on the Hub website. ACTA finds this lack of transparency unnecessarily defensive. We question why a sample Check cannot be scrutinised and open to feedback from independent, external stakeholders and experts.

2) *Real and pseudo words*

Because English phonics are probabilistic, decoding by both mother tongue English speakers and EAL/D learners may reflect their exposure to equally valid and alternative orthographic patterns.

The sample marking guide specifies only one correct phoneme/grapheme correspondence for real words. Other plausible phoneme/grapheme correspondences are not accepted. The rationale for this requirement is unclear.

In fact, it is impossible for a teacher/assessor to determine whether the required recognition and pronunciation of real words rests on vocabulary knowledge or sounding out. Vocabulary knowledge is needed to say many “real” words correctly. For example, the sample Check requires the “ou” spelling in “groups” to be said “oo” (/u:/). Saying the “ou” letters as “ow” /æʊ/ “ow” as in house – an equally plausible realisation of “ou” – is assessed as incorrect. It follows that a correct reading of “groups” may stem equally from knowledge of this word and its pronunciation, or from guessing the correct realisation of “ou”.

In short, the “real word” component of the sample Check is as much an assessment of vocabulary knowledge as it is of “decoding” even according to the synthetic phonics definition of this word.

The inclusion of pseudo-words in the Check implicitly recognises the potential role of vocabulary knowledge. The scoring guide advises that all plausible pronunciations are acceptable, including the inclusion of /r/ before consonants (as in American English /hard/ “hard”).

However, if the sole construct to be assessed is the ability to match graphemes to phonemes, i.e. decoding according to the synthetic phonics definition, it follows that the Check should consist only of pseudo-words.⁶⁶

For EAL/D learners, “real words” can be as foreign as pseudo-words, as we have explained (section 5.6). Therefore, including pseudo-words reveals no information beyond that obtainable from real words.

For all the above reasons, the sample Check does not exemplify a reliable test of decoding when understood as “sounding out” letters.

3) *Saying versus decoding*

To our knowledge, phonics checks in all jurisdictions equate **saying** a word with decoding it. This conflation embodies synthetic phonics’ fundamental lack of clarity and confusion in its interpretation of “decoding” (e.g. its relationship to reading, what is meant by word recognition), its monolingual English bias, and the false assumption that the ability to match the English alphabet with a standard/accepted realisation of English phonemes is *the* foundational element in reading English (see section 4.3).

These problems become apparent when phonics checks are used to diagnose EAL/D learners’ decoding skills. EAL/D learners, especially (but not only) in the early stages of learning English, are likely to bring their L1 phonological system to their spoken English (see sections 2.1 and 4.1). This phenomenon highlights the fact that phonics checks cannot determine:

- which phonological rules (or combination of phonologies) are being applied by the learner in saying a word
- what knowledge or strategies are being deployed by any learner (English mother-tongue or EAL/D) in saying a word from a list of words
- what the learner understands of English orthography, i.e. how the English alphabet forms English words. This understanding need not rely on knowing how these words are said.

⁶⁶ On the other hand, Shanahan (2023) notes that although nonsense-word and real-word identification tests are broadly comparable in the early stages of reading, evidence from direct comparisons suggests that real-word identification becomes a slightly better indicator of reading growth as reading develops. By Grades 2–3, real-word performance is generally the stronger predictor of reading outcomes, and a meta-analysis likewise found word identification to have the strongest relationship with various reading outcomes. While Shanahan considers nonsense-word tests useful for monitoring phonics learning, he acknowledges that the differences are small and suggests that, if only one measure is used to monitor phonics progress in K–2, a real-word reading test is preferable, particularly from the second half of Grade 1 onwards. This raises questions about the value of nonsense-word testing for EAL/D learners, for whom lack of familiarity with English vocabulary may affect performance independently of their ability to apply phonics knowledge.
<https://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/blog/which-should-we-use-nonsense-word-tests-or-word-id-tests>

- whether a learner is able to access English word meanings from English words. This knowledge is independent of any ability to say a word.

In technical terms, the construct to be assessed is unclear, and these phonics checks are invalid and unreliable diagnostic tools.

Table 16 below summarises how saying the words aloud in the sample Check is liable to be influenced by EAL/D learners' phonological systems other than English, and therefore fail to provide valid, reliable and usable information on the learner's reading skills.⁶⁷

Table 15: Potential Misdiagnoses of EAL/D Learners in Phonics Checks

FEATURE IN THE PHONICS CHECK	EXAMPLES	HOW AN EAL/D LEARNER'S FIRST LANGUAGE MAY INFLUENCE SAYING A WORD ALOUD	HOW THIS MAY BE MISDIAGNOSED USING THE ASSESSMENT GUIDE
Single consonants	d, t, n, r, p	Some English consonants may not exist in the learner's first language, or may be produced differently. E.g., the learner may substitute the closest sound from their own language, or pronounce /t/ and /p/ without the aspiration required in English.	Inability to decode individual consonants.
Consonant digraphs	ch, sh, th, ph, ck	Learners may pronounce these letter combinations using the closest sound available in their first language or may treat the letters as separate sounds. For example, <i>th</i> may be pronounced as /t /or /s/, and <i>sh</i> as /s./	Inability to recognise or blend digraphs.
Consonant blends and clusters	str, spl, dr, tr; -st, -sk, -mp	Many languages do not allow the same consonant combinations as English. Learners may simplify these clusters by omitting or changing one of the consonants, particularly at the end of words.	Inability to blend consonants or decode consonant clusters.
Vowels and vowel combinations	a, e, i, o, u; ai, oa, ee, ie, ue; a-e, i-e	Learners may use the vowel system of their first language when saying a word aloud. They may pronounce English diphthongs as a single vowel, pronounce both vowels separately, or use the closest vowel available in their own language.	Inability to decode vowels, long vowels or split digraphs.
Multi-syllable words and word endings	arrow, forest, brighter; -s, -ed, -ing	Learners may place stress on different syllables, pronounce every written vowel, or pronounce grammatical endings differently because these features work differently in their first language.	Inability to decode multi-syllable words or common suffixes.
Pseudo-words	lig, mep, gax, rird, phope	Learners are likely to apply the sound patterns of their first language, producing responses that are linguistically reasonable but different from those expected by the marking guide.	Inability to decode unfamiliar words.

See Appendix M for further analysis of the sample Check. This shows that every item is an invalid and unreliable measure of EAL/D learners' proficiency in decoding English words.

This fatal flaw applies to **all** phonics checks that require EAL/D learners to say words aloud. Such assessments cannot reliably distinguish cross-linguistic influences from difficulties in decoding English.⁶⁸

We do not accept the proposition put to us in responses to an earlier draft of this paper that inaccurate knowledge about EAL/D learners' decoding skills is better than none.

4) *Inherent deficit assumptions*

The sample Check and accompanying guidelines treat L1 as a *prima facie* source of error to be eradicated.

In confusing pronunciation with decoding, the sample Check fails to alert – much less assist – teachers/assessors to consider the phonological knowledge students bring with their L1 and, worse, to investigate possible literacy in L1 or another language.

Rather than informing effective teaching, the Check risks generating misleading diagnoses and inappropriate interventions. The older the learner, the greater the danger of misplaced interpretations and pedagogical interventions.

⁶⁷ https://www.literacyhub.edu.au/search/year-1-phonics-check-test-items-2020-23/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁶⁸ ACTA does not accept the definition of decoding as matching graphemes to phonemes irrespective of meaning: see sections 2.3, 4.3 and 5.6. In fact, we can see no rational reason for matching graphemes to phonemes for their own sake – we find such a proposition absurd.

To the extent that the sample Check exemplifies phonics checks based on synthetic phonics principles, these checks do not provide constructive information about EAL/D learners' reading in English. Instead, as Burnett et al. (2020, p. 113) describe:

overly simplistic analyses of children's perceived underachievement can lead to narrow, prescriptive approaches in language and literacy teaching that fail to provide the rich, meaningful experiences that could do much to foster children's linguistic and literacy repertoires.

The overall effect is deficit positioning of EAL/D learners.

6.3 Conclusion

Linguistically and assessment informed analysis shows that, used with EAL/D learners, this sample Check:

- cannot measure what it claims to measure, viz. matching graphemes to phonemes, i.e. it is invalid
- cannot produce consistent assessments of the required skill (matching graphemes to phonemes), i.e. it is unreliable
- is likely to have flow-on effects that narrow literacy teaching to a focus on grapheme-phoneme relationships at the expense of a comprehensive and systematic approach to English language development, i.e. it has potentially negative washback effects
- can misidentify EAL/D learners as having reading difficulties, i.e. it has potentially adverse consequences for EAL/D learners.⁶⁹

To the extent that the 2020-23 sample Check exemplifies current practice, it does not represent evidence-based reform, as claimed by the Minister (section 1.1).

As reflected in the sample Check, early literacy assessment based on synthetic phonics is not simply inadequate for the EAL/D school population – it is governed by assumptions that are fundamentally incompatible with the realities of learning to read in an additional language.

These incompatibilities take a toll not just on learners but also their teachers:

... [the] persistent, cumulative effects of working under surveillance, meeting standardized benchmarks, and witnessing the marginalisation of their most vulnerable student population ... [leads to]... experiences of burnout, self-doubt and even thoughts of leaving the profession. (Calisa et al. 2026, p. 27).

Recommendations: Phonics Checks

- 12) Phonics assessment data for EAL/D learners should always be interpreted with reference to accurate cross-linguistic phonology regarding the learner's L1, the learner's overall English proficiency level and amount of their exposure to spoken English in their local community.
- 13) The Literacy Hub Phonics Check should be reviewed by reputable, highly qualified linguists with expertise in phonology who are tasked to produce valid and reliable measures for both mother tongue English speakers and EAL/D learners, including learners with literacy in a language other than English.
- 14) EAL/D learners who are assessed as in the *Beginning* and *Emerging Phases* on the ACARA English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) Learning Progression or other State assessments used for EAL/D learners should not be assessed against phonics checks based on synthetic phonics principles. These learners' English literacy proficiency should be documented against EAL/D-specific assessment tools.

7. Concluding remarks

Learning to read in one's mother tongue is a significant task. In Australia, it normally begins at a young age, often with entry to formal schooling. The learner comes to literacy with an established linguistic system for making and conveying meaning. The child learns that written symbols represent spoken words, that words have boundaries and that writing is directional. Both learner and teacher can take for granted the linguistic knowledge needed to interpret and create meaning in English, and the understanding that literacy provides another powerful means of making meaning.

⁶⁹ See Messick (1989) re validity and consequential validity; Bachman & Palmer (1996) re test usefulness (including impact); Shohamy (2001) re ethics, power and social consequences; McNamara (2000) and (2006) re language testing as social practice; Elder (1997) and McNamara, Knoch, & Fan (2019) re fairness and test bias.

Speakers of languages other than English likewise bring well-established linguistic systems for making and conveying meaning, whether they are First Nations learners or learners from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Where learners are acquiring literacy in a language they already speak, the most efficient and effective foundation is therefore to build on this existing linguistic knowledge. There is overwhelming evidence that literacy in the mother tongue provides a strong platform for subsequent language and literacy learning (see section 4.2).

Bilingual and two-way education should consequently be a priority for the approximately 30,000 First Nations students in remote communities where English functions as a foreign language and is encountered almost entirely through schooling. For migrant- and refugee-background learners with little or no prior literacy, learning literacy in the mother tongue should similarly be provided wherever possible.

Where bilingual approaches are not possible, translanguaging techniques should be incorporated into literacy teaching for both those beginning literacy learning and those learning to read English on the basis of literacy in L1 or another language.

Unlike with English mother-tongue literacy learners, the starting points for learning to read in a new language, cannot be taken for granted. EAL/D learners in Australian schools may be any age and may enter schooling at any year level. They may or may not be literate in their first language or another language; some may have literacy in English without corresponding oral proficiency. They may have had extensive or very limited experience of formal schooling and may or may not have acquired the schooled knowledge and skills expected of English mother tongue peers. Equitable literacy pedagogy must therefore begin by identifying and responding to learners' actual linguistic, literacy and educational starting points rather than assuming a common starting point (see section 2.2)

What all EAL/D learners require is an English literacy pedagogy grounded in the development of meaningful oral English. This is the linguistic knowledge through which the phonological distinctions necessary to convey and understand meaning in English are acquired.

Central to ACTA's position, which is clearly supported by research on reading, is that learning to decode English words is not simply a matter of learning phoneme-grapheme correspondences. Decoding as **an integrated process of identifying and understanding written words through the coordinated and iterative use of orthographic, phonological, morphological, grammatical and semantic knowledge**. For EAL/D learners, this process also draws on knowledge of their first language(s) alongside their developing English. (See section 4.3)

ACTA has long supported principles now associated with contemporary, evidence-informed literacy instruction, including explicit and systematic teaching of literacy and of English phoneme-grapheme relationships. Our concern is not with explicit teaching of phonics *per se*. It is with the assumption that evidence for particular approaches can be generalised to learners whose linguistic and educational starting points differ fundamentally from those represented in the evidence base (see section 3.1). Evidence that supports a particular approach for English mother tongue learners cannot simply be assumed to establish its effectiveness for learners who are simultaneously acquiring English and learning to read it.

Evidence-informed pedagogy must be informed by *evidence about the learners being taught*. Explicit teaching based on incorrect information about English, or on assumptions that learners already possess English phonology, prosody, vocabulary, grammar and semantics, is at best ineffective and at worst damaging.

For EAL/D learners, systematic and explicit teaching of phonics needs to be situated within pedagogies that systematically develop the spoken English language knowledge on which reading English depends. This includes explicit teaching of English phoneme-grapheme relationships, together with the vocabulary, phonology, morphology, grammar, semantics, discourse and pragmatics required to interpret and use the English being read.

Such teaching should provide rich, interesting and motivating learning experiences incorporating:

- the learner's existing knowledge of their home language and, where possible, continued development of that language;
 - explicit, systematic and targeted teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing;
- and
- extensive and focused practice in all forms of enjoyable and meaningful English.

The precise content, balance and sequencing of these elements will necessarily depend on the learner's age, previous schooling, existing literacy and linguistic background.

Achieving this pedagogy requires teachers who understand the diverse linguistic and educational starting points of EAL/D learners and the different pathways through which they develop English and literacy. The requisite professional knowledge and skills depend on EAL/D-informed pre-service teacher education, appropriate pedagogical resources and ongoing professional learning.

EAL/D-informed professional development cannot be sustained in the absence of teachers and teacher educators with high-level *specialist* qualifications. Where Australia once led the world, we now face an escalating decline in schools and teacher education of experts in language learning, applied linguistics and language pedagogy.

The resources reviewed in this paper do not meet the needs of EAL/D learners in any comprehensive, systematic and explicit way. They substantively marginalise learners' L1s, assume linguistic knowledge that cannot be assumed for EAL/D learners, and do not adequately address the English language knowledge that EAL/D learners must acquire in order to learn to read English.

The problem is therefore not simply that these resources contain insufficient EAL/D material. Their underlying pedagogical assumptions lead down the path to a narrowed, misdirected pedagogical focus and falsely diagnosed deficits. They are perpetuating and extending the failure to identify and meet the needs of many of the approximately 750,000 EAL/D learners in Australian schools.

These commercial resources not only fail EAL/D learners but their teacher scripts and rigid protocols are de-skilling teachers – to the point where some teacher training has been reduced to unquestioning induction into their use.

This is an equity issue. EAL/D learners are entitled to evidence-informed, targeted approaches to learning English, including reading in English. Applying a pedagogy designed around assumptions that do not hold for these learners cannot be regarded as equitable simply because the pedagogy is systematic or evidence-informed for another population. The drive to install expensive, commercially produced synthetic phonics packages in Australian schools is diverting attention and resources from EAL/D learners' rights to equitable educational provision. Current policy and practice assume that equity means the same for everyone until they can be classed as and indeed become "vulnerable".

ACTA acknowledges and commends the teachers and consultants within jurisdictions and systems who are doing vital work to mitigate the limitations of uniform synthetic phonics approaches. Their work is important in ensuring that EAL/D learners' linguistic and literacy needs are recognised within increasingly standardised approaches to literacy instruction. We pay tribute to these educators, who daily face the professional and emotional burden of negotiating the conflict between EAL/D-informed principles and fundamentally misaligned requirements (Calisa et al. 2026, p. 27).

ACTA hopes that this position paper will contribute to a better-grounded understanding of the issues these educators are working to address, and that it will support their efforts to progress more equitable and informed provision for EAL/D learners.

Acknowledgements

ACTA thanks the following people for their contributions to drafting this position paper: Liz Easton, Misty Adoniu, Chris Davison, Ronan Kelly, Kathy Rushton and Helen Moore.

We are most grateful to the many educators who provided comments (both supportive and critical) on previous drafts, including Dr Beverly Derewianka, Elizabeth Campbell, Maree Adams, James Muldowney, Sam Chrzczonowicz and the NSW Department of Education EAL/D Team. Although people critical of those drafts may not approve this one either, we sincerely valued your engagement and hope you can see some positive effects of your comments.

In response to a previous draft of this paper, we were contacted by a representative from Multilit. A subsequent draft was checked by Multilit to ensure all references to their resources are accurate. They expressed their gratitude to ACTA "for the opportunity to provide feedback on the factual accuracy of information about Multilit programs presented in this paper." We would be pleased to receive similar fact checks from the publishers of the other resources we have reviewed.

We thank the Australian Government Department of Education for the written information provided in response to a previous draft of this paper.

The detailed analysis of the six reviewed synthetic phonics programs was done with the assistance of ChatGPT, as was initial drafting of some overview statements.

Appendix A: Further details on the six representative programs/resources

Table 16: Sources and publication details of six programs/resources

PROGRAM	PLACE OF ORIGIN	FOUNDING / FIRST PUBLISHED	DEVELOPER / INSTITUTIONAL BASE	COPYRIGHT OWNER / PUBLISHER	COMMERCIAL BASIS
Letters and Sounds	United Kingdom	2007 (DfES phonics guidance)	Produced by the UK Department for Education as part of the Primary National Strategy; not a commercial program, although widely used with commercial resources developed around it.	Crown Copyright (UK Department for Education)	Government-produced phonics framework. Free official guidance and downloadable teaching materials.
Read Write Inc.	United Kingdom	2002 (full program development)	Developed by Dame Ruth Miskin through her work in primary schools and Ruth Miskin Training; published by Oxford University Press since 2006.	Ruth Miskin Literacy / Oxford University Press	Commercial literacy program. Program materials, licensing and professional development (availability varies by region).
Jolly Phonics	United Kingdom	First commercial materials published 1992 (following the establishment of Jolly Learning in 1987).	Developed by Sue Lloyd and Sara Wernham, experienced UK primary teachers; published and supported by Jolly Learning Ltd.	Jolly Learning Ltd	Commercial synthetic phonics program. Teaching materials, decodable readers, digital resources and professional development.
MultiLit suite	Australia	Research commenced 1995 at Macquarie University; first publications in the late 1990s; MultiLit Pty Ltd established in 2006.	Originated as a research initiative at the Macquarie University Special Education Centre led by Prof. Kevin Wheldall AM and colleagues; now a private company offering a suite of literacy and language programs informed by ongoing research.	MultiLit Pty Ltd	Commercial suite of literacy and language programmes. Program kits, assessment tools and professional development.
Sounds-Write	United Kingdom	Developed 2002–2003; officially launched in 2003; approved by the UK Department for Education as a systematic synthetic phonics program in 2011.	Developed by John Walker and Susan Peacock, experienced teachers and teacher educators; delivered through Sounds-Write Ltd, providing teacher training, curriculum resources and professional support.	Sounds-Write Ltd	Commercial systematic synthetic phonics program. Annual school membership, practitioner training, teaching resources, decodable readers and professional development.
Promoting Literacy Development	Australia	PLD resources developed during the 2000s (commonly cited from around 2007).	Developed by Dr Margaret Harris and Dr Carole Tuckfield, speech pathology and education practitioners; originated as a consultancy and is now a specialist publisher and professional learning provider.	PLD Literacy	Commercial literacy resource suite. Teaching manuals, classroom resources and professional development.

Table 17: Further details re components in five programs/resources

PROGRAM / RESOURCE	DECODABLE READERS	EXPLICIT ORAL LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION	ASSESSMENT TOOLS	PROFESSIONAL LEARNING
Letters and Sounds	No	Limited	Limited	No formal training required
Read Write Inc.	Yes	Limited	Yes	Yes
Jolly Phonics	Yes	Limited	Yes	Yes
MultiLit suite	Yes	Yes (particularly <i>LanguageLift</i>)	Yes	Yes
Sounds-Write	Yes	Limited ⁷⁰	Yes	Yes
Promoting Literacy Development	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

⁷⁰ Sounds-Write places a strong emphasis on spoken language for teaching phoneme awareness, articulation, blending and segmenting, but it does not provide a broader, systematic oral English, vocabulary and language-development strand for EAL/D learners.

Appendix B: The Australian Literacy & Numeracy Hub: EAL/D resources

What the Hub offers for EAL/D learners

The Australian Literacy & Numeracy Hub includes a dedicated section on “English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D)” within its *Student Learning Support* guidance.⁷¹ It endorses promotes a strengths-based view of EAL/D learners by encouraging teachers to learn about students’ home languages and involve families in literacy conversations, and students to use their home language knowledge when developing English vocabulary. The Hub offers explicit guidance and practical strategies for EAL/D learners, including oral language development (continued rich conversations, listening to texts, role plays and guided talk), slowing pace and guided support (adjusting instruction tempo and scaffolding English phonological awareness), explicit pronunciation support (emphasising correct English sounds with attention to articulatory features, e.g., mouth shape), targeted support for phonological awareness within the English language context.

These strategies reflect principles of effective EAL/D pedagogy – explicit instruction with appropriate scaffolds — and help situate phonics within a broader language learning process rather than as isolated grapheme-to-phoneme practice.

The Hub curates and links to several materials that support EAL/D learners: Phonemes and Graphemes slide pack with recorded sounds to support pronunciation and phonological awareness, 12 shared reading digital texts with accompanying activity ideas for oral language and vocabulary development, EAL/D Learning Progressions (Foundation to Year 10) and a graphic illustrating English progressions to assist teachers in tracking language development, Professional learning videos demonstrating strategies to engage EAL/D students. These resources go beyond mere mention of EAL/D learners, providing explicit tools for teachers to incorporate language supports into literacy teaching.

The Literacy Hub explicitly includes oral language and vocabulary development as part of the instructional support for EAL/D learners. Examples include: activity ideas within shared reading resources designed to promote vocabulary extension and oral discussion, suitable for learners with varying English proficiency, encouragement of using home language words to support understanding of English vocabulary. This reflects research-informed practice: explicit attention to vocabulary and oral language is essential for EAL/D learners’ literacy and comprehension development.

Limitations

The Hub’s treatment of EAL/D learners remains largely supplementary rather than embedded.

1. **It does not differentiate pathways** with reference to significant features of learners’ profiles, viz.

- EAL/D learners with age-equivalent prior schooling
- learners with interrupted or limited prior schooling
- learners acquiring English from birth versus in later schooling.

Consequently, teachers are left to infer how phonics pacing, grouping and assessment should vary across these groups.

2. It gives **limited attention to learners’ L1 sound systems**. It does not:

- reference learners’ first-language phonemic systems;
- address predictable cross-linguistic influences on English phonics learning;
- support teachers to distinguish language difference from decoding difficulty.

Phonics instruction is implicitly treated as language-neutral, despite strong research evidence that phonological transfer is systematic and predictable.

3. **Translanguaging is not embedded in lesson sequences, i.e.:**

- there is no guidance on how to strategically use L1 to support phonics, vocabulary or comprehension;
- home language use remains optional and teacher-dependent.

4. **It neglects relevant issues for First Nations EAL/D learners**, viz. no targeted guidance for:

- Aboriginal English speakers
- Kriol or Torres Strait Creole speakers

⁷¹ https://www.literacyhub.edu.au/plan-teach-and-assess/student-learning-support/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

- learners in remote and very remote communities.

These learners are linguistically diverse EAL/D students, not simply speakers of “non-standard English”, and require explicit recognition of dialectal phonology and grammar.

Recommendations

15) The Literacy Hub should be urgently developed by one or more experts in second language development, English phonology, EAL/D pedagogy and assessment to include:

- a. **an EAL/D Literacy Pathways section** detailing:
 - i. key EAL/D learner profiles (First Nations, new arrivals, long-term EAL/D, limited schooling) with specific reference to literacy in English
 - ii. implications for pacing, grouping and assessment in EAL/D learners’ command of English phonics
 - iii. links between phonics and oral English development.
- b. guidance on **potential L1–English phonological differences**, i.e. short, practical guidance explaining:
 - i. why some English sounds and clusters are difficult for many EAL/D learners;
 - ii. how L1 phonology influences how words might be heard and/or read aloud;
 - iii. how to interpret phonics assessment data in the light of language background.
This should be framed as interpretive guidance, not as a requirement for teachers to master multiple languages.
- c. **embedded translanguaging examples**, i.e. worked examples showing how teachers can:
 - i. use home languages to explain vocabulary or concepts;
 - ii. compare sound systems informally;
 - iii. encourage bilingual meaning-making during shared reading.
- d. information and advice for **teachers with First Nations students** on:
 - i. understanding and appreciating First/traditional languages, new Indigenous languages (such as Kriol and Yumplatok/Torres Strait Creole) and Aboriginal English as culturally and communicatively valued and valuable, and linguistically systematic, valid and distinctive
 - ii. how phonics instruction may interact differently with these sound systems
 - iii. culturally and linguistically responsive approaches for teaching phonics where these languages are commonly used and in remote communities where English is a foreign language.
- e. **clear links and pathways** to this material on the Hub home page.

See:

Section 2.2: Who are EAL/D learners?

Section 4.1: Sound systems differ.

Section 5: the six resources and EAL/D learning needs.

Section 6: Mandatory phonics checks.

16) The Literacy Hub should be resourced to develop two longer-term projects:

- a. to provide teachers of **older EAL/D learners with limited/disrupted/minimal/no previous formal education** with resources (created or links to existing resources) for teaching EAL/D-informed basic literacy
- b. to develop English literacy learning resources with pedagogy that is responsive to **First Nations EAL/D learners** who may speak an Aboriginal language, Torres Strait Islander language, a contemporary language such as Aboriginal English, Yumplatok (Torres Strait Creole), Kriol or other named or unnamed language varieties.

See:

Section 2.2: Who are EAL/D learners?

Section 4.2.1: EAL/D learners with minimal/no literacy in any language.

Section .6: Mandatory phonics checks.

Appendix C: Phonemic symbols

Below is the widely accepted set of phonemic symbols for General Australia English based on Cox, F., & Fletcher, J. (2017). *Australian English Pronunciation and Transcription* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

CONSONANTS

Plosives

VOICELESS

/p/ as in *pin*
/t/ *ten*
/k/ *cat*

VOICED

/b/ as in *bin*
/d/ *den*
/g/ *gap*

Fricatives

/tʃ/ as in *chin*
/f/ *fat*
/θ/ *thin*
/s/ *see*
/ʃ/ *she*
/h/ *hat*

/dʒ/ as in *jam*
/v/ *vat*
/ð/ *this*
/z/ *zoo*
/ʒ/ *measure*

Nasals (all voiced)

/m/ *man*
/n/ *net*
/ŋ/ *sing*

Approximants

/l/ *lip*
/r/ *red*
/j/ *yes*
/w/ *wet*

VOWELS

Monophthongs

/i:/ as in *fleece*
/ɪ/ *kit*
/e/ *dress*
/æ/ *trap*
/ʌ/ *strut*
/a:/ *palm*

/ɒ/ *lot*
/ɔ:/ *thought*
/ʊ/ *foot*
/u:/ *goose*
/ɜ:/ *nurse*
/ə/ *schwa* (i.e. the unstressed syllable as in *student*)

Diphthongs/Glides

/æɪ/ as in *face*
/aɪ/ *price*
/ɔɪ/ *choice*
/əʊ/ *mouth*

/əʊ/ *goat*
/ɪə/ *near*
/eə/ *square*
/ʊə/ *cure* (rare, declining in younger speakers)

The correct description of a **monophthong** (previously known as a “pure vowels” is “a vowel produced with a single, relatively stable articulatory configuration throughout its duration”. The tongue height, tongue backness, and lip rounding remain essentially constant from onset to offset. That is, the jaw and tongue movements are minimal once the vowel target is reached.

The correct description of a **diphthong** is “a vowel in which the tongue (and sometimes lips) moves from one articulatory position to another during the vowel’s duration”. □ The sound begins with a starting point (onset) and moves toward an ending target (offglide). The articulatory movement can be small (narrow diphthongs) or larger (broad diphthongs). That is, the vowel quality changes over time; tongue and/or lip position shifts from onset to offglide.”

Appendix D: Writing systems

English is an **alphabetic language** that uses the so-called **Roman/Latin alphabet**.

Some languages use a Latin alphabet, as English does, but the letters often represent different sounds to English. Their alphabets may have fewer or more letters than English, and some of those letters will represent different sounds to English.

There are many other alphabets besides the Latin alphabet. Greek uses the Greek alphabet. Cyrillic alphabets are used by the Slavic languages. All of these alphabets have symbols for both consonant and vowel sounds.

Some languages (e.g. Arabic and Hebrew) have writing systems (**an abjad system**) where letters represent consonants only and other symbols (called diacritics) may or may not indicate vowels. The reader uses context to deduce which vowel sound may be needed so the word makes sense.

Many South Asian languages, like Hindi, Lao, Burmese and Thai each use a kind of alphabet called an **abugida**. The symbols in these alphabets represent a consonant and a vowel sound.

Japanese Hirigana is a **syllabic system** rather than an alphabet. Each symbol represents a syllable. Korean has a unique mix of symbols representing both individual sounds and syllables, so it is both alphabetic and syllabic.

One of the most widely spoken languages in the world, Chinese, does not have an alphabet. It is a **logographic language** where symbols mostly represent meanings rather than sounds.

Some languages which have only been written down in more recent times utilise a mix of alphabets. For example, Dinka is written using a mix of Latin alphabet letters and symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet to represent the Dinka sounds that are not easily matched to Latin alphabet letters. This alphabet was developed to make the Dinka writing system phonetic i.e. only one symbol possibility for each sound in spoken Dinka, and therefore easier to teach the masses to decode.

This information is summarised in Table 19 below.

Table 18: Graphemes in Different Languages

WRITING SYSTEM	EXAMPLE	WHAT A GRAPHEME TYPICALLY REPRESENTS
Alphabetic (English, Spanish, Russian)	b, sh, ng	A phoneme (or sequence of phonemes, depending on the orthography).
Abjad (Arabic, Hebrew)	ن, پ	Primarily consonants.
Abugida (Amharic, Devanagari)	क, ह	A consonant with an inherent vowel, modified by vowel marks.
Syllabary (Japanese kana, Cherokee)	か, D	A syllable.
Morphosyllabic / logographic (Chinese)	学, 山	A morpheme and usually a syllable.

Appendix E: Terminology used to refer to Indigenous languages

REPRINTED FROM Queensland Government (no date). *Aboriginal languages and Torres Strait Islander languages statement*. (p. 4) <https://education.qld.gov.au/student/Documents/aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-languages-statement.pdf>.

Aboriginal languages and Torres Strait Islander languages include all the languages and dialects that First Nations peoples have used throughout history and continue to use today.

Many of these are First **Languages**⁷² that were spoken and signed within Australia prior to colonisation. These languages inform a holistic world view of land, culture and identity. Over 100 Aboriginal First Languages and Torres Strait Islander First Languages have been recognised in Queensland, along with over 250 Aboriginal language groups and Torres Strait Islander language groups across Australia. First Languages may still be spoken or signed, or are being learned, renewed or revitalised.

New languages are those that have evolved following colonisation through contact between people who speak different languages. Many different creoles and contact varieties are spoken throughout Queensland. Some new languages, such as Yumplatok and Kriol, are recognised and named, but others may not be. They may be referred to in communities or speakers through a range of names such as Murri, Broken, Slang, and Lingo. New languages have influences from their source languages, including First Languages and English, but they are not automatically understood by Standard Australian English (SAE) speakers.

There are also **Aboriginal ways of speaking English**, sometimes called Aboriginal Englishes or Blackfulla English. These varieties of English differ in systematic ways from SAE, just as SAE and American English differ but can be more or less understood by speakers of SAE.

Standard Australian English (SAE) is the language used in Australian schools as the primary means of communication, instruction and assessment. Aligned to the Two way strong5 model which describes the desire of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people for their children to be strong and competent in accessing and moving between both Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge. Proficiency in SAE is considered very important.

Regarding “**Aboriginal ways of speaking English**”:

Drawing on the Western Australian Aboriginal English tradition developed by scholars such as Ian Malcolm, Diana Eades, Glenys Collard, Celeste Rodriguez Louro, Susan Kaldor and others, a strong argument can be made that Aboriginal English is best understood not as hundreds of unrelated local dialects, but as a single pan-Aboriginal dialect continuum and lingua franca with regional varieties. The evidence suggests that while Aboriginal English displays local differences, it possesses sufficient shared grammatical, semantic, pragmatic and sociocultural features across Australia to justify recognition as one identifiable language variety (Eades, D., 2013; Kaldor, S., & Malcolm, I. G., 1982; Malcolm, I. G., & Kosciielecki, M., 1997; Malcolm, I. G. 2018; Rodriguez Louro, C., 2016).

⁷² First Languages, also referred to as traditional languages, are those recognised by Aboriginal communities and Torres Strait Islander communities as languages belonging to Country. These terms are not intended to refer only to historical forms of these languages, as all languages evolve over time.

Appendix F: Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) by School Sector

Data on English language proficiency in Australian schools is not collected nationally. The proxy indicator “language background other than English” (LBOTE) is used to provide a national picture of supposed need, for example in disaggregating NAPLAN data.⁷³

In the absence of a valid and reliable indicator of EAL/D learning needs, Table 20 shows the national distribution of LBOTE students across Australian school sectors, based on data from the 2023 NAPLAN National Report (Table 3.8) and the National Report on Schooling in Australia (2023).

The figures illustrate how linguistic diversity is concentrated in the government sector, with Catholic and independent schools enrolling proportionally fewer LBOTE students.

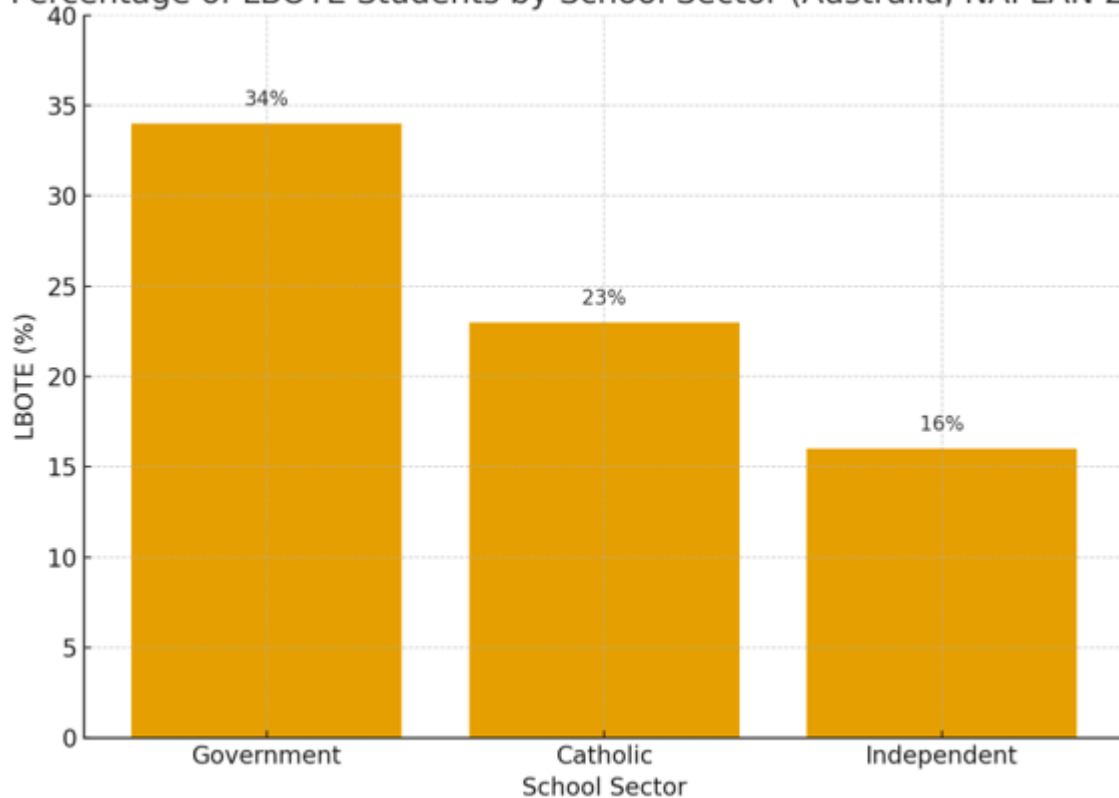
Table 19: Language Background other than English Students in Australian Schools – 2023 NAPLAN Data

Sources: ACARA (2023). National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy: National Report for 2023, Table 3.8 (Language background other than English by school sector).

ACARA (2023). National Report on Schooling in Australia 2023, Table 1.1 (Enrolments by school sector).

SECTOR	TOTAL STUDENTS (APPROX.)	% LBOTE (2023 NAPLAN)	LBOTE STUDENTS (EST.)
Government	2,515,000	34%	855,000
Catholic	770,000	23%	177,000
Independent	665,000	16%	106,000
National Total	3,950,000	28% (avg.)	1,138,000

Percentage of LBOTE Students by School Sector (Australia, NAPLAN 20)



⁷³ For a recent ACTA submission that points out the deficiencies in use of the LBOTE indicator, see section 10 in <https://tesol.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ACTA-Response-to-the-Better-Fairer-Consultation-Review-31-July-2023.pdf>

Appendix G: Examples of why decoding is more than “sounding out” graphemes

Several common Australian English vowel phonemes (e.g. /eɪ/ as in *make*, *rain*, *say*) are represented by multiple graphemes whose pronunciation cannot be determined reliably by a focus on matching graphemes to phonemes. Resolving these ambiguities requires word-level familiarity and accumulated lexical knowledge, which EAL/D learners need to develop.

For example, the diphthong /eɪ/ is realised in written English in multiple ways. All require processing more than one grapheme at a time (that is, “sounding out” does not work). The programs we reviewed teach three rules that require whole word recognition. These are taught at later stages, as shown in Table 21.

Table 20: Staging and explanation of rules for spellings of /eɪ/ in synthetic phonics resources

GRAPHHEME	EXAMPLE WORDS	STAGE/UNIT INTRODUCED	TEACHER GUIDANCE / EXPLANATION
a-e (split digraph)	make, cake, bake	Stage 4/5 (RWI), Phase 5 (L&S), Group 3 (Jolly Phonics), Extended code (Sounds-Write), Middle-later sequence (PLD)	Introduce after short vowels; silent e changes vowel to /eɪ/; practice blending and segmenting
ai	rain, train, pain	Later stage/unit as above	Medial position; teach blending and grapheme awareness
ay	say, play, day	Later stage/unit as above	Word-final position; emphasize position rules; blending/segmenting practice

However, these rules are probabilistic, that is, they are not always reliable, as shown in Table 22.

Table 21: Examples of “a-e”, “ai” and “ay” spellings that do not sound /eɪ/

GRAPHHEME	WORD	ACTUAL VOWEL	EXPLANATION
a-e	<i>have</i>	/æ/	Historical exception; silent-e pattern does not trigger /eɪ/
	<i>give</i>	/ɪ/	Silent “-e” present but vowel remains short
	<i>come</i>	/ʌ/ or /e/ (AusE)	Orthographic fossil; not decodable
ai	<i>said</i>	/e/	High-frequency irregular.
	<i>again</i>	/ə/ or /e/ (AusE variation)	Reduced unstressed vowel.
	<i>mountain</i>	/ɪ/ in second syllable	Vowel reduction in unstressed syllable.
ay	<i>says</i>	/e/	Morphological relationship to “say” but different vowel.
	<i>Monday</i>	/eɪ/ (first), /e/ (second)	Reduction in unstressed syllable.
	<i>okay</i>	/eɪ/ or /e/	Variable realisation in weak position.

The resources we reviewed teach high frequency exceptions as “tricky words” or “irregular words”. These are taught as whole words that must be memorised, often with morphological or semantic support, as shown in Table 23.⁷⁴ In other words, correct decoding must rely on prior word knowledge, not matching graphemes to phonemes.

Table 22: Explanations for decoding that require word knowledge

RESOURCE	ILLUSTRATIVE WORDS / PATTERNS	WHEN INTRODUCED	HOW THE PROGRAM HANDLES THEM
Letters and Sounds	<i>have</i> , <i>said</i> , <i>says</i> , <i>care</i> and other words containing alternative grapheme-phoneme correspondences.	Phase 5–6.	Introduces alternative pronunciations and spellings explicitly after the basic code has been established. Some high-frequency words are taught as “tricky words”, while learners are encouraged to try alternative pronunciations where initial sounding out does not produce a meaningful word.

⁷⁴ Multiliteracy InitialLit teaches high frequency exception (“tricky”) words by pointing out the regular and irregular parts of words. Students are taught to apply phonic knowledge to read the regular parts. These words are also taught for automatic recognition to support reading fluency.

RESOURCE	ILLUSTRATIVE WORDS / PATTERNS	WHEN INTRODUCED	HOW THE PROGRAM HANDLES THEM
Read Write Inc.	<i>have, said, says, care</i> and other words not fully predictable from the initially taught code.	Stage 4–5 (after the regular pronunciation of <i>ay/ai/a-e</i> has been established and the Extended Code is introduced).	Introduced as “tricky words” or alternative spellings/pronunciations. Learners are taught that these words cannot always be decoded using the earliest grapheme–phoneme correspondences alone and require additional word-specific knowledge.
Jolly Phonics	<i>have, said, says, care</i> and other high-frequency irregular words.	Introduced progressively alongside later teaching groups and the “tricky words” sequence.	High-frequency irregular words are taught separately from the regular phonics sequence using multisensory techniques, while more regular grapheme–phoneme correspondences continue to be taught through the structured phonics progression.
MultiLit suite	High-frequency irregular words, alternative vowel spellings and pronunciations, including words such as <i>said, have</i> and <i>one</i> . (Examples vary by program within the suite.)	Introduced progressively after the basic alphabetic code has been established.	Explicitly teaches irregular words and alternative spelling patterns as learners extend beyond the basic code. Increasing attention is given to orthographic patterns, morphology and vocabulary as reading develops.
Sounds-Write	Alternative spellings and pronunciations (“Extended Code”), including words such as <i>have, said, says</i> and multiple pronunciations of common spellings.	Introduced during the “Extended Code”, after the “Initial Code” has been mastered.	Rather than treating these as isolated exceptions, Sounds-Write teaches that many spellings represent more than one sound and many sounds can be spelled in different ways. Learners develop flexibility in applying the code while drawing on vocabulary and meaning to determine the appropriate pronunciation.
Promoting Literacy Development	High-frequency irregular words and alternative pronunciation patterns, including words such as <i>have, said, says, care</i> .	Middle to later stages of the phonics sequence.	Explicitly teaches irregular pronunciation patterns in meaningful language contexts. Alternative pronunciations and spellings are taught alongside vocabulary, oral language and morphology rather than being treated simply as exceptions to phonics rules.

Appendix H: Select list of research articles on EAL/D reading strategies

These studies concern the reading strategies of older and adult learners, mostly strategies for comprehension. They do not address how beginning readers identify words.

REFERENCE	LEARNER AGE / LEVEL	PHONICS VS MEANING FOCUS	IMPLICATIONS FOR EAL/D LEARNERS
McKeown & Gentilucci (2007) https://doi.org/10.1598/JAAL.51.2.5	Middle school ELLs (≈11–14)	Meaning-focused: learners monitored comprehension, predicted, re-read to repair meaning	EAL/D students benefit from explicit comprehension strategies alongside phonics; phonics alone won't address comprehension gaps. Supports modelling think-aloud strategies in classrooms.
Bakhshalinezhad et al. (2015) https://doi.org/10.7575/aiaa.all.v.6n.3p.15	Adult EFL learners (tertiary)	Early phonics/word-level focus for lower-proficiency; higher-proficiency moved to meaning-based strategies	For EAL/D learners, transition from sounding-out to comprehension-focused strategies is critical. Phonics instruction must be paired with teaching inference and integration skills.
Pattapong (2022)	University EFL learners	Weak readers: sounding out /vocabulary focus; strong readers: global comprehension and monitoring	Highlights need for differentiated instruction: EAL/D students at lower proficiency may need more structured phonics support, while still being scaffolded to meaning-focused strategies.
Thu & Truong (2022)	Primary / young EFL learners (≈10–12)	Shift from phonics-only to meaning-based after think-aloud instruction	Even young EAL/D learners can engage meaningfully with texts if think-alouds or modelling comprehension strategies are used alongside phonics. Early exposure to metacognitive reading strategies is feasible and beneficial.

Implications for EAL/D learners

1. **Learning grapheme-phoneme relationships is essential** for EAL/D learners, particularly at early stages or low proficiency, but must be **integrated with meaning-focused strategies**.
2. **Think-aloud strategies** can be used both as a **research tool** and as a **pedagogical scaffold** to develop comprehension and self-monitoring.
3. **Differentiation is crucial**: scaffolding should adjust to learners' proficiency to ensure reading strategies are linked to understanding and making meaning(s).
4. Even **young learners can benefit from comprehension modelling** if supported – teachers (and others) should not assume young EAL/D learners can only do phonics.

Appendix I: Phonics programs that claim to be designed for EAL learners

PROGRAM / RESOURCE	COUNTRY DEVELOPED	TYPICAL AGE/GRADE LEVEL	DESCRIPTION
Zoo-phonics ELL Kit	USA	Preschool–1st grade (ages 3–7)	Multisensory phonics program using animal cues, movement, and visuals; explicitly designed for EAL/ELL learners to support phonemic awareness and decoding. (zoo-phonics.com)
Complete ELL Phonics Bundle (Super Phonics, First Words for ELL, etc.)	USA	Early childhood–elementary	Suite of phonics and literacy resources specifically for ELLs, with multilingual support for vocabulary, phonics, and sight words.
Really Great Reading – ELL Solutions	USA	K–5	Structured literacy solutions with explicit phonics lessons adapted for ELLs; supports programs like <i>Countdown</i> and <i>Blast</i> . (reallygreatreading.com)
READ 180	USA	Upper elementary–high school (Grades 4–12)	Literacy intervention blending adaptive tech with phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency for struggling readers and ELLs. (en.wikipedia.org)
System 44	USA	Elementary/secondary intervention (Grades 3–12)	Phonics-based reading intervention integrated with READ 180, focusing on foundational decoding and literacy skills. (hnhco.com)
Benchmark Phonics Intervention	USA	Primary/elementary	Structured phonics curriculum with decodable texts and tiered instruction; adaptable for ELLs.
Foundations (Wilson Language Training)	USA	K–2 (with extensions)	Multisensory phonics and spelling curriculum frequently adapted for diverse learners including ELLs.
Jolly Phonics	UK	Early years–early primary (~ages 4–7)	International synthetic phonics program teaching letter sounds, blending, and segmentation with multisensory activities; widely used globally. (jollylearning.com)
Words Their Way	USA	K–5	Developmental word study program with hands-on sorting activities to reinforce phonics, morphology, and syllable patterns; used alongside core instruction. (savvas.com)
UFLI (University of Florida Literacy Institute)	USA	K–3	Structured literacy/phonics curriculum framework and materials from a university literacy research centre; adaptable for ELL instruction.
Lexia Core5 Reading	USA	Pre-K–Grade 5	Adaptive blended literacy program with systematic phonological awareness and phonics; includes supports for multilingual learners. (lexialearning.com)
Crystal Clear ESL Phonics	USA	Early childhood–early primary (ages 3–8)	Structured phonics curriculum designed specifically for ESL/EAL learners; uses synthetic phonics with interactive lessons, songs, actions, and vocabulary activities. (esl-curriculum.com)
Phonics for EAL: Instruction Methods (Phonics.org)	UK	All ages (guidance for teachers of EAL learners)	Teaching guide outlining strategies for phonics instruction with EAL students: systematic phonics, contrastive analysis with L1, vocabulary integration, and scaffolded reading; not a lesson-based program. (phonics.org)

Here is a separate listing of EAL programs with a strong literacy focus.

PROGRAM	PLACE OF ORIGIN	TARGET LEARNER GROUPS	PHONICS USED? (SYNTHETIC?)	USED IN AUSTRALIA?	KEY EAL/ELL FEATURES
Learning Village	United Kingdom (Across Cultures)	EAL learners; multilingual learners; SEND; low literacy; ages ~6–16 (primary/secondary)	Includes phonics strand (as part of reading progression), but phonics is one component within blended language learning (no explicit claim to synthetic phonics, more a combined language/reading track) (Literacy Hive)	Possibly via schools that adopt it; not mainstream in Australian system (UK-based)	Designed for EAL learners with survival language, vocabulary, reading, grammar and phonics; uses images as language support and trackable progression (Learning Village)
ReadingWise (especially Zip phonics + literacy modules)	United Kingdom	Early to upper primary, secondary, including EAL and SEND learners	Uses phonics reinforcement in adaptive modules that align with systematic phonics sequences (can support any SSP programme) (ReadingWise)	Schools in some regions (UK, NZ, Aus distribution possible)	Not <i>solely</i> EAL-designed, but explicitly marketed as suitable for EAL learners and adjusts pacing based on gaps; includes vocabulary & comprehension modules (ReadingWise)
Languagenut EAL/ESOL	UK/Global company	EAL/ESOL learners of all ages (aligned with proficiency levels like WIDA/CEFR)	Has phonics area for English within its EAL suite, but broader language focus (Languagenut Global)	Can be licensed internationally; some Australian schools may use it but not mainstream	Fully designed for EAL/ESOL with vocabulary, listening, reading, writing, grammar, sentence building, multilingual support & integration (Languagenut Global)
GrapeSEED	United States	Preschool to early primary, disadvantaged learners, ESL/EAL	Oral language–first; doesn't foreground synthetic phonics the way structured phonics programmes do, emphasis on language acquisition before reading (Wikipedia)	Some use in international contexts, not widely documented in mainstream Australian curricula	Structured oral language acquisition before literacy; useful for learners new to English; supports listening, speaking, reading and writing (Wikipedia)

Appendix J: Responsiveness of the six synthetic phonics resources to EAL/D learning needs

The following tables synthesise ACTA's evaluation of the six commercial synthetic phonics resources reviewed in Section 5. They draw together the evidence presented across the issue-specific tables into a single profile for each resource, enabling readers to compare how each responds to the EAL/D learning criteria explored in this paper. These profiles are intended as summary reference tools and should be read in conjunction with the fuller discussion and evidence presented in Section 5.

Table 23: Letters and Sounds

RECOGNITION & POSITIONING OF EAL/D LEARNERS	SUMMARY
Overall approach to EAL/D learners	Recognises that phonics benefits EAL/D learners but provides little EAL/D-specific guidance. EAL/D learners are not treated as a distinct pedagogical group and second-language acquisition principles are not systematically incorporated into the program.
Productive utilisation of L1 (incl. bilingual/translanguaging approaches)	Acknowledges that learners' first language may influence English acquisition but provides no systematic guidance on using L1 as an instructional resource. Makes no reference to bilingual, two-way or translanguaging pedagogies.
Attention to L1 phonology	Teaching is based entirely on the English sound system. No guidance is provided on predictable differences between English and learners' existing phonological systems or on cross-linguistic phonological transfer.
Oral English, vocabulary and meaning-making	Oral language activities focus primarily on phonological awareness and articulation. Vocabulary development is assumed rather than systematically taught, and meaning is generally positioned as following successful grapheme-phoneme matching rather than developing alongside it.
Attention to learner age & educational background	Designed primarily for Foundation–Year 2 learners. Does not explicitly accommodate older EAL/D beginners or learners with interrupted or limited prior schooling. Classroom literacy practices and print concepts are assumed.
Role of pseudo-words	Uses pseudo-words for practice and assessment without considering how limited English vocabulary may affect EAL/D learners' performance.
Role of decodable readers	Places strong emphasis on decodable readers during beginning reading. Readers are designed for young English-speaking beginners and are not adapted for older EAL/D learners or learners with varied educational backgrounds.
Role of writing	Writing primarily reinforces taught grapheme-phoneme correspondences through spelling and simple sentence construction. Vocabulary, grammar and writing for communication are secondary to application of the alphabetic code.
Overall ACTA assessment	Assumes an English mother-tongue learner model throughout. While acknowledging EAL/D learners, it provides little guidance on integrating English language development with phonics instruction and gives minimal attention to multilingual learning.

Table 24: Read Write Inc (RWI)

RECOGNITION & POSITIONING OF EAL/D LEARNERS	SUMMARY
Overall approach to EAL/D learners	Explicitly recognises learners new to English and provides supplementary guidance and FAQs. However, EAL/D learners are primarily positioned according to reading ability rather than second-language learning needs, and no separate EAL/D instructional pathway is provided.
Productive utilisation of L1 (including bilingual/translanguaging approaches)	Recognises learners' language backgrounds and encourages vocabulary support, oral rehearsal and visual scaffolding. Provides little guidance on using learners' first languages as instructional resources and does not refer to bilingual or translanguaging pedagogies.
Attention to L1 phonology	Assumes the program applies equally across language backgrounds. Does not provide structured guidance on how learners' existing phonological systems may influence English sound perception or production.
Oral English, vocabulary and meaning-making	Uses extensive oral rehearsal to support pronunciation, blending and fluency. Vocabulary explanations are included but vocabulary development is not organised as a systematic English language development program. Meaning and comprehension generally follow mastery in matching graphemes to phonemes.

RECOGNITION & POSITIONING OF EAL/D LEARNERS	SUMMARY
Attention to learner age & educational background	<i>Fresh Start</i> provides age-appropriate materials for older struggling readers, but older EAL/D learners are largely conceptualised as requiring literacy catch-up rather than English language development. Interrupted schooling is not systematically addressed.
Role of pseudo-words	Uses "alien words" to assess the ability to match graphemes with phonemes independently of word recognition. No explicit consideration is given to how pseudo-word performance may interact with developing English vocabulary.
Role of decodable readers	Places very strong emphasis on decodable readers matched to the taught code. <i>Fresh Start</i> provides more age-appropriate texts for older learners, but these are designed as literacy intervention rather than specifically for EAL/D learners.
Role of writing	Writing is closely linked to taught phonics through scaffolded sentence writing, spelling and supported composition. Writing develops progressively but remains constrained by the phonics sequence during the early stages.
Overall ACTA assessment	Provides more explicit acknowledgement of EAL/D learners than several other programs and includes useful vocabulary and oral support. Nevertheless, it continues to assume a common phonics pathway and does not systematically integrate second-language acquisition principles into program design.

Table 25: Jolly Phonics

RECOGNITION & POSITIONING OF EAL/D LEARNERS	SUMMARY
Overall approach to EAL/D learners	Provides more explicit recognition of children learning English than most of the reviewed resources through its companion <i>Jolly English</i> program. Includes translated materials, parent guidance and activities designed to support children learning English. However, English language development primarily serves preparation for phonics rather than constituting a structured second-language learning program.
Productive utilisation of L1 (incl. bilingual /translanguaging approaches)	Recognises that learners acquiring English require additional support but provides little guidance on using learners' first languages as instructional resources. Makes no explicit reference to bilingual, two-way or translanguaging pedagogies.
Attention to L1 phonology	Uses actions, stories and visual supports to introduce English sounds but provides no systematic guidance on differences between English and learners' existing phonological systems or on cross-linguistic phonological transfer.
Oral English, vocabulary and meaning-making	Gives greater emphasis to vocabulary, songs, stories and oral participation than many phonics programs. Vocabulary learning supports access to phonics but is not organised as a cumulative English language development program. Meaningful contexts are provided, although grapheme-phoneme relationships remain the principal instructional focus.
Attention to learner age & educational background	Designed primarily for young children beginning literacy. Provides little guidance for adolescent or adult EAL/D learners and does not explicitly address interrupted or limited prior schooling. Associated materials remain largely early-childhood oriented.
Role of pseudo-words	Uses pseudo-words mainly in blending activities. Gives little consideration to whether pseudo-words may confuse learners who are simultaneously developing English vocabulary and meaning.
Role of decodable readers	Supports the use of decodable readers while allowing greater flexibility than some synthetic phonics programs. Published readers remain directed towards young children and are not adapted for older EAL/D learners or learners with interrupted schooling.
Role of writing	Writing integrates letter formation, spelling and simple sentence construction through a multisensory approach linking sounds, actions and print. Early writing remains constrained by the phonics sequence and introduced vocabulary.
Overall ACTA assessment	Demonstrates greater awareness of children learning English than most of the reviewed programs and provides useful preparatory language activities. However, it does not systematically integrate multilingual pedagogy, first-language resources or second-language acquisition principles into phonics instruction.

Table 26: MultiLit Suite⁷⁵

RECOGNITION & POSITIONING OF EAL/D LEARNERS	SUMMARY
Overall approach to EAL/D learners	Recognises EAL/D learners within a broader literacy intervention framework. <i>LanguageLift</i> provides explicit oral language support for learners with sufficient English exposure, but EAL/D learners are generally conceptualised as requiring literacy intervention rather than as additional-language learners.
Productive utilisation of L1 (incl. bilingual /translanguaging approaches)	Acknowledges that first-language literacy can support English literacy acquisition. Some components encourage teachers to draw on learners' linguistic knowledge, although L1 is not systematically incorporated into literacy instruction and bilingual or translanguaging approaches are not adopted.
Attention to L1 phonology	Focuses on developing English oral language and literacy. Provides little explicit guidance on learners' existing phonological systems or cross-linguistic phonological transfer.
Oral English, vocabulary and meaning-making	Oral reading, modelling and repetition support literacy learning. <i>LanguageLift</i> provides explicit oral language and vocabulary instruction, but across the suite oral English and vocabulary primarily support reading development rather than functioning as integrated English language development. Meaning generally incidental to success in matching graphemes and phonemes
Attention to learner age & educational background	Includes programs for older learners such as <i>MacqLit</i> and adult literacy programs. However, differentiation is primarily based on reading difficulty rather than English language acquisition or previous schooling, and interrupted schooling is not systematically addressed.
Role of pseudo-words	Uses pseudo-words in some assessment and diagnostic contexts. Provides limited discussion of how English language proficiency may influence EAL/D learners' performance.
Role of decodable readers	Gives strong emphasis to decodable readers while also incorporating authentic literature within classroom instruction. Readers for older learners are adapted mainly for age and reading level rather than multilingual backgrounds or interrupted schooling.
Role of writing	Writing reinforces phonics, spelling, encoding and sentence construction. Broader composition develops progressively, but early writing remains closely tied to application of taught grapheme-phoneme correspondences.
Overall ACTA assessment	The suite contains greater diversity than most programs, particularly through <i>LanguageLift</i> and resources for older learners. However, EAL/D learners remain largely positioned within a literacy intervention framework, and multilingual language development is not systematically embedded across the suite.

Table 27: Sounds-Write

RECOGNITION & POSITIONING OF EAL/D LEARNERS	SUMMARY
Overall approach to EAL/D learners	States that the program is suitable for learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds and acknowledges that English learners may require explicit teaching of the English writing system. Nevertheless, EAL/D learners are not treated as a distinct pedagogical group and additional English language development is assumed to occur alongside, rather than within, the program.
Productive utilisation of L1 (incl. bilingual /translanguaging approaches)	Acknowledges that learners' existing linguistic knowledge may assist learning and encourages comparison where appropriate. However, first languages are not systematically incorporated into instruction, and bilingual or translanguaging pedagogies are not explicitly recognised.
Attention to L1 phonology	Comes closest among the reviewed resources to recognising that learners' language backgrounds may influence learning the English sound system. However, instruction remains centred on English phonology and provides no systematic guidance on contrastive phonology or predictable first-language influences.
Oral English, vocabulary and meaning-making	Provides highly explicit teaching of spoken sounds, segmenting and blending. Oral language is used primarily to develop phonological awareness and grapheme-phoneme relationships rather than broader English language development. Vocabulary and meaning support literacy learning but are not organised as systematic instructional strands.
Attention to learner age & educational background	Can be used across age groups and is more adaptable than programs designed solely for early childhood. However, older EAL/D learners continue to be conceptualised largely as learners requiring literacy intervention rather than as additional-language learners with diverse educational backgrounds.
Role of pseudo-words	Uses pseudo-words to assess application of the alphabetic code. Provides little discussion of the implications for learners whose English vocabulary and phonological representations are still developing.

⁷⁵ Multilit also has have a spelling program, SpellEx, based on synthetic phonics and "Triple Word Form Theory", integrating phonology, morphology and orthography. Releasing InitialWrite, a writing program intended for Foundation to Year 2, in late 2026.

RECOGNITION & POSITIONING OF EAL/D LEARNERS	SUMMARY
Role of decodable readers	Places very strong emphasis on decodable readers aligned with the taught code. While suitable for older struggling readers, there is no clear evidence that published readers have been adapted to reflect the linguistic or educational profiles of older EAL/D learners.
Role of writing	Integrates writing closely with encoding, spelling and application of phoneme-grapheme knowledge. Sentence writing develops progressively but remains largely determined by learners' mastery of the alphabetic code.
Overall ACTA assessment	Provides one of the clearest and most explicit accounts of the English writing system and acknowledges linguistic diversity more readily than several other programs. However, its instructional design continues to assume an English mother-tongue learner model and does not systematically integrate English language development, first-language knowledge or multilingual pedagogy.

Table 28: Promoting Literacy Development (PLD)

RECOGNITION & POSITIONING OF EAL/D LEARNERS	SUMMARY
Overall approach to EAL/D learners	Gives the most explicit attention to EAL/D learners of the six reviewed resources. Advises teachers to consider English exposure, oral language and vocabulary development, and provides references to broader EAL/D resources. However, EAL/D learners are sometimes discussed alongside learners with oral language delay or literacy difficulties rather than consistently as multilingual learners.
Productive utilisation of L1 (incl. bilingual /translanguaging approaches)	Explicitly recognises that first-language literacy can support learning to read English and encourages teachers to consider learners' linguistic backgrounds. Nevertheless, L1 is not systematically used as an instructional medium, and bilingual or translanguaging pedagogies are not incorporated into the framework.
Attention to L1 phonology	Recognises linguistic diversity and the importance of oral language but provides little explicit guidance on learners' existing phonological systems or on cross-linguistic phonological transfer. Phonological instruction remains centred on English.
Oral English, vocabulary and meaning-making	Gives substantially greater emphasis than the other reviewed resources to oral language, vocabulary, sentence structure and meaning-making. Treats oral language and vocabulary as core instructional goals and integrates comprehension, vocabulary and grapheme-phoneme relationships from the outset of literacy learning.
Attention to learner age & educational background	Primarily designed for younger learners but less closely tied to chronological age than several other programs because of its language-development orientation. Recognises variation in oral English development but does not explicitly address interrupted or limited prior schooling.
Role of pseudo-words	Does not use pseudo-words, instead emphasising meaningful language, vocabulary and literacy development.
Role of decodable readers	Treats decodable readers as one component within a broader language and literacy framework rather than the dominant independent reading resource. No evidence was identified that published reading materials are specifically adapted for older EAL/D learners or learners with interrupted schooling.
Role of writing	Positions writing as a vehicle for developing vocabulary, sentence construction, narrative and meaning while also teaching phonics and spelling explicitly. Writing is integrated within broader language and literacy development rather than serving primarily to reinforce the alphabetic code.
Overall ACTA assessment	Of the six reviewed resources, PLD demonstrates the strongest alignment with ACTA's emphasis on oral language, vocabulary and integrated literacy development. Nevertheless, it remains an English literacy program rather than offering systematic second-language pedagogy; does not systematically incorporate first-language knowledge, cross-linguistic phonology or bilingual approaches into its instructional design.

Appendix K: Role of decodable readers in the six reviewed resources.

Table30 summarises the use of decodable texts in the phonics programs we reviewed.

Table 29: Role of decodable texts in the six reviewed resources.

PROGRAM / RESOURCE	ROLE OF DECODABLE READERS IN EARLY READING INSTRUCTION	POSITIONING OF DECODABLE TEXTS IN RELATION TO WIDER INDEPENDENT READING	POSITION ON SHARED READING / READ-ALOUDS
Letters and Sounds	Decodable texts are a core component of early reading instruction and are intended to align closely with the grapheme-phoneme correspondences already taught.	Positions decodable texts as the main texts children should read independently in the early stages of learning to read. Wider reading is encouraged primarily through adult reading aloud rather than through children independently reading texts containing untaught correspondences.	Encourages teachers and families to read a wide range of high-quality literature aloud to develop vocabulary, comprehension and enjoyment.
Read Write Inc.	Decodable texts are central to the program and are closely matched to children's assessed phonics level.	Makes the strongest distinction between texts children read themselves and texts adults read to them . Children's independent reading is expected to consist of books matched to their current phonics knowledge; wider literature is accessed primarily through teacher reading aloud.	Strong emphasis on daily story reading, discussion and exposure to rich vocabulary and literary texts.
Jolly Phonics	Decodable readers are used to provide practice with taught letter-sound correspondences and blending. Explicitly marketed as “	Positions decodable readers as important early reading practice, but appears less prescriptive than some SSP programs about limiting children's independent reading to fully decodable texts. Wider reading is seen as compatible with the approach.	Stories, songs and shared reading are integral parts of the program.
MultiLit suite (including InitialLit, MiniLit Sage, MacqLit, Reading Tutor Program (RTP), Word Attack Skills-Extension (WAS-Ex) and Reinforced Reading.	Decodable texts are a major component of beginning reading and intervention programs, providing practice in applying taught phonics knowledge.	Positions decodable texts as the preferred material for independent practice during explicit phonics instruction. Wider reading is not necessarily excluded, but is generally provided through teacher-led reading and exposure to authentic texts rather than replacing decodable practice.	Particularly in InitialLit, includes teacher read-alouds and exposure to quality children's literature to support oral language, vocabulary, content knowledge and comprehension.
Sounds-Write	Decodable texts are a core element of instruction and are designed to match the code knowledge learners have been explicitly taught.	Positions decodable texts as the appropriate material for children's early independent reading because they enable successful application of the taught code. Wider reading is encouraged through adult-supported reading and read-alouds while independent reading develops.	Encourages exposure to rich texts beyond the learner's independent reading level through teacher and family reading.
Promoting Literacy Development	Decodable texts are available and recommended as one resource for practising phonics and reading accuracy.	Positions decodable texts as a support for developing phonemic skills rather than as the organising principle of all early reading. Wider reading and meaningful engagement with texts are not framed as separate from phonics learning.	Places strong emphasis on oral language, vocabulary, comprehension and engagement with meaningful texts.

Appendix L: Phonics checks used in State & Territory jurisdictions

Table 30: Use of Phonics Checks in States & Territory Jurisdictions

JURISDICTION	MANDATED CHECK (GOVT SCHOOLS)	TOOL / NOTES	LITERACY HUB ALIGNMENT	IDENTIFICATION OF READERS BELOW SPECIFIED BENCHMARK	GOVERNANCE / RESPONSIBILITY
NSW	Yes	NSW Year 1 Phonics Screening Check; Term 3	Conceptually aligned; state tool	Yes. Students below the NSW benchmark (28/40) are identified for additional support.	NSW Department of Education administers the state check
SA	Yes	SA Phonics Screening Check; statewide	Closely aligned to Literacy Hub model	Yes. Students below the expected threshold are identified for additional support; Year 2 recheck available.	SA Department for Education administers the state check
VIC	Yes	Victorian Year 1 Phonics Check; Term 3	Aligned to national approach	Yes. Benchmark of 28/40 ; Year 2 reassessment available for students below benchmark.	VIC Department of Education / VCAA
ACT	Yes	ACT Year 1 Phonics Check (Strong Foundations)	Conceptually similar	Yes. Used to identify students requiring additional support; ACT uses its own implementation arrangements.	ACT Education Directorate administers check
TAS	Yes	Tasmanian Year 1 Phonics Check	Directly aligned; uses the national check	Yes. Students below the 28/40 threshold are identified; implementation documentation also refers to “struggling” or “developing” decoders.	Tasmanian Department for Education, Children and Young People
QLD	Yes / implemented	Year 1 Phonics Check; supported statewide	Directly available through Literacy Hub	Yes. Used as a universal screener to identify students requiring additional support; no separate QLD category identified.	QLD Department of Education supports implementation
WA	Yes / implemented	Year 1 phonics check; schools have flexibility in assessment choice	Literacy Hub check available; flexible implementation	Yes. Used diagnostically to identify students requiring additional support; no separate WA category identified.	WA Department of Education
NT	Yes – from 2026	Year 1 Phonics Check; Term 3	National approach available	Yes. Used to identify students requiring additional support; no separate NT category identified.	NT Department of Education and Training
National / Literacy Hub	Voluntary	Online Year 1 Phonics Check; free	National reference tool available to all schools	Yes. Designed to identify students who may need additional help in learning to read; national tool uses a 28/40 threshold.	Australian Government Department of Education; Literacy Hub

Source/date: Information checked against Australian Government and state/territory sources on 24 September 2026. Jurisdictional arrangements may change.

Sources and notes on Year 1 Phonics Checks

National position

The Commonwealth Expert Panel recommended that all governments and school systems implement the Year 1 Phonics Check by the end of 2026, while retaining its diagnostic rather than high-stakes purpose. [Department of Education](#)

The Australian Government’s March 2026 progress report states that Year 1 phonics checks are being used in public schools **nationwide**. [Department of Education](#) In September 2026, the Federal Minister for Education stated that “**this year we rolled out a Year 1 phonics check across all Australian public schools for the first time.**” [Ministers' Media Centre](#)

Australian Government – Year 1 Phonics Check (Literacy Hub) [Year 1 Phonics Check](#)

The Australian Government provides a **free, voluntary, teacher-administered Year 1 Phonics Check** through the Literacy Hub. The check is designed to help teachers identify students who may need additional help in learning to read. The check is a 40-item assessment and includes real and pseudo-words. The Literacy Hub also provides administration guidance, professional learning and teaching resources. [Department of Education](#)

Australian Capital Territory

ACT Strong Foundations – Year 1 Phonics Check – [Strong Foundations rollout](#)

The ACT introduced its Year 1 phonics check through the **Strong Foundations** literacy initiative. By September 2025, all ACT public primary and early childhood schools had participated in the check. The ACT check forms part of the Directorate's broader literacy strategy rather than simply being an optional use of the Commonwealth Literacy Hub check.

Queensland

Queensland Department of Education – Universal screeners: phonics and numeracy – [QLD Universal screeners](#)

Queensland has now moved beyond the earlier “transition / supported” description. The Department provides funding to state schools for implementation of the **Year 1 phonics check**, including teacher training, familiarisation and administration. The funding applies to state schools with Year 1 students and is based on 2026 enrolments. [Education](#)

New South Wales

NSW Department of Education – Year 1 Phonics Screening Check – [NSW Year 1 Phonics Screening Check](#)

The NSW check is mandatory for Year 1 students in NSW government schools and is administered in Term 3. NSW has used its state Year 1 Phonics Screening Check since 2021. The NSW benchmark is **28/40**, with students below the benchmark identified for additional support.

Northern Territory

The NT position has also changed since your earlier notes. The NT Better and Fairer Schools Agreement commits the Territory to a **Year 1 Phonics Check**, with annual reporting of participation commencing in **2026**. [Department of Education and Training](#) The NT Department's 2024–25 Annual Report subsequently describes the **mandated Year 1 Phonics Check** as part of its early-screening approach under the Boosting Literacy and Numeracy Plan. [Department of Education and Training](#)

South Australia

SA Phonics Screening Check – Department for Education – [SA Phonics Screening Check](#)

South Australia has operated a statewide Year 1 Phonics Screening Check for several years. The check is administered to Year 1 students and is used to identify students requiring additional literacy support. The SA check is closely aligned with the national approach.

Tasmania

Tasmania – Year 1 Phonics Check / Lifting Literacy – [Tasmania's Year 1 Phonics Check results](#)

Tasmania introduced a **statewide Year 1 Phonics Check** as part of its *Lifting Literacy* strategy. The national check is used, with results used to identify students requiring additional support. Tasmania's implementation also provides for subsequent assessment of students who have not reached the expected level.

Victoria

Victorian Year 1 Phonics Check – Victorian Government – [Victorian Year 1 Phonics Check](#)

Victoria piloted its Year 1 Phonics Check in 2025 and made it mandatory in 2026. It is administered in Term 3. The Victorian check uses a **28/40 benchmark**, with Year 2 reassessment available for students who do not meet the benchmark.

Western Australia

WA Department of Education – Phonics Initiative – [WA Phonics Initiative](#)

WA is participating in the national Year 1 phonics-check reform. The WA Better and Fairer Schools Agreement includes a **Year 1 phonics check to identify students requiring additional help**. The Commonwealth agreement allows jurisdictions some flexibility in the assessment arrangements, so WA should not be represented as simply using the identical NSW/SA/Victorian state instrument. WA's Department also has a broader Phonics Initiative to strengthen systematic phonics teaching. [Department of Education](#)

Source/date: Information checked against Australian Government and state/territory government sources on **24 September 2026**. Jurisdictional arrangements and implementation details may change.

Appendix M: Item-by-item analysis of the sample test version of the 2020-23 Phonics Check⁷⁶

This item-level listing shows how EAL/D learners' performance on the Year 1 Phonics Check results can be misinterpreted.

None of these items can yield valid or reliable information about EAL/D learners, because the learner may say each word using their L1 phonological patterns and rules.

For the same reason, this analysis also shows that it is pointless to use pseudo-words with EAL/D learners because it is impossible to tell in any given example whether the learner is using (i) their English knowledge or (ii) expected phoneme-grapheme relationships or (iii) the L1 phonological system.

SIMPLE PSEUDO WORDS

2020-23 PHONICS CHECK- ADVICE TO ASSESSORS ON HOW TO INTERPRET STUDENT MISTAKES		ACTA ANALYSIS POSSIBLE EXPLANATION OF HOW WORD IS SAID BY EAL/D LEARNERS ACCORDING TO THEIR L1 PHONOLOGICAL SYSTEMS
Word	Decoding diagnosis	
lig	"Cannot decode consonant + vowel"	L1 vowel inventory may not distinguish between /ɪ/ and /e/. If the vowel is too short, the assessor may hear /k/ instead of /g/.
mep	"Cannot decode CVC"	L1 vowel inventory may have a vowel between /e/ and /æ/. If vowel is too long, assessor may hear /p/ as /b/.
gax	"Cannot decode final consonant"	L1 may not allow /ks/ in word-final position.
emp	"Cannot blend cluster"	L1 may not allow this cluster in word-final position.
beff	"Cannot decode double consonants"	L1 may not allow /f/ in word-final position.
shup	"Cannot decode digraph"	L1 may not have /ʃ/ so learner pronounces "sh" as /s/.
doil	"Cannot decode vowel digraph"	L1 may not have diphthongs.
charb	"Cannot decode digraph or cluster"	L1 may not have /tʃ/ ("ch") or may not permit it in initial word position. "ch" can also be decoded as /k/ as in "Chris".
frex	"Cannot decode cluster"	L1 may not permit /fr/ L1 may not permit /ks/ in final position.
criff	"Cannot decode complex cluster"	L1 may not permit this combination of sounds or may not permit it in initial position.
haps	"Cannot decode final cluster"	L1 may not permit consonants or /ps/ or /s/ in final position.
barst	"Cannot decode consonant string"	L1 may not permit /st/ cluster or /st/ in final position.

SIMPLE REAL WORDS

WORD	DECODING DIAGNOSIS	POSSIBLE EXPLANATION OF HOW WORD IS SAID BY EAL/D LEARNERS ACCORDING TO THEIR L1 PHONOLOGICAL SYSTEMS
chin	"Cannot decode digraph /ch/"	L1 may not have /tʃ/ ("ch") or may not permit it in initial word position. "ch" can also be decoded as /k/ as in "Chris".
deck	"Cannot decode final consonant /ck/"	L1 may not permit final /k/.
horn	"Cannot decode r-controlled vowel"	L1 may require /r/ to be pronounced. This will affect vowel quality.
queen	"Cannot decode vowel digraph"	L1 may have a vowel between /i/ and /ɪ/. L1 may also affect the length of /i/. Assessor may hear the sound as /ɪ/.
tram	"Cannot decode consonant cluster /tr/"	Cluster simplification common in some L1s. This cluster may not be permitted in L1. Learners may fail to aspirate /t/ in initial position, which will affect the quality of /r/.

⁷⁶ This sample test for the 2020-23 Literacy Check was accessed by ACTA in early 2026 at this website [Search | Literacy Hub](#). Access to the actual test is open only to those with a Year 1 Phonics Check account.

WORD	DECODING DIAGNOSIS	POSSIBLE EXPLANATION OF HOW WORD IS SAID BY EAL/D LEARNERS ACCORDING TO THEIR L1 PHONOLOGICAL SYSTEMS
press	"Cannot decode final consonant cluster"	L1 may not permit final /s/.
self	"Cannot decode seg /lf/"	/lf/ is not permitted in many languages and can be an extremely difficult cluster to pronounce. Reading aloud may also be affected by some languages having a phoneme between /l/ and /r/.
keeps	"Cannot decode vowel + final cluster"	L1 may not permit /ps/ in final position.

COMPLEX PSEUDO WORDS

WORD	DECODING DIAGNOSIS	POSSIBLE EXPLANATION OF HOW WORD IS SAID BY EAL/D LEARNERS ACCORDING TO THEIR L1 PHONOLOGICAL SYSTEMS
jigh	"Cannot decode trigraph /igh/"	Complex pseudo-words are designed to probe deeper decoding. However, they do nothing of the sort for EAL/D learners because exactly the same factors apply to complex pseudo-words as to simple ones, viz. L1 phonotactic transfer may dictate how they are said aloud.
woats	"Cannot decode vowel sequence"	
rird	"Cannot decode r-controlled vowel"	
phope	"Cannot decode digraph /ph/ or split digraph"	
glips	"Cannot decode cluster"	
floost	"Cannot decode /oo/ + cluster"	
splam	"Cannot decode multi-consonant cluster"	
stribe	"Cannot decode cluster + split vowel"	

COMPLEX REAL WORDS

WORD	DECODING DIAGNOSIS	POSSIBLE EXPLANATION OF HOW WORD IS SAID BY EAL/D LEARNERS ACCORDING TO THEIR L1 PHONOLOGICAL SYSTEMS
stair	"Cannot decode vowel sequence ⁷⁷ /ai/"	L1 may not have diphthongs or this particular one, so learners may treat vowel as pure /a:/.
haunt	"Cannot decode /au/ diphthong"	The vowel in "haunt" is not a diphthong in Australian English. It is the "pure" vowel or monophthong /o:/: see Appendix B.
lied	"Cannot decode split digraph"	L1 may treat letters separately
wove	"Cannot decode split digraph"	/o_e/ pattern may be parsed as 2 syllables
drank	"Cannot decode /dr/ cluster + short vowel"	Cluster simplification/transference
treats	"Cannot blend vowel + cluster"	/tre/ + /ts/ may cause reduction
scram	"Cannot decode initial /scr/ cluster"	Complex onset often simplified in L1s
stroke	"Cannot decode split vowel + cluster"	Multiple features compound difficulty
arrow	"Cannot segment syllables correctly"	Two syllables may be mis-timed
forest	"Cannot decode multi-syllable word"	Syllable segmentation differs across languages
wishing	"Cannot decode morphological changes"	/-ing/ may be omitted or mispronounced
brighter	"Cannot decode derivational morphology"	Vowel change + suffix complexity

⁷⁷ It is misleading to call diphthongs "vowel sequences". In fact, the issue here is not *vowels*. The sequence to be decoded is a **grapheme** sequence. See Appendix C.

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Queensland University of Technology - Home Language in Schools

[Home Languages in Schools: Students, Families and Teachers Learning Together \(HLinS\)](#)
