ACTA CONFERENCE 2026 · SHAPING THE FUTURE · PRESENTATION 3

Limitations, affordances and recommendations in EAL/D education in Australia

Part of the symposium "Fading Footprints: Tracing EAL/D teaching courses at Australian universities and investigating the state of EAL/D education in Australian schools"

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Methodology

25+ one-on-one interviews, conducted online and face to face across Australia

3 participant groups: primary and secondary school teachers and leaders; university EAL/D teacher educators and course developers; system-level officers

6 states and territories represented, including metropolitan, regional and remote settings

2024–25 data collection period, running alongside the national survey and the ITE course audit

Analysis

Transcripts were reviewed for broad codes, then the utterances coded as “institutional limitations/affordances” and “recommendations for teacher training” were re-read and refined into the themes reported

A note on names

All participants are identified by pseudonym. Schools, universities and systems are described by type and state only.

INSTRUMENTS

The interview schedules

Four tailored schedules were used, for course providers, mainstream teachers with large EAL/D cohorts, Intensive English Centre teachers, and school leaders.

Course providers	Responsiveness to linguistic diversity in ITE; exemplar units; factors behind including or excluding EAL/D units; available specialisations
Mainstream teachers	The EAL/D cohort and its needs; classroom challenges; preparedness; professional learning; what ITE did and did not equip them for
IEC teachers	What happens after students exit; what mainstream teachers need to know; whether schools hold that knowledge
School leaders	EAL/D profile; strategic planning and resourcing; deploying EAL/D staff to build mainstream capacity; models of high-quality provision

Scan for the full interview schedules

All four question sets, in full

From broad codes to focal categories

Broad codes across the transcripts

- Background information
- Teachers and staffing
- Complexity of the learning environment
- Complexity of the EAL/D student cohort
- Employment requirements

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Institutional limitations

- Power of principals and one-line budgets
- EAL/D teacher shortages and staffing
- Impact of top-down mandates
- (Lack of) university provision of EAL/D units
- Lack of practicums in EAL/D-rich schools
- No accountability
- Systemic devaluation of multilingualism

Institutional Affordances

- Whole-school capacity building
- Practice-based innovation
- A formal EAL curriculum
- EAL/D pedagogy as good pedagogy
- Strong specialist teams in ITE
- School–university partnership

Recommendations for teacher education

- Diversity as fact of life and resource
- ITE should centre EAL/D: major or core units
- What content is required in ITE courses
- Staff awareness of EAL/D learners
- Top-down policy change for systemic delivery

01

Institutional limitations

What constrains EAL/D provision in schools and its preparation in universities — budgets, staffing, mandates, placements, and the standing of multilingualism itself.

LIMITATION 01

The power of principals and the one-line budget

EAL/D funding reaches the school, but school-level discretion, limited oversight and weak accountability determine whether it reaches EAL/D learners.

> *Schools are now on one line budget. It's up to principals how they direct the money… I didn't have any say at all in where any of the funding went… It was absorbed into a one line budget, with no accountability for services for EAL/D or international students.*

Paula · secondary EAL/D teacher and program leader

> *I asked them, do you know that there's funding attached to EAL/D students? And they said, oh yes, we know we get the funding. And so then my next question was, what programmes are you putting in place…? And they turned around and said, oh, there's no money for that.*

Jane · secondary EAL/D coordinator

> *The department talks the talk about equity… but then there's not a lot of accountability to the schools to demonstrate that that money is really being used for those students… The Department doesn't hold schools accountable for how those programs should be run.*

Rosa · intensive English centre leader, WA

LIMITATION 02

Teacher shortages and the qualification gap

> *Out of 25 coordinators I can pinpoint and tell you that two are qualified EALD, and the third one is actually studying. So there is very limited… teachers who are qualified EALD teachers.*

Nadia · senior education officer, Queensland

> *We have just never had enough specialist training for the needs of a migrant country, essentially.*

Susan · teacher educator, Victoria

> *At best they might have a CELTA that they did 10 years ago before they went travelling. A CELTA, a heartbeat and some passion… there are absolutely people working in our program now who wouldn't have got a foot in the door 10 years ago… because of what's not coming out of the universities.*

Rosa · intensive English centre leader, WA

LIMITATION 03

MAJOR THEME

The impact of top-down mandates

Accreditation and standards regimes shape what can be taught. Each new mandate is accommodated by displacing something else — and EAL/D is repeatedly what gives way.

> *The ITE [authority] has come and said, we've added more standards, find a place to stick it in your course. So the only way we can find it is to give up some of that languages and literacies and learners elective.*

Andrew · teacher educator, Victoria

> *The decisions that have been made have seen a whittling away, or a diluting, or a fragmentation of addressing the needs of EAL students, and so it's been left up to people that are not specialists. It's a one week here or a one week there.*

Susan · teacher educator, Victoria

> *There's no innovation. There's no agency or autonomy over what we actually think is important. We're just ticking boxes… the whole point of standardisation is that it shouldn't matter [where you study], you're all learning exactly the same thing.*

Andrew · teacher educator, Victoria

LIMITATION 04

MAJOR THEME

(Lack of) university provision of EAL/D units

> *…we did raise the issue of universities not providing EAL/D major as a course of study for teachers across the whole country, not just WA… they were doing a minor in ESL, but never saw an ESL student in the classroom… It's an incredible gap in secondary teacher education.*

Paula · secondary teacher and school leader

> *We used to have the initial teacher education unit called Linguistics for Educators, but we don't run it anymore… I think the logic is that this is covered in every other unit.*

Priya · teacher educator, ACT

> *I have seen removal of units focused particularly on EAL for content area teachers… the reason they gave us was, it was an elective unit. So when the course was restructured they had to prioritise core and required units, and the elective unit will be the first to be considered removed.*

Linh · teacher educator, Victoria

> *They're not necessarily brought to the understanding that teaching English language is part of the responsibility of their learning area… I've seen assignments where students say, well, it's not relevant to me.*

Diane · teacher educator, South Australia

LIMITATION 05

Lack of placement opportunities: Nowhere to practise

Even where units survive, pre-service teachers often complete their degrees without meeting an EAL/D learner or an EAL/D specialist.

> *If you set it up in ITE, where do they go for a placement? There are no EAL leaders. Who looks after them in their placement, in their prac? Because the system's been destroyed… You've just really got a policy made without the operationalisation.*

Yvonne · teacher educator, Queensland

> *Many of them have never met an EALD learner. They might have done a placement in a school that had EALD learners, but it may not have been brought to their attention… So for a lot of the time we were working in the hypothetical.*

Peter · teacher educator, NSW

> *We used to mentor. We had prac students twice a year, three or four, every year, coming through TESOL majors. A lot of our new staff came to us that way… And of course, that doesn't exist anymore.*

Rosa · intensive English centre leader, WA

No policy line, no funding, no accountability

> *Because of those accountability lines: if language isn't there, then there's no funding… If government departments have signed up to things that don't include specifically EALD, then by and large it just goes by the wayside, because it's not on that line.*
>
> **Roslyn · academic, language and First Nations education**

> *EALD is not even in the Department of Education portfolio. There is no EALD and there's no staffing. There is no unit. There is no differentiation. There is no body that represents EALD in the curriculum.*
>
> **Nadia · senior education officer, Queensland**

> *It's this really weird kind of managerial culture, that you generate a new document, you say you're doing it, and then you generate another one… and the folk on the edges for whom that mainstream mechanism isn't working are sort of going, excuse me, not working.*
>
> **Roslyn · academic, language and First Nations education**

LIMITATION 06

The systemic devaluation of multilingualism

> *Whatever is valued in teacher education, it's not this. And so we constantly have to be fighting and we're at risk of losing it… It's not sexy. It's not like STEM… students, parents, teachers in our field, they're not the ones with voices that are heard.*

Diane · teacher educator, South Australia

> *Anytime we've had multilingualism, it's often been a bit otherish. Certainly not referring to all of us… It's an odd thing.*

Roslyn · academic, language and First Nations education

> *The systems are set up so that it is totally invisiblised… there are these very big, overarching discourses that gazump language, even though in a kind of way language is the biggest thing.*

Roslyn · academic, language and First Nations education

> *When it comes to EALD, which was a specialised area, they didn't see any value in it. They thought it was something you could just pick up… It wasn't really considered real teaching.*

Peter · teacher educator, NSW

02

Institutional Affordances

Participants also pointed to what works. These are local, fragile and unevenly distributed — but they are existence proofs, and they tell us what to build on.

AFFORDANCES

What is already working

Whole-school capacity building

Where a school funds a dedicated EAL/D leadership role, capability is built across all staff rather than siloed in one classroom.

A formal EAL curriculum

Victoria's formal EAL curriculum gives the field status and gives departmental staff an obligation to act on it.

Strong specialist teams in ITE

Where literacy and TESOL teams hold deep expertise, EAL/D survives embedding — but participants knew this depended on individuals.

Practice-based innovation

Structured school observation tasks, placement preferences for EAL/D-rich schools, and case-study assignments make the abstract concrete.

EAL/D pedagogy as good pedagogy across the board

Participants consistently framed EAL/D strategies as benefiting every student, which lowers resistance in mainstream settings.

School–university partnership

Schools reported being willing, even eager, to host, mentor and co-design with universities — the appetite is not the barrier.

One school, one role, one year

26

students identified as EAL/D before the EAL/D role existed

→

1,700

identified once identification processes were put in place

> *When I started this work three years ago for the school, 26 students were identified as EALD… So you can see the size of the missed opportunity, that through nothing more than people didn't know what they didn't know. They didn't know how to go about actually identifying in the first place, before we can even get to the teaching and learning.*

Helen · EAL/D lead teacher, secondary school, WA

03 Recommendations

What participants said teacher education, schools and systems should do — including the two recommendations that recurred most consisently across the dataset.

RECOMMENDATION 01

Diversity as a fact of life — and a resource

> *EALD students are not a deficit model. EALD is a highly active, positive academic model by definition, because they're multilingual… That's been the biggest challenge, changing that mindset and that culture.*

Helen · EAL/D lead teacher, secondary school, WA

> *I just wish that there was a shift away from viewing EAL/D students as synonymous with students with special needs… I would prefer that they were looked at with the gifted and talented students.*

Paula · secondary EAL/D teacher and program leader

> *You can tap into their bilingual expertise. You can also start to make them feel proud of their language background… start accessing that as a resource and a strength of those learners instead of viewing it always as a deficit… tap into the diversity and celebrate it and nurture it.*

Paula · secondary EAL/D teacher and program leader

> *Using EALD pedagogy and focusing on teaching language is something that benefits all students, not just your EALD students… It works both ways.*

Fiona · intensive English centre teacher

RECOMMENDATION 02

ITE should centre EAL/D: a major, or compulsory units

> *So look, having an EAL/D major would be a great, great start… it should be a compulsory unit to do on EAL/D learners, because the reality is, with growing migration, most schools now have a significant percentage of the student population who are EAL/D learners.*

Jane · secondary teacher and school leader

> *If you are going to provide within the confines of a degree, I feel that one semester of EALD is not enough.*

Nadia · senior education officer, Queensland

> *The other great tragedy of losing EAL/D as a major option is that the fact that those courses existed showed young people considering teaching that that was a pathway. Whereas a lot of them now have got no idea. They don't know that that's a career pathway.*

Rosa · intensive English centre leader, WA

> *I constantly say to them: TESOL pedagogy is good pedagogy. It's inclusive.*

Bev · teacher educator, WA

RECOMMENDATION 03

MAJOR THEME

What content should ITE courses require?

What participants named

- Knowing who EAL/D and LBOTE learners are, and what the categories mean
- The EAL/D learning progression and ESL scales — and how to actually use them
- Explicit teaching, scaffolding and the gradual release of responsibility
- Differentiation and assessment design for emerging academic English
- Second language acquisition and how the English language works
- Trauma-informed practice, especially for refugee-background learners
- An EAL/D lens embedded in every curriculum method unit, not one standalone

> *There should be all of that minimum standard stuff… What does it mean? The phases of the learning progression, the ESL scales if need be, but definitely as a minimum the learning progression — and knowing how to use it.*

Wendy · EAL/D advisor, NSW

> *What I wish I'd had more of is the pedagogical strategies that are specific to teaching EALD students… scaffolding techniques… assessment design. How can I support these students to show what they know in different ways?*

Sarah · EAL/D teacher

RECOMMENDATION 04

Staff awareness: Put pre-service teachers in front of EAL/D learners

> *I think that is the best way to learn — to be in front of students who are EAL/D and to have that real life, real experience in real time. There is nothing more valuable than that, and I didn't have that.*
>
> **Mai · intensive English centre teacher, WA**

> *I would like to see students at universities having a very practical, hands-on experience of what it is… it's different from the English curriculum, this is a language curriculum. How do you design it? How do you deliver it? What do the kids think of it?*
>
> **Helen · EAL/D lead teacher, secondary school, WA**

> *We need to have much more proactive partnership work with the universities, because we are not going to bridge that divide — and there is a divide between what is the need in schools and the training and the knowledge that goes on in universities. We have got to work in partnership… to build capacity, knowledge first, and capacity to deliver for EALD kids and their communities.*
>
> **Helen · EAL/D lead teacher, secondary school, WA**

RECOMMENDATION 05

MAJOR THEME

Policy change for systematicity and consistency

> *The need would be to centralise… because this is a human rights issue, and not addressing EALD needs is not giving equity for EALD students… EALD is a specialised area and it is not every teacher can teach EALD. You need specialist training.*

Nadia · senior education officer, Queensland

> *The issue of language keeps getting folded into culture… if a student doesn't understand the language of instruction, how on earth can a teacher be culturally responsive?*

Graham · teacher educator, NSW

> *If you had AITSL standards that insisted that EALD students, and particularly language issues, were dealt with systematically across the curriculum, that would help enormously… But you also need a specific purpose subject where you can focus exclusively on EALD as well.*

Graham · teacher educator, NSW

> *We use the wrong language. When you've got to talk to the people that are in power and making the decisions, we've got to frame it in a way that they understand.*

Susan · teacher educator, Victoria

SYNTHESIS

Challenges and the opportunities they open

Challenge	Opportunity
EAL/D funding disappears into one-line budgets	Attach a reporting line to EAL/D allocations and publish school-level acquittal
EAL/D units are the first cut when courses are restructured	Recognise EAL/D as a specialisation within accreditation, not an elective
Pre-service teachers graduate without meeting an EAL/D learner	Fund structured school–university partnerships and targeted placements
Language is folded into culture and literacy	Name language explicitly in the standards and in curriculum documents
Specialist workforce is ageing out and not being replaced	Restore EAL/D as a visible, credentialled career pathway

WHERE TO FROM HERE

Implications for advocacy

For universities

Restore dedicated EAL/D units and pathways and treat embedding as a supplement to specialist study rather than a substitute for it.

For systems and schools

Give EAL/D a structural home, a funding line and an accountability line — and resource the identification work that makes the cohort visible.

For accreditation bodies

Name language explicitly in the standards, and recognise EAL/D as a specialisation so that course structures can protect it.

The interviews complement the survey and the audit with something neither can supply: an account of the mechanisms by which EAL/D provision erodes — and of the practitioners who are holding it together anyway.

Policy Reform and Future Directions

Future Research Focus

Accumulate evidence for advocacy by:

- exploring qualitative aspects of EAL/D teaching and documenting their impact on classroom practices for multilingual learners.
- investigating the experiences of teachers who are not equipped with dedicated units on how to teach EAL/D students or are teaching in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms

Thank you

Questions and discussion

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Stephanie Dryden Curtin University
David Partridge University of New England

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Interview schedules

With thanks to the Australian Council of TESOL Associations and to the practitioners, leaders and academics who gave their time.