

# Supporting Children Learning English as a Second Language in the Early Years (birth to six years)

November 2009

Dr Priscilla Clarke • OAM, Early Childhood Consultant

This Discussion Paper was commissioned by the VCAA as a supporting document to the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework, 2009.

© Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2009

No part of this publication may be reproduced except as specified under the *Copyright Act 1968* or by permission from the VCAA. For more information go to: [www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/aboutus/policies/policy-copyright.html](http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/aboutus/policies/policy-copyright.html)

The VCAA provides the only official, up-to-date versions of VCAA publications. Details of updates can be found on the VCAA website: [www.vcaa.vic.edu.au](http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au)

This publication may contain copyright material belonging to a third-party. Every effort has been made to contact all copyright owners. If you believe that material in this publication is an infringement of your copyright please email the Copyright Officer c/o: [information.services.vcaa@edumail.vic.gov.au](mailto:information.services.vcaa@edumail.vic.gov.au)

Copyright in materials appearing at any sites linked to this document rests with the author of those materials, subject to the Copyright Act. The VCAA recommends you refer to copyright statements at linked sites before using such materials.

**ISBN 978-1-921702-17-4**

Dr Priscilla Clarke, OAM was formally Executive Director of FKA Children's Services, which includes the Multicultural Resource Centre. She is currently an early childhood consultant specialising in the Second Language acquisition of young bilingual children. Priscilla has conducted professional development for early years professionals in Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Ireland. She is the author of many publications including a book written jointly with Professor Iram Siraj-Blatchford and published by Open University Press.

*In 2003, Dr Clarke was awarded an Order of Australia Medal for her significant contribution to the bilingual preschool education of immigrant and refugee children.*



# Contents

Background and purpose	6
Introduction	6
Relationship with the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) birth to eight years	7
Who are learners of English as a second language?	7
The importance of language for young children	8
Partnerships with parents	8
The importance of maintaining the first or home language	9
Why is it important to be bilingual?	9
Maintaining the first language in children under three	10
Maintaining the first language in years prior in children age three to six years	11
Learning English as a second or an additional language	12
Babies and toddlers	12
Children in the years prior to school	13
Identity and wellbeing	14
Do children need to be fluent in English before going to school?	14
Children new to English in the early years of school	15
Stages of ESL development for children in the years prior to entering school and the early years of school	16
The importance of oral English language development	16
Stages of second language acquisition	16
Use of the home language	17
Oral English language development – an overview of stages between three to six years of age	17
Stage 1 – New to English	17
Stage 2 – Becoming familiar with English	19
Stage 3 – Becoming a confident user of English	19
Stage 4 – Demonstrated competency as a speaker of English	20
Rates of acquisition	22
Provision of inclusive environments	22
Importance of play	22
The role of early childhood professionals	24
Developing listening skills	24
Use of contextualised language	24
Use of decontextualised language	24
Supporting language comprehension and production	24
Sustained shared communication	25
Assessing outcomes	25
Achieving outcomes	26
Language delay	27
Appendix 1	28
Resources and support	28
Books, CDs and resources reflecting diversity of culture and language	29
Reference material for early childhood professionals	29
Appendix 2	30
References and further reading	30

## Background and purpose

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) (Victorian Framework) birth to eight years, has been developed in partnership with the Office for Children and Portfolio Coordination, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA). The VEYLDF was launched November 2009 for implementation in 2010.

The Victorian Framework describes five Learning and Development Outcomes for children from birth to eight years. It links the learning outcomes from the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia to the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) Levels 1 and 2. The Outcomes provide a shared language for all early years childhood professionals and families to use when planning for children's learning and development.

This document, Supporting Children Learning English as a Second Language in the Early Years (birth to six years) is the first in a series of Implementation guides designed to support families and early years professionals. It has a particular focus on children in the three to six years age group and supports children's transition into school.

The Victorian Framework recognises that children's learning and development takes place in the context of their families and that families are children's first and most important educators. Families provide children with the relationships, the opportunities and the experiences which shape their learning and development.

The Victorian Framework acknowledges that the families and communities in which children live are diverse; and that children's learning and development is enhanced when they experience relationships with early childhood professionals that respect their culture and ways of knowing and being. In particular the framework recognises and respects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and the unique place of these as a valued part of Victoria's heritage and future. Learning about and valuing the place of first nations people will enhance all Victorian children's sense of place in our community.

The Victorian Framework recognises that every child will take a unique path to the five Learning and Development Outcomes. Children will require different levels of support, some requiring significantly more than others.

## Introduction

In Australia at the present time there are many children starting kindergarten or child care for whom English is not their first or home language. Some early childhood settings have a diversity of languages spoken, while others have only one or two children who do not speak English. Early childhood professionals working with these children need to ensure that the support they provide benefits all the children in their program.

The five Learning and Development Outcomes in the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) birth to eight years are accessible to all children. However, the pathways to these outcomes will vary for different learners. This document provides information about the second language learning development of young children from birth to six years of age and intersects with the advice offered in the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS), English as a Second Language (ESL) companion.

Honouring diversity, respecting and promoting the use of languages other than English and also ensuring all children acquire English as a second language, is fundamental to securing the rights of all children to an early childhood program that meets their needs and provides them with educational and social outcomes that assist them in attaining a high standard of education and a responsible life in the future.

Cultural and linguistic diversity has been a feature of Australia for more than 40 000 years. Prior to colonisation currently more than 250 Indigenous languages were spoken throughout Australia. The VEYLDF recognises family diversity and children's rights to maintain their culture, language, faith, religion and spirituality.

## Relationship with the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) birth to eight years

The Victorian Framework strengthens children's learning and development in the critical years of early childhood. It identifies what children should know and be able to do from birth to eight years of age. It recognises that children's first and most important learning happens in the family. It supports partnerships between families and all professionals who are responsible for a child's learning and development during this time.

The five Victorian Learning and Development Outcomes in the VEYLDF relate to:

- children have a strong sense of Identity (Identity)
- children are connected with and contribute to their world (Community)
- children have a strong sense of wellbeing (Wellbeing)
- children are confident and involved learners (Learning)
- children are effective communicators (Communication).

The Victorian Framework will ensure that the specific learning and development needs of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are met through the inclusion of the following key considerations:

- Bilingualism is an asset. It is important to maintain the children's first or home languages as this has a significant role in shaping identity, language development and increased cognitive development.
- Continued development of first or home languages gives the children access to opportunities for learning in the early years by building on knowledge and competencies that the children have already developed.
- Secure and trusting relationships between children and early childhood professionals, including those who speak languages other than English, are essential for children to feel valued and accepted in all early childhood settings.
- It is important for early childhood professionals to understand the stages of first and second language development in children.

- The recognition of the role of parents as educators in their children's development is vital.

Maintenance of the first language and progress in learning English as a second language are essential pathways for children in achieving the outcomes. Learners as individuals will follow different pathways to achieving these outcomes.

### Who are learners of English as a second language?

Standard Australian English is the national language of Australia and it is essential that all children growing up in Australia have access to opportunities to become proficient speakers of English. Children who are learning English as a second (or additional language) speak a language other than English and bring rich and diverse cultural and linguistic knowledge to the early childhood and school settings.

In Victoria children learning English as a second may be children of immigrant heritage born in Australia and other English-speaking countries and children born in a non-English speaking country.

Children learning English as a second language are a diverse group. Some children will have had little or no exposure to English when starting child care, family day care, kindergarten or school. Other children will have been exposed to English through older siblings, child care or playgroup experiences or will have been introduced to some English at home. Some very young children will still be acquiring their first language at home, while learning English as a second language in child care or family day care.

Children learning English as a second language need explicit modelling and language teaching, appropriate time to acquire the new language and quality exposure to English. This requires early childhood professionals to be knowledgeable about the way children learn a second language, the stages of acquisition and the recognition that children differ in their rate of acquisition.

Children from language backgrounds other than English vary in their linguistic preferences. It is important not to assume that children who come from homes where English is not the main language will speak only their first language in the home. Some bilingual parents may choose to speak English at home. However, it is essential that parents understand the benefits of maintaining their first language and feel confident in speaking their language at home, if this is what they choose. It is a right enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 30, 1990) to maintain the first or home language.

## The importance of language for young children

The early years are recognised as the foundation years for children's development. In particular, the first six years are crucial for young children in developing their first language and cultural identity, and it is during these early years that children build up their knowledge of the world around them. For children from language backgrounds other than English, the language or languages of the home that have been used since birth are the basis for developing meaningful relationships and learning about meaningful communication and interaction (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke 2000).

'Language is the most powerful tool in the development of any human being. It is undeniably the greatest asset we possess. A good grasp of language is synonymous with a sound ability to think. In other words language and thought are inseparable' (Vygotsky 1986). Language has a major role in supporting children's process of identity formation and in helping them understand where they fit in the new environment they are entering. The acquisition of language is essential not only to children's cognitive development, but also to their social development and wellbeing.

For young children interaction with adults and other children is the key to the acquisition of language. For infants and toddlers their early interaction with parents and caregivers provides the basis for communication and learning in both the first or home language and in the second language (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke 2000).

## Partnerships with parents

The importance of links between home, and early childhood settings or school is widely recognised. Parents need to participate in both the development of the educational program and its implementation. When children and parents start the program, they bring with them a wealth of cultural, linguistic and economic experience which the early childhood professional can draw upon.

Strong partnerships with parents are essential, if children learning English as a second language are to have positive outcomes in the early childhood setting. Partnerships with parents are primarily about equity. In supporting families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, early childhood professionals take responsibility to ensure fairness and build dynamic relationships that create a sense of belonging for all.

In early contacts with a family, early childhood professionals learn as much as they can from parents about the home environment, languages spoken at home, other family members etc, important cultural and religious factors, food preferences, taboos and other cultural information that is relevant to building up a profile of the child, the family and the community. This also includes finding out what name is used for the child at home, and using the correct pronunciation of the child's and the parents' names. It is both important and reassuring for parents to know that the use of the child's home or first language will support the child's development in English (Clarke 1992). Translated materials on the value of maintaining the first language are available in both written and recorded forms from FKA Children's Services (Appendix 1).

It is important that early childhood professionals establish meaningful dialogue with parents and wherever possible, that information is communicated in the first language of the family using qualified and accredited interpreters, not bilingual aides, assistants or other parents. Parents need to be kept informed of their children's progress in learning English, and, at the same time, of their right to maintain their first language at home. Sensitive information should always be gathered using interpreters (Appendix 1). It is also important to gain parental permission before passing on any information to a third party. This includes transition reports, when children move from child care to pre-school, or from pre-school to school.



Parents can be encouraged to take an active part in the early childhood program. This should involve more than just coming to prepare fruit or washing the towels and smocks. True participation builds on partnerships with parents and communities and encompasses respect, negotiation, a sense of belonging, compromise, communication and realistic expectations. Some parents will be happy to join in the educational program, as they can speak to the children in their first language, or share music and cultural aspects. Other parents may not wish to participate in this way, either through lack of time or cultural unfamiliarity. It is important that early childhood professionals accept the level of participation that families wish to offer.

Early childhood professionals play an important role in assisting parents to understand the Victorian Education system. ‘The transition to school is an experience that starts well before and extends far beyond the first day of school’ (Morand 2009). When working with parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds there are different strategies and approaches that can be used.

In Term 2, in one inner city kindergarten, bilingual sessions for parents are held to discuss enrolments for school the next year. At these sessions, the different types of schooling available in Victoria, public and private are discussed and the procedures for enrolling and visiting are given. Later in the year, the local schools provide information to the kindergarten detailing when children can enrol, these are distributed to all families and include the information on *Transition; A Positive Start to School Guide* Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. 2009

## The importance of maintaining the first or home language

One of the greatest gifts we pass on to children is language. The first language, learned in the home, is extremely important and forms the foundation for all later language development. Parents, family members and early childhood professionals are the most significant influences on the development and maintenance of the first language (Clarke and Milne 1996).

Evidence shows that young children can learn more than one language with ease, as long as they are exposed to good language models and have plenty of exposure to both languages. Maintaining the first language does not interfere with the learning of English. Research suggests the opposite – that knowing one language can help the child understand how other languages work. The maintenance of the first or home language is particularly important for the child’s development of a positive self-concept and well-being.

Children who have the opportunity to maintain their first language can extend their cognitive development, while learning English as a second language. Their level of competence in the second language will be related to the level of competence they have achieved in their first language (Cummins 1984). Children with a sound knowledge of their first language will be able to transfer skills from one language to another.

Early childhood professionals can play a vital role in the maintenance of children’s first languages. They can provide opportunities for children to use their first language in early childhood settings and at school and encourage the parents to use the first language at home in order to provide a good foundation for learning English. It is important to reassure parents that children will learn English as a second language from English speakers.

### Why is it important to be bilingual?

Bilingualism is the ability to use two languages, and involves both understanding and speaking, not necessarily with the same degree of fluency, but in either language. For example, young bilingual children may use only their first language at home and use only English in the early childhood setting or school. Some children may use their home language with certain adults in the family, while using English with other adults and with their siblings. Some children may feel comfortable using both languages in the same setting

and may 'switch' from one to the other easily (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke 2000).

There is now widespread recognition of the social, personal and cognitive benefits of bilingualism: a sound foundation in the language/s of the home increases children's self-esteem and confidence, enhances motivation for learning, increases cognition, strengthens family relationships and provides a strong basis for learning the second language (Cummins 1984, Clarke and Milne 1996). Over 70 per cent of the world's population speaks more than one language. Thus for many children it is as natural to grow up speaking more than one language as it is to grow up speaking one.

Children under six years of age are still in the stages of acquiring their first language. However, by three years of age, they have achieved much of the development of spoken language. Many children at this age are already fluent in their home language, which provides a sound basis for learning English as a second language. By this time children have knowledge of language and how it works. They are practiced in communicating with others and will transfer these skills to the learning of their second language.

Two types of second language acquisition have been described: 'simultaneous acquisition' and 'sequential or successive acquisition'. 'Simultaneous acquisition' occurs when children are exposed to more than one language from an early age, for example, when parents speak different languages, or when a baby starts in a children's service and is exposed only to English, but speaks only a language other than English at home. 'Sequential or successive acquisition' occurs when children begin to learn the second language when the first language is partially established, for example, when children start in the nursery or school (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke 2000, p. 29).

There are many reasons why it is important to support the continued learning of the home language or mother tongue, for example:

- a strong first language supports the development of a positive self-concept
- speaking the first language well helps strengthen relationships within the family
- continuing to speak the first language provides the opportunity to continue cognitive development while learning English as a second language.

In supporting the first language development of young children, early childhood professionals need to:

- respect and support the home language/s of the children
- ensure that the children's cultural background is incorporated into the program
- base their planning on current knowledge of language development
- create an environment which supports natural language learning and interaction
- closely observe children talking in a variety of situations to find out what they know and to access their skills in using language
- establish a supportive environment which affirms children's right to use languages other than English
- understand and appreciate the home literacy environments of the children
- assist parents to understand the value of a strong first or home language.

### **Maintaining the first language in children under three**

For children under three years of age who are entering a children's service, the maintenance of the first or home language is critical. Between the ages of twelve and eighteen months many babies can produce first words or units of language. Babies who start in a language environment different from the home will also start learning single words in English. As in the development of their first language, children will learn functional words such as 'no', 'mine', 'bye-bye'. Parents need to be supported to feel comfortable using their own language at home.

In an ideal child care setting, babies and toddlers would hear their own language for most of the time. However, this is often not possible. Since this is the crucial time for developing language, early childhood professionals, parents and caregivers need to provide support for young learners through direct, personal communication. If bilingual staff are available they are a valuable resource for working with children under three as this is a crucial time for learning language. Babies learn about language long before they say their first word. They learn to listen and discriminate among different speech sounds and enjoy hearing a variety of sounds. They are strong communicators from a very early age and respond to the voice of their caregiver. They turn to look for the familiar

person when they hear them talking. They smile at the sound of a favourite voice, they coo and babble when spoken to (Bruner 1983; Milne, Orzeszko et al. 1994).

Babies need to hear their own language as well as English. It is not always possible to employ bilingual staff. However, other strategies can be used. Early childhood professionals can:

- learn and sing songs in languages other than English
- learn simple rhymes
- play CDs with simple songs and rhymes in Languages other than English (LOTE)
- ask parents to stay for a few minutes to share something of their language with their own and other children
- ask parents to record songs from their culture.

Early childhood professionals can also actively encourage parents to use their first language at all times and to make opportunities for engaging their babies and toddlers with lots of language. There are a number of bilingual playgroups established throughout Victoria. These provide excellent opportunities for parents to support the learning of languages other than English through a play based approach. Contact the Playgroup Association for further information <[www.playgroup.org.au](http://www.playgroup.org.au)>.

## Maintaining the first language in years prior in children age three to six years

There are many fun ways of learning other languages. The best way is to surround children with natural language use in play, in conversations with adults and other children, in songs and games, stories and rhymes. All children can learn the meaning of words in other languages.

Ask parents to assist by speaking to children in their first language, teaching songs and rhymes, helping with small group experiences such as cooking, and talking in their own language during group times such as puzzles and block play. Utilise bilingual early childhood professionals, students or volunteers, who can provide quality time for children speaking in their first languages.

Games and activities for maintaining the first language include:

- playing picture lotto, bingo and card games, using two languages or playing in a language other than English

- listening to stories on CDs in languages other than English
- learning skipping and counting games in languages other than English.
- asking parents to teach games and words in other languages
- providing bilingual story books
- writing children's names in other languages
- learning singing games in different languages. Ask the parents if they can teach some; ask a bilingual worker to teach games from their cultures
- accessing computer programs in languages other than English for games and activities
- finding bilingual websites and websites with games, stories and songs.

## Learning English as a second or an additional language

### Babies and toddlers

When babies and toddlers from language backgrounds other than English start in a children's service, they begin the process of learning a second or additional language. From birth, they will have started to acquire their first language. This first language is learnt through contact with family members and others in early communication that includes talking, singing, cooing, making sounds and engaging in non-verbal communication. It is vital that early childhood professionals working with young children promote the continued use of the first or home language and encourage families to spend as much time as they can talking with their young children. When English is added as a second language, much of the opportunity for many young children to hear and practise their first language may be diminished.

During the first three years of life the foundations of a child's language development are laid. It is vital that babies and toddlers have rich language experiences at this time. Babies learn about language long before they utter their first words. They learn to listen and to discriminate among different sounds. Interaction with parents and caregivers at this time is crucial. During the first twelve months of life, babies need faces and voices to listen to and focus on. For babies and toddlers this early interaction provides the basis for communication and for learning in both the home language and English as a second language. It establishes the basis for ongoing development of language in the early years.

A significant aspect of communication at this time is 'joint attention'. Joint attention occurs when adults engage with young children in social interaction in a two-way process. Early childhood professionals can engage children in two-way communication through talking, playing word games, making sounds, and responding to attempts by babies and toddlers to engage with adults. Babies and toddlers are very receptive to talking, cuddling, playing and singing. Early childhood professionals have a vital role in ensuring that babies and toddlers are exposed to as many positive language experiences as possible (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke 2000).

For children under three the stages of their development in English as a second language are similar to those of their development in their first language. They first play with language, make sounds, learn and use single words, and use non-verbal actions. These single words convey meaning to the adult who responds, elaborates and extends what is being said. Later single words are combined and short sentences are produced.

### Strategies for supporting babies and toddlers learning English as a second language

The first years of life are crucial for children to acquire basic trust, and forming new attachments are difficult in a new and strange environment. Basic trust comes from the provision of responsive care in supportive, predictable environments. Young children need opportunities to develop positive relationships with their carers and other children. The younger the child, the more important it is to keep things similar between the home and child care. Children who have had major changes in their lives need as much harmony as possible between their home and child care practices.

In the first years, the early experiences of babies and toddlers need to reinforce their identity and self esteem. Children need to feel that their caregivers value and respect their family, particularly their language and culture. This respect is demonstrated in the way babies are spoken to, soothed, fed, carried and nurtured. These early experiences are influenced by diverse cultural practices and values of the family. Early childhood professionals working with babies and toddlers need to show respect for the families cultural practices and incorporate familiar routines for sleeping and eating (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke 2000).

Parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds face a number of challenges including not having access to someone who speaks their first language and can explain the program of the centre. Some will have difficulty understanding the limitations for the children's service including early childhood professionals: child ratios, regulations, hours of operation and type of program offered. Some parents will be anxious about maintaining the child rearing practices that they are used to. Early childhood professionals working with young children need to be responsible and responsive so that children and parents can develop trusting relationships.

Babies and toddlers need freedom to explore challenges, to hear their own language and to start hearing and using English. Early childhood professionals need to develop positive environments based on knowledge of the families' experiences, values and beliefs. They need to provide opportunities for close interactions between early childhood professionals and children and quiet spaces for individuals and small groups. Activities provided should reflect cultural and linguistic experiences of the children.

Activities to assist babies and toddlers learning English as a second language are no different from those that are provided from children with English as their first language. It is important to provide a range of interactions, particularly those that happen on a one to one basis, or in a small group. These regular interactions provide the best outcomes for learning and practicing language.

Strategies include:

- read and tell stories everyday
- introduce new words
- play word games
- tie words to actions and objects
- engage in conversations
- share simple rhymes and games
- learn rhymes and songs in languages other than English
- expand and model conversations.

## Children in the years prior to school

Children from language backgrounds other than English, who start in a kindergarten program at three or four years of age, already have the basis of language development acquired by being immersed in their home environment. These children already understand about the meaning and function of language, learned through everyday acts such as giving and receiving instruction, responding to and initiating conversation and talking together with family and friends. When they start kindergarten, child care or school, the language they know and use at home is no longer the language of their new environment. They now have to acquire not only a new language, English, but also new ways of behaving and communicating. In the first few months these children learn to link new words to actions and concepts acquired through their first language (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke 2000, p. 23).

Children learning English as a second language have experienced a wide range of contexts in which they have acquired their mother tongue, but have a much more restricted range of contexts in English. If their previous language experiences are not taken into account when they start kindergarten and school, and if they are expected not only to learn a second language but also to learn in it, it is hardly surprising that without focused English language support they may start to fall behind their peers, who are operating in a language they have been familiar with since birth.

Research (Clarke 1996, Tabors 1997) has shown that a number of factors make a difference to the way children approach the learning of a second language and their ability to interact with others. These factors include:

- social factors – some children are more outgoing and are risk takers
- aptitude factors – some children have more ability as second language learners
- psychological factors – some children are more motivated to learn the second language or their personality affects the way they approach the task
- environmental factors – the way the environment is set up and managed, the inclusive nature of the program, the range of resources available, the way staff support children to interact with others.

## Strategies for supporting children in the years prior to school learning English as a second language

All children have the right to access and participate equally in early childhood services regardless of their culture, language, religion, gender and ability. Early childhood professionals advocate for children's rights within the service and community. They demonstrate acceptance and respect for diversity and difference, to acknowledge and accept children both as individuals and as a member of their community. Early childhood professionals balance the needs and interests of individual children with the group. Programs for children can be developed in collaboration with parents. Supportive relationships between early childhood professionals and parents are fostered as a result of this collaboration. Early childhood professionals in children's services communicate with, empower and resource families.

## Identity and wellbeing

Research (Clarke 1996) has shown that a strong sense of identity and positive wellbeing are vital to success in learning. Positive self-esteem comes from being acknowledged and appreciated for who and what you are. This includes acceptance and acknowledgement of race, class, ethnicity, religion, language and ability. It is essential that children have emotional security, if they are to grow up as confident healthy people who can take responsibility for themselves and others. It is recognised that positive self-esteem depends on whether children feel that others accept them and see them as competent and worthwhile. There is clear evidence of a correlation between academic achievement and self-esteem (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke 2000).

When children start in a children's service or school without prior knowledge of English, they cannot draw on their knowledge base and home language in the same way as children familiar with English since birth. Children new to English may find it difficult to communicate with others or make themselves easily understood. They may now be forced to operate at a lower conceptual level, since they are unable to communicate in the language of the kindergarten or school. They may be confused or frustrated, as they cannot convey their needs to the early childhood professionals and other children, and may lose confidence, if they feel others do not value their language or culture. They may be given messages by early childhood professionals that they are not valued because their language and culture are not respected or utilised (Nyakatawa and Siraj-Blatchford 1994).

The settling in process for children learning English as a second language is crucial. 'Children with a healthy self-esteem feel that those around them love and accept them and go out of their way to ensure their safety and well-being' (Clarke 2000, p. 3). Early childhood professionals can assist children to settle in by encouraging parents to visit together with their child before starting in a children's service or school. If possible, they can use a bilingual early childhood staff member to explain the routine of the service to the parents, who can then explain this to their child in the home language. Early childhood professionals need to take account of the parents' perspectives and concerns about leaving the child for the first time. It is important that they familiarise themselves with the child's cultural and language background and ask the parents for information that can help settle the child in comfortably.

In the first few weeks the parents may be happy to leave their child for a shorter period of time than normal, or stay and spend some time with their child. They can talk to their child in the home language, which helps make a bridge between the home and the new unfamiliar environment. A warm welcome and acceptance of the use of languages other than English or a minimal use of English will provide reassurance to parents and children. After several months of exposure to English children of three and four years of age will start using English and will communicate their needs and ideas in both verbal and non-verbal ways. It is important to acknowledge that children will understand more than they speak.

## Do children need to be fluent in English before going to school?

Some early childhood professionals and parents believe that children who have limited English may not be ready to start school. They feel that the children's level of English will be insufficient to cope with the school environment. While it is an advantage for children to speak some English and be able to communicate their needs and wishes, some children do begin school without having been exposed to English, and schools have programs to support these new learners.

For children who have already attended in a children's service, the ability to speak English is an important asset that they can use within the school environment. However, children's readiness for school is shown in many ways. For example, children need to demonstrate an awareness of other children around them and be able to relate to others in a social context. Being able to take a risk and talk to a peer or adult even with only a few words in English is an indicator that a child is 'socially' ready for school. Other skills include self-confidence, positive social skills and an interest in learning. In the pre-school years early childhood professionals work with children to develop their social skills so that they are able to interact with others without much spoken English. It is important to remember that children's comprehension of English always exceeds their ability to speak fluent English and that the ability to communicate is not measured by grammatical competence.

## Children new to English in the early years of school

Some children from language backgrounds other than English may not have had the opportunity to attend a children's service before starting school. These children should be supported at school by early childhood professionals in the same way as children in the kindergarten year. They will exhibit similar behaviours to younger children learning English as a second language, who are aged between three and five.

Children new to English in the early years of school need to feel a sense of belonging within the school community. They need to find a place for themselves in their interactions with others. How they are accepted by others in the group will affect their ability to find a place in the group and thus their opportunities for hearing and using English. Social relationships and membership of the classroom community lead to participation, and to participation in English language development and learning (Toohey 1996). Patterns of language use vary across cultures, so that children new to English must also learn the cultural values, norms and beliefs that apply to Australian culture. Like children in the years before school they have to acquire not only a new language, but also new ways of behaving and operating in a new culture.

Children starting school need to interact with others to be successful learners. How they are accepted by other children and by staff affects their ability to find a place for themselves and thus to have access to the resources available. In the school environment children are exposed to English in a range of settings, through interactions with teachers and children and through practice with language for different communicative purposes, including English for social interaction, for participating in classroom activities, and for obtaining, processing, constructing and providing information.

In the early stages of learning English as a second language children should hear contextualised language; that is, language supported by visual materials and opportunities to handle objects. They need to tie known concepts to new vocabulary. Visuals provide clues for learners. As the children proceed through school, the language used by teachers and other children becomes increasingly decontextualised and this makes learning for children from language backgrounds other than English more difficult.

A good quality school program should foster rich language interactions for all children and encourage the use of the first or home language as well. The best experiences for children learning English are those that occur within the classroom environment rather than outside it away from their peers. It is important to remember that learning English as a second language is like other forms of learning, and learners should not be isolated from the mainstream program where the best models of natural language occur (Clarke 1992).

## Stages of ESL development for children in the years prior to entering school and the early years of school

During the early years of, children's progress in English as a second language is measured in three inter-related dimensions: listening and speaking, reading, and writing. In the school sector children's progress is monitored using the ESL standards that are described in the English as a Second Language (ESL) Companion to the Victorian Essential Learning Standards <[http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/downloads/ESL\\_Companion.pdf](http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/downloads/ESL_Companion.pdf)> and the ESL developmental continuum <[www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/teaching-resources/esl/default.htm](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/teaching-resources/esl/default.htm)>.

In the preschool years, children's progress in learning English as a second language can be assessed in four stages: Stage 1 – New to English, Stage, 2 – Becoming familiar with English, Stage 3 – Becoming confident as a user of English and Stage 4 – Demonstrated competency as a user of English (Clarke 1996, Hester 1989).

As well as developing competence in the linguistic aspects of English, children learning English as a second language also need to learn about the different, diverse cultural practices, values and expectations of Australian society and of kindergarten and school.

Learners have to:

- learn new vocabulary
- recognise new non-verbal language, gestures and facial expressions
- recognise differences in stress, rhythm and intonation
- differentiate the grammatical structure of the new language
- adopt new ways of behaving and new values
- understand jokes, metaphors and idiomatic language.

(Adapted from ESL Stage A1 Teacher support materials for lower primary new arrivals, p. 30.)

In the years before school, the main focus for young children is developing oral English language through the dimensions of listening and speaking. Children learning English as a second language in early childhood settings also demonstrate early outcomes in reading and writing.

## The importance of oral English language development

This dimension focuses on children's development in understanding and using spoken English. This includes using English in social situations and in more structured situations. Children demonstrate progress in both formal and informal contexts.

It is important for early childhood professionals to remember that the children:

- are still at the early stages of cognitive development
- will experience early literacy development in their home language
- may be experiencing very different literacy experiences at home in their first language
- are still developing their first language/s or may already be bilingual
- may be shy or withdrawn
- may experience a silent period in the early stages of learning English
- may find the new environment of school very different from their home environment and have to learn a new culture as well as a new language
- may have limited experience of playing with children the same age.

(Adapted from McKay, P 1993, NLLIA.)

## Stages of second language acquisition

All children learning English as a second language proceed through identifiable phases in the acquisition of the second language. When they are ready, children will move to the next phase having achieved control of different grammatical structures of the new language, built on the achievement of the phase before (Clarke 1996). In observing children's progress through the phases it is important to distinguish between the first times they use a new structure and continued use of the structure. The learner is seen to have reached a given phase when they have demonstrated use of the structure in a number of ways and in a range of contexts.

Learning a language is a complex process of which the development of grammar is only one part (Clarke 1996). Other social and psychological factors are important in understanding the processes of language acquisition. Research has shown that the learner's use and development of English is not restricted to the development of grammatical structures and vocabulary



but also includes the development of communicative aspects such as attracting and sustaining attention, managing interactions in groups and with different speakers and the development of positive attitudes towards themselves as learners (Clarke 1996).

In developing a framework for monitoring the progress of young learners of English as a second language it is essential to include social aspects of learning rather than concentrating on the development of morphology and syntax. The stages described here take account of both grammatical progress and communicative competence (Clarke 1996, Hester 1989).

In the early years, young learners of English as a second language are likely to progress through the following stages (Clarke 1996, Tabors 1997):

- continued use of the home language in the new language context
- use of non-verbal communication
- a period of silence for some learners
- use of repetition and language play
- use of single words, formulae and routines
- development of productive language
- metalinguistic awareness.

Children's progress through these stages can be described in terms of achieving outcomes at various levels. An outline of these levels is provided below.

## Use of the home language

In the early stages of learning English as a second language, some learners may continue to speak their home language. Sometimes they will answer questions directed in English using their first language and may expect others to understand them. If early childhood professionals accept this or if bilingual support is available, the children may feel confident to use their first language and this provides opportunities for further cognitive development as they can use the first language to draw on previous experiences and knowledge. Children will quickly become aware of the negative attitudes of peers and early childhood professionals, if they are discouraged from speaking their first language.

## Oral English language development – an overview of stages between three to six years of age

### Stage 1 – New to English

At Stage 1, the learner is at the beginning stage and has little or no spoken English. In the first few weeks of exposure to English children will begin to understand isolated key words and familiar words, particularly if the language is supported by gestures, real objects and visual materials. The learners may respond non-verbally. During this period they may sit and observe others, or join in an activity without speaking. Sometimes they will make contact with other children, or make a non-verbal request from an adult. Some children may have difficulty understanding non-verbal gestures, if they differ from gestures and signs used in their own culture. At this time learners will carefully watch what other children are doing.

Children may be happy to join in activities or group times without responding or taking part. They may imitate others and show comprehension with gestures and efforts at participating. During group times, such as music and singing, they may join in the actions or echo or mimic another child. At this time learners will respond to key words or actions.

In the early days in an early childhood setting, children learning English as a second language vary tremendously in their willingness to begin using English. Some children are risk takers and naturally outgoing. They will make efforts to start speaking English immediately, repeating the words and phrases of early childhood professionals and other children, responding non-verbally and showing their eagerness for developing friendships. Other children will be more reticent in starting to speak English, observing others quietly and joining in with non-verbal responses or single words such as 'yes' or 'no'. Others will retreat into silence.

### The silent period

The silent period can be defined as any prolonged period of time when learners of English as a second or additional language refuse to try and speak English, where 'prolonged' means 'silence' for more than a month of exposure to English. Learners may also

avoid using non-verbal language, routines or repetition. The silent period can last for months. These children are usually fluent speakers of their first language and continue to use this at home (Clarke, P 1989, 1996).

Some children learning English as a second language may choose to be silent, since they have had little or no exposure to English prior to starting child care, kindergarten or school, and they may feel insecure in the new unfamiliar environment. They need to build up a sense of trust. Sometimes children have high expectations of themselves and do not want to make mistakes in the new language. Other children may be timid and find trying new things difficult.

The silent period is recognised as an important stage for some children learning English as a second language. Research (Clarke 1989, 1996; Tabors 1997) has shown that initially they experience a period in which they are reluctant to start speaking English. This is commonly referred to as 'the silent period'. Many early childhood professionals working with young children learning English as a second language become concerned when children refuse to speak English after several months' exposure. In some cases children are thought to be experiencing 'language delay' and further interventions are often sought.

It is very important to understand the nature of the silent period before referring children for Speech Therapy or early intervention support. Children should be assessed in their first language before assuming that the child has language delay. Efforts should be made to interview parents in their home language to find out how well the child is using their home language. Language delay is always present in both languages (see p. 27 for further information on language delay).

It is not uncommon for children in an early childhood setting to experience such a silent period. This period should not be confused with the non-verbal period during which learners do not speak English, but are willing to join in and communicate using non-verbal gestures, eye contact, nods etc. (Clarke, P 1996).

The strategies that are employed by early childhood professionals working with young children who choose to remain silent can make a great difference to whether these learners feel part of the group or whether they become marginalised. Young learners who remain silent may feel rejected by early childhood professionals and other children, if efforts are not made to include them in interactions and to accept whatever level of participation these children are pre-

pared to offer. Other children may quickly decide that children who refuse to speak in English cannot play with them, and reject non-verbal attempts by silent children to join in. Every effort needs to be made to include children in group times, to develop strategies to support children during routine times and to encourage other children to support the learner (Clarke, P 1989, 1996).

The following strategies support children in a silent period (Clarke, P 1996)

Early childhood professionals need to:

- model good practices of talking and listening
- demonstrate to other children that the silent child can communicate
- continue talking even when the learner does not seem to be responding
- make efforts to include the learner in a range of group experiences
- focus the conversation on other children in the group if the learner seems reluctant to be included in interaction
- accept and praise the learner's minimal efforts to communicate including use of nonverbal responses
- use simple language which is supported by visual materials
- expect that the learner will eventually respond and try to speak in English
- provide a wide variety of activities that encourage interaction.

If children are in a prolonged silent period it is important to ascertain how much language they are using at home. If necessary use a bilingual worker to talk with the family and establish what language the child speaks at home, ask the family questions about what they talk about at home and whether their child knows and uses any English at home, either with siblings or older family members.

### The non-verbal period

It is natural for young learners to remain silent or seem reluctant to use any English in the early weeks while they are settling in and becoming accustomed to the new environment. Children cannot speak in a language that they have had little exposure to or opportunities to practice. In the early days of transition to a children's service or to school, children may be reluctant to join in interactions with others. Initially

they rely on nonverbal responses. In the nonverbal period children may demonstrate the following:

- initial reluctance to join in interactions with others
- growing willingness to be included in interactions
- eye contact
- responding with gestures
- responding to requests to repeat words or actions
- talking/chanting under breath
- initiating interactions with others using nonverbal behaviours.

When young children realise that those around them cannot understand them or speak to them in a language they understand, then they may stop talking. However, they do not necessarily stop communicating (Clarke 1996 and Tabors 1997).

## Stage 2 – Becoming familiar with English

In Stage 2, learners start to understand familiar English, including the language used by early childhood professionals and other children. They use basic communication and strategies for taking part in group times or in limited interactions with other children. Learners depend on adults to extend their efforts at communicating, but are still reliant on non-verbal communication. Some children will be reluctant to respond with more than the occasional single word, but they will be happy to join in and work alongside others.

Learners begin to show growing confidence in using limited English. They start to understand some of the English that is spoken and will begin using isolated words such as greetings, naming objects and actions, labeling objects in the playroom and personal things. Some children may join in the singing, particularly the songs that have repetition and are supported by actions. It is not uncommon for children to mimic the words used by others, or to repeat words and the endings of sentences.

Learners are now growing familiar with playroom speech, including routine language associated with the environment. They start to use single words holistically to convey meaning. At this stage learners may employ frequently heard phrases in a formulaic way. Routine phrases are common, such as ‘Sit down’, ‘Come inside’, ‘Good morning’, ‘How are you?’, ‘Hello’, ‘Come here’ and ‘Go outside’. Other formulaic phrases are heard frequently and initially memorised, such as ‘I want the –’, ‘This one is mine’,

‘I can –’, and ‘I’ve got the –’. These phrases are useful to learners as a social strategy. They give the impression that the learners know English and can help them gain access to conversations with more experienced peers. Memorised chunks of language are acquired from familiar stories and songs and from frequently heard routines and playroom language. At this stage the learners are reliant on these memorised words or sentences, but they cannot change them in any way.

With more and more exposure to English, the understanding and willingness of learners to speak English increases. They can now comprehend more than they are able to say. They understand and respond to greetings and courtesy phrases, follow and give simple instructions, exchange personal information, and understand and respond to routines. At times they may still communicate with non-verbal language. Learners gain confidence from hearing familiar and repetitive language and they enjoy looking at books and listening to stories.

As learners progress with speaking English, they begin to show understanding of the language used by early childhood professionals and their peers and can distinguish spoken English from other languages. At this time they are very dependent on support from both adults and their peers. They still need this support to take an active part in interactions and to be able to impart meaning. Although children are developing fluency in English, they may still rely on use of the home language (if possible) to engage in more reflective socio-dramatic play.

Progress in English at this stage is demonstrated by a growing vocabulary related to objects and events and by more frequent attempts to describe things in detail. The learner shows greater confidence in using limited English. Single words are combined to communicate new ideas. On some occasions the learner may rely on other children in the group to answer questions or contribute to the discussion. Visual materials such as photos, pictures, and real objects provide support for the learner.

## Stage 3 – Becoming a confident user of English

As children make progress in speaking English they demonstrate greater understanding of English in a variety of contexts and show increasing fluency in spoken English. They start to participate in group interactions and converse with early childhood professionals and peers. They are beginning to undertake some learning through English. Through different activities, both inside and outside the playroom,

learners have opportunities to practise English with adults and other children. The observation of children shows increased vocabulary, better control of grammatical features, more willingness to initiate as well as respond in interactions, and evidence of increased learning and acquisition of new information.

By Stage 3, learners are less dependent on formulaic or rehearsed language and show the beginnings of the use of grammatically correct sentences. Learners start to sort out the finer points of the language. For example, they can distinguish between ‘he’ and ‘she’, and begin to use the definite or indefinite article correctly. They are still more interested in communicating meaning rather than correctness. As dependence on the use of formulaic language diminishes, learners may make more grammatical mistakes, or use sentences without verbs. This is a normal part of second language development and early childhood professionals should reformulate, elaborate and expand children’s speech, rather than focus on mistakes in grammar or pronunciation. Sometimes discussions between early childhood professionals and other children are still hard for learners to comprehend, particularly if the interactions are not supported with visual materials and the language is decontextualised, but learners will adopt strategies to engage in interaction.

Children already fluent in their first language will demonstrate understanding of two languages and will feel confident switching from the first language to English with different speakers. They still may prefer to use the home language, particularly for social interactions and taking part in socio-dramatic play.

By this time learners are participating in routines in the pre-school environment. They are able to use both single words and formulaic language to convey meaning and will initiate conversations as well as respond. Learners can be observed to demonstrate greater flexibility with spoken English. They are beginning to combine single words into short sentences. They use comprehensible pronunciation, stress and intonation and their pronunciation is similar to that of native-speakers. Progress in English is shown in a growing confidence in using English in different contexts.

## **Stage 4 – Demonstrated competency as a speaker of English**

At Stage 4, learners are able to communicate in a range of different learning situations. They can express ideas and take part in discussions with adults

and their peers, as they consolidate their understanding and use of English. They listen, talk and develop competence in extended speech in English, when they communicate with different speakers, including their peers and early childhood professionals. In the early years the environment is a mix of structured and unstructured play and provides learners with opportunities to practise grammatical structures. Greater confidence in speaking English enables them to take an active part in extended conversation. Conversations are now jointly constructed and learners can engage in cognitively challenging tasks. They are beginning to demonstrate reflective thinking rather than just engaging in reporting or answering questions. Early childhood professionals should be skilful in scaffolding children’s language development and provide opportunities for sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford 2009).

Learners are now able to engage in playroom or classroom conversation and show better comprehension and interest in using English in a range of situations. They can extend their vocabulary through hearing stories, poems and discussions in other curriculum areas. They gain greater control of the English tense system in certain contexts, such as story telling, reporting events and activities, and from book language. Learners with growing competence in English demonstrate understanding of extended speaking from the teacher, including the introduction of new topics (Clarke 1996).

At Stage 4, learners are experienced users of English and show a growing command of the grammatical system of the language. They are confident in verbal exchanges and in collaboration with their English-speaking peers, and move with ease between English and their first language, depending on different situations and what is appropriate, and the encouragement of the peer group. They are now beginning to explore complex ideas (for example, in role play, discussion groups, maths and scientific investigation) and can demonstrate leadership in group situations (Clarke 1996, Hester, in Barrs et al. 1989).

## **Reading and writing**

In the years before starting school young children enjoy a variety of activities which support the later learning of reading and writing. Young children learning English as a second language develop early literacy skills through engagement in symbolic and socio-dramatic play. They learn to recognise symbols, including play with matching games, puzzles and sequencing activities. Initially children new to English

will have a limited concentration when listening to stories. They will enjoy stories in their own language and may mimic words said by others. They may recognise their own language and will enjoy books that have clear realistic illustrations.

As children become more familiar with English they will engage in a range of activities with books and reading. They enjoy simple stories, repeat repetitive phrases in books, anticipate the ending of a story or the stages of a story, join in with shared reading, recognise letters, logos, signs etc., enjoy looking at books on their own, choose favourite stories, and show familiarity with DVDs, CDs etc. Even children with limited spoken English can demonstrate a knowledge of the way books work, and can handle books appropriately, turning the pages and responding to illustrations or rhyme and repetition. When listening to stories, learners will listen for key words and for repetition. In the early stages of learning English, they may repeat words said by the adult, fill in gaps or predict what is coming on the next page.

As children gain confidence in speaking English they engage in discussions around books and stories, both fiction and non-fiction. They are now able to respond to a wide variety of texts, and enjoy reading with other children and adults. Some learners will attempt to read or write letters and words. They enjoy seeing their words written down. They are familiar with a variety of multimedia, including computers, digital cameras, DVDs and CDs.

Children enjoy drawing, painting and other creative activities, and use limited English to engage in pretend play around writing (the home corner and post office). They may recognise their own language written down and show interest in copying the writing of their name. As the learners' understanding and use of English increases, they get pleasure in practising their own writing. They can describe their drawings etc., and match written words in games. They will often want to copy their name on their drawings or write it themselves. Sometimes this will be in their first language.

As their competence in English grows, learners can begin to recognise written texts in English. Some children may demonstrate book awareness and start to enjoy writing and printing letters and numbers. Learners can recognise that print conveys meaning and make a connection between visual images, such as logos, and actions or meanings. They are able to understand that the words have a structure and purpose, and they will make a link between the illustra-

tions and the story. Children may name letters, write their own name, and know some of the sounds that letters represent. They can recognise the written form of their own name and will give opinions about texts and stories, read their own writing and match words and letters.

## Rates of acquisition

It is very important to acknowledge the individual nature of learners of English as a second language. Some children will seem to learn fast, while others will not show much progress. In the early stages some may appear to acquire English quickly and may seem to use correct grammatical structures. In most cases, however, this reflects the use of formulaic and rehearsed language. As they gain more control over their use of English, they become less reliant on these formulae, though their English may seem to be less grammatically correct.

Children's rate of learning English is influenced by a number of factors that include their position in the early years setting, their feeling of belonging, their previous experiences or exposure to English, the attitudes of the early childhood professionals and other children, and the type of program provided.

### Children starting school (The ESL Companion to the Victorian Essential Learning Stages)

Children starting school with little or no English will progress through Stages A1 and A2 as they develop growing competence in communicating in English and an ability to function in increasingly complex learning situations. In the school sector, the ESL Companion to VELS used to monitor the progress of ESL students as they learn English. The ESL Developmental continuum provides additional information on the stages in the ESL Companion. For further information refer to English as a Second Language (ESL) Companion to the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VCAA 2005) <[http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/downloads/ESL\\_Companion.pdf](http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/downloads/ESL_Companion.pdf)> and the ESL developmental continuum <[www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/teachingresources/esl/default.htm](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/teachingresources/esl/default.htm)>.

## Provision of inclusive environments

Setting up and maintaining a safe physical environment which encourages exploration and learning through play and which is responsive to the diversity of needs is a challenge for all early childhood professionals. Programs for children in the early years which are well planned and well organised, provide a structure that encourages children to explore, experiment, and make decisions as they play together.

Consideration needs to be given to multicultural and equity perspectives in program planning regardless of whether they are developed for exclusively English-speaking children or for children from a range of diverse backgrounds. A good early years program, regardless of the age or stage of the child, takes into account the needs and interests of the children in the program, the socio-cultural environment that the children are growing up in, the previous experiences that children have had, the values that are important to their families. Planning needs to consider what qualities should be fostered in children, what children need to grow up safe and secure, how children can develop pride in their ability to be bilingual and bicultural, how children can be assisted to develop a keen desire to learn, and a sense of social justice and care for others (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke 2000).

Consideration of multicultural perspectives in the program includes:

- the way the room is set up and arrangements of space
- the daily routines – arrival and departure, meal times, toileting, sleep routines
- a variety of bilingual and multicultural resources, books, pictures, toys and games
- a balance of structured and unstructured play
- activities that reflect the cultural and linguistic experiences of the children and families
- strategies for developing children's languages, both the first or home language and English
- communication with parents, including access to interpreters if necessary.

### Importance of play

The most appropriate program for children in the pre-school years is a play based program.

The way the indoor and outdoor space is arranged will convey messages about the value placed on the

culture and language backgrounds of the families. The layout of the playroom or classroom affects children's emotional security and ability to choose free play. Providing sufficient space allows children to play effectively. This means spaces which are not cramped with too many tables and chairs and furniture, or with activities that are pre-determined, such as work sheets. Both the indoor and outdoor environments can be planned to maximise interactions and encourage play and provide opportunities for learners to interact in small groups, or on a one-to one basis with another child or an adult. Provision of opportunities to experience quiet times as well as activities which encourage talk is also a consideration. The way the playrooms are set up, the regularity of daily events and the predictable and routine language that is part of this context provides both organisational and linguistic supports for second language learners (Clarke 1996).

During opportunities for free play, young learners have ideal opportunities to acquire a second language as the speech they hear during play is highly predictable, routine in nature and repetitious. While they play children are using objects and actions which relate to the environment around them. This provides opportunities for the learners to experiment with the language. Furthermore, the learners also have opportunities to learn and practice the rules which are a necessary part of joining in games or role playing situations (Clarke 1992, Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke 2000).

Play which is adult-directed also provides opportunities for children to learn and practice English. This includes the provision of games with rules, card games, matching games and outdoor games with balls (Clarke 1992). Since many of these activities require adult direction, the children hear a great deal of natural language directed to the 'here and now', such as instructions for playing the game, rules of turn-taking and new information. In these activities, early childhood professionals make clear the behavioural and language expectations for the learners. The way the games are organised and the support provided assists the learners to take part using the comprehension and level of English they know at that time.

In the early years, children's play is best guided by adults but not dominated by them. Skilled early childhood professionals are able to support children's conversations and scaffold children's oral language as they engage children in conversation and fine tune the balance between talking and listening to the children.

The type of play most valued in the early years is imaginative play. Socio-dramatic play offers children the opportunity for problem solving, creative thinking and developing communication skills (Milne 1997). Free play provides ideal opportunities for children to engage in pretend talk, a type of extended discourse that predicts stronger language and literacy development. Literacy is about the understanding of symbols, play is where children practice many different ways of representing reality creating symbols with clay, paint, blocks, sand, and dress-ups (Milne 1997). Play allows children to develop and refine their capacities to use symbols, to represent experience and to construct imaginary worlds, and it makes the roles of people in the environment more meaningful and hence more accessible to children. Early literacy development does not simply happen; rather, it is a social process, embedded in children's relationships with parents, grandparents, extended family members, siblings, early childhood professionals, caregivers, friends and the wider community (Clarke 1999:1).

Children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds may feel marginalised in the early childhood service and practices that they bring to the program may be very different and not understood by others in the group. The way the children are accepted by other children and early childhood professionals affects their ability to feel welcome and thus have confidence in accessing the resources available. If the identity that the child has acquired in other contexts is very different from the values and behaviours of the new environment then children may feel isolated and be denied access to opportunities for developing a strong sense of identity and a sense of belonging. Early childhood professionals can ensure that children feel included, secure and valued. Children, parents and early childhood professionals can work together in an atmosphere of mutual respect. For young children from diverse backgrounds, forming attachments are more difficult in new environments when early childhood professionals and other children look and speak differently and where the routines and activities are also unfamiliar. Consistent, secure, responsive and respectful relationships with caring adults are essential to children's wellbeing.

## The role of early childhood professionals

The skill of adults is critical at this time. They have a dual role of providing a supportive environment and supporting the learners. In the early months of the year in the early childhood service, early childhood professionals need to work persistently to establish the predictable routines and behavioural expectations for the learners. These include greeting the children on arrival, using routine language to assist children to choose activities, using simple English to help children understand the routines and expectations of the program and providing good models for the learners (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke 2000). An important strategy to assist in the learning of the second language is the use of repetition. Saying the same thing more than once gives a child more than one chance to understand what is being said.

The children's level of confidence will affect the degree to which they are willing to take risks in the use of English. A child who is confident to try new vocabulary or to take part in conversations will appear to be more competent than a child who is shy or worries about making mistakes. Feedback can include generous use of praise such as 'good shot', 'well done' and 'great'.

### Developing listening skills

'Listening is an integral part of any early years program and for young English as second language learners, learning to listen is critical' (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke 2000, p. 60). Early childhood professionals as active listeners show respect for children's efforts at speaking and they model good listening habits. They do this by concentrating on the learner's efforts at speaking and encouraging other children to listen to them. They can assist learners by making directions and instructions implicit and checking that the learner has understood.

Children's listening skills can be fostered using simple songs and rhymes, playing listening games and providing a range of quality games and CDs. Children learning English as a second language can be encouraged to listen and practice English in fun ways, such as playing word games and introducing rhymes. This helps them become familiar with the pronunciation, sounds, stress and rhythms of the new language.

## Use of contextualised language

A major difference between the context of the home and the context of the school is that the language used at home is highly contextualised, physically and socially and has a high level of predictability. For example, most of the talk revolves around objects and actions that are visible and supported by concrete examples. The language of the early childhood environment is usually more similar to the home than the language used in the school setting.

In the early years environment, much of the learning that occurs focuses on the 'here and now'. Early childhood professionals can support children learning English by focusing on topics and activities that children are familiar and which can provide shared background knowledge for children. Use of 'hands on' activities, support from visual materials and other activities that focus on personal and concrete experiences support learners to develop important concepts and learn key language items in English. Children may choose to respond using non-verbal language or with single words and gestures. All these choices need to be acceptable to early childhood professionals. As well as visual and contextual clues, linguistic cues, such as calls to attract and hold attention and repetition are important as they provide support for learners to try out new words and phrases.

### Use of decontextualised language

As children develop confidence in the use of English, it is important to expose them to more 'decontextualised language'. That is, the language not supported by visual materials. This is often the language of stories, or of recalling past events. As young learners gain confidence with their use of English, they are less reliant on visual or concrete referents. Children become confident in expressing their interests, opinions and preferences and they learn to negotiate solutions to problems and enter into sustained conversations with others.

### Supporting language comprehension and production

As children develop fluency with the second language their comprehension increases and they are able to use more complex constructions. Early childhood professionals have a major role in supporting both the learners' acquisition of comprehension and their pro-



duction of English through the use of modifications to speech, use of key words, repetition and paraphrase, and expansions of the learners' utterances.

## Sustained shared communication

Research (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009) has shown that the quality of adult-child verbal interactions is vital to positive learning outcomes for children. If children have a good command of spoken English they are able to take part in extended conversations using sustained shared thinking. 'Sustained shared thinking occurs where two or more individuals work together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate an activity, extend a narrative etc. Both parties should contribute to the thinking and it should develop and extend the understanding' (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002, p. 9).

The opportunity for children to engage in 'sustained shared thinking' is important for learning outcomes. However, many children who are in the early stages of learning English as a second language are not able to engage in sustained shared thinking which requires metacognition, that is the ability to undertake higher level thinking and problem solving. Many children learning English as a second language have not had enough time to be able to understand or speak English well enough to take an active part in this type of interaction. Most of these children will be more advanced in speaking in their first language. If opportunities exist for these children to hear and use their first language, they can take part in this type of extended conversation which requires the ability to think and reflect on the conversations.

## Assessing outcomes

Assessment of children's ongoing language development is crucial to ensure relevant planning for each child. Assessment of learning includes reviewing, gathering and analysing information about what the learner can do, what they understand and the progress they are making at any particular point in their development. Documentation and evaluation can assist early childhood professionals to:

- plan effectively for children's development
- understand children's progress in learning English
- provide regular updates on children's progress for parents
- identify whether additional support or resources are required
- evaluate the effectiveness of the program provided
- reflect on appropriate pedagogy for children learning English as a second language.

Assessment assists early childhood professionals in early years settings to find out and support the cultural and linguistic experiences of the children. The most appropriate form of assessment is based on ongoing observation and recording of children's efforts at communicating. Testing children in the early weeks of kindergarten or school does not always provide real indication of children's ability. Some children need a long time to settle in and are unwilling to perform simple tasks. Children may be deemed as having little or no knowledge of English or understanding of English, when in fact their responses to testing is a result of fear of new or unknown situations, fear of failure, or inadequate understanding due to cultural factors of the task being requested.

Ongoing observation of the children will provide the best indicators of children's progress in English and early English literacy. Assessments would reflect dialogue between the kindergarten/child care/school and parents. When early childhood professionals do not share the same cultural and linguistic background as the children, communication should be enhanced using interpreters and bilingual early childhood professionals, positive outcomes are linked to positive communication with parents and communities. Positive relationships built at this time will establish a foundation for later collaboration.

All early childhood professionals in early childhood settings need to observe, record and assess the

ongoing progress of children in their care. The purpose of this is to understand the child in the context of their home experiences and their development in the early years service. Regular observation and keeping detailed records helps to develop a profile of each child. The profile can include information on languages spoken at home, adults living in the home environment, siblings and other cultural aspects that may assist in developing a profile.

An important consideration in undertaking ongoing observation and assessment of children learning English as a second language is ensuring that early childhood professionals understand the stages of ESL development and are aware of the time it takes to achieve fluency in oral language. It is inappropriate to judge children on grammatical ability in the early stages of learning English, it is more important to assess the learner's ability to communicate with others and take part in interactions.

## Achieving outcomes

In the early years, children's level of English depends on how much exposure they have had, and on whether English is used outside the setting. After only one year of exposure in an early years service children have minimal English. This English may be restricted to the use of routine phrases or single words. Some children will be starting to use short sentences and be beginning to use correct grammatical constructions. Children's comprehension will exceed their ability to speak in English.

For children in bilingual settings, the English used may be simpler and more minimal than children forced to speak only English. However, the comprehension of children using both languages will usually exceed those having to use English all the time.

Regular observations should provide early childhood professionals with a clear picture of each child's progress in English as a second language at various stages throughout the year. Children's outcomes in each of the standards are described previously.

A variety of strategies and methods can be used to record children's progress. These include:

- asking children to tell you about their drawing, recording this and collecting the art work
- writing detailed observations and 'running records'
- keeping an account of what parents say about children's language development
- documenting children's development using learning stories (Carr)
- using video/DVDs to record children's progress.

Ongoing observation and record keeping provides the means to show children's progress even if the progress is minimal. In assessing language development it is important to fully understand the stages that children progress through and to acknowledge the individual variation that occurs. The important point to acknowledge is that children's progress is marked in terms of communicative competence, not grammatical competence. Children need to demonstrate that they can play and interact with others and make themselves understood, in time the ability to speak grammatically will develop.

## Language delay

Research has shown that most children have no trouble learning English as a second language while maintaining their home language. Some people believe that it is a disadvantage for children to be learning two languages at the same time. Sometimes conflicting advice is given to staff and parents working with young bilingual learners. In some cases, the inability to speak English is seen as a language disorder or disability. Parents and teachers may be mistakenly advised that parents should give up speaking their languages at home so that children can learn English (Clarke 2006).

The differences in the way bilingual children communicate and their progress in learning English must be distinguished from language delay or disorder. If professionals are unclear of the distinctions, children may be wrongly diagnosed or assessed. A bilingual child is often assessed in English, rather than in the usually stronger first language. This may result in inaccurate assumptions about language and cognitive development (Baker 2000).

If children learning English as a second language are reluctant to speak at all or join in interactions, it is important to determine how long the child has had consistent exposure to English. Reviewing children's first language development will provide information on how well the child can communicate in their first language and whether there is potential for language delay. There is a great deal of variation between learners in how quickly they learn a second language. There is no significant theoretical reason to believe that learning, knowing or using two languages jeopardises children's development (Genesee et al. 2004, Clarke 2007, Dopke, S 2007).

If professionals working with young children suspect language delay, then it is essential when diagnosing language delay to assess both the home language and the development of English. Language delay always occurs in both languages. A child whose language skills seem noticeably deficient for their age may have delayed language. Children learning English as a second language are not considered as language delayed unless other symptoms are present. About five per cent of children will experience language delay. Any part of language learning may be affected, including pronunciation, articulation, understanding, grammar, social uses or the ability to remember words (Clarke 2006, Dopke, S 2007).

## Appendix 1

### Resources and support

#### **FKA Children's Services, Inc.**

First floor 9–11 Stewart St Richmond 3121

Telephone: (03) 94284471

[www.fka.com.au](http://www.fka.com.au)

Provides professional support, advice and resources for all children's services in Victoria

#### **LMERC**

Statewide Languages and Multicultural Education Resource Centre

Ground floor, 150 Palmerston St Carlton 3053

A specialist resource centre supporting school curriculum development and programs.

- LMERC provides expert advice and support
- Access to the library, including postal service to schools

The LMERC library includes over 27 000 items, including:

- Teacher reference materials and journals
- Culturally inclusive picture books, fiction and big books
- Posters and charts
- Materials in 40 languages
- DVDs, audio and CD ROMs English and multilingual

For information regarding these services visit the resource centre

Email: [lmmerc.library@edumail.vic.gov.au](mailto:lmmerc.library@edumail.vic.gov.au)

Telephone: (03) 9349 1418

LMERC membership is available to:

- teachers from all Victorian school sectors and community language schools
- staff and students from tertiary education faculties
- Staff of education authorities in Victoria.

#### **Department of Education and Early Childhood Development**

Level 2, 33 St Andrews Place

East Melbourne

Telephone: (03) 9637 2039

Support for English as a second language and Multicultural Education

Interpreting and translating services

Resources Available

## Books, CDs and resources reflecting diversity of culture and language

### Global Books Sydney

[www.globallanguage.com.au/contact\\_global\\_language.php](http://www.globallanguage.com.au/contact_global_language.php)

Carry a large supply of bilingual and dual language books and CDs.

### Book Garden, NSW

[thebookgarden.com.au](http://thebookgarden.com.au)

Children's books and text books – suppliers of books on diversity and language.

### Snippets for Bilingual families

[www.bilingualoptions.com.au](http://www.bilingualoptions.com.au)

This irregular electronic publication disseminates information about issues of interest and importance to bilingual families and professionals working with such families.

All of Us. Victoria's new multicultural policy

### Victorian Multicultural Commission

[www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/](http://www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/)

## Reference material for early childhood professionals

### Videos/DVDs

Bilingual staff work (FKA) available for purchase or to borrow from FKA Children's Services

And now English (FKA) available for purchase or to borrow from FKA Children's Services

## Appendix 2

### References and further reading

Bruner, J S 1983, *Child's Talk: Learning to use language*, Norton, New Jersey, USA.

Baker, C 2000, *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, fourth edition, Multilingual Matters, UK.

Carr, M, May, H and Podmore, V N with Cubey, P, Hatherly, A, and Macartney, B 2000, *Learning and teaching stories: Action research on evaluation in early childhood*, New Zealand Council for Educational Research and Ministry of Education, Wellington, New Zealand, ERIC 447930.

Clarke, P 1989, 'Examining the silent period', *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, Applied Linguistics Association of Victoria, Canberra, Vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 22–37.

Clarke, P 1992, *English as a 2nd language in Early Childhood*, Free Kindergarten Association, Multicultural Resource Centre, Richmond, Victoria, Australia.

Clarke, P 1996, *Investigating second language acquisition in preschools*, unpublished PhD dissertation, Latrobe University, Australia.

Clarke, P 1999, 'Early Literacy', in *Clearing house: Journal of the Free Kindergarten Association*, Issue No. 35, November, Free Kindergarten Association, Richmond, Victoria, Australia.

Clarke, P 2000, 'Language development and Identity', keynote paper, London University Conference: Supporting identity and language in the early years, London, UK.

Clarke, P 2005, 'Second Language Development and Language disorder', *Talking Diversity*, Free Kindergarten Association, Children's Services, Richmond, Victoria, Australia.

Clarke, P and Milne, R 1996, 'Maintaining the first language and learning English as a second language', *Talking Diversity*, Free Kindergarten Association, Children's Services, Richmond, Victoria, Australia.

Cummins, J 1984, *Bilingualism and special education: Issues in assessment and pedagogy*, Multilingual Matters, UK. Department for Children, Schools and Families 2007, *Supporting children learning English as an additional language: Guidance for Practitioners in the Early Years Foundation Stage*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, UK.

Dopke, S 2007, 'Understanding Bilingualism and Language Disorder', *Talking diversity*, Free Kindergarten Association, Children's Services, Richmond, Victoria, Australia.

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, ESL Unit 2007, *ESL Stage A1: Teacher Support Material for lower primary new arrivals*, Victoria, Australia.

Genesee, F, Paradis, J and Crago, M 2004, *Dual Language Development and Disorders*, Paul Brookes Publishing, Baltimore, USA.

Hester, H 1989, *Stages of English Learning*, in Barrs, M, Ellis, S, Hester, H, Thomas, A 1989, *Patterns of Learning*, Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, UK, p. 41.

McKay, P 1993, *An overview of characteristics of ESL learners and their learning context*, Junior Primary Learners, ESL Development, Language and literacy in schools Project, First teachers Manual. National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia

Milne, R 1994, *Emerging Literacy in the first five years*, National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia, Journal 3 January

Milne, R, Orzeszko, S and Clarke, P 1994, *Affirming Family Diversity*, Free Kindergarten Association Multicultural Resource Centre, Richmond, Victoria, Australia.

Milne, R 1997, *Marketing Play*, Free Kindergarten Association, Richmond, Victoria, Australia.

Nyakatawa, S and Siraj-Blatchford, I 1994, 'Bilingualism, biculturalism and learning in Early Years Classrooms', in Blackledge, A (Ed), *Teaching bilingual Children*, Trentham Books, UK.

Siraj-Blatchford, I, Sylva, K, Muttock, S, Gilden, R and Bell, D 2002, *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years*, DFES Research Report 365, Queen's Printer, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, UK.

Siraj-Blatchford, I 2009, 'Conceptualising progression in the pedagogy of play and sustained shared thinking in early childhood education: a Vygotskian perspective' in *Educational and Child Psychology* 26 (2) June, The British Psychological Society, UK.

Siraj-Blatchford, I and Clarke, P 2000, *Supporting identity, diversity and language in the early years*, Open University Press, Bucks.

Tabors, P O 1997, *One Child, Two Languages: A Guide for Preschool Educators of Children Learning English as a Second language*, Paul Brookes Publishing, Baltimore, USA.

Toohy, K 1996, 'Learning English as a second language in kindergarten: a community of practice perspective', *The Canadian Modern Language Review* 52 (4)(4): 549–576, University of Toronto Press, Canada.

*United Nations Declaration on the Convention on the Rights of the Child* 1990

Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority 2006, Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority, Melbourne, Australia

Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority 2006, Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS), *English as a Second Language (ESL) companion*, Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority, Melbourne, Victoria

Victorian Multicultural Commission, 2009, *All of Us*, Victoria's Multicultural Policy, Victorian Multicultural Commission

Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) 2009

Vygotsky, L 1986, *Thought and Language*, Cambridge, MIT Press, MA, USA.

Wei, L, Miller, N and Dodd, B 1997, 'Distinguishing Communicative Difference from Language Disorder in Bilingual Children', *The Bilingual Family Newsletter* Vol. 14 No. 1, Multilingual Matters, UK.