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Language, Literacy and Learning Two-Way: teaching Aboriginal EAL/D students in the early years

- > [Summary](#)
- > [Target student group](#)
- > [Method](#)
- > [Results](#)
- > [Lessons learned](#)
- > [Next steps](#)
- > [Research base](#)
- > [Further reading and links](#)
- > [Contacts](#)





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Summary

Schools seeking an approach to accelerate improvements in the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people could find the Language, Literacy and Learning Two-Way initiative worthy of consideration. The objectives of the project are in line with the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010–2014](#) and the initiative provides valuable ideas for teaching Aboriginal English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) students in the early years. This initiative, developed by the Western Australia Department of Education, was designed to support schools and teachers to improve their teaching of Standard Australian English (SAE) literacy and numeracy by developing pedagogies that are sensitive to, engage with and include Aboriginal students' languages and cultures.

Promoting a whole-of-school approach, strong school leadership and whole-school engagement, the initiative includes action research-based professional development modules using the Two-Way methodology; where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators work together to create a more inclusive learning environment for Aboriginal students.

'Growing up I knew that Aboriginal people talked differently and there was a clear home speak and public/school speak, but I always believed that what we as Aboriginal people needed to do was maintain culture at home but also adapt to the "majority culture". Aboriginal students should not be made to feel like they have to change their identity in order to function successfully in their educational experience.' (Remote community school principal)

'The idea of the "majority" valuing indigenous home cultures could quite possibly be the key to improving educational outcomes among Aboriginal people.' (Remote community school principal)

Target student group

This initiative targeted primary school teachers, Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs) and Education Assistants, and Aboriginal EAL/D students from Foundation to year 3 across a wide variety of regions from metropolitan to very remote. The initiative supported 2653 Aboriginal students. Students from years 4 to 12 also benefited in situations where the school literacy specialists, principals and whole-school staff completed the professional learning course.

A total of 242 participants (teachers, AIEOs and Education Assistants) from 43 Aboriginal focus schools, five public schools, three Catholic schools and two independent schools participated as part of the Closing the Gap initiative.



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Seventeen principals and deputy principals followed the progress and learnings of the participants and observed the changes in the teachers' approaches and Aboriginal students' engagement and attendance.

Method

The Language, Literacy and Learning Two-Way is an early childhood professional learning course involving principals, teachers, AIEOs and Education Assistants, which promotes collaborative Two-Way partnerships and EAL/D practice to increase opportunities for Aboriginal students in urban, regional and remote communities to acquire language, literacy and learning commensurate with their SAE-speaking peers.

Schools elect teachers to undertake professional development (eight modules) with trained facilitators across a year. The action research takes place between visits where teachers apply theory, trial techniques and strategies and gather data about student progress.

The content of the professional development course supports participants to develop knowledge of the elements considered essential for improving inclusive teaching practices, and increasing awareness and respect for Aboriginal English (AE). These elements are essential to establishing a firm place for two way inclusive practices in the learning environment. Between each module, participants are provided with readings and tasks to support the action-research methodology.

The essential knowledge promoted throughout the course is:

- Two-Way teaching – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators working together to create a more inclusive learning environment for Aboriginal students
- language and dialect understandings – research presented about teaching EAL/D including valuing and building on students' home language(s) with a focus on oral language development
- classroom strategies for practical application, eg the use of appropriate texts in teaching language and literacy to EAL/D learners, strategies that promote inclusive practices in assessment and programming.

One of the significant features of this professional learning is presenting the Aboriginal voice through Two-Way course delivery with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal facilitators and providing opportunities for the inclusion of local Aboriginal participants to share stories, give practical illustrations and discuss the implications for the presented theory. At the same time, it models for participants the process of working Two-Way, which they in turn can transfer and use in their own contexts and classrooms.



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Members of the Two-Way Team work together and learn from each other, developing their cross-cultural communication skills and gaining an understanding of their own perspective.

The initiative principally operated using federal funding to support the Closing the Gap commitments of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). The schools paid for half of the teacher relief and any associated travel costs for the course. The model for this course delivery means that there is an initial outlay to train the trainers and costing for travel to regions, venue hire and catering costs.

Results

Evaluation of the professional development/action–research based model was established using pre- and post-course surveys, and interviews completed by school principals, teachers and Aboriginal co-workers, and course presenters. The principals are asked to comment on the effect of the professional learning on teacher practice.

Data about students' progress was gathered from pre- and post-course ESL/ESD student Progress Map levels by participating teachers. The Progress Map is an assessment tool designed to level EAL/D students' SAE literacy and language proficiency.

These overall outcomes were noted in teacher self-reflection (see Table 1):

- teachers felt more confident about teaching Aboriginal students as a result of the professional learning, with 68 per cent feeling very much more confident
- awareness was raised about the need and value of inclusive practice, building on what students already know and bring to the school environment
- increasing awareness of the benefits of a Two-Way approach to teaching and learning and its place in school planning, including working with parents/caregivers and communities
- teachers are assessing, monitoring and reporting using appropriate strategies and measurement tools (ESL/ESD Progress Map).



Table 1: Self-reflection – perceived skills and knowledge mean scores per theme

Areas	Teacher n = 158				AIEO/EA n = 22			
	<i>i</i>	Pre-	Post-	Change	<i>i</i>	Pre-	Post-	Change
1. Language and dialects	5	2.82	3.26	0.47	2	3.05	3.20	0.25
2. Learning an additional language or dialect	7	2.81	3.21	0.40	2	3.18	3.32	0.14
3. Oral language	6	2.99	3.39	0.40	2	2.98	3.11	0.14
4. Literacy	10	2.75	3.11	0.36	2	3.39	3.34	-0.05
5. Working Two-Way	4	2.43	3.01	0.58	2	2.68	3.21	0.45
6. Inclusive assessments	5	2.51	2.95	0.41	1	3.00	2.74	-0.23

i = number of individual items in area

xxx = highest rated area/highest increase in scores

yyy = lowest rated area/lowest increase in scores.

Detailed description of Table 1

The highest rated area/highest increase in scores were as follows: Teacher n = 158: 3. Oral language (Pre-, Post-); 5. Working Two-Way (Change). AIEO/EA n = 22: 4. Literacy (Pre-, Post-); Working Two-Way (Change). Lowest rated area/lowest increase in scores were as follows: Teacher n = 158: 4. Literacy (Change); 5. Working Two-Way (Pre-); 6. Inclusive assessments (Post-. AIEO/EA n=22: 5. Working Two-Way (Pre-); 6. Inclusive assessments (Post-, Change).

Teachers felt that students were talking more and asking more questions. They were more confident in speaking and approaching the teachers. Students' confidence and pride were evident. Behaviour and attendance improved.

'One student is very confident in telling me what things are in home language. He would often say: "That's your language, but in my language it's ..."' (Regional teacher)



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The school principals also noted these outcomes in their feedback. Seven principals (78%) observed their teachers putting new course learnings and strategies into practice, and thought that it was having a moderate to positive effect on their Aboriginal students.

Analysing the ESL/ESD Progress Map data (see Table 2) supplied by participating teachers, student levels in listening and speaking increased (over a time period of 12 to 22 weeks) between pre- to post-course attendance by an average of 0.55 levels in all aspects of speaking and listening.

This growth is significant considering the age of the students whose cognitive understanding of language and literacy use is still developing.

AIEOs reported in informal group discussions about the success of working Two-Way and the awareness-raising aspects of the initiative:

'For me that I was speaking another language; I didn't even consider it as a different language. I knew I was using it with the kids; I wouldn't speak it to teachers, but when I was asked to talk to the kids, I used it so I could get an answer; didn't know I was doing anything different until I did the course.' (Metropolitan AIEO)

Table 2: ESL/ESD Progress Map results pre- and post-data

Aspect	Listening <i>n</i> = 134			Speaking <i>n</i> = 278		
	Pre-	Post-	Change	Pre-	Post-	Change
Communication and the use of text	2.36	2.89	0.53	2.46	3.02	0.55
Sociocultural and contextual understanding	2.26	2.86	0.60	2.40	2.99	0.60
English language structures, features and conventions	2.27	2.80	0.53	2.38	2.90	0.51
Language learning processes and strategies	2.26	2.79	0.53	2.35	2.89	0.55
Mean	2.29	2.83	0.55	2.40	2.95	0.55



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Lessons learned

Facilitators are the key to sustainability of the initiative. They carry with them a wealth of knowledge and experience. Course facilitators can tailor the course delivery to cater for local contexts. They have significant value as they are able to share lessons learned about the associated community, Aboriginal dialect, contexts and values. The facilitators in each region can also counter the effects of high rural and remote teacher turnover. Facilitators can be used flexibly across the region to work with small groups of teachers in their own or other schools.

A supportive school leadership team is vital to the success of the initiative. It is best if they can engage and participate in the course to provide instructional leadership for the rest of their staff and support the teachers implementing the initiative. In addition, administrative plans are essential concerning the time and work commitments associated with supporting course participation.

It became apparent during the pre-assessment period that a large number of teachers had not used the Progress Map before and/or did not feel confident to accurately assess their students. The team identified the need for, and developed, support materials and offered coaching to participating teachers. Module eight of the course includes a specific focus on how to assess AE speaking students' SAE development using the Progress Map.

An important element for achieving success is to increase teachers' knowledge and encourage acceptance of their Aboriginal students' particular dialect. Identifying the key aspects of difference between the AE dialect and SAE ensures that the students' Aboriginal languages can be valued and used to support student learning with skills and strategies that build on the existing language abilities in an inclusive classroom environment.

'It was useful for them to understand that there is such difference in Aboriginal groupings; some things are very specific. They did that well.' (Regional Aboriginal teacher)

Next steps

The next phase of the initiative is directed at training more teachers and cultural facilitators so that more schools and networks have greater access and opportunity to build their schools Two-Way culture. They will build their capacity as leaders and as trainers for future courses and continue to embed the positive messages about valuing Two-Way discourse to improve teaching, student engagement, attendance and motivation of Aboriginal EAL/D learners.



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An online course delivery mode is being developed and will be finalised in 2014. This will ease some of the costs associated with travel and course facilitation.

Due to the success of the K–3 initiative, alternate professional learning course materials for staff teaching year 4 and above are being proposed.

Research base

The South Australian Department of Education and Child Development's (DECD) professional learning course English as a Second Language ([ESL in the Mainstream for the Early Learner](#)) was modified to address the needs of Aboriginal students who speak SAE as an additional language or dialect. In collaboration with Aboriginal consultants, the content was localised to Western Australian students and further localised by facilitators for individual workshop locations.

Further reading and links

Government of South Australia, 'Unlocking the world: Quality assured professional development for teachers' website, www.unlockingtheworld.com/resources/public

Government of Western Australia Department of Education, *Aboriginal Education Plan 2011–2014*, det.wa.edu.au/policies/detcms/policy-planning-and-accountability/policies-framework/strategic-documents/aboriginal-education-plan-2011-2014.en?oid=com.arsdigita.cms.contenttypes.FileStorageItem-id-11577079

Government of Western Australia curriculum report to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs: Chapter 4, Learning Indigenous languages and Standard Australian English, www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=atsia/languages/report/chapter4.htm#chapter4f7

Konigsberg, et al 2012, Teacher awareness and understandings about Aboriginal English in Western Australia, www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/aral/article/viewFile/2117/2510

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