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Successful language learners: whole-school ESL language and literacy practices

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





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Summary

Inclusive education is based on the right of all learners to a quality education that meets basic learning needs and enriches lives.
(UNESCO)

The Successful Language Learners Whole-school ESL Language and Literacy project was grounded in UNESCO's inclusive education ideal. The purpose was to improve the English language, literacy and numeracy performance of students learning English as a second language, including refugee students. The program aimed to achieve this through a multifaceted, integrated approach based on research about what works in schools with high concentrations of ESL learners. Research indicates that it takes up to three years – with the provision of additional support – for ESL students to reach parity with their English-speaking year-level peers in everyday communicative fluency, but a minimum of five to seven years to 'close the gap' on standardised tests of literacy.

Eleven NSW schools – all ethnically, religiously and culturally diverse – were involved in the two-year pilot program, and results conclusively prove that the strategies in this program lead to improved English language, literacy and numeracy performance.

The outcomes of the strategy were significant. The three measures used to evaluate student progress underline the significant improvements made by students, and demonstrate the major impact that ESL-informed pedagogy can have on the language learning of ESL students.

The Successful Language Learners (SLL) project was a joint initiative of the NSW Department of Education and Training and the Catholic Education Commission of NSW. Funding was provided by the federal [Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations](#).

Target student group

The strategy focused on 11 metropolitan public and Catholic school communities 30 to 40 km south-west of Sydney. Families within these schools are in different stages of the immigration and settlement process. Enrolling Kindergarten and primary school students have had limited opportunities to engage with English. As these are areas of first settlement for many migrants, the schools experience a



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constant enrolment of newly arrived non–English speaking students throughout the year. Since 2000, there have been enrolments of large numbers of refugee students at these schools. The refugee students often have underdeveloped language, literacy and numeracy skills due to disrupted education; many have lived through traumatic and stressful experiences.

The strategy focused on ESL students with significant need. Within this major group, a number of subgroups with particular needs were targeted, including refugee students, newly arrived students with little or no English language skills, and students deemed ‘at-risk’.

The participating schools were Auburn Public School; Auburn North Public School; Auburn West Public School; Fairfield Public School; Old Guildford Public School; Villawood East Public School; Wiley Park Public School; St Joachim's Primary School, Lidcombe; St John's Primary, Auburn; Holy Family Primary School, East Granville; and St Oliver's Primary, Harris Park.

Method

The NSW [DEC Multicultural Programs Unit](#) developed the Successful Language Learners project. This unit's role is to provide strategic advice and support to schools and regions on multicultural policies, programs and services, including anti-racism education, ESL education, culturally inclusive curriculum, migration and settlement services, refugee support programs, community relations and community harmony, and translation and interpreting services.

The scope

The pilot project began in 2009–2010 and was implemented over two years. It consisted of four major interrelated initiatives:

1. Targeted support for students.
2. Professional learning for teachers.
3. School leadership development.
4. Establishment of schools as centres for community activity.

Eleven primary schools in south-western Sydney – seven government schools and four Catholic schools – were selected on the basis of the low socio-economic status of their school communities; their literacy and numeracy performance on



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NSW Basic Skills Tests and NAPLAN tests; and their demographic profiles. The project involved almost 5,000 students across the 11 schools, including 4,400 ESL students from 50 different language backgrounds and 809 refugee students. Information was also gathered about 551 targeted ESL students, especially refugees, who were seen as 'at-risk' or in need of additional support.

Over 280 teachers, support staff and school leaders participated in the SLL project, including 90 full-time and part-time executive. Each school was provided with an additional executive member, an ESL expert, to help the leadership group lead change in ESL teaching practice. In the government school system, this was an Assistant Principal ESL (AP ESL); in the Catholic sector, each school was supported by a Teaching Educator (TE). All 11 principals across the sectors participated in the project.

Schools were also supported by additional Community Liaison Officers (CLOs) working to build stronger links between schools, parents and community members, with an emphasis on community activity taking place within schools.

Governance

Two subgroups provided advice and direction on student data and professional learning. Each subgroup comprised members of the Coordinating Committee and principals. All principals of the schools involved were members of one subgroup or the other.

Coordinators were appointed to advise and support their schools in implementing the project: a regional coordinator for government schools and a coordinator for each diocese.

Guidelines outlining the aims of the project and the national context were developed and distributed to schools. The guidelines detailed the key research used as the evidence base for the project; management and accountability requirements; and information relating to potential operational issues at the school level. Schools received the guidelines in Term 4, 2008, to enable leadership teams to incorporate key outcomes and strategies of the SLL project into their school's plans.



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Key role in each school

Assistant Principals ESL or Teaching Educators were responsible for coordinating the project in their school. Their responsibilities included:

- coordinating provision of targeted support to students
- coordinating homework support programs
- coordinating professional learning for teachers
- coordinating brokerage of services from external organisations
- monitoring the progress of the initiatives.

Targeted support for students

Targeted support for students included the following:

- Provision of in-class support for teachers, so that the latest research strategies could be incorporated into classroom practice.
- Helping teachers analyse student achievement data to inform planning and teaching programs.
- Helping teachers develop whole-class language-learning plans for ESL students.
- Helping teachers develop and implement personalised language-learning plans and a case-conferencing approach for targeted refugee students.
- Assisting the principal and class teachers report to parents.
- Establishing systems to monitor improvements in students' literary and numeracy performance.

Homework support programs were established across all project schools. These provided specialist after-school tuition for ESL and refugee students requiring additional support.

The emphasis was on improving the targeted teaching and learning support for students, including measuring student achievement, identifying students most in need of support and providing additional after-school support.

A key focus was providing targeted support to ESL students, including refugees, at critical transition points, especially on arrival and in preparation for the transition to high school.



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Surveys and teacher focus-group interviews indicate an enormous increase in teacher confidence in teaching ESL students, including refugees.

Results

Types of data

Data about student achievement was gathered using the following means:

1. **ESL Scales:** All ESL students in years K–6 were assessed using ESL Scales (Curriculum Corporation 1994) at four points during the project: Terms 1 and 4 in 2009; and Terms 2 and 4 in 2010.
2. **SLL Assessment Banks:** Four Assessment Banks were administered to all students in years 3–6 in Terms 1 and 4 in 2009, and Terms 2 and 4 in 2010.
3. **NAPLAN** results for year 5 students in 2010 (the second year of the project) were compared with the results for the same cohort when they were in year 3 in 2008 (before starting the project).
4. **Targeted student profiles** gathered information about students' language background, education and welfare needs, as well as information that tracked students' progress. Each school identified a number of students who were targeted for additional support and monitoring of their learning outcomes.
5. **Case studies:** Each school involved in the SLL project identified one 'at-risk' student, who was targeted for additional support and monitoring of their learning outcomes over the two years of the project. The aim of the case study was to document the level and type of support for a targeted at-risk student, and analyse the effectiveness of interventions on students' language, literacy and numeracy performance.
6. **Homework and co-curricular support:** Schools recorded students' attendance and the focus of the activities undertaken on the Homework/Co-curricular Support



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Attendance Sheet. These records allowed schools to determine the consistency of students' attendance as a measure of their engagement and to gauge whether the activities provided were meeting students' needs.

Quantitative data was collected regarding teacher professional learning and parent and community engagement. Qualitative data was collected through focus-group interviews with school leadership teams, teachers, parents, students and Community Liaison Officers.

In Terms 1 and 4 of 2009 and Terms 2 and 4 of 2010, schools conducted ESL Scales assessments of all year K–6 ESL students. On each occasion, assessments were completed for over 4,500 students. The data allowed teachers to track the progress of individual students and plan programs in areas of need.

In addition, the NAPLAN results of 2008 year 3 students were matched with the same cohort's 2010 year 5 results. Data from the SLL Assessment Banks and NAPLAN were used to measure growth in student performance.

Outcomes

There is considerable evidence of significant improvement in the English-language proficiency of ESL students, and the literacy and numeracy of all students in the SLL schools.

The ESL Scales were more useful for assessing the needs of individual students rather than cohorts of students; however, outcomes data for matched groups of students across academic years showed that students' English language development was greatly helped by the innovative strategies implemented by schools.

Overall, data from the SLL Assessment Banks shows that there has been positive growth in Reading and Numeracy at all year levels between Assessment Banks 1 and 4 for all schools in the SLL project. Based on historical data from 1996–2007 Basic Skills Tests, the growth for all students in this study is better than expected, compared to state figures for BSTs.

Analysis of the NAPLAN results for matched students who were in year 3 in 2008 and year 5 in 2010 shows significant growth across the SLL group of schools. While the average results for all schools across the state shows major growth – as



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would be expected for students from years 3–5 – the growth for the SLL group of schools as a whole was even greater. This pattern was consistent across all four areas of Literacy (Reading, Writing, Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation) and in Numeracy.

Together, these three measures of student achievement show the significant improvements made by students over the course of the project, and demonstrate the major impact that ESL-informed pedagogy can have on ESL students' language learning.

Intensive tracking

In Term 2, 2009, the profiles of 388 targeted students were completed across the 11 schools using the SLL Targeted Student Profile Sheets. By Term 2, 2010, a further 163 profiles were completed, making a total of 551 students identified and targeted for additional support or individualised learning. This intensive tracking strategically placed 551 students under the microscope. This specialised form of profiling identified 12 per cent of the 4,719 students across 11 schools, instantly making a small number of students highly visible to all members of the school community.

Each AP ESL or TE completed one case study in their school, in consultation with class teachers, ESL teachers and other relevant specialist teachers (ie Special Education, literacy support or Reading Recovery). There was also a focus on improving the engagement of targeted students who were at-risk of falling behind their peers. A significant improvement in engaging these students was achieved by providing a wide range of homework/co-curricular programs. The data indicate increased activity and participation across the life of the project as these activities grew more popular with parents and children, and schools learned to tailor the support for students' individual needs.

Impact on teachers

Surveys and teacher focus-group interviews indicate an enormous increase in teacher confidence in teaching ESL students, including refugees. Teacher capacity was greatly improved through professional learning, especially in-class coaching by Assistant Principals ESL or Teaching Educators. Teachers' capacity to identify students' English-language needs – and to design teaching and learning programs to meet those needs – was enhanced through their learning to use ESL Scales,



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and by gathering information in Targeted Student Profiles. Teachers were then able to use this information to design whole-class and individual language-learning plans with the support of their AP ESL or TE.

Impact on school leadership

Professional learning for leadership teams resulted in school leaders learning about ESL pedagogy, which allowed them to become leaders of pedagogical change. At the start of the project, a two-day conference for school leadership teams was held, with leading academics setting the scene in relation to ESL pedagogy, refugee issues and cultural perspectives. A further five school leadership workshops were conducted during the project. The appointment of Assistant Principals ESL or Teaching Educators gave schools ESL expertise within their leadership teams; this helped promote the changes in teacher practice.

“Professional learning for leadership teams resulted in school leaders learning about ESL pedagogy, which allowed them to become leaders of pedagogical change. “

School community

There was a fundamental change in the way schools engaged with their parents and community. While schools have always provided opportunities for parents to engage in the schooling of their children, the SLL project allowed schools to significantly increase the number and range of activities offered, more effectively matching parents' needs. As a result, teachers, Community Liaison Officers and parents themselves reported increased parent confidence in supporting their children's learning. Schools have also learnt how to 'broker in' services from the community, such as English language lessons and health screening, that help migrant and refugee families settle successfully.

Evidence framework

An evidence framework was developed to measure and report on progress and outcomes of the project, and to gather evidence on effective interventions and practice. A number of instruments were developed for schools to use to ensure consistency and comparability of student data. These include:



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- SLL Professional Learning Online Survey
- Targeted Student Profile Sheet
- ESL Scales Year Level Recording Sheet
- SLL Assessment Bank
- Professional Learning Mapping Form
- Parent and Community Activity Form.

Other tools developed include focus-group interview questions with teachers, parent and caregivers (and for school leadership teams), and two online surveys for all teachers and executive staff.

An external evaluator was appointed to help evaluate the project. An evaluation plan was developed, and a calendar of data collection requirements and key dates was developed to help schools in their planning.

Lessons learned

The findings of the [Successful Language Learners](#) pilot project highlight the importance of implementing a range of strategies that provide an informed and balanced whole-school approach to improve the English language, literacy and numeracy performance of ESL students.

The results from this project will allow schools to reappraise the way they implement ESL strategies and programs. Schools have reported a number of key aspects of the project that will be sustained.

At school level, those key aspects include the following:

- The use of ESL Scales to assess and diagnose students' English language performance, and the development and use of individual language-learning plans for targeted at-risk students.
- The coordinated development of whole-class language-learning plans that incorporate the explicit teaching of language within the teaching program.
- Homework and co-curricular support programs, particularly those that have been provided by outside agencies at no cost to the school.
- Strategies for engaging parents in the schooling of their children, including the brokering of services for parents.



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At regional or diocesan level, those key aspects include the following:

- Continuing school leadership development to lead language and numeracy teaching for ESL students.
- Professional learning for classroom teachers in second-language acquisition and in the use of ESL Scales.
- Professional learning for newly appointed staff to help them meet the language-learning needs of ESL students.

A cross-sectoral network of Assistant Principals ESL and Teaching Educators met twice each term to share effective teaching practice and ideas. They used the [ning](#) online professional learning community to upload teaching ideas and resources and keep in contact between network meetings.

Schools that are part of the [Low SES School Communities National Partnership](#) could use their funds to employ an ESL specialist teacher to lead professional learning, or use their funds to employ Community Liaison Officers to support parent engagement. Such opportunities are being promoted to schools at regional and diocesan level.

Two resources were produced to promote the successful strategies of the project:

- A DVD for distribution to schools with ESL student enrolments. It contains a video describing the project strategies and outcomes for students, teachers, school leaders, parents and communities, and a case study of one school's approach to improving outcomes for ESL students.
- [The Successful Language Learners website](#), containing the on-line professional learning community's discussions and teaching ideas from the project. This is a good resource for schools seeking to improve the performance of their ESL students.

Many teachers found it challenging using new technology. Teachers with varying degrees of skill and expertise benefited from ongoing hands-on professional learning in the use of Excel and Web 2.0 tools.

Managing the delivery of ESL Scales professional learning across whole-school staff was a challenge for schools, as they often had to use their time and resources creatively to meet the need. Solutions included temporary changes to timetables; support from departmental and diocesan staff to help deliver the training; and the



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use of casual staff. Ongoing professional learning is supported by teachers' increasing use of blogs and online professional learning communities.

“Teachers’ capacity to identify students’ English language needs – and to design teaching and learning programs to meet those needs – was enhanced through learning to use ESL Scales and gathering information in Targeted Student Profiles.”

One school's story

[Old Guildford Public School](#) aimed to become a centre for community activity via a two-year project called Successful Language Learners: Whole-school ESL Language and Literacy Practices.

The school strengthened communication links with parents, community leaders and volunteers by employing Community Liaison and Student Learning Support Officers and interpreters. This gave the community confidence to participate in the wide range of programs designed to address students' and parents' needs. This confidence was demonstrated by the significant increase in parent participation in education programs, meetings and parent excursions, even though the majority of participants spoke little or no English.

Programs ranged from formal education programs to informal social activities. Communication occurred through parent surveys, school personnel and interpreters. Programs included English classes (TAFE outreach programs), parenting programs, transition programs, numeracy and computer workshops, homework information sessions, women's health programs, settling-in programs for newly arrived refugees, parent excursion programs and motivational talks by outstanding community role models, such as Bilel Jideh. The school's Education Week assembly featuring Bilel Jideh attracted over 50 parents; this was the largest turnout for an organised parent event.

The establishment of the school as a community meeting point was another rewarding development. This was achieved by inviting community groups to use the school cottage. Taking up the offer, the local Karen community used the space



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to organise network meetings, so that community leaders and members could gather to address and discuss community concerns.

“As a result of the SLL program, teachers, Community Liaison Officers and the parents themselves reported increased parent confidence in supporting their children’s learning.”

Research base

Research showed that schools that adopt instructional approaches to help ESL learners acquire and sustain their English language and literacy proficiency all:

- collect and analyse individual student data
- take a long-term view of the processes needed for English learners to reach parity with native-English speakers
- emphasise student achievement across the curriculum, not just English proficiency. (Thomas & Collier 2001)

The quality of an education system and the students’ performance depend on the quality of teachers. Top-performing systems recognise the only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction. Effective interventions include coaching classroom practice, moving teacher training to the classroom, developing stronger classroom leaders and enabling teachers to learn from each other (McKinsey & Company 2007).

The SLL project emphasised professional learning about how children acquire English language to help teachers understand how children learn a second language. This initiative helped teachers develop effective teaching practices for ESL and refugee students.

This project built on the work of Michael Fullan (2001) in leading a culture of change in schools by establishing and coordinating ongoing accountability and capacity-building efforts at three levels: school, regional/diocesan and state.

Student learning is influenced not only by their teachers but their family and their neighbourhood. Social exclusion inhibits young people's chances of achievement, not just because of their economic disadvantage, but



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because of the social and cultural isolation that it imposes on them. Schools often unintentionally entrench the isolation by failing to make themselves open to the wide range of support and influence in their local communities (Bentley 1998). Interaction and collaboration between schools and the community create and sustain social capital, thereby reducing demands on teachers and principals, providing opportunities for teachers to focus on learning activities (OECD 2001; Billett, Ovens, Clemans & Seddon 2007)

For successful participation in schooling, it is critical that teachers and parents focus on classroom and home practices that support the development of effective learning habits. For example, 'productive stillness and quiet' are integral to successful readiness for learning; behaviours counterproductive to learning are often evident if these habits are absent.

Research has shown that effective ESL teaching programs:

- build on students' current language skills and knowledge
- integrate English language learning within the key learning areas
- identify the language demands of the curriculum and develop explicit teaching programs to address the required skills
- cater for individual students' language-learning needs in the context of a whole-group or whole-class program
- are developed through ESL specialist teachers and classroom teachers working together.

“Student learning is influenced not only by teachers but by students’ families and their neighbourhood.”



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Further reading and links

Bentley, T 1998, *Learning beyond the classroom: education for a changing world*, Demos, London.

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NSW Department of Education and Training, *Successful language learners*, available at [\(Link\)](#).

OECD 2001, *What schools for the future?* OECD Publishing, Paris.

Thomas, WP & Collier, VP 2001, *A national study of school effectiveness for language minority students' long-term academic achievement*, Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence, University of California-Santa Cruz, US, available at [\(Link\)](#).

UNESCO, [\(Link\)](#)

Contacts

Contacts for the project can be found on the Successful Language Learners website: [\(Link\)](#) or email Multicultural.programs@det.nsw.edu.au