

What is building the field?

Why is it an essential component of an EAL/D teaching sequence?

Rationale

The [Multicultural Education Policy](#) commits schools to providing opportunities that enable all students to achieve equitable education and social outcomes and participate successfully in our culturally diverse society. Approximately 25% of students in NSW public schools are learning English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D). These students require support to develop their academic English language skills so they can access the curriculum, successfully participate in learning alongside their peers in mainstream classes, and engage confidently in the broader Australian community. This document aims to develop teachers' understanding of building the field and its significance for EAL/D learners. It also aims to assist teachers to plan effective English language learning support that aligns with system priorities in literacy and numeracy and meets the commitments of the Multicultural Education Policy.

Audience

EAL/D specialist teachers, classroom teachers, SLSOs, Assistant Principals C & I, Lead specialists, School leaders

Timeframe for use

The document should be read in planning the implementation of intensive English programs and by teachers planning support for EAL/D learners.

Instructions for use

The document can be used to professionally develop teachers on key precepts in English language acquisition and EAL/D pedagogy. It can assist school leaders to plan professional learning, lead professional discussion and guide programming for EAL/D learners.

Concept overview

Building the field involves providing both the requisite content knowledge and English language to successfully participate in a teaching and learning unit. It supports EAL/D learners as they learn English at the same time as they learn subject content. Building the field is an essential component of an EAL/D teaching sequence and a crucial stage of language and content learning for EAL/D learners. Building the field ensures that all students are familiar with the context of new learning to both activate schema and provide a meaningful context for learning and using academic language. Building the field activities provide both designed-in scaffolding (staff only), planned in advance to support students' access to subject content, and contingent scaffolding (staff only), provided as needs arise during a learning sequence. By building the field, students are able to develop shared curriculum knowledge, understanding and language about the topics under focus. This ensures equitable educational outcomes, as all students are provided with the core knowledge and skills to engage with the unit of learning and to complete any assessment.

Why is building the field important for EAL/D learners?

Academic success builds on a process of cumulative curriculum knowledge and skills. EAL/D students who may enrol at any age or stage of schooling may not have the assumed curriculum knowledge and skills as other students. Effective teaching begins with a solid understanding of the knowledge and skills students bring to curriculum learning to ensure new learning builds on previous knowledge (schema theory). The most effective way to build the field is to draw students' cultural capital by helping them make connections between the knowledge, skills and experiences they bring to learning and the topic under focus, creating a bridge to new learning. This prepares students for the learning ahead by establishing a level of background knowledge and key language.

Building the field fills gaps in learners' cultural and linguistic background knowledge so they can understand and engage with the topic. It allows learners to become familiar with important concepts associated with the content, and to develop key vocabulary and language structures required to engage with the topic and to meet learning outcomes.

A focus on language during the building the field stage provides learners with opportunities to use, hear and see the language associated with the topic in context, providing them with exemplary models of language use and opportunities to practice this new language.

Interactive and collaborative building the field activities contribute to a supportive learning environment in which learners are encouraged to participate, take risks, share ideas and learn from others.

Building the field requires teachers to assess their students' knowledge, language and skills relevant to the topic before and during the learning. This assessment enables teachers to plan appropriate learning experiences that are both intellectually engaging and challenging, and that will support and enhance learning for their EAL/D students.

How do you build the field for EAL/D learners?

When introducing any new learning throughout a teaching sequence, EAL/D learners benefit from a range of building the field strategies which incorporate all language modes – speaking, listening, reading and writing - as well as multimodal and practical activities. Beginning with concrete or experiential activities which encourage 'talking to learn' and gradually incorporating more abstract and language-based tasks, teachers can support EAL/D learners' language development and understanding of the topic including:

- Selecting culturally inclusive topics where possible and including texts and resources which offer learners opportunities to share their prior learning, experiences, and different perspectives. It is important to be aware of students' backgrounds to avoid inadvertently marginalising their experiences or triggering past traumas.
- Students sharing what they know about a topic through brainstorming, creating a concept map, using [KWL charts](#), developing a word wall or word bank.
- Organising excursions to relevant sites, conducting experiments and incorporating hands-on activities so learners develop a shared experience on which to build new language.
- Drawing on students' home languages using bilingual texts, bilingual dictionaries, glossaries, and pairing with peers who share the same home language to build background knowledge or activate schema.
- Using collaborative activities such as jigsaw tasks, barrier games, interviews, and quizzes to introduce and reinforce key concepts and language through communicative interaction. Including the four language modes of speaking, listening, reading and writing, will model and teach language and key terms.
- Using visual supports to convey complex ideas and introduce new language, as they support learners' comprehension of content and production of language.

- Using relevant videos and providing learners with structured activities to complete before, during and after viewing that require them to utilise different language modes and share their ideas.

For more information

- [EAL/D enhanced teaching and learning cycle](#)
- [What works best: EAL/D](#)
- [EAL/D effective school practices research report \(CESE\)](#)
- [Building the field](#) (Illustration of practice of orally building the field during reading)

Evidence base (reference list)

Hertzberg, M. (2012). Teaching English language learners in mainstream classes. Newtown: PETAA

Gibbons, P. (2009). English learners academic literacy and thinking, Learning in the challenge zone. Portsmouth: Heinemann

Hammond, J. (2001). Scaffolding: Teaching and learning in language and literacy education. Newtown: PETAA

Derewianka, B. and Jones, P. (2016). Teaching language in context (2nd edition). South Melbourne: Oxford

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2021), English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) effective school practices, NSW Department of Education, education.nsw.gov.au/cese

Alignment to system priorities and/or needs: Aligns with strategic priority to improve literacy and numeracy, aligns with [What works best – EAL/D](#), aligns with [Multicultural Education policy](#) and [Multicultural Plan 2024-2027](#).

Alignment to School Excellence Framework: Learning domain: Curriculum; Teaching Domain: Effective Classroom Practice

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers: 1.3, 1.5, 2.1, 2.2, 3.2

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