

# FAQs EAL/D learners and decodable texts: advice for beginning readers

## 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. NSW public schools with primary school enrolments were provided with decodable texts to support the explicit teaching of phonics to assist students learning to read. This advice sheet guides teachers of beginning readers who are EAL/D learners on the use of decodable texts.

EAL/D learners comprise approximately one third of the K-2 school cohort, and approximately one quarter of students enrolled in Years 3 to 6. These students may enrol in school with limited or no English language proficiency. EAL/D students' oral language skills, including their vocabulary knowledge, may be in a language other than Standard Australian English. Phonic knowledge is a foundational skill for learning to read. For students to use taught phonic knowledge in learning to read, they must understand words and their meanings in English. This document provides advice on the use of decodable texts to support teachers to plan explicit English language teaching for EAL/D learners in alignment with system priorities in literacy and commitments in the Multicultural Education Policy.

## Intended audience

EAL/D specialist teachers, classroom teachers, SLSOs, Assistant Principals Curriculum and Instruction, 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 who are beginning readers in primary school.

## Instructions for use

The document can be used to plan and implement learning to read programs for EAL/D learners who are beginning readers. It can assist school leaders to plan professional learning, lead professional discussion and guide programming for EAL/D learners. This teacher advice should be read in conjunction with [EAL/D learners and reading comprehension \(staff only\)](#) and [EAL/D learners and reading vocabulary \(staff only\)](#).

## Concept overview

Decodable texts support the systematic reinforcement of learnt sound-letter relationships. They consolidate students' knowledge of sound-letter relationships and support decoding skills. Decodable texts are strategically written to the target sound-letter relationships and develop their narratives around these sound-letter relationships. **While valuable in reinforcing taught sound-letter relationships, these texts alone do not expose learners to the broad vocabulary they need to increase their English language proficiency. EAL/D learners need exposure to a wide range of oral and written language to increase their English language proficiency.** English-speaking students typically begin school with an oral vocabulary of 5000 to 10000 words (Chung, 2012), which form the basis of their decoding knowledge as they are already familiar with the sounds of many words and understand their meaning. EAL/D learners are learning phoneme-grapheme relationships at the same time as learning the word, the meaning of the word, and how it is used.

Decodable texts are an essential tool in learning to read. According to Verhoeven (2017), beginning EAL/D readers generally show minor problems with word decoding but their reading comprehension often stays substantially behind their monolingual peers. Decodable texts should be used in conjunction with quality literature texts to support comprehension. The use of a broad range of quality literature texts, with opportunities to explore language, vocabulary and concepts, assists EAL/D learners to develop a rich English language oral repertoire on which they can build their decoding and reading comprehension skills simultaneously.

## What are decodable texts?

[Decodable texts](#) are 'texts [that] are specifically written for beginning readers as they are developing their blending and segmenting skills and their knowledge of the alphabetic code. Decodable texts support students as they practise by using a continuous meaningful

text. Decodable texts contain a very large percentage of words that incorporate the letter-sound relationships that students have been taught. Decodable texts increase in complexity as the student learns more of the phonetic code.’ There are [further resources](#) on the use of decodable texts.

NESA’s English K-2 syllabus defines decodable texts as ‘simple texts that are made up of taught grapheme–phoneme correspondences (GPCs). These texts are used by beginning readers to practise segmenting and blending skills, and to read words so that automaticity can be developed’ and references the use of decodable texts to support phonics. NESA has published [additional teaching advice](#) on phonics in Early Stage 1 and Stage 1 as well as teaching advice on [Understanding and responding to literature](#) and [Reading comprehension](#) on how to explicitly teach the other essential reading skills.

## How do EAL/D students learn to read?

EAL/D learners develop English language proficiency across all language modes through exposure to a wide range of texts including decodable texts and quality literature. The knowledge of the sound of words and their meaning is an essential component in learning to decode and the basis of students’ reading vocabulary. English-language speaking students are familiar with the meaning of words through their oral vocabulary, and can associate sound, grapheme and meaning when reading a decodable text. At this early stage of learning English and learning to read in English, EAL/D learners will be simultaneously developing word recognition, decoding and reading comprehension skills. When reading, all students apply their knowledge about language and the world to make meaning from texts. Exposure to quality literature, as well as decodable texts, is essential to develop English language proficiency and reading skills for EAL/D learners. It is not recommended that decodable texts are the sole reading material.

In learning to read, EAL/D students require explicit instruction with phonics, requiring repeated exposures to English language sound-letter relationships, and repeated opportunities to understand the relationship between the phoneme, the grapheme and the meaning of the word. After a teaching sequence of explicit phonics instruction, this new knowledge of sound-letter relationships should be reinforced through the use of [well-chosen decodable texts](#).

Decodable texts reinforce newfound knowledge of the orthography of English words. In learning English and learning to read in English, EAL/D learners require extensive exposure to new words and their meanings, which should be consolidated through repeated occasions of being read to and wide reading of quality literature. Explicit teaching of language using quality literature should include oral discussions to build EAL/D students’ vocabularies, conceptual understanding and background knowledge. Opportunities to talk about texts benefits EAL/D learners, as well as their English-speaking peers (Anderson 2015, Beck, McKeown, Kucan 2013, Gibbons 2009, 2015).

## How do I select decodable texts to be read by my EAL/D learners?

Decodable texts should be chosen to reinforce the taught grapheme-phoneme correspondence. EAL/D students may not be familiar with the background knowledge assumed in certain decodable texts nor some of the CVC words which are used to reinforce taught sound-letter relationships, such as names of characters. These should be explicitly taught prior to guided reading of the decodable text.

To choose appropriate readers for students to read independently, teachers should read the text prior to assigning to EAL/D students. Decodable texts with familiar topics and familiar words will reduce cognitive load and allow beginning EAL/D readers to focus on consolidating taught-sound-letter relationships. Any words used to reinforce taught GPC, such as characters' names - Mup and Bim, for example, should be discussed with students prior to reading. This assists EAL/D learners to recognise authentic language as well as understand the words designed to consolidate phonic knowledge.

## How should I use decodable texts with my EAL/D learners?

Explicitly taught phonic knowledge should be reinforced with the use of well-chosen decodable texts. Decodable texts should not be the sole reading material for EAL/D learners in learning to read as they do not provide exposure to rich and authentic language. As Castles, Rastle and Nation (2018) state 'phonics supports comprehension by allowing the child to link an unfamiliar printed word with a familiar word in oral vocabulary,' which assumes that all the words in the text are in the student's oral vocabulary. We know this is not the case with most of our EAL/D learners, and some of the unusual words and language patterns in decodable texts – whose language is constructed to repeat the targeted sound-letter relationship – may confuse EAL/D learners who 'struggle to make sense of these texts' (Moustafa 2001 quoted in Arthur and Hertzberg, 2019).

There is significant academic research stressing the importance of EAL/D students learning to read, including decoding, in meaningful contexts in which the topic of the text and assumed background knowledge is familiar to the reader (Dufficy 2005, Gibbons 2009, Gibbons, 2015, Hertzberg 2012). Additionally, these researchers stress the need for EAL/D learners to be exposed to a wide range of quality literature, particularly on subjects which are familiar to them, to develop their English language knowledge. Quality literature needs to be carefully selected to target the English language proficiency and extant background knowledge of the EAL/D students. Applying existing knowledge of the world helps EAL/D learners understand the language and learn new vocabulary in the texts that they are reading (Derewianka and Jones, 2012, Gibbons 2009).

# How do I create opportunities for EAL/D learners to develop English language proficiency for reading?

As oral vocabulary is the basis of reading vocabulary, building oral vocabulary will support EAL/D learners to learn to read (Anderson 2015, Commonwealth Government of Australia Literacy Hub 2022, Quigley 2018). The K-2 English syllabus focusses on oral language, giving teachers the opportunity for a sustained focus on oral language in their teaching and learning programs. This focus on oral language continues in the English syllabus for the latter years of primary school.

EAL/D learners can be introduced to new vocabulary through a quality literature text which is then explored in [Think alouds \(staff only\)](#) or using Frayer diagrams or models, which can be found on the [Digital Learning Selector](#). Whenever possible, all new vocabulary learning should be supported by visual prompts to explain and explore the words, and the use of the whiteboard for connecting the written and spoken forms of words. Teachers can create oral tasks such as Think, Pair, Share in which EAL/D learners recycle new language, and communicative tasks which use the learned words. Accessing bilingual texts through the [Henry Parkes Equity Resource Centre](#) and allowing students to use home language to discuss the new English words will support beginning EAL/D readers to consolidate their English language knowledge.

NESA (2021) frames its teaching advice for Early Stage 1 content on Understanding and responding to literature on the ‘assum[ption] the student is being read a wide range of literature by the teacher.’

## Should I use decodable texts with newly arrived students beginning to learn English?

Newly arrived EAL/D learners in primary schools are supported in intensive English programs to develop their foundational English skills in listening and talking, reading, and writing. In a teaching and learning program dedicated to teaching the specific English language skills students need to negotiate school and a new culture, decodable texts may not support the rich and context specific English language learning required by newly arrived students.

Intensive English programs for newly arrived students are most effective when there is a concerted focus on developing rich oral language and comprehension skills. Activities such as learning greetings, labelling images which are relevant to a student’s immediate needs and interests, and reading and writing about topics of personal interest are

important skills to develop in an intensive English program. Texts for intensive English programs for newly arrived students should be chosen to develop the foundational English language skills needed to negotiate school and a new culture.

A well-chosen decodable text could be used as part of a broader unit of English language learning. A decodable text on picnics, for example, could be one text in a sequence of teaching and learning on places in the local environment, complemented with the use of a range of quality literature texts. With the decodable text, students might discuss and label various places they could visit for a family picnic. After reading, they could write or draw either a recount or narrative about family picnics. The phonic knowledge developed by the decodable text should be supported and augmented by exposure to other rich, relevant language on the topic and practised daily.

## How does Scarborough's Reading Rope help me understand reading for EAL/D learners?

Scarborough's Reading Rope is a visual metaphor of skilled reading, and evidences [Effective Reading Kindergarten to Year 2](#) reading guide. Skilled readers have mastered the skills in the lower rope so that cognitive attention is deployed to the skills elaborated in the upper rope. Some EAL/D learners in K-2 may have beginning reading skills in home language, and will require explicit instruction to develop these reading skills in English. [EAL/D elaborations on the Reading rope](#) explores how to think about this metaphor of reading in relation to EAL/D learners.

## What other consideration can be made when assessing my EAL/D learners' phonic knowledge?

Oral competency in home language plays a role in oral competency in English. Researchers discuss the skill of 'auditory discrimination' which is the ability to hear a phoneme in English. If EAL/D learners have not encountered a similar sound in their home language, it is more challenging for them to hear and reproduce the sound in English (Saiegh-Haddad 2019). Teachers will need to explicitly model these new sounds for students. While [home language will affect EAL/D learners' pronunciation of English](#); accent is incidental to the EAL/D learner's ability to communicate effectively in English.

## Glossary

**Decodable texts:** Simple texts that are made up of taught grapheme–phoneme correspondences (GPCs). These texts are used by beginning readers to practise

segmenting and blending skills, and to read words so that automaticity can be developed. (NESA 2021 K to 2 English Syllabus)

**Quality literature:** Primary curriculum English offer a [checklist](#) to decide on the quality of a text.

Quality literature:

- is widely regarded (for example, award-winning or classics)
- contains rich language
- has powerful images
- has characters and plot which are engaging and interesting for the students
- enriches discussion
- is complex with meanings on multiple levels
- can be read and enjoyed more than once, exposing layers each time
- allows the exploration of the literary devices which composers use to communicate, inform, persuade or entertain
- can be examined for their conceptual textuality to develop deep, critical and new ways of thinking.

**Well-chosen decodable text:** A decodable text which focuses on the taught GPC, is on a topic familiar to students and contains familiar words. This reduces cognitive load, allowing beginning EAL/D readers to focus on consolidating taught-sound-letter relationships.

## Evidence base (reference list)

Anderson, P (2015) Teaching reading in the early years

<https://www.acer.org/au/discover/article/teaching-reading-in-the-early-years>

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

Gibbons, P (2015) Scaffolding language scaffolding learning: Teaching second language learners in the mainstream classroom. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed Portsmouth: Heinemann.

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

### [Literacy Hub](#)

New South Wales Education Standards Authority (2021) English K-2 syllabus

Saiegh-Haddad, E (2019) What is phonological awareness in L2? Journal of Neurolinguistics 50 17-27.

Quigley, A (2018) Closing the vocabulary gap. Oxon and New York: Routledge.

Verhoeven, L (2017) 'Learning to read in a second language' in Cain, K, Compton, D L and Parrila, R K (Eds) Theories of reading development, Amsterdam: John Benjamin, pp 215–234.

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**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](#) statements and [Multicultural Plan 2019-2022 \(PDF 1804 KB\)](#) targets.

**Alignment to School Excellence Framework:** Learning domain: Curriculum

**Consulted with:** Literacy and Numeracy, Aboriginal Outcomes and Partnerships

**Feedback and comments:** Please email [eald.education@det.nsw.edu.au](mailto:eald.education@det.nsw.edu.au) citing document title

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