

Supporting Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children who speak languages other than English

This resource was developed in collaboration with Denise Cedric, Kindergarten teacher, Indigenous Pre-Prep program at Yarrabah State School, and Di Hoy, the Pre-Prep support teacher involved in the trial of the *Queensland kindergarten learning guideline (QKLG)*.

Key messages

1. It is important to value Aboriginal children's and Torres Strait Islander children's first languages while also building their skills for using Standard Australian English (SAE).
2. Teachers need to understand the features of language so they can intentionally support children to extend language skills.
3. Language learning is linked to children's social and cultural experiences and provides a starting point for building new learning.

Why is it important to value children's first language and build their skills for using SAE?

- For Aboriginal children and Torres Strait Islander children to be successful learners they need support to become 'two way strong', that is, they 'develop strong foundations in both the culture/s and language/s of their family and of the wider world, allowing them to move fluently across cultures without compromising their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities' (*Foundations for success*, no date, <http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/indigenous/projects/foundations.html> p. 1).
- Language is an integral part of a child's personal and cultural identity (*Foundations for success*, p. 7).

The Yarrabah Pre-Prep program acknowledges and values the children's first language (Yarrie Lingo) while also developing their awareness of and ability to use SAE.

For example, I do roleplays with my co-workers. We take on different roles. One person speaks in Yarrie Lingo and the other in SAE. This helps the children to see the difference. We talk about using SAE in particular contexts, such as in dramatic play where they are roleplaying doing 'business' (e.g. working in a shop).

- A child's first language is the medium by which they have been communicating and building understandings since birth. It shapes a child's everyday experiences and is central to their sense of personal and cultural identity. It is the vehicle through which a child makes sense of the world, gains information, learns new concepts and shares their feelings and experiences (*Foundations for success*, p. 6).

Teachers demonstrate that they accept a child's first language/s as a valid form of communication by including and celebrating it/them within the learning environment. They carefully plan play

experiences, teach songs and rhymes, share stories, play games, and use signs and pictures to engage the child in using their first language/s and SAE.

What do teachers need to know to work with Indigenous children who speak language/s other than English?

Teachers need to understand:

- how languages are acquired
- that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children may speak one or more languages, such as an Indigenous Creole (IC), Torres Strait Creole (TSC), traditional language or SAE
- that the language/s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children speak reflect their community and family contexts
- how the child's first language/s differs from SAE
- that Aboriginal children and Torres Strait Islander children may have delays in their first language and listening skills because of conductive hearing loss as a result of otitis media
- that when children are learning English as an additional language, they need support to know whether they are using (or should use) their first language or SAE to communicate in particular social learning situations
- how to provide clues to help children to 'code switch', that is, to know when they are (or should be) using their first language and when they are (or should be) using SAE
- Note: For more information about code switching, refer to Rosemary McKenry, 2006, 'See youse later: Teaching English literacy to Australians', Fine print, Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council, www.valbec.org.au/05/fineprint/archive/2006/fp_06-wn.pdf.
- children who are learning SAE are likely to interact in learning situations in different ways to children who speak SAE. For example, they may:
 - be passive participants or exhibit inappropriate behaviours
Note: This may indicate an inability to comprehend verbal interactions.
 - participate in action songs by mimicking others' actions, but not sing/say the words
 - respond with actions to formulaic phrases used in games, action songs or dramatic play
 - respond with gestures and/or facial expressions when listening to songs and stories.

Working with community members can help teachers to learn about the features of children's first language/s and where and when these languages are used in everyday life.

In Yarrabah, new teachers are assisted by the Aboriginal teachers and support workers to understand the features of the local Indigenous Creole (Yarrie Lingo). It is a unique language that is used within the Yarrabah community. For Yarrabah children, this is the language they have heard and spoken since birth. It is part of who they are and the world they know. Teachers need to understand that Yarrie Lingo encompasses both verbal and non-verbal ways of communicating.

Teachers need to realise that some sounds in English words are not familiar to children who speak other languages. Grammatical structures are also likely to be different, e.g. in Yarrie Lingo, plural forms are not used ('boat' is used for 'boats') and words used in SAE may be omitted, e.g. the words 'to the' are omitted in the sentence 'I bin go shop'. This means that the children need many opportunities to hear SAE sounds, words and sentence structures and may need an adult to point out differences in sounds/sentences to help them use SAE to communicate.

What language skills do children bring to kindergarten that can become starting points for further language learning?

Children bring with them a wide repertoire of personal and family knowledge and experiences that are framed within the oral language tradition and real-life situations they participate in daily.

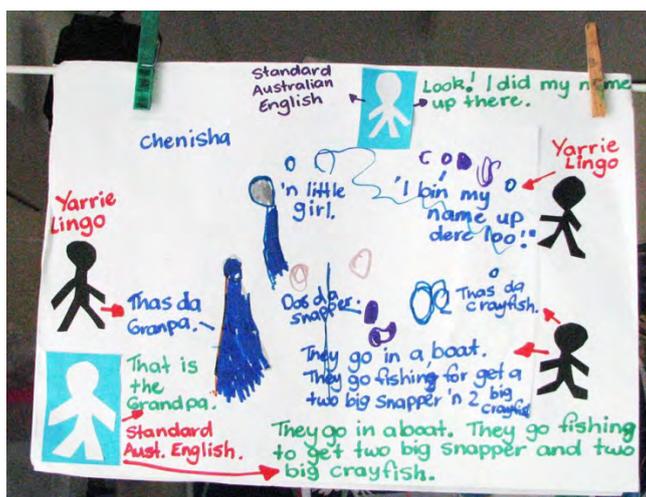
Children in Yarrabah, for example, have extensive knowledge and language for communicating about the sea and bush, including sea creatures' names, hunting and gathering tools and practices, the names of places to camp, fish and collect bush food, language to talk about foods, when these can be collected (seasons) and ways to prepare foods. They also know and talk about how to get to these places, who and what to take there (e.g. particular family members with knowledge and expertise about the bush and the hunting dogs). In addition, they have well-developed knowledge about technologies and how they work, including mobile phones, computers, DVD players and electronic games. Teachers need to recognise and value the language and knowledge children have, as children will use this in their play and interactions throughout the kindergarten day.

Children who are learning English as an additional language need to be encouraged to contribute to learning conversations using their first language. Teachers must:

- be willing to accept the contributions made by these learners and use these opportunities to explicitly build understandings about SAE, e.g. learning SAE vocabulary and sentence structures
- explain clearly the difference between SAE and the child's first language.

We find in Yarrabah, that many of the children don't realise they are Aboriginal. I make this very clear. I talk about 'Who are you?' We talk about being an Aboriginal person and talking using Aboriginal language and that this is different to how a Migloo (Yarrie Lingo for non-Indigenous people) acts and talks.

I explain clearly the differences between their first language and SAE, e.g. *When I say that in Yarrie Lingo, I say, 'Where door?' but when I say that in Migloo, I say, 'Where is the door?'* In this way, teachers acknowledge and value (rather than correct) the child's first language and create a supportive learning environment for Aboriginal children.



Responding to a text: The teacher scribed the words this child used to talk about the drawing. The teacher explained to the child that they were using 'Yarrie Lingo'. The teacher then restated and recorded the child's ideas using Standard Australian English. Together, they discussed the words recorded in both first language and SAE.

Involving the community in promoting children's language skills and learning

As well as community language/s and SAE, people within an Aboriginal community may use a traditional language or have access to traditional Indigenous language speakers. 'Knowing who you are' and having a positive sense of cultural identity is central to Aboriginal children's and Torres Strait Islander children's social, emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual wellbeing (*Foundations for success*, p. 2).

At Yarrabah Pre-Prep, we have a family and community day once a fortnight. We invite family members to join in the program with the children during the day. We also encourage them to talk and play with the children, join in our music program and contribute to planning activities for the next family and community day.

Our children's health is very important. The community health worker comes in to the centre, helps develop health programs, provides health care for the children and runs a teeth cleaning program. It is good for the children to see health workers and other community people in the centre. They take more notice of what they say and also become familiar with these people who they see in the community.

Our staff also work with local Elders in the Yidinji traditional program. This program includes learning language, dance, storytelling, art, hunting and gathering practices, and bush medicine collection and administration. Participation in the program is important for helping children to define their cultural heritage and identity — who they are as Indigenous people (past, present and future) and how they fit into the Yarrabah community.

The traditional language program is valued and highly respected within the community. Engaging children from a young age in learning three languages: Indigenous Creole (Yarrie Lingo); SAE and a traditional language will help the children to become 'three way strong'.