



# Learning English as an additional language



**Note on content:** FKA Children's Services is the exclusive provider of the VCAA training resource, **Supporting Children Learning English as an Additional Language in the Early Years (Birth to Six Years)**. The content in this document gives an overview of the material covered in the course. FKA acknowledges Dr Priscilla Clarke, OAM, whose expert research and contributions form the basis of the training course.

The course comprises three modules which can be delivered according to individual Professional Learning needs and goals. For further information, please contact [training@fka.org.au](mailto:training@fka.org.au).

## Language, culture and identity

Language, culture and identity are strongly related. Contemporary academic discourse highlights that language is more than words, phrases and sounds but the coming life of social interaction (Evans 2014, p3). Further to this, culture is recognised as not only surrounding language, but also residing within it (p187).

Children's linguistic identities can involve a number of languages. All children have the right to be continuing users of their home language as well as to develop competency in Standard Australian English (EYLF, p38). It is critical to acknowledge all aspects of a child's identity and ensure that they are supported to develop strong foundations both in the languages and cultures of their families and those of the broader community, including English, without compromising aspects of their identities (VEYLDF, p19).

- What could constitute a compromise for the development of a child's cultural and linguistic identities?
- What practices do educators and families promote to ensure compromises are not made?

## The importance of home languages

With sufficient quality input in both languages, children can learn English alongside maintaining their home languages. In order to learn English as an additional language, it is important to support the continuing development of the child's home languages as this:

- Provides a foundation to learn English, for example by being able to transfer skills from one language to another (Clarke 2009, p9).

- Helps make a bridge between the home and the initially unfamiliar environment of the service (p14).
- Is essential not only to children's cognitive development, but also to their social development and wellbeing (p8).

Respecting children's cultural identities, including their languages, is a keystone of culturally competent practice. The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework acknowledges that maintenance of a child's home or first languages is important for identity, wellbeing, communication and learning (p28). The Framework recognises bi- and multilingualism as an asset and compels Early Childhood Professionals to support children to maintain their home languages (p11).

## Additional language acquisition

The process of learning an additional language comprises a number of stages. The VEYLDF emphasises the need for early childhood professionals to be knowledgeable about the way children learn a second language, the stages of acquisition and the recognition that children differ in their rate of acquisition (p28). Recognising a child's progression through these stages can guide practice so that children are supported appropriately at the right time.

The stages of additional language acquisition that are recognised by the VEYLDF supporting documents (see below) are based on the research of Dr Priscilla Clarke and include:

- Continuing to use home languages, including when responding to communication in English
- Use of non-verbal communication
- A period of silence for some learners
- Use of repetition and language play
- Use of single words, formulaic and routine language
- Development of more complex English
- Metalinguistic awareness and sustained shared thinking (Clarke 1996)

Educators are champions for leading advocacy in upholding children's cultural and linguistic rights by becoming informed about the stages of additional language development and sharing information with colleagues and families.



For further information on the stages of the development of English as an additional language, FKA recommends the VCAA resource authored by Dr Priscilla Clarke, Supporting Children Learning English as a Second Language in the Early Years (birth to six years) alongside the VCAA training modules delivered by FKA Children's Services. Contact [training@fka.org.au](mailto:training@fka.org.au) for details.

## The role of families

The VEYLDF acknowledges the importance of interaction to the development of effective communication (p30). Children who are learning English as an additional language have been interacting with their families and communities since birth. As such, these relationships are the critical foundations of language development for children, together with being pivotal to a strong sense of identity. Professionals build on these foundations by working in partnership with families to support children's learning and development experiences (p10).

- How do educators support families to understand their role in their child's language and literacy development?
- How are families' concerns regarding language acquisition addressed? Which resources are readily available for educators to draw upon?
- How do educators gather information about literacies of home to inform practice (p30)?
- In what ways are families supported to engage their children in written and oral culturally constructed texts? (p30) How can families assist educators to make use of the stories and symbols of their own cultures (p31)?
- How are families involved in using information and communication technologies to explore diverse perspectives and information with their children (p31)? Are there opportunities for innovative engagement with families and communities living elsewhere?

## Further considerations

Below are some responses to common misconceptions about learning additional languages. How can educators address these to ensure educators, families and the community are empowered by access to accurate information about language development?

- Children learning English as an additional language are not considered to be children with additional language or learning needs.
- Families do not need to stop speaking their home languages to their child in order for them to learn English.
- Continued development of the home languages is crucial to the development of English as an additional language.

## Practice tips

- Provide encouragement and non-threatening opportunities for children to try to use their new language, even if this is restricted to repeating words, responding non-verbally or using single words.
- Provide a wide variety of activities which encourage children to talk about things they know and which build on their experiences at home and in the community. Encourage the continued use of the home language in these experiences to build a base for using English.
- Encourage educators to talk to children throughout the day and respond positively to their verbal and non-verbal attempts at communication and extending interactions.
- Invite family members to take part at the service and assist with planning and providing opportunities to use their home languages with children.
- Plan experiences that focus on communicating with educators and other children in a variety of ways, including the use of non-verbal language and single words.
- Continue to model language naturally and avoid changing or simplifying language for the child. Use questions that do not necessarily require a spoken response.
- Avoid correcting children's mistakes as this can create anxieties for children.
- Accept and acknowledge children's responses, including silence and non-verbal language, as valuable contributions.
- Do not plan or implement an alternative code or language, such as a sign language, unless this is one of the home languages of the child.

## How we can help

Bicultural Support is provided by FKA Children's Services throughout Victoria. We offer early childhood education and care services access to skilled and experienced professionals who provide specific language and cultural assistance to help enrol and settle children. The Bicultural Support Team can be reached on 03 9428 4471 or by contacting [fkacs@fka.org.au](mailto:fkacs@fka.org.au).

FKA offers a range of professional learning opportunities for services, which are customised according to individual needs. Check our website for upcoming opportunities, or contact the Professional Learning Team by calling the office or emailing [training@fka.org.au](mailto:training@fka.org.au).



## Research and frameworks

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations & Council of Australian Governments 2010, *Educators' guide to the early years learning framework for Australia*.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations & Council of Australian Governments 2009, *Belonging, being & becoming: the early years learning framework for Australia*.

Clarke, P 1996, *Investigating second language acquisition in preschools*, unpublished PhD dissertation, Melbourne: Latrobe University

Clarke, P 2009, *Supporting Children Learning English as a Second Language (birth to six years)*, Melbourne: Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority

Evans, D 2014, *Language and Identity: Discourse in the World*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development & Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2009, *Victorian early years learning and development framework for all children from birth to eight years*.

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2012, *Trainer Manual: Supporting Children Learning English as a Second Language (Birth to Six Years)*.

## Further information



How to request bicultural support  
<http://fka.org.au/bicultural-support/request-bicultural-support>

Free Interpreter support for Victorian Government funded early childhood services,  
<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/comms/Pages/interpreterservice.aspx>