

Using teacher-researcher collaborations to respond to the demands of ‘real-world’ EAL/D learning contexts across the curriculum

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Abstract: Despite the increasing levels of cultural and linguistic diversity represented in Australian classrooms, many universities do not adequately prepare teachers to teach English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D). Moreover, in neoliberal educational regimes, teaching tends to remain steadfastly focused on monolingual conceptions of literacy development, and ‘evidence-based’ practices tend to reflect this stance. In this paper, we argue that due to the diversity and complexity of EAL/D learner cohorts, and current systemic constraints, teacher-researcher collaborations can be one avenue available to teachers to develop their knowledge and skills whilst simultaneously guiding future research. Drawing on ‘identity texts’ and arts-based approaches, through this case study, we describe our teacher-researcher collaboration in a super-diverse primary school classroom setting to illustrate the ‘messiness’ of classroom research, the challenges, and the considerable opportunities to effectively respond to EAL/D learner needs whilst valuing and embracing their diverse linguistic repertoires.

Introduction

According to the most recent census, there are over 350 languages spoken in Australia and 5.5 million people in Australia use a language other than English (ABS, 2021). Since opening Australia’s

border again after COVID closures, record levels of migration have been recorded with a net migration of 387,000 people in 2023 (ABS, 2023). This increase in cultural and linguistic diversity represents a ‘superdiversity’ situation that has not yet been experienced in Australia and is likely to continue (Vertovec, 2007, p. 1024). The implications for the classroom are significant. Teachers need to respond to the highly diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their students in their teaching and must teach students whose first language is not Standard Australian English (SAE) (Ollerhead, 2018; Scarino, 2022). These students are referred to as English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) learners.

Despite the growing number of EAL/D learners in Australia, and the curriculum requirement to teach SAE to EAL/D learners, most teachers do not possess specialist language teaching education or sufficient levels of professional development in this area (Gilmore et al., 2018; Neilsen et al., 2016). At the same time, support from EAL/D specialist teachers has diminished. Once a leader in the provision of specialist language learning education through trained specialist teachers, the responsibility of teaching SAE has gradually shifted to mainstream classroom teachers over the last few decades (Oliver et al., 2017). Moreover, EAL/D specialist teachers have been amongst the hardest hit educational sectors from the COVID pandemic, resulting in a critical skills shortage (Neilsen et al., 2020; Neilsen & Weinmann, 2022). Consequently, teachers and education systems are currently ill-prepared to meet the challenges and demands of teaching superdiverse student populations. This, combined with the increased demands placed on teachers’ time and an ‘over-crowded’ curriculum, can result in professional learning in this area being sidelined with preference given to more ‘pressing’ matters or those perceived to be more important.

It is notable that the level of linguistic diversity amongst student populations in Australian classrooms is not adequately expressed in learner’s EAL/D status. Within EAL/D populations, there is a diversity of learners, learner language backgrounds/ecologies, and across Australia, the SAE language learning environment can differ dramatically. Therefore, different approaches to learning and teaching SAE might be required, according to the learner and their context. For example, some students’ SAE might represent an additional language whereas for others, it might be an additional dialect. Even though some

students speak additional languages, it might be a localised dialect of that language, not the standard language. Thus, it is crucial to understand the intricacies of students' linguistic repertoires beyond language boundaries (Wei & García, 2022). Some students may speak a range of languages at varying levels of proficiency. Some may not have developed literacy skills in their first language. Some may have experienced disrupted schooling. Some students may be gifted and talented whilst others may have a language impairment or disability that may be difficult to identify due to language barriers. The wide range of attributes that characterise EAL/D learners may impact their language acquisition. Furthermore, in parts of Australia, for example remote Aboriginal communities, very little SAE may be spoken and it may be limited to school settings (Poetsch, 2020; Angelo & Hudson, 2021; Wigglesworth et al., 2018). These environments are akin to learning 'English as a Foreign Language' (EFL) where generally, in EFL language learning environments language input and opportunities for language use/practice are reduced and language acquisition is slower (Steele & Wigglesworth, 2023). In other contexts, EAL/D learners might be required to use SAE in almost all their daily interactions resulting in rapid SAE acquisition (Dobinson & Steele, under review). Given the diversity and complexity inherent within EAL/D learner cohorts and learning contexts, one-size fits all approaches are not recommended. Yet, these approaches are increasingly being implemented as teachers grapple with teaching SAE to EAL/D learners across the curriculum (Creagh et al., 2022; Fogarty et al., 2017). Instead, we offer teacher-researcher collaboration as an avenue to learn about and respond to diverse EAL/D learner needs in the classroom.

Neoliberalism, literacy & evidence-based practices

The rise of neoliberal approaches to education has resulted in increased school autonomy, higher accountability measures for schools and teachers, and the privatisation and commodification of education (Gobby et al., 2017; MacDonald et al., 2021). The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is a key feature of the recent suite of neoliberal reforms in Australia. Whilst, NAPLAN has emerged from the national focus on 'English literacy' (Lo Bianco, 2008; Lo Bianco, 2016), the role of the media and its coverage of NAPLAN results has intensified the already pervasive monolingual centric discourses about

'literacy' (see Cross et al., 2022) both in the public arena and educational settings (Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003; Doolan & Blackmore, 2018; Thomas, 2005; Waller, 2012). Examples of these discourses include the focus on 'back-to-basics' approaches and the 'literacy wars' between phonics based versus whole language approaches to teaching literacy which receive extensive media coverage alongside the 'literacy crisis' and falling standards of English (Steele & Oliver, under review).

With this steadfast focus on monolingual literacy development, the English language learning needs of EAL/D learners are often conflated with 'literacy' learning. In the absence of specialist knowledge and education in additional language acquisition, first language monolingual literacy programs (and frequently literacy programs designed for monolingual English-speaking children with learning difficulties) are often adopted with EAL/D learners in response (Creagh et al., 2022; Fogarty et al., 2017). Creagh et al. (2022) describe how, in Queensland, the decentralisation of EAL/D support and greater school autonomy (without commensurate accountability measures for EAL/D funding) associated with neoliberal approaches to education have resulted in the replacement of specialist EAL/D programs and educators with commercial products. One example is the use of the American literacy program designed for children with learning difficulties that has been funded by the Federal government for use with predominantly EAL/D First Nations children across the country (Fogarty et al., 2017). Fogarty et al. (2017) argue that this product is another in a long list of packaged programs that hold little validity in these contexts and for which there is not an established evidence base for this learner cohort and learning context. In these ways, as argued by Piller and Cho (2013), neoliberalism, as an economic ideology 'serves as a covert language policy' (p. 23) that shapes educational practices.

Ironically, at the same time, education systems are calling for a greater focus on evidence-based teaching practices in the classroom (e.g., Productivity Commission, 2022) with the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) established in 2021 to develop a relevant research evidence base for Australian schools (Productivity Commission, 2022, p. 18). These calls are based on reports that suggest the use of evidence-based practices in classrooms remains a significant challenge (Productivity Commission, 2022, p. x) and that 71% of teachers use ineffective strategies in most or every lesson (AERO, 2021). However, for the

reasons discussed above, existing evidence may not fully cater for EAL/D learners, or account for the diversity of EAL/D learners and language learning contexts represented across Australia. Within EAL/D specific research, one of the main reasons posed for teachers not engaging with research is a lack of relevance (McKinley, 2019; Rose, 2019). Therefore, there is a need to expand the current evidence base to include this diversity. Teacher-researcher collaborations can address the need for highly relevant, and contextual, teaching practices specifically for EAL/D learners. In doing so, teacher-researcher collaborations hold the potential to expand the current, and somewhat limited, evidence-base about teaching practices for diverse EAL/D learners.

Teacher-researcher collaborations

Against this backdrop, teacher-researcher collaborations can be one avenue available for teachers to develop their knowledge and skills for teaching EAL/D learners. Current demands on teachers' time make it crucially important to ensure that research is both relevant and accessible to support teachers who seek to enhance their knowledge base and professional capabilities in this area. To achieve this, Rose (2019) argues that in applied professions such as teaching, the focus should not be on research-informed teaching – but rather, teaching-informed research. That is, research conducted with teachers in the classroom in response to their needs, as determined by them. It is crucial that such research is conducted collaboratively. In a similar vein, McKinley (2019, p. 876) calls for 'research to be more grounded in classroom contexts, and for methods to be more transparent about the messiness of doing real-world classroom research'.

Applied linguistics, as an applied field, has a long history of teacher-researcher collaborations. However, more recently, increased impediments to conducting classroom-based research are making collaborations more difficult. Despite this, teacher-research collaborations offer great potential to meet the skills shortage in specialist EAL/D teachers, to counter the use of commercial and often inappropriate literacy programs, and to address the specific and highly contextual needs of diverse EAL/D learners, as widely acknowledged within the literature (Edwards, 2017; Fowler-Amato & Warrington, 2017; Hamza et al., 2018; Slaughter et al., 2020; Tian & Shepard-Carey, 2020).

Research centres teachers' knowledges, co-constructed approaches to learning and teaching and relationality as being

integral to enacting teacher-researcher collaborations that generate new ideas and bring about change. Tian and Shepard-Carey (2020) build upon García et al.'s (2017) framework for enacting translanguaging pedagogies (e.g., a stance, a design, a shift) to conceptualise this process with teacher-researcher collaborations in mind. They argue that these collaborations are inherently dynamic, negotiated, and complex. From this perspective, teachers and researchers are not viewed as separate entities but rather are seen as constantly engaged in a process of co-construction (Tian & Shepard-Carey, 2020). Together, they develop a *co-stance*, engage in *co-design*, and responsively deploy *co-shifts* in their teaching (Tian & Shepard-Carey, 2020). With a focus on the centrality of co-design to creating transformative practices, Fowler-Amato and Warrington (2017, p. 359-360), in their teacher-led classroom-based interventions, position teachers as “transformative intellectuals” (citing Giroux, 1985, p. 378) who must rightfully play a driving role as “designers of their own futures” (citing Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016, p. 2). Edwards (2017) brings relationality to the fore in her discussion of teacher-researcher collaborations. Likewise, Hamza et al. (2018) describe their long-term commitment to developing a community of practice approach in order to overcome initial minor differences between teachers and researchers to ultimately develop reciprocal learning, teaching and research practices.

Identity texts & arts-based research methodologies

To meet the learning needs of diverse EAL/D learners, first and crucially, teachers must learn about their students' language backgrounds and language use. Indeed, culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies are based on the premise that teachers not only account for students' cultural and linguistic repertoires in their teaching but adopt strengths-based approaches that capitalise on students' rich cultural and linguistic knowledge (Cummins & Early, 2011; García & Wei, 2014; Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Paris & Alim, 2017). Identity texts and arts-based approaches are increasingly being used as a starting point for culturally and linguistically responsive practices in the classroom, and to effectively plan for EAL/D learners across the curriculum.

From Cummins and Early (2011, p. 3), ‘identity texts’ are representations of students’ identities that are created in

multimodal forms, and may be written, spoken, visual, musical, dramatic, and so on. They act to affirm students' identities in educational spaces that may have previously silenced students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Cummins et al., 2015). Some examples include language portraits (Browne, 2019; Busch, 2018; Chik, 2019), language maps (Browne, 2019; Dutton et al., 2018; D'warte, 2013) and language trajectory grids (Choi & Slaughter, 2021; Slaughter et al., 2020). In our study, we used both language portraits and language maps in a Year Two multilingual classroom to gain insight into EAL/D learners cultural and linguistic identities as well as their daily language use. In this article, we focus on the language maps as an arts-based practice, and give example of how identity texts can be integrated across the curriculum in learning areas other than English to inform teacher planning and practices.

Case Study: Year Two multilingual classroom

Our case study is from a Year Two classroom in an independent public school in Western Australia (W.A.). The school population represents 32 cultural and linguistic groups with 10 of those represented in the classroom of students aged between 7 and 8 years old and many identifying as EAL/D learners. Traditionally a lower socioeconomic location, with population growth, the area is becoming increasingly gentrified, and students come from a range of family backgrounds including from immigrant, refugee, and international student statuses as well as First Nations and settler Australians.

Our case study forms part of an ongoing critical participatory action research project that has been running since 2018 between the school and our institution led by the second author. Permission to conduct research has been granted by the Department of Education, W.A., and the Human Research Ethics Committee, Curtin University. The school principal, the teacher, the children, and their parents all provided informed consent for the study. Age-appropriate consent forms were used with the Year Two students with verbal explanations to ensure that the children were able to consent.

Two university academics (Authors 1 and 2) and the teacher of the Year Two classroom (Author 3) formed the teacher-researcher collaboration. Both university academics situate

themselves as teacher-researchers having both previously had teaching careers outside of a university context. The Year Two teacher has been involved in the research project since 2018. In November 2022, the team met to discuss the future directions for the collaboration for the next year. Given that further collaboration was planned for Term 1, when the Year Two teacher would have a new class, it was suggested that identity texts might provide the teacher with a good opportunity to learn about the cultural and linguistic identities of the children in the class to further inform planning and teaching practices. This would enable the classroom teacher to effectively respond to EAL/D learners needs whilst valuing and embracing their diverse linguistic repertoires.

Using examples from Browne's (2019) study, the university academics shared student samples of the language portraits and language network maps with the classroom teacher who was enthusiastic about the potential of using these tools in the classroom. However, there were significant constraints to negotiate. An extensive assessment regime in Term 1 left little time for teaching. Furthermore, the school, like most schools, had a dedicated two-hour literacy block in the morning with school-wide expectations and a mandated schedule. Activities like this would take up a significant proportion of the literacy block, and impact overall planning and progress. Lastly, there was the perceived value of such activities not always being viewed as central to the curriculum (despite forming a crucial, but often ignored, element of the general capability 'intercultural understanding' in the Australian Curriculum). However, the power of teacher-researcher collaborations was immediately felt when the classroom teacher innovatively suggested ways that we could work around these constraints to bring research-based approaches into the classroom. The classroom teacher suggested that we re-create the language network into an art activity to be used as the class's Harmony Day display.

Harmony Week is a yearly event intended to be a 'celebration that recognises our diversity and brings together Australians from all different backgrounds.' (Australian Government, n.d.). The Australian Government (n.d.) states, 'It's about inclusiveness, respect, and a sense of belonging for everyone.' In 2023, Harmony Week was held from Monday 20th to Sunday 26th of March. Across education sectors, a day is usually designated for Harmony Day celebrations. Internationally, Harmony Day is known as the 'International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination'

(Anderson, 2022). However, in Australia it has been re-imagined with the ‘race-neutral language’ of Harmony Day reflecting the broader silencing of talk about racism in Australia (Anderson, 2022; see also Hollinsworth, 2016). It is therefore not surprising that Harmony Day celebrations have been accused of being tokenistic, superficial or at worst, encouraging of cultural stereotypes and appropriation. In this regard, developing identity texts with students to share with their parents and the wider school community through their Harmony Day display represented a chance to engage more meaningfully with the real intent behind the day. Developing these texts also fits within the intent of identity texts: ‘When students share identity texts with multiple audiences (peers, teachers, parents, grandparents, sister classes, the media, etc.) they are likely to receive positive feedback and affirmation of self in interaction with these audiences’ (Cummins & Early, 2011, p. 3). As a final point, the classroom teacher was thrilled at the thought of preparing for Harmony Day in a meaningful way weeks beforehand, thus, avoiding a last-minute panic and/or high demands on his time and class time just before the event.

Tying the identity texts to Harmony Day addressed the concerns about the perceived value of the activities by meaningfully locating them within school/community events with a broader social value as well as the curriculum. To overcome the time constraints related to initial assessments in Term 1, and the requirements placed on the morning literacy block, the identity texts were re-imagined as art activities to take place in the allocated art time. Without a specialist art teacher in the school, teaching the art curriculum was the responsibility of the classroom teacher, providing scope to connect the activities to learning areas other than English. The language network map was re-imagined as a ‘dreamcatcher’ with coloured paddle pop sticks as the frame, labelled with the different places their languages were spoken, and coloured cotton wool representing the different languages spoken. Using a hot glue gun, feathers were added as a decorative element. Some example dreamcatchers are shown in Figure 1 and were displayed alongside language portraits for the Harmony Day display. The dreamcatchers illustrate the classroom teacher’s creative and innovative thinking to re-create identity texts in ways that are both engaging and meaningful for students whilst also integrating learning about EAL/D learners cultural and linguistic identities and practices in other learning areas, for example, art.

Figure 1. Language network map ‘dreamcatchers’



When creating the dreamcatchers with students, we were fortunate to also have a pre-service teacher in the room alongside the two academics and the classroom teacher because we encountered many difficulties in the process and students required a high level of support to complete the activity. The most obvious difficulty was that many students did not have the dexterity to complete the task of weaving the cottonwool around the popsticks and required assistance. Another notable observation was the confusion between the language portraits they had completed and the language maps that required students to identify domains – or the places – they spoke the language rather than the language itself, which was indicated by the coloured cottonwool and coloured key they had developed. Despite these challenges, the children reported enjoying the process immensely. We attribute this to the cognitive and physical demands of the task. It was a highly tactile arts-based activity that was intrinsically related to their expressions of self.

Student responses to the task were audio recorded during the classroom activities and in a reflective lesson. They reveal that their enjoyment largely derived from the process of connecting the strings, which surprised us given that this was what they appeared to find most difficult. Student responses included:

- S1: I liked the Language Network because it was very fun to connect the strings.
- S2: And I got to finish the string.
- S3: Cause because the strings.

- S4: I like the string part where we put the strings where we go to and talk with other languages... Because, because, I really like strings like with writing and we talk about.
- S5: I liked the pop sticks because I got to paint it then.
- S6: The language network because of pop stick has places and I got to write my favourite places.
- S7: Because I got to put the language network up under the undercover area.
- S8: Pop sticks... I feel like wood.
- S9: Because it was nice, and we can take it home.
- S10: Because it's telling us where we use our languages... The language network makes me feel calm and happy.

Many of the student responses point toward the value of the task being related to its tactile nature with the use of strings, painting, and the feel of the wood (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S8). This point could even be extended to student 10's response that the activity produced a 'calm and happy' feeling. Others suggested it was the personal connections through their languages, and the places they visited that made the task valuable to them (S4, S6, S10). While other student responses (S7, S9) reflected the position of Cummins & Early (2011, p. 3) that the value of identity texts is also derived from the experience of sharing one's identity with others. As one child poignantly described with reference to his language portrait, "Because honestly, I think when we did the language portrait, I liked it because we could colour in, and we could express our feelings and the cultures."

Whilst identity texts hold great value as a vehicle through which students can describe their identities and feel a sense of belonging in the schooling community, they also hold the potential to inform future planning and teaching practices across the curriculum. The classroom teacher shares his reflection on the process:

I have been very fortunate to work with university practitioners to plan, implement and reflect on a series of lessons designed to recognise and value students' multilingual abilities for meaningful language learning experiences. This approach required me to develop a deep understanding of translanguaging practices and to create inclusive classroom environment that

embraces linguistic diversity. As a result, I became a facilitator of student-centered learning, promoting active engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking. This method not only enhanced language acquisition with the majority of students speaking an additional language but also promoted higher-order thinking skills and creativity. The students appreciated learning about additional languages and how this fostered and nurtured their own identity and sense of self. This is an important aspect of the Early Childhood Curriculum.

In this excerpt, the classroom teacher speaks to the value of teacher-researcher collaborations for the students and the teacher. The reflections from the university academics highlighted the importance of connecting theory to practice and experiencing the ‘messiness’ or the ‘realities’ of the classroom. They felt this was especially important for those university-based researchers who are currently training future generations of teachers (McKinley, 2019; Rose, 2019).

Discussion and conclusion

One benefit of teacher-researcher collaborations is the ability to create something new that, whilst being based on well-established theoretical grounds and pedagogical approaches, is responsive to the needs of children in the classroom. In our study, the classroom teacher was able to borrow a somewhat ‘dry’ research-based approach and re-imagine it in creative ways that students thoroughly enjoyed. The benefits extend beyond the students’ learning to the learning of teachers and researchers who are actively involved in the process. Working collaboratively, they bring different insights to produce new learnings that are mutually beneficial. Together, they are required to navigate the complexities and constraints of the educational system to locate opportunities and produce innovations.

Our case study demonstrates the value of identity texts in the classroom but also, how through teacher-researcher collaborations, neoliberal educational regimes can be successfully navigated to resist dominant monolingual approaches to schooling. In doing so, students’ diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds were embraced and valued in the classroom, and EAL/D learner needs were explicitly addressed in teaching. This extended beyond the identity texts. For example, the classroom teacher included

greetings in students' languages as part of the morning routine. He invited parents into the classroom to read bilingual stories in their languages to the children. He created a reading corner with bilingual books from a diverse range of languages for children to explore. Furthermore, the classroom teacher was able to use his knowledge of students' language backgrounds to inform his planning and to effectively respond to EAL/D learners' needs in the classroom. He included specific teaching techniques for EAL/D learners such as explicitly teaching word stress in English and pointed out how writing directionality in English differs from Arabic. These examples, and others were included in his teaching to not only foster inclusion, but also to specifically aid language learning.

Case studies highlight the highly contextual nature of teaching. Thus, research cannot necessarily speak to every situation. Teacher-researcher collaborations can work to address this through the development of theoretically grounded and empirically based localised approaches. In doing so, research conducted through teacher-research collaborations can act to broaden the evidence base. To achieve this, teacher-researchers need to make clear the processes undertaken and the realities of classroom-based research; the challenges and the opportunities presented (McKinley, 2019). In this way, the focus shifts from research-informed teaching to teaching-informed research (Rose, 2019). Encountering the 'realities' of the classroom in teaching-informed research also provides university-based researchers with vital knowledge, involvements and understandings for their role as educators of future teachers.

In our experiences, we have noted considerable impediments to conducting research-based teacher-researcher collaborations. There have been significant delays due to the ethics approval process which must be completed at both the university institution as well as the Department of Education, each with a different process and focus for their evaluation of the application. These delays are often compounded by the busyness of teachers, and academics, and their respective education systems. In many cases, where we are situated, it can take between 1 to 2 years to enact teacher-researcher collaborations. Given the current focus on embedding evidence-based teaching practices into the classroom, as well as ensuring the university-based researchers are cognisant of the realities of classroom teaching (AERO, 2021; Productivity Commission, 2022), there is a strong need to develop more

streamlined and supportive approaches to university/school collaboration.

There is also the divergence in philosophical stance that is often present in teacher-researcher collaborations on which to reflect. Currently, neoliberal philosophies dominate educational policies and are evident in everyday classroom practices. Not only are opportunities for teacher-researcher collaborations limited due to the schooling time constraints and over-crowded curriculum that is associated with increased teacher accountability, but there are also the underlying normative assumptions of monolingual first language learners inherent within neoliberal policies (Cross et al., 2022). Teacher-researcher collaborations must overcome the impasse these approaches present for education generally, and specifically for EAL/D learners. As academics in this space, we strongly advocate for approaches that better align with social justice perspectives and sociocultural theories of learning. More recent theories of translanguaging, and culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies, reflect this positioning in the way they value and embrace students' rich cultural and linguistic knowledge (Cummins & Early, 2011; García & Wei, 2014; Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Paris & Alim, 2017). The tensions between these approaches and dominant monolingual teaching approaches that tend to silence students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds are often acutely felt in educational settings. Whilst we seek to resist and counter these monolingual approaches, these approaches alongside the tensions that exist, are the realities of teachers' and students' classroom and schooling experiences. Thus, it is crucial to learn to navigate diverse ideologies, philosophies, theories of learning, and systemic pressures, constraints, and opportunities. This is where the strength of school teacher-university researcher collaborations lies (Edwards, 2017; Fowler-Amato & Warrington, 2017; Hamza et al., 2018; Slaughter et al., 2020; Tian & Shepard-Carey, 2020).

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