

# Introducing language learning into a preschool program



Michelle has been a preschool educator for 20 years. She often encourages parents who speak another language at home to come and share some of their language and culture with the children. She finds that preschool children enjoy hearing other languages and learning about the cultures of their friends. She is always impressed by how the young children mimic some of the new words and phrases they hear – and with accurate pronunciation.

To build on this interest and enthusiasm and to celebrate diversity, Michelle sometimes includes songs from other languages in her program or asks children to bring in things relevant to a particular celebration or event in their culture. Although she knows that introducing preschool children to languages has many benefits, Michelle has been unsure how to provide the regular and frequent exposure to language that she knows is needed to develop children's language awareness further.



## What are the benefits of language learning in early childhood?

Language learning, like all learning in early childhood, is most successful when the community has a common understanding of the reasons for its inclusion in children's education (Early Years Learning Framework, Principles, 2: Partnerships). That is why communicating the benefits of language learning in early childhood is an important part of establishing parent and community support.

Learning a language from an early age has many benefits, some of which include:

- development and strengthening of literacy skills that are transferable across other areas of learning
- enhancing communication and social skills
- improved critical thinking and problem-solving skills
- becoming aware of and developing an understanding of other cultures and peoples
- preparing children for positive language learning experiences at school.

(For more about the benefits, see the References section, in particular the work of Baker, Bialystok and Kotulak.)

*“We know that learning another language is a great brain gym for children, and we know that in the longer term the more access they have to a second language, from early time all the way through, we know they actually do better in school. This is confirmed by NAPLAN testing ... So the benefits of learning another language are actually extensive and extend through the whole learning experience and ability of a child.”*

*Professor John Hajek, School of Languages and Linguistics, The University of Melbourne, 2014*





### Current approaches to language learning in early childhood settings

Language learning in Australian early childhood settings is based on a number of approaches. These include:

- a preschool teacher or childcare worker who is a native speaker of the language and who provides language learning experiences
- a language provider who works with a preschool teacher or childcare worker to support the provision of language experiences
- a language provider who comes into the early childhood site to provide language experiences
- immersion, where another language is used as the medium of instruction for all or part of the preschool program. This is a well-evidenced approach that requires a policy commitment as well as a significant commitment of resources and support, not only from the educational community, but also from parents and the local community. It is less common than other methods, but successful immersion preschool programs operate in most Australian states and territories.

(Source for first three approaches listed above: Department for Education and Child Development, South Australia 2010–2011, National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) South Australia Evaluation Report, Adelaide.)

### Characteristics of effective language learning programs

The following characteristics were identified in the development phase of ELLA as important in promoting early childhood language learning:

- The most effective language activities are those with a purpose such as solving a problem or completing a mission.
- Music, story, and play should be the predominant activity types.
- Culture and language should be connected.
- Software should have a predictable structure that incorporates new challenges and problems as the child using it progresses.
- Explicit language teaching should be embedded into meaningful activities.

### The language learning approach in *The Polyglots* apps

*The Polyglots* apps provide opportunities for children to 'respond to diversity with respect' by 'exposing children to different languages and dialects and encouraging appreciation of linguistic diversity' (EYLF).

#### Language-learning links to the EYLF

*The Polyglots* apps are designed to be used within an existing preschool program, without the requirement

#### Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

Children's connectedness and different ways of belonging with people, country and communities helps them to learn ways of being which reflect the values, traditions and practices of their families and communities. Over time this learning transforms the ways they interact with others.



of having a qualified language teacher available on site.

These apps encourage the development of language awareness in children, with minimal impact on the educators' existing workload. This is made possible by a play-based language learning design. This design makes the most use of tablet functionality that allows for self-directed learning.

The Polyglots apps are designed to be used over an extended period of time, as language learning is most successful when children have regular and frequent



experiences of the target language.

The apps aim to create fun and engaging language-learning experiences for children. The EYLF-inspired design and the nature of the tablets make it possible for educators to allow children to explore and learn at their own pace.

The Polyglots apps also incorporate effective language learning approaches, including:

- listening to and singing songs in the target language

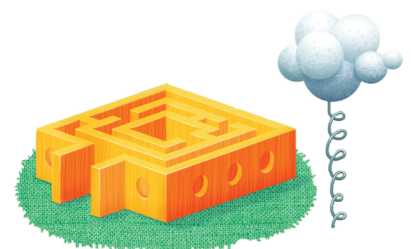


- providing opportunities for hearing the target language (receptive language)
- providing opportunities for speaking the target language (productive language)
- re-using contextualised language in different ways
- providing opportunities to experience cultural aspects of the language
- ensuring the repetition and scaffolding of language concepts.

Additionally, the apps use a light, engaging narrative in familiar EYLF-linked contexts within which children learn and play with characters. They combine a range of experiences and play types to cater for varied learning styles and children's levels of development. The play types include open-ended play, modelled play and purposefully framed play. These are described more fully in the Educator Materials for each app.

***“The use of the apps and the new technology in the classroom is actually a great way of including everybody – those of an English speaking background and of a non-English speaking background. Linguistic diversity is the norm in the room nowadays and that should actually be celebrated and explored. It’s a great way for children to develop intercultural understanding, to develop relationships and also to understand the relationship between themselves, their own language or languages and what’s going on with the apps and the tablets.”***

***Professor John Hajek, School of Languages and Linguistics, The University of Melbourne, 2014***





### References

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