



GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE

# Guide for ECE teachers: Oral language development in the early years

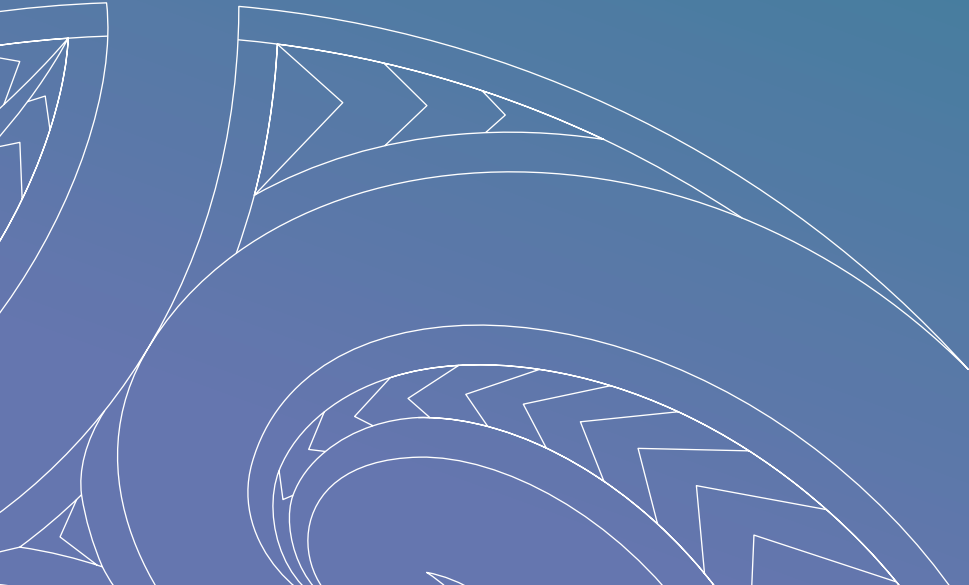




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# About this guide

ERO looked at oral language development in the early years, in ECE services and new entrant classes across Aotearoa New Zealand. We wanted to know what the evidence says about teaching practices that make the most difference, and what those practices look like in real life.

This guide is designed to be a brief, practical resource for ECE teachers<sup>a</sup> who want to improve their practice. New entrant teachers may also find these strategies useful.

## How did ERO found out about good practice?

We took a deep dive into the literature about what works, for supporting young children's oral language development. This covered both the national and international literature base, and then we checked our understandings with Aotearoa New Zealand experts. We found five areas of practice that make the most difference, each of which have some key practices.

We visited a range of ECE services and new entrant classrooms, and asked teachers about the practical ways that they bring evidence-based oral language practices to life. We wanted to know about the particular strategies that have worked well in their experience.

### Why is oral language important?

Oral language is the foundation of literacy.

Oral language helps children collaborate and problem-solve.

Oral language skills help children communicate their needs and wants.

Oral language helps children succeed at school.

For more about the value of oral language teaching and learning, see ERO's good practice report - [www.evidence.ero.govt.nz](http://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz).

<sup>a</sup> In this report, the term 'teacher' is used for qualified and unqualified teaching staff working in early childhood services. In some services, they may be referred to as kaiako or ECE educators.

## What do we mean by ‘oral language’ in this guide?

This guide is focused on speaking skills and listening skills.

- listening (receptive language) skills: the ability to hear, process, and understand information
- speaking (expressive language) skills: the ability to respond and make meaning with sounds, words, signing, or gestures.

### What about bilingual or multilingual children?

Speaking more than one language has many learning advantages for young children, as well as ongoing life benefits. Young children who are learning English as an additional language benefit cognitively from building their skills across multiple languages at the same time; it is a positive and useful process.


The practices and supports highlighted in this report are relevant for teachers of all children, whether they have one, two, or more languages. It’s important for teachers to work in partnership with families and whānau to support children’s home languages, and to be aware that children learning more than one language might take longer than their single-language peers to grow their English word bank, combine words, build sentences, and speak clearly compared to children who have one language. This is normal and expected.

### What needs to be in place to support teachers?

This report is mostly focused on effective teaching practices. But to be well set up, teachers need good service leadership and conditions that prioritise oral language teaching. They also need good professional knowledge and assessment understandings themselves, positive partnerships with parents and whānau, and an understanding of how and when to work with specialists around oral language. ECE leaders can read more about their role in supporting good teaching in our companion guide: [Guide for ECE leaders](#)

### Evidence shows that the early years are key

Studies show that children’s vocabulary at age two is strongly linked to their literacy and numeracy achievement at age 12, and delays in oral language in the early years are reflected in poor reading comprehension at school. Great teaching and learning around oral language in the early years is needed to set children up for future success.





# Practice area 1: Teaching new words and how to use them

## 1) What is this practice area, and why does it matter?

This practice area is about deliberately teaching and modelling words to children through everyday interactions. This means intentionally using words that build children's word bank (vocabulary) and encouraging them to use and apply words in the right context.

Adults teaching and modelling different words for children is necessary for children to be able build and use a larger vocabulary themselves. This supports children to be increasingly able to comment on and describe things around them, interpret their world, and use more specific words (rather than general terms).

## 2) What are the key teacher practices?

### a) Naming

This involves supporting children to use the words for objects, ideas, and people in their environment. For example, teachers might:

- use 'sportscasting' with infants and non-verbal children, where they narrate activities that are within the child's view
- affirm when multilingual children use their home language words to name things, and then explaining what the name is in English, te reo Māori, or relevant Pacific or other languages that are used at the service.

### b) Labelling

This involves using words to identify objects, people, and ideas across different mediums – for example, teachers might point out something in the ECE environment that is also being labelled in a story book.

### c) Explaining

This involves clarifying and unpacking the *meanings* of words to help children understand new words and express ideas.

### d) Showing

This involves being clear about the mouth and tongue movements used. This can include saying new words extra clearly, loudly, or slowly, or talking with children about what the mouth movements look like or feel like. However, teachers should be cautious about over-exaggerating their mouth movements, as this can distort sounds.

## e) Repeating

This involves intentionally repeating key words to help children grow their understanding of the meaning of a word, and how the word is used in context.

“I’ve actually seen great results... I’ve got one child in the toddlers’ room that’s really keen to speak, and he keeps repeating everything we say. [He’s] really determined to use the language. He would point at his shoes and say, ‘On the shelf, up, up there, up there’. Then from this...I’d give him extra words and a week later he would say, ‘My shoes, they are up there’ – which was incredible.”

ECE TEACHER



## f) Extending

This key practice involves adding extra words (like adjectives or adverbs), to descriptions (for example, ‘big red ball’). For infants and children who are not yet speaking, ‘serve and return’ interactions which involve teachers responding to gestures, eye contact, etc. with descriptive words, are another useful form of extending.

### Real-life examples from ECE services:

- **Pointing at objects while naming them**, “making sure that we give the vocabulary to what the children are trying to express.” (Teacher)
- **Naming feelings and emotions** during conflict resolution conversations – “key words that they can use to express themselves.” (Teacher)
- **Actively listening to children and adding on extra words in their response.**
- **Introducing groups or categories of similar words that relate to children’s play**, such as different types of animals, vegetables, or tools.
- **Modelling correct words after children make errors**, emphasising the correct word in their reply – for example, “That’s right, you’re going to the *library* this afternoon”.
- **Occasionally emphasising sounds or parts of words**, to prompt discussion with children. “You can pick up how they might pronounce certain things, like the ‘th’ is really hard.” (Teacher)
- **Pointing towards the mouth when saying a new word**
- **Using call-and-response** to get all children saying a word aloud.
- **Encouraging children to repeat new words.** “I said, ‘Well, you can use your words. How could you say it?’ So, if she hasn’t got the word, I give her the words and I let her repeat the words.” (Teacher)

### 3) Reflective questions

These questions may be useful to reflect on individually or discuss as a team. Think carefully and critically about your day-to-day practices.

- How often do I repeat words when speaking to children? How about explaining or discussing what they mean?
- How often do I ask children to vocalise what they are doing and their ideas or emotions? Can I add to their word bank, for example by *naming* objects, or *labelling* connections to other contexts?
- When working with infants and non-verbal children, how regularly do I maximise interactions with 'serve and return' responses to their gestures and non-verbal cues, or use 'sportscasting' strategies to describe what is happening around them?
- How do we show children that the language they speak at home is welcomed in our service and that their added vocabulary is a strength?
- When could I say a bit more or add complexity to my language, to increase children's knowledge of words? (E.g., during care routines, mealtimes, discussing children's construction creations, etc.)



## Practice area 2: Modelling how words make sentences

### 1) What is this practice area, and why does it matter?

This practice area includes intentionally using language to show how words are linked to make sentences (grammar), and providing opportunities for children to practice this in their own speech.

Teaching and modelling how words link together helps children become familiar with the different sounds in words, rhythm, and rhyme, gain an interest in storytelling, and be creative and expressive through describing and telling stories. These learning outcomes and strengths are emphasised in *Te Whāriki* and are pivotal to children's ongoing literacy learning. When teachers ask children follow-up questions and recap previous learning, this helps consolidate children's language.

“We did shift our language a little bit as well, to talk with the children about what do you want to **learn about** today, not what do you want to **do**...it changes their thinking and also makes the space a lot safer to get things wrong as well.”

TEACHER

### 2) What are the key teacher practices?

#### a) Storytelling

This involves using interesting stories to intentionally model sentence structures. In Pacific language services, teachers might engage in talanoa with children to share stories and build language skills.

#### b) Singing

This involves using songs to intentionally model different uses and forms of language. For example, the use of rhyming words, rhythm, music, and waiata to teach language patterns and rules.

“We have different songs for different seasons...So it's all linked with the rhythm of the earth.”

LEADER



### c) Questioning

This involves asking a range of questions to invite different forms of responses from children. It helps when teachers listen to what children are talking about and the ideas they're expressing, in order to ask relevant, engaging questions that challenge children to consider more expressive or complex answers.

It's important to keep in mind that *relentless* questioning can reduce children's participation in conversation – so teachers should balance their use of questions with statements and comments, that encourage children to think, respond, and take the lead in conversation too. 'I wonder about...' statements can be useful for this.

“They know that they are expected to speak, but we also give them that prep time beforehand ... so they have that time to turn and talk...And then you know that they've all had that processing time and then they can share.”

TEACHER

### d) Sequencing

This involves using stories to model how language is used to put events and activities into order, and to help children learn the language used for signalling sequences and what to expect in a narrative. For example, words like 'then', 'next', 'just before', or 'finally'.

“It's the warning, saying, 'Hey, we're going to be finishing and packing this away soon'.”

TEACHER

### e) Recapping

This involves intentionally recapping topics and subjects that children have been learning about, to revisit what was covered and help children remember the language that was used.

### Real-life examples from ECE services:

- **Putting emphasis on new words while reading books**, emphasising new or tricky words.
- **Choosing books that have new words** for children to discover rich descriptive vocabulary and grammar that isn't found in everyday speech.
- **Using rhyming songs for everyday routines.** "You would not say it, you sing it...in a gentle way...'wash the dishes, dry the dishes, turn the dishes over'...You sing songs while you do that...They sing all those songs now too, because they're used to it." (Leader)
- **Planning open-ended questions to ask children.** "I'll...write down some questions [that are] open-ended... I can ask these questions for these tamariki." (Teacher)
- **Asking questions and waiting**, giving children time to think and practice constructing sentences in response.
- **Emphasising words and phrases that relate to the timing of events during storytelling.**
- **Using props and materials to show a sequence of events**, such as creating pictures with scenes from a story that children have read, and encouraging children to put the pictures in order.
- **Prompting children to recap prior events.** "Can you remember what you did in the morning?" – actually getting the sequence of events, just getting them to start to talk to us." (Teacher)

### 3) Reflective questions

These questions may be useful to reflect on individually or discuss as a team. Think carefully and critically about your day-to-day practices:

- Am I intentional about supporting children to explore language and construct sentences?
- Do I ask open-ended questions (or comments like 'I wonder...') that encourage children to talk and experiment with language? Do I allow them enough time to consider their answers?
- How can I use songs and stories to engage children in different aspects of oral language – like rhyme, rhythm, narrative, etc.?
- What opportunities do children have to reflect and recap on past learning, language, and new words? How could I build this into my everyday practice?



## Practice area 3: Reading interactively with children

### 1) What is this practice area, and why does it matter?

This practice area is about involving children in the process of reading aloud from books, encouraging children to be active participants during teachers' book-reading.

Reading with children supports children to enjoy poetry, pūrākau, fiction, and non-fiction, and to be more confident storytellers. Teachers can stimulate children's interest in reading by regularly sharing interesting books with them. Following up by asking questions, explaining in further detail, retelling the story, and reading it again make the process of reading more engaging and interactive.

### 2) What are the key teacher practices?

#### a) Questioning

This involves asking children questions when reading, to prompt discussion and encourage active engagement. This supports children to answer logically using clues from the book and its context – such as the title of the story – and also to answer creatively and use their imagination.

#### b) Recalling

This involves helping children to make links between the content that they read and hear in stories, and what they remember from other learning.

#### c) Expanding

This key practice involves talking in more detail about new words from stories or rhymes, to expand children's vocabulary.

#### d) Extending

This involves intentionally using the ideas and themes in books to broaden children's thinking and support them to talk about concepts from stories.

#### e) Explaining

This involves using different words to explain ideas from books. Teachers can help children to understand difficult-to-grasp concepts when they are reframed slightly differently.

## f) Retelling

This involves encouraging children to retell stories themselves, in a range of ways. Teachers might provide physical props and tools, or encourage dance, art, music, or drama performances to retell stories in new ways.

“We...put pictures on the wall in the right sequence, and the children will come and look at the pictures, point at things, and use certain words to retell the story that they are familiar with.”

TEACHER

## g) Rereading

This involves being intentional about the selection of stories that children read and hear again and again, maximising opportunities for learning particular oral language skills.

“Putting less out on the bookshelf but being more intentional about what it is and leaving it there for a longer period of time so that children are able to revisit and have those conversations again and develop those ideas further over time... that was something that sounds so simple, but it was a really big shift.”

TEACHER

### Real-life examples from ECE services:

- **Talking about a new book before starting to read it**, such as asking children questions about the words and characters in a new story.
- **Linking stories to previous outings and learning activities**, such as helping children to recall the different things they saw on their last bush walk when reading a book about nature.
- **Linking books to children’s life and home experiences.**
- **Actively using new words from popular books.** This ties into choosing books that match or overlap with current learning topics.
- **Being intentional about the books that are most accessible and available.**
- **Adding in extra detail when reading a book more than once.**
- **Encouraging and facilitating peer book-reading.** Encouraging tuakana-teina interactions between older and younger children with diverse vocabularies. “[Two boys] actually sit together ... telling each other the stories [and] taking turns in that.” (Teacher)
- **Using puppets, magnets, or blocks to creatively retell stories.**
- **Acting out stories as a group**, “so that the children internalise the story.” (Teacher)
- **Displaying familiar books at children’s eye level** to promote rereading.

### 3) Reflective questions

These questions may be useful to reflect on individually or discuss as a team. Think carefully and critically about your day-to-day practices.

- Do I actively involve children in reading, by asking them questions, commenting on the story, and allowing opportunities for retelling?
- Are we purposeful about the selection of books and reading material that is accessible to children? What specific areas of oral language learning are we working to promote with this selection?
- Are our books interesting and relevant to our children? For example, do we choose books with characters that look like the children at the service, and reflect the cultural backgrounds of the children at the service?
- How can I use books and stories as a jumping-off point for more oral language learning? For example, by extending on the story in a performance or through a construction activity, or by relating stories to rich discussions about children's home lives and interests?

Children who are learning in more than one language can benefit from hearing stories that feature more than one of their languages. See the links below for some examples.

- *Pasifika early literacy project resources* – are a collection of downloadable dual-language story books in a range of Pacific languages and English. [PELP Resources \(education.govt.nz\)](https://www.education.govt.nz/resources/pelep/)
- *Some favourite bilingual books in te reo Māori and English* – is a blog post from the National Library that lists a selection of engaging dual-language story books in te reo Māori and English. [Some favourite bilingual books in te reo Māori and English | National Library of New Zealand \(natlib.govt.nz\)](https://www.natlib.govt.nz/te-reo-maori/some-favourite-bilingual-books-in-te-reo-maori-and-english/)



## Practice area 4: Using conversations to extend language

### 1) What is this practice area, and why does it matter?

This practice area is about teaching through purposeful discussions. This means intentionally using language to engage children in challenging activities and conversations that involve learning about and sharing complex ideas, and reasoning with others.

Teaching through discussions encourages children to stretch their language abilities, to talk about complex information and ideas, and engage in problem-solving and debate with others. Talking together helps children make connections between different concepts, make evaluative judgements, and test out their ideas about how the world works. These skills are foundational to their ongoing learning.

### 2) What are the key teacher practices?

#### a) Making links

This involves talking with children about connections between ideas, experiences, and events. For example, intentionally starting conversations about new topics and ideas that relate directly to children's interests or home experiences.

#### b) Evaluating

This involves supporting children to evaluate their own learning by talking about why they think or do things in a certain way. More complex ideas – like metacognition (thinking about your own thinking) – can require more nuanced language, and teachers have a key role in equipping children with that language.

“If they don't have an idea they say, 'I don't have an idea.' ... That's been a huge learning curve, actually a huge shift to the 'It's okay if you don't know' – that we all don't know something. And that's the biggest shift I think we've seen.”

TEACHER

#### c) Testing working theories

This involves engaging with children's play to identify the learning taking place and then encouraging children to test their own and each other's thinking through talk. Teachers can make the most of opportunities within interactions to support children to talk through their theories about the world.

### Real-life examples from ECE services:

- **Starting the morning by asking about children’s experiences and making connections.**
- **Asking children about their learning progress.** Asking, “Do you think you understand now, or would you like to talk about this some more?” (Teacher)
- **Probing with ‘why’ questions,** such as ‘Why do you think that?’, giving children an opportunity to think through and articulate their reasoning.
- **Recognising and responding when children group similar words together.** This can be used as a learning opportunity to teach children about categories and differentiation. “Sometimes the child would be saying ‘blue’ when they’re trying to talk about this book about a ‘yellow’ digger.” (Leader)
- **Encouraging children to share and debate their ideas.** They’re not afraid to share with their peers because they know their peers might be like, ‘I disagree with you’, and that’s okay. That’s been our big one – that’s very powerful.” (Teacher)

## 3) Reflective questions

These questions may be useful to reflect on individually or discuss as a team. Think carefully and critically about your day-to-day practices.

- How can I enhance the learning environment or daily schedule to maximise small group activities and peer interactions?
- Do I take time to listen carefully to children’s ideas, and encourage them to do the same and listen to others? Are all children, including quieter or non-speaking children, invited to contribute?
- How often do I support children to talk about the links between their experiences and ideas, and others’ experiences and ideas? How about making links back to past learning?
- How can I prompt children to evaluate their own learning and progress through talk? How can I ensure that these conversations are safe, fun, and challenging?



## Practice area 5: Developing positive social communication

### 1) What is this practice area, and why does it matter?

This practice area is about helping children learn the social ‘norms’ and rules of communication - the ways we tend to talk with each other in social situations. This includes building skills like changing the words we use in different contexts, how quietly or loudly we speak, and how we position ourselves when talking and listening to others.

Social communication is an important skillset, and the key to success in a range of life and learning areas. Social communication norms vary between cultures. A lot of social communication is picked up through interactions, but deliberate and purposeful teaching and modelling is needed too.

“You can’t separate oral language and social competencies. They all kind of come together...and they complement each other.”

TEACHER

### 2) What are the key teacher practices?

#### a) Practising the social rules of communication

This involves making it clear what the social norms (expectations) are for play and communication with children at the service, and making sure they have plenty of opportunities to practise and be affirmed for positive social communication. Teachers might talk about the service’s expectations for how to talk kindly to others, expectations for listening to others, or how to reply when someone greets you.

“They understand what a good listener is, what a good speaker is. It’s being modelled all the time. It’s being encouraged.”

TEACHER

“They know in all circumstances that their voice is heard and valued...It’s okay to disagree... but it’s disagreeing respectfully.”

TEACHER



## b) Waiting

This involves teachers consistently giving children time to respond after asking a question, to model respectful waiting. Teachers can also discuss the reasons for this with children – for example, that often people need to think about what they’re going to say before they are ready to speak out loud. In Pacific services, teachers model and discuss the warmth and respect that are a key part of unhurried conversations that include waiting (for example, mafana ofa fakaaloalo).

“[You’re] teaching them the words like ‘wait’, but you’ve actually got to show them what ‘wait’ means.”

TEACHER

## c) Body positioning

This involves modelling positive social body language – for example, maintaining open, welcoming postures and gestures, meeting children at their level, maintaining eye contact while listening, and not having arms crossed. This practice also includes talking about body positioning and supporting children to practice positive positioning themselves. (For some neurodivergent children, looking *towards* the speaker, rather than direct eye contact, can be a more appropriate marker for listening – Teachers can check in with the child’s family, whānau, or with a specialist.)

## d) Mirroring

This key practice involves mirroring children’s words and body language, to model what active listening looks like. For example, matching eye-contact, sitting facing them at a similar level, or repeating back what children have said to check you understand correctly.

## e) Gesturing

This key practice involves modelling the use of gestures to support and complement oral communication. For example, nodding along while listening, or using hand motions during a story or while giving instructions.

“That eye contact and gesture...speaking with our hands is really big with our three-year-olds.”

LEADER

## f) Reminding

This key practice involves using social language to reinforce established social expectations and support children to communicate positively. For example, gentle reminders for children about the social rules of behaviour like asking for a turn and waiting for a response.

### Real-life examples from ECE services:

- **Discussing what makes a good conversational partner.**
- **Displaying posters** showing service-specific expectations, like how we listen to others or raise our hand to ask a question at mat time.
- **Discussing why waiting is respectful and important.** “They’ve done a lot of work on wait time and processing, and now they’re actually giving each other wait time.” (Teacher)
- **Providing opportunities for children to grow confidence when positioned in front of a group.** “They stood up in front of the whole group, projected their voice all the way to the back and shared. It was fabulous. It was so cool, wasn’t it?...You could see their mana...She was so confident”. (Teacher)
- **Being mindful of words and body language while in the service.** “They often imitate what we do. And all of a sudden you would hear the story you just told... wherever we do something, we need to make sure we are worthy to imitate.” (Teacher)
- **Using familiar and repeated gestures across the teaching team for consistency,** such as motioning to your ears when asking children to listen.
- **Linking social norms and rules back to children’s prior experiences.** For example, prompting children to remember back to a time when they or someone else used positive communication skills, and how that felt.

## 3) Reflective questions

These questions may be useful to reflect on individually or discuss as a team. Think carefully and critically about your day-to-day practices.

- Do I use non-verbal communication, like gestures and body positioning, to complement my spoken communication with children and support their understanding?
- Do the children at my service know *why* our social expectations and rules about communication are important? Would it be useful to be clearer and more explicit about how and why we communicate in particular ways in this place?
- How well do I model being a respectful conversational partner?
- What communication ‘rules’ or norms are valued by parents, whānau, and community?



## Useful resources

This guide is part of a suite of resources about oral language in the early years, available for download on [www.evidence.ero.govt.nz](http://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz). Other resources include:

- A **guide for ECE leaders**, about what needs to be in place to support teachers to do their best work: <https://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/guide-for-ece-leaders-oral-languagedevelopment-in-the-early-years>
- **Poster for early childhood services**: <https://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/poster-for-teachers-oral-language-development-in-the-early-years>
- **Insights for parents and whānau**: <https://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/insights-for-parents-and-whanau-oral-language-development-in-the-early-years>
- **Insights for new entrant teachers**: <https://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/insights-for-new-entrant-teachers-oral-language-development-in-the-early-years>
- A **good practice report**, which extends on this guide with more detail: <https://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/good-practice-oral-language-development-in-the-early-years>
- An **evaluation report**, which sets out the findings from ERO's evaluation: <https://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/lets-keep-talking-oral-language-development-in-the-early-years>

Other useful resources include:

- *Kōwhiri whakapae* – The 'Oral Language and Literacy' section – [Kōwhiri Whakapae \(education.govt.nz\)](http://KōwhiriWhakapae.education.govt.nz)
- *Te kōrerorero: Talking together* – A suite of resources from the Ministry of Education. [Te Kōrerorero - Talking together \(education.govt.nz\)](http://TeKōrerorero-Talkingtogether.education.govt.nz)
- *Much more than words* – a short booklet that provides ideas for supporting children's growing capability as communicators. It's also useful for parents and whānau. [Much More Than Words | Learning from home](http://MuchMoreThanWords|Learningfromhome)
- *Responding to diverse cultures: Good practice in home-based early childhood services* – Examples are drawn from home-based services but will be useful for centre-based teachers too. [Responding to diverse cultures-good practice in home based early childhood services. \(ero.govt.nz\)](http://Respondingtodiversecultures-goodpracticeinhomebasedearlychildhoodservices.ero.govt.nz)
- *Supporting children to become bilingual in Aotearoa New Zealand* – A webinar from Associate Professor Mere Skerrett and the Education Hub. [Supporting children to become bilingual in Aotearoa New Zealand - THE EDUCATION HUB](http://SupportingchildrentobrecomebilingualinAotearoaNewZealand-THEEDUCATIONHUB)



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Guide for ECE teachers: Oral language development in the early years

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