RESEARCH REPORT

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The oral language and emergent literacy skills of preschoolers: Early childhood teachers' self-reported role, knowledge and confidence

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Abstract

Background: Early childhood teachers (ECTs) play a significant role in equipping children with oral language and emergent literacy skills ahead of school entry. They are well positioned to play a vital role in ensuring preschool children receive a high-quality preschool curriculum to prepare them for later literacy learning.

Aims: The purpose of this study was to explore early career ECTs' views and confidence regarding their role in providing preschoolers with oral language and emergent literacy support and to examine their perceptions of their preservice preparation.

Methods & Procedures: Nine Australian early career ECTs were recruited via purposive sampling for an in-depth, semi-structured interview. Data were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis approach.

Outcomes & Results: Participants attached strong significance to their role in facilitating children's oral language growth and emergent literacy skills and reported a range of practices to support children's learning. However, they rarely referred to using established language facilitation strategies or using dialogic book reading prompts. Further, emergent literacy concepts such as phonological awareness and print awareness were not routinely described as features of participants' classroom activities. Participants did not consistently make a clear conceptual distinction between the constructs of oral language and emergent literacy and often used these terms interchangeably. Notably, participants indicated that they did not feel confident in their ability to identify preschool children who were not meeting developmental language milestones and reported that they felt poorly equipped to do so by their preservice training.

Conclusions & Implications: ECTs' strong willingness to support preschool children's oral language and emergent literacy skills may be hindered by gaps in their knowledge; these may contribute to important and missed opportunities for identifying and supporting preschoolers' oral language and emergent literacy growth.

What this paper adds

What is already known on this subject?

- High-quality learning experiences in preschool are important for maximising preschoolers' oral language and emergent literacy growth. Early childhood teachers can play an important role in facilitating this development and preparing children for later literacy learning.

What this paper adds to existing knowledge?

- The study findings provide insight into ECTs' perceptions of their role and support in developing children's oral language and emergent literacy skills. The results indicated ECTs did not feel confident with their knowledge of children's language milestones or identifying children with language difficulties. Participants reported that their preservice training left them underprepared in the area of oral language.

What are the potential or actual clinical implications of this work?

- ECTs demonstrated a strong willingness to support preschoolers' oral language and emergent literacy skills. However, their self-reported knowledge gaps and low confidence may have implications for the early detection of children who are not reaching language developmental milestones in a timely way.

INTRODUCTION

In Australia, 22.9% of children begin school with communication skills that are not developmentally on track (Australian Early Development Census [AEDC], 2021). With a significant number (90%) of children attending a preschool program in the year before school entry, early childhood settings are ideal environments for the promotion of high-quality experiences to support children with communication needs (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017). Oral language (i.e., vocabulary, discourse, morphological and syntactic competencies) and emergent literacy skills (the knowledge and skills that precede formal reading and writing mastery) are two foundational areas for successful literacy learning (Snow,

2021; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Code-focused emergent literacy skills include phonological awareness and print knowledge and are important precursors for word recognition (decoding) and assisting children with "cracking the code" during the early years of school (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Phonological awareness describes children's implicit and explicit understanding of the sound structure of spoken language (Justice et al., 2009), whilst print knowledge encompasses alphabet knowledge (naming graphemes), and print concept knowledge, such as awareness of print features and function (Justice et al., 2009).

Children's oral language competencies and emergent literacy skills prior to school entry are closely associated with literacy success in the early years of school

(National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Oral language and emergent literacy skills, while theoretically distinct, possess a strong interdependent relationship and serve as important precursors to skilled reading (Cabell et al., 2011; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Due to this concurrent relationship, preschoolers at risk of language difficulties may also be disadvantaged for learning code-related emergent literacy skills (Cabell et al., 2011). High-quality learning experiences in preschool settings are critical for school-aged children with continuing oral language problems who may go on to receive a diagnosis of developmental language disorder (DLD) that is, persisting oral language problems that are not associated with a known biomedical cause or a language disorder in the context of another neurodevelopmental diagnosis (Bishop et al., 2017). DLD has impacts on social and emotional well-being, learning to read and spell, and risk for behavioural and academic challenges (Bishop et al., 2017; Norbury et al., 2016). Children with persisting language difficulties identified in preschool are more likely to have ongoing and poorer literacy outcomes when they commence formal literacy instruction (Snowling et al., 2016). Whilst beneficial for all children, high-quality instructional practices in preschool are particularly pivotal for children with language difficulties to improve their developmental trajectory.

Early childhood education in Australia

Early childhood education and care options in Australia for preschool children predominantly include childcare and preschool education. Children may access childcare from birth until school age, which is typically when children are aged 5 and turning 6 in their first year of schooling (Victoria State Government, 2018). Structured, play-based preschool programs are available for children in the two years prior to formal school entry. Parents may opt for their child to attend a sessional, stand-alone preschool program or a long daycare (i.e., childcare) service that offers an embedded preschool program. Attendance in preschool is not compulsory; however, an increasing number of children are attending preschool education due to universal access and its recognised benefits. Universal access covers or reduces the cost of preschool to ensure every child has the opportunity to attend 15 government-funded hours of preschool per week, in the year before they commence school (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments, 2009). Preschool may be offered through government or non-government service providers (e.g., community not-for-profit, independent schools, private),

with administration of each type differing amongst states and territories (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

Preschool programs in Australia are regulated to ensure the quality of services. One requirement is that all preschool programs are led by a qualified early childhood teacher (ECT). ECTs are the most highly qualified personnel working in the early childhood sector, having completed an accredited undergraduate or postgraduate university degree, specialising in early childhood education (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2020a). Preschool programs are assessed across seven quality areas under the National Quality Standard. Quality Area 1 – "Educational program and practice" ensures preschool programs are stimulating to extend children's learning and maximise development and are based on an approved national learning framework (ACECQA, 2020b). The national curriculum document *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF), is used to guide the decision-making around curriculum and practices to support children's learning across five key learning outcomes. Children's language skills are addressed throughout the fifth outcome – "Children are effective communicators". Literacy is also embedded throughout Outcome 5 and recognised as an important area of communication. Literacy is broadly defined in the document as encompassing*"a range of modes of communication, including music, movement, dance, storytelling, visual arts, media and drama, as well as talking, viewing, reading, drawing and writing"* (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p. 41). Examples are included within the curriculum document to support children's language and literacy outcomes and encompass a range of activities including reading to children, play, music, art, songs, stories, drama, dance, discussions, technology and craft. Instructional practices include modelling language, developing vocabulary, book-related discussions, encouraging interactions, and engaging children in conversations. Examples that relate to code-focused emergent literacy skills include rhyme, letters, letter-sound correspondences, and print concepts (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments, 2009).

Developing oral language competence and emergent literacy in preschool

ECTs can incorporate a range of linguistic experiences and emergent literacy concepts to facilitate learning for preschoolers in early childhood settings. To support oral

language, ECTs can engage children in drama and role-plays (e.g., pretending to be a shopkeeper) to draw on different situations or people, learn different concepts as well as model and prompt new vocabulary (Fellowes & Oakley, 2020). Responsive and high-quality adult–child interactions are also a well-documented vehicle for supporting oral language growth in preschoolers (Cabell et al., 2015; Justice et al., 2008). This adult linguistic input can be provided through open-ended questions, purposeful use of advanced vocabulary as well as repeating, expanding, extending and recasting a child's utterances (Justice et al., 2008). To support emergent literacy development, music and songs can also be used to promote sound discrimination and word play with rhyme and alliteration (Fellowes & Oakley, 2020). ECTs can also support the phonological awareness and letter-sound knowledge of preschoolers with communication difficulties and their typically developing peers (Carson et al., 2018). Shared adult–child book reading is widely recognised as an activity context that can promote both oral language (Milburn et al, 2014) and emergent literacy skills (Justice et al., 2009) in preschool settings. Dialogic book reading (Whitehurst et al., 1988) is one interactive shared book reading approach that encourages engagement between adults and children with book-related talk. The adult prompts children to speak with one of five specific prompts (WH prompt; completion prompt; open-ended prompt; distancing prompt; recall prompt) to promote active participation from the child.

Early childhood teachers' knowledge and training

ECTs' disciplinary content knowledge comprises their understanding of the structure of oral and written language and how they are interconnected (Piasta et al., 2020a). Those who lack the requisite knowledge to support children's oral language growth and emergent literacy development may be less likely to provide evidence-based and robust instruction in the classroom. ECTs' content knowledge has been found to be one predictive factor of language and emergent literacy instruction and associated with children's language and literacy outcomes (Piasta et al., 2020a,b; Schachter et al., 2016). ECTs' knowledge of language and its development has been associated with positive gains in children's expressive vocabulary and ECTs' knowledge of literacy and its development has been reported to predict gains in children's print knowledge, print concepts, letter naming and phonological awareness (Cash et al., 2015; Piasta et al., 2020a). Previous research has established that ECTs' own knowledge of language (Schachter et al., 2016) and knowledge of emergent literacy is variable (Carson & Bayetto, 2018; Meeks & Kemp,

2017) and ECTs overestimate their knowledge in the area of phonological awareness (Carson & Bayetto, 2018). Gaps in language and literacy knowledge raise important questions about the robustness of the preparation ECTs receive during their preservice training.

In Australia, ECTs can receive their bachelor or master degree qualification from a university or institution that offers an accredited course in early childhood education. All ECT courses must receive accreditation through the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA, 2020b), the national authority regulating requirements for ECT courses, preschool programs and qualifications. Curriculum content for all ECT courses is stipulated across six areas. "Language development" is referenced under the content area "child development and care" and "language and literacy" is mentioned under "education and curriculum studies" (ACECQA, 2020b). The amount of training ECTs receive in language and literacy during their initial preparation is not specified; however, a recent review of preservice training courses in Australia indicated the number of subjects (units) dedicated to language and/or emergent literacy differed across ECT courses (Weadman et al., 2021). Further, there was variability across the reported content in preservice ECT courses with differences in the language and emergent literacy topics documented. The review demonstrated there was a stronger curriculum focus on literacy than on language; however, there did not appear to be a strong focus on code-focused emergent literacy concepts and language structure with ECT courses (Weadman et al., 2021). International studies have also revealed limited content about children's language development in preservice training courses that provide ECTs with their initial preparation that qualifies them to work as an ECT (Letts & Hall, 2003; Mroz, 2006a,b). Consistent with this, research has demonstrated that ECTs desire more training about language development (Letts & Hall, 2003; Mroz, 2006b), atypical language development and specifically, how best to support and identify children with language and other communication difficulties (Brebner et al., 2016, 2017; Mroz, 2006a; Scarinci et al., 2015). These perceived knowledge gaps have been reported to affect ECTs' confidence in their knowledge about children's language development (Letts & Hall, 2003; Mroz, 2006a,b).

ECTs' knowledge and confidence about children's language development are fundamental for early identification of children not meeting language milestones and at risk for language difficulties. ECTs and other teachers play an important role in identifying children with language difficulties in the context of a referral basis for initial identification of language disorders (Christopulos & Kean, 2020). Despite having a primary role in referral, teachers have been identified as having difficulty in identifying children with language disorders. Parents are twice

as likely to accurately identify possible issues with language development compared to teachers (Christopulos & Kean, 2020). These results are concerning, given parents in Australia have identified ECTs to be their primary source of information about communication difficulties, ahead of speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and general practitioners (McAllister et al., 2011). ECTs and early years teachers have demonstrated low accuracy in identifying children at risk of language difficulties or children whose language skills required additional investigation (Antoniazzi et al., 2010; McLeod & Harrison, 2009). Early identification of children with language difficulties is significant as it has the potential to affect access to intervention services, literacy trajectories and psychosocial development and participation more broadly (Antoniazzi et al., 2010).

The current study

Optimal oral language and emergent literacy support in preschool settings relies on the presence of knowledgeable and skilled ECTs. ECTs have a role in early identification of children with possible language difficulties, as many of these children will go on to experience literacy difficulties (Snowling et al., 2016), and therefore, knowledge and confidence in recognising key language developmental milestones is of particular importance. Evidence that explicitly examines Australian ECTs' perceptions of their oral language and emergent literacy knowledge as well as their preservice training is limited. If ECTs do not receive a strong preparation during their initial preservice training, this has consequences for their own content knowledge and affects children's oral language and emergent literacy outcomes. There is also a paucity of research examining early career ECTs' perceptions about their role in supporting oral language and emergent literacy and capacity to do so.

We begin to address these identified gaps in the present study. Our primary aim was to explore early career ECTs' views, perceived confidence and self-described practices regarding their role in building preschoolers' oral language and emergent literacy skills. A secondary aim was to examine their views about their preservice training and knowledge regarding oral language and emergent literacy.

METHODS

Theoretical framework

This qualitative research was conducted within the sociocultural theory of child development (Vygotsky, 1978) that positions children's learning as being influenced by adults providing mediated assistance at a level exceeding independent ability (Vygotsky, 1978). This learning is underpinned by Vygotsky's (1978) concept of zone of proximal development, the difference between what a child can achieve with adult support and what they can achieve independently. This can occur through what Vygotsky referred to as scaffolding: an adult (such as an ECT) providing guidance to support a child to achieve something beyond their capability if attempted without assistance (Fellowes & Oakley, 2020).

Ethics approval for the study was granted by the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee and the Department of Education and Training in Victoria.

Participants

Nine early career ECTs from Victoria, Australia participated in this study including six from metropolitan Melbourne and three from regional Victoria (Table 1). Participants, who were all female, were recruited by writing to site managers of early childhood centres or through a flyer circulated on closed Facebook groups for ECTs. One participant was recruited using snowballing by hearing about the study from a colleague in her workplace. To be eligible, participants had to work in publicly funded preschool settings teaching children in the year prior to school entry. Further, they were required to have qualified as an ECT in the past five years, in order to minimise variability within the sample on years of experience. These eligibility criteria were chosen to gain perspectives from recently qualified ECTs working in the same government-auspiced system. None of the study participants or preschool centres were known to any of the authors prior to participating. Seven ECTs worked as teachers in a preschool service that was integrated into a long daycare setting, and two ECTs worked in a sessional, stand-alone preschool service. All except one participant had previously worked in preschools with a diploma or certificate qualification. The mean age of participants was 39.5 years (SD: 8.0, range: 26–55) and they had been working for a mean of 14.7 years (SD: 6.2, range: 6–23). Eight of the nine participants had 1 or 2 years' experience as a qualified ECT. The study participants received their undergraduate ECT degree from five of a possible 12 Victorian universities. Three participants received a bachelor double degree in early childhood teaching and primary school teaching; five received a bachelor degree in early childhood teaching and one received a bachelor degree in early childhood teaching with honours (completion of a research project and dissertation).

Data collection

Each participant was interviewed individually by the first author, a qualified and experienced paediatric SLP. An interview schedule was developed through reference to the

TABLE 1 Participant characteristics

	Age	Years since ECT qualification	Previous qualifications in early childhood	Previous number of years working in early childhood settings
P1	32	1	Yes	12
P2	36	2	Yes	18
P3	43	2	Yes	20
P4	40	1	Yes	10
P5	42	1	Yes	23
P6	40	5	No	6
P7	42	1	Yes	20
P8	26	2	Yes	7
P9	55	1	Yes	17

ECT, early childhood teacher.

academic literature and consultation with an experienced SLP and ECT, to guide the interviews (Supplementary material). Prior to formal data collection, the interview schedule was piloted in an interview with one ECT to allow for refinements to be made. In the final version, questions probed participants' views and practices for supporting children's oral language and emergent literacy skills and their perceptions about their preservice training in these areas. Of the nine interviews, eight occurred at participants' workplaces and one was conducted at a participant's home. Interviews were audio-recorded for later verbatim transcription and analysis. The interview length ranged from 41 min to 1 h and 9 min (M: 49.44 min, SD: 8.56). Each written transcription was then uploaded to NVivo 12 for Mac (QSR International, 2020).

Data analysis

Data collection and analysis were carried out concurrently by the first author until no new themes were generated from the data. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Analysis was led by the first author and an audit trail was used so that verification processes could occur with the second and third authors who were also experienced SLPs. To commence, each audio recording was listened to, transcribed verbatim and re-read with preliminary observations for each interview noted. Repeated readings of the entire data set were completed to find patterns within the data and generate initial codes. Initial codes were grouped according to the question prompts in the interview schedule with corroboration of the second author. Once all initial codes were generated, the three authors met to begin sorting codes into potential themes. Themes were reviewed subsequent to further readings of the interview transcripts. During this process, some initial codes were collapsed or expanded. The reviewing of

codes and themes was ongoing and iterative as more data were collected. Theme development was achieved across multiple meetings with all three authors. Four overarching themes were generated over multiple meetings with all three authors.

A number of methods were employed to ensure rigour and trustworthiness. The audit trail was used throughout the research process and in meetings with the other authors to ensure the themes were generated from participants' responses and not the first author's own preconceptions an a SLP. Intercoder reliability was completed to establish recommended rigour in semi-structured interview research. An independent coder (a SLP) was engaged to assist with the intercoder reliability. A codebook (available as Supplementary material) developed by the first author, with the support of the research team, was used in the process of establishing intercoder reliability (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). The procedure for establishing intercoder reliability and agreement was based on Campbell et al.'s (2013) method. The first author met with the independent coder to discuss how the codebook was generated and to clarify the codes and definitions. The independent coder then coded a randomly selected interview transcript. To assist with the intercoder reliability the interview data were unitised into coding (text) segments by the first author (Campbell et al., 2013). These codes were compared to the first author's coding of the same transcript and discrepancies discussed during a separate meeting. Some minor changes were made to the codebook and then applied to the entire data set. The same process was followed a second time, with the independent coder and two randomly selected transcripts from two different interviews (Campbell et al., 2013). Finally, a third, randomly selected transcript was independently coded to obtain a percent agreement of 84%. The first author met with the independent coder to reconcile all discrepancies through discussion and to provide further consistency to the coding (Campbell et al., 2013). In addition, all participants

TABLE 2   Themes and codes

Theme	Codes
Language and emergent literacy practices are a key focus	Role with oral language Role with emergent literacy Support for language[a] Support for emergent literacy[a] School-readiness in literacy Communication for school readiness Social-emotional readiness
Unclear conceptual frameworks for language and literacy	Language use and terminology Understanding of literacy Literacy as language Language as literacy
Awareness of knowledge gaps	Language knowledge gaps Confidence with raising concerns Referral pathways Identifying late language emergence Scope of knowledge
Shortfalls in preservice preparation	Preservice training in language Preservice training in literacy Gaining knowledge

[a]Specific practices for language and emergent literacy supports are outlined in Table 3.

were offered to have their written transcript sent back to them to review, request changes or correct errors. Three participants accepted this opportunity, with no changes requested.

RESULTS

Four core themes were generated as a result of the analysis exploring ECTs' views, knowledge and practices for supporting preschool children's oral language and emergent literacy skills. These are displayed in Table 2 along with the codes. An overview of each theme, with quotes from ECTs, is provided next.

Theme one – language and emergent literacy practices are a key focus: "It's in nearly everything we do"

Participants were united in emphasising that they strongly feel they have a role in supporting growth in oral language and emergent literacy skills and identified both areas as central to their daily preschool program. Participants highlighted that the majority of their preschool activities and experiences had an oral language and emergent literacy focus:

> P1: "Pretty much most of our experiences are … most things have literacy attached to them somehow"

> P4: "I think that nearly all of them [activities] are set up for oral language"

> P5: "In nearly everything we do there'll be a component of literacy … it's very hard to define one thing from another because it is so holistic, you know, everything is involved in almost everything … well it is in every area of play"

Although language and literacy-related activities were considered integral to their preschool program, children's social-emotional readiness was considered to be a stronger indicator of school readiness. Writing-related skills, such as name writing, alphabet knowledge, and early reading skills, were seen as more the domain of primary-school teachers. ECTs described providing exposure to these early writing activities, but not placing a large emphasis on them in a preschool program if children were not showing interest:

> P4: "I think that being able to write their name and being able to recognise letters of the alphabet, that's where the teachers will come into it"

> P7: "I think they need to be emotionally ready and socially ready rather than having children that have great academic skills"

TABLE 3 ECT-reported oral language and emergent literacy practices

ECT-reported practices	N
Reading to children	9
Specific focus on dialogic book reading	1
Encouraging verbal exchanges amongst children	7
Alphabet exposure	7
Information and communication technology	7
Computer tablet	5
Television	2
Writing activities	7
Building confidence and providing opportunities for children to speak	5
Name exposure	4
Speaking clearly and correctly	4
Music, drama, and role-play	4
Play-based experiences and areas	4
Literacy area (e.g., book corner)	3
Adult–child interactions (including expanding language, asking questions, modelling language)	3
Print concepts	3
Encouraging verbal exchanges between an ECT and child	3
Rhyme awareness	2
Phoneme-grapheme correspondences	2
Arts and craft	1

Note: Practices are listed in order of frequency.
ECT, early childhood teacher.

P8: "I don't place a huge importance on it… It if happens it happens it's great. But I don't want parents to freak out because their kids can't write their name"

Participants' self-reported practices, and the frequency with which they were reported by different participants, are presented in Table 3. The study participants frequently described adopting a range of strategies to *foster more talk* between children. As noted by seven of the nine participants, these entailed encouraging *verbal interchanges* between children and boosting their own interactions with a child. The selection of quotes that follow highlights ECTs' general focus on seeking to encourage *more* talk by children.

P4: "Try to encourage them to have more interactions and express themselves … being involved in what the children are doing and what they're playing and encouraging more dialogue"

P6: "Trying to promote their language, just to engage them in conversations … promote positive interactive experiences"

P9: "I think that it is my role to encourage conversations and to, depending on the child, to not make it a confronting experience … getting the children to talk or encouraging children to talk"

Participants described setting up experiences or activities such as pretend play areas, group time discussions, songs, plays and drama, specifically to encourage verbal interactions between children. For example, P7 described setting up *"spaces where children work together and where they can interact"* and P4: *"all of those are opportunities for two or more children to be working on something or working together, playing together and working on their oral skills"*.

Participants also discussed their own communication style in supporting children's communication. One participant described helping children by modelling the appropriate language: *"if they've said something incorrectly, maybe modelling it back the right way and the way it should be said"* (P1). A further two participants described asking children questions to encourage interactions between the ECT and the child, with one of these participants referring to open-ended questions as it *"prompts more than just the single word response"* (P9). Multiple participants discussed this modelling as "speaking correctly":

P1: "A lot of that comes from our modelling … so just making sure that what we're saying is using the correct words, no slang and things like that, making sure you are using full sentences"

P2: "We don't dumb down the way we speak, we'll make it age appropriate"

P7: "I think just talking to children individually promotes language … just speaking properly and modelling that kind of speaking well to people"

Some participants also sought to build children's confidence as a strategy to support children with possible language difficulties, which involved encouraging them to speak in front of other children.

P4: "Try and help those children who are not as confident with their expressive language skills to not feel so shy in front of the whole group"

P5: "So just building that confidence … We just make sure that that child's not feeling that they're made to stand out"

All participants reported incorporating print-based activities into their preschool program. The most commonly reported, mentioned by all participants, was providing opportunities for reading-related experiences. The majority of participants described their input as reading to children regularly, increasing children's exposure to books and fostering an appreciation of written text:

P2: I am a book reader so to me having books in the environment is really, really important … for me it's really just building a love of reading as well

P5: "Getting children exposed to as much books and reading [as possible]"

P7: "Provide lots of experiences which promote reading"

Five participants elaborated on specific strategies they use when reading with children and one participant made specific reference to the term *dialogic book reading*. Three participants described asking children questions about the story or encouraging more interactive reading by talking about the pictures, and another spoke about moving the book to reinforce the story ideas. Three participants discussed how they orient the children to books and print, aligning with concepts of print by "*Pointing out an author at the start of every book*" (P7), "*Pointing to the words so that they are starting to see the words that you're reading*" (P1) and "*So often I'll start it off with reading just to get the idea of those basic things- left to right, up to down*" (P8).

Exposing children to letters of the alphabet was the most frequently reported practice described to foster print knowledge. Most participants described activities involving immersion in play-based activities by placing magnetic letters and flashcards into play spaces. For example, P3: "*We use little posters and things around, with the alphabet on them, we have little flashcards and things like that*". Three participants described more explicit teaching practices, such as talking to children about letters as a means of promoting alphabet letter-name learning, such as P8: *we're on T, at the moment, so I just display it with the capital and the lowercase, talk about the sound, talk about the friends' names that start with that letter "T"*. In addition to initial phoneme identification described within this example, the same participant and one other reported

focusing on rhyming phonological awareness tasks. This was described as pointing out rhyming words in books, encouraging onset-rime games and/or playing nonsense rhyme games. Two further participants also discussed aiming to increase children's awareness of letter-sound correspondences either during shared reading or through introducing a different letter and sound each week in the preschool program. This was described as pointing out rhyming words in books, encouraging onset-rime games or nonsense rhyme games.

Theme two – unclear conceptual frameworks for language and literacy: "Literacy is just communication in all its forms"

Participants did not differentiate clearly between oral language and literacy constructs. Analysis indicated that participants generally used a broad definition of literacy that could be applied across related but different developmental capabilities. For example, P9 reported "*it's extremely broad; it's in everything I believe*". Most participants viewed literacy as being far wider than the skills of reading, writing and spelling. For instance, three participants included numeracy in their understanding of literacy and two participants made reference to art, dance or drama. This broad conceptualisation was exemplified by P8: "*Literacy to me is just communication in all its forms. So visual, verbal, dance, art, it's a form of a child expressing. So that's how I see literacy*". Further, most participants explained their conceptual understanding of the term *literacy* to include oral language, with no clear demarcation between the two. P6 defined literacy as "*mainly language development*", suggesting a lack of differentiation between oral language and (written) literacy as distinct, albeit closely aligned skills. In line with the fact that there did not seem to be clear conceptual differences between oral language and reading, writing and spelling under the umbrella term "literacy", participants did not always differentiate a clear language or literacy focus for activities. When describing language-related activities, P1 reported teaching a "*letter of the week program*" and another participant spoke about handwriting and letter tracing. The terms language and literacy were used interchangeably when participants discussed their *literacy* promotional activities suggesting participants may not differentiate between them in their practice as reflected in the following quotes:

P4: "Every area that we have set up we try and have some sort of literacy involved in it … I think that nearly all of them are set up for oral language"

P7: "Pretty much everything that we do here has some kind of element of literacy involved in it because it's all about communicating … It's pretty much all the experiences we put out every day, that are available every day, encourage and promote literacy or numeracy or social skills just for children to interact and connect with each other, learning … I think everything that we do here allows and promotes children's language, whether it's listening or talking"

The terms "speech" and "language", and associated terms such as "phonetics", were also used in ways that suggest participants lacked robust and consistent conceptualisations of their discrete boundaries. Concepts related to speech production were typically discussed when ECTs were in fact describing children's *oral language*, suggesting they may not clearly distinguish these two connected but distinct constructs. Further, there was a tendency to focus on children's speech production when participants were prompted to discuss how they support children with oral language difficulties. All but one participant made reference to children with speech sound difficulties and three participants also referred to the need for a *speech* assessment when asked about children with *language* difficulties:

P2: "Obviously they're still developing some language skills so there's going to be sounds and little stutters and things like that which is all age-appropriate"

P5: "We're sounding out phonetics, you know different sounds, and we incorporate that for all children, so obviously those children who have had speech issues"

Theme three – awareness of knowledge gaps: "What is normal language?"

Participants perceived themselves as well equipped to help children build emergent literacy skills in preschool settings. The same self-efficacy was not evident for eight of the nine participants with respect to understanding children's language development milestones and in particular, determining when a child's language skills are not developing as expected. This sense of uncertainty and limited confidence about oral language developmental norms for preschool children was strongly represented:

P2: "What is normal language?"

P5: "I would like to be more informed of exactly what we're looking for, the specifics"

P9: "What we should be looking for, some sort of expectation of perhaps where your age group should be"

This self-described knowledge gap appeared to contribute to participants doubting their confidence in determining whether a child's language difficulties were likely to be transient or indicative of a more persistent problem requiring further investigation:

P3: "It's just like when does it get to a point where they're not going to grow out of it, they need to have some speech therapy?"

P7: "Although I've had 20 years' experience working with young children, I don't know if they're on the right track. Do you know what I mean?"

P8: "It's really hard as a teacher to determine if something is worth bringing up to a parent or if it's something that's just going to work its way out … is it worth stressing over?"

Consequently, many participants described feeling reticent to raise concerns with parents about their child's language development since they themselves could not be sure their concern was valid or could not confidently determine whether the child's language difficulties would resolve naturally. Essentially, these participants felt that it was outside their scope of practice as they perceived themselves as lacking the appropriate qualifications or knowledge-base to make these decisions:

P5: "We're very wary of boxing anyone into anything because that's not our role. We're not diagnostic - we're not doctors or specialists in that area, but we sort of skirt around that and there is a very grey area I think in early childhood…. it's a really undefined - so it's a bit of a grey area"

P6: "I'm not qualified … so I wouldn't know if what I'm doing is right for that child. I would

have to seek outside help for that … I'm just unsure of how far that role goes in terms of what I need to do and how to help children because I don't have the knowledge or the skills or the education behind me … All we can do is just what we do and just support children the best we can, work with parents if they're up for it"

Theme four – shortfalls in preservice preparation: "I don't think I was given a great grounding"

There were mixed responses amongst participants in relation to their perceptions of their preservice preparation in early literacy. Overall, participants conveyed the view that there was a much stronger focus on literacy than there was on oral language in their preservice training. Participants commonly reported having one unit (subject) specifically focused on literacy, or a combined unit on literacy and numeracy. One participant who studied a combined degree in early childhood teaching and primary school teaching felt school-aged literacy was emphasised more prominently, with very little content on preschool language or literacy. Based on these descriptions, it appeared they felt more confident in emergent literacy than language, but less prepared when it came to helping children with their oral language skills as they had received less training in this area. All except one participant indicated that children's language development was not covered in sufficient depth during their preservice training:

> P3: "They could have probably gone into it a lot more … they probably could have done a lot more in that sort of area, especially in the language side I think"

> P8: "I found that it didn't cover enough … it wasn't covering the really importance- like they touched on it … which in the scheme of a university degree is nothing"

A common theme was that participants described their preservice training as "too broad" and "too theoretical", as noted by P5 who stated, *"It's all very under the umbrella of theory and you sort of have to pull it apart"*. The desire for practical skills and knowledge, rather than theory-based learning was raised by almost every participant: "*It was about being fed a lot of theory but not much practical" (P6)*; "*I think that there's nothing better than practical knowledge … I think that practical applications are more beneficial"*

(P2) and "*… in the sense of practical skills to use in the field, it was almost non-existent" (P8)*. Perceptions about insufficient training and lack of content-specific knowledge, particularly in relation to oral language, contributed to uncertainty as noted by P9: "*I feel that I need more knowledge … that I'm not feeling confident"*.

Participants commonly described drawing upon real-life experiences to enhance their knowledge and their practices, further emphasising the importance they place on practical skills. P9 identified having her own children, *"you have the knowledge of your own experiences with your children and also having worked in the field"*. Work-related and personal experiences and sharing knowledge with colleagues were most commonly described as their main knowledge source since becoming an ECT. This was stated by P2 as the main source when *"up against a barrier or a challenge in the workplace … you use your teammates"* or by P9 who described this knowledge-sharing process as *"very collegial"*. Some participants described collaborating with an SLP about a child in their class, or with their own children, and then applying learnings from these experiences to other children in their preschool program. These were more frequently reported than attending professional development seminars and personal reading.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated ECTs' perceptions of their knowledge, role and level of confidence with supporting the oral language and emergent literacy skills of preschoolers. This is important in the context of SLP collaboration because ECTs can play a key role in early identification and support of children requiring assistance with their oral language and emergent literacy skills. The data suggest that our participants attach strong significance to their role in children's language development but lack confidence and do not consider that they have adequate knowledge about developmental language milestones to identify children with or at risk for language difficulties. Our findings support previous evidence (Brebner et al., 2016, 2017; Mroz, 2006a; Scarinci et al., 2015) that ECTs would like further training in identifying children whose language skills may not be developing as expected. An important finding in the current study was the apparent reticence of ECTs to raise apprehensions about a child's language ability with a parent. With a high proportion of children attending a preschool program in Australia, ECTs are ideally placed to identify children with language problems and activate referral to a SLP for in-depth assessment and possible management. Concerningly, 17.4% of Australian children have *developmentally at risk* or *developmentally vulnerable* language skills at school-entry (AEDC, 2021). If ECTs

are reluctant to raise concerns with parents, children's language difficulties are more likely to be undetected on school-entry and opportunity for earlier detection and intervention may be missed. Investigation of language difficulties needs to occur as early as possible in order for these rates to reduce and result in fewer children requiring intervention at school age. This would place less load on SLPs who are often already under-resourced in schools. It is also of great concern if a high proportion of children are entering school with low language skills, yet ECTs are indicating that they are not well equipped to identify such children and raise these concerns with parents. It is especially concerning given Australian parents frequently rely on ECTs for information about their child's communication ability (McAllister et al., 2011). Reluctance to raise concerns with parents may have implications for the early identification and support of children with possible language difficulties and may result in important missed opportunity for high-quality early intervention.

In our participants' views, their preservice training in oral language development was insufficient and contributed to their self-acknowledged knowledge gaps and low levels of confidence. The perception that their preservice training did not prepare them sufficiently in the area of language is supported by a recent review of Australian preservice courses that identified that oral language is not strongly nor consistently represented in ECT courses (Weadman et al., 2021). Given the participants in this study were recent graduates, their views are reflective of these findings. These results raise questions about Australian ECT preservice training and its adequacy in equipping graduates with fundamental disciplinary content knowledge regarding language and literacy constructs so they can provide high-quality language and literacy experiences and support (Piasta et al., 2020a,b). Our findings suggest that ECT preservice courses need to place a greater focus on preschool language development and identifying children with late language emergence. There is a clear expectation that ECTs support children's communication skills within the national curriculum document, The EYLF (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p. 41). However, a strong theoretical grounding in language and literacy constructs is required to maximise their adoption of high-quality language and early literacy practices.

Our findings suggest that ECTs have a strong commitment to providing oral language and emergent literacy-focused support using practices suggested within the Australian curriculum document. Participants reported using a range of practices including print-focused activities, music, drama and encouraging interactions to support oral

language and emergent literacy skills. Further information is needed, however, about their ability to implement high-quality language and literacy instructional practices associated with later literacy success. The provision of high-quality learning experiences in preschool is particularly important for narrowing the developmental gap for socially disadvantaged preschoolers (Neumann, 2016). Both quantitative and qualitative differences exist with respect to early language exposure as a result of the social gradient between low socioeconomic status (SES) children and their higher SES peers (Weisleder & Fernald, 2013). The participants in this study only infrequently described responsive adult–child interactions which are a key feature in facilitating language development in early childhood settings (Cabell et al., 2015). SLPs working collaboratively with ECTs in community settings can provide specific guidance in supporting responsive interactions between ECTs and children to ensure important opportunities to capitalise on these skills are not missed. The study participants also reported reading to children daily, but only a small number described incorporating strategies to enhance print knowledge, print concepts or dialogic reading prompts during interactive, shared book reading. Further, phonological awareness was only infrequently reported by ECTs as an activity focus. Previous research indicates that Australian ECTs do not regularly assess for phonological awareness in preschool settings (Carson & Bayetto, 2018) and the present findings suggest they may also not be a regular focus for ECTs in classroom practice. These results raise important questions about how well ECTs are supporting preschoolers' code-focused emergent literacy skills that are predictive of later reading ability (NELP, 2008). Shared book reading was emphasised by study participants as a key practice in supporting emergent literacy skills and, therefore, it is essential that such opportunities are maximised.

Finally, an important finding relates to the ECTs' use of key terms such as "speech", "language", and "literacy". ECTs appear to work with definitions of what constitutes *literacy* that are so broad that a problematic lack of clarity emerges. The definition of "literacy" in the curriculum document, the EYLF includes aspects such as dance, storytelling, movement and music (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments, 2009). Participants' conceptualisation of "literacy" was consistent with this broader definition rather than a narrower, domain-specific definition that encompasses skills such as writing, reading and spelling (Snow, 2021). Understanding ECTs' perceptions of the term "literacy" is important as this conceptualisation underpins classroom practices (Fellowes & Oakley, 2020). Further, if the term "literacy" has multiple meanings it poses the risk

that ECTs and other professionals are talking at cross-purposes within this sector. It is important for ECTs, SLPs and other health professionals to share a common language and therefore, these terms require specificity. A common and shared language amongst professionals supports a more integrated approach to identification and intervention. Oral language and emergent literacy skills are interrelated, and profiles of preschoolers with varying language skills have demonstrated a strong interdependence (Cabell et al., 2011). Differences exist, however, with respect to how these skills can be targeted throughout preschool settings. Consensus would support ECTs to differentiate emergent literacy from oral language and to understand both the links and distinctions between the domains. These results are significant because they highlight that SLPs cannot make assumptions that they have a shared understanding when using terminology such as "speech", "language" and "literacy" with ECTs. Different use of terms indicates further collaboration, and perhaps shared professional learning between the two professions is warranted to avoid the risk of different understanding of a child's communication impairment. In addition, ECTs need to be able to differentiate between oral language and speech to ensure they have robust understandings of these important developmental constructs. This is important for early identification, and for accurate and timely communication with parents. While preliminary, these findings raise further questions about how ECTs are prepared across these domains during their preservice training.

Study limitations

A number of limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. Firstly, the study included a small sample size of nine participants from one state within Australia. Future research in this area should include theoretical sampling from a wider population of ECTs, with more years of practice and from other states and territories within Australia. Future studies with a larger sample would also allow for representation from a greater number of institutions. Secondly, interviews were the sole data source with no data triangulation. The analysis is based entirely on self-report and participants may actually be doing more (or less) than articulated in their responses to the interview probes. Future research should include observations or other data collection methods to corroborate findings. Further, participants self-selected to be interviewed which may have resulted in a specific subgroup comprising those who were particularly interested in children's language and literacy.

CONCLUSION

Our findings suggest Australian ECTs value their role in and display a strong commitment to developing children's language and emergent literacy skills in preschool programs. However, commonly described practices indicated potentially missed opportunities to incorporate evidence-based strategies during shared book reading and high-quality adult–child interactions to facilitate this development. This study also contributes to our understanding of ECTs' perceptions of their preservice training and preferences for translating knowledge into practice. These findings indicate a possible need for more in-depth preparation in oral language and emergent literacy skills and identifying children at risk of language difficulties in preservice ECT programs.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
No conflict of interest has been declared by the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data not available due to ethical restrictions.

PATIENT CONSENT
Written informed consent was obtained from all study participants.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE MATERIAL FROM OTHER SOURCES
Not applicable.

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