

ESOL COURSE EVALUATION THROUGH A SURVEY OF POST-COURSE EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a tracer study to analyse learner needs retrospectively and considers the role of study-focussed ESOL courses in migrant settlement. Such courses tend to concentrate specifically on the reading and writing skills required to succeed academically, however it will be seen that for new migrants the priorities lie elsewhere. Course planners and teachers may assume that their students want to prepare for further study, but for these students study was incidental to finding work achieving the status previously enjoyed before emigrating to NZ. It becomes clear that the most important contribution any ESOL course can make is to boost self-confidence, help learners to better understand NZ society and to focus on informal spoken language.

Background

The subjects of this study entered New Zealand during a period of ad hoc immigration policies. These were based on a market forces ideology which saw immigrants as human capital and failed to take into account even the most obvious factors such as whether or not the particular individuals would be able to actually use their skills due to language or professional registration restrictions. This, along with the lack of any sort of settlement programs, meant that a large number of highly skilled people were left to fend for themselves. This report will describe how some of them have fared and how an ESOL course might help.

The Study

The aim of the study was to find out how well former students of a study-focussed post-intermediate level ESOL course (hereafter referred to as PIS) had fared, and measure this in terms of language, work and study, and settlement. The study is best described as a tracer study. (See Chapman and Fisher 1995, who describe the tracer study procedure developed by AMES Victoria.) It was in effect a needs analysis, but unlike most attempts to analyse learners' needs and evaluate courses and programs at some stage during the course (eg. Bailey 1999), this one sought to survey learners' needs with the

benefit of hindsight.

The particular course is a one semester full time course run by a major ESOL provider in Auckland. It aims to both facilitate the settlement of new migrants and provide a study focus for those who may want to go onto mainstream courses. The course content involved topics (eg NZ History, NZ Business) and skill focussed units (eg. reading strategies, organising learning, listening and note-taking.) A lot of work was also done with the newspaper and listening to the news as a way of providing an authentic context in which to set up task-based activities.

The study itself involved two separate cohorts of former students. Subjects were first asked to complete a questionnaire and then more in-depth interviews were held with twelve participants, six from each group. Group One was surveyed twelve months after the course, while Group Two was surveyed six months after the course. In total there were 38 subjects. The average age on arrival in New Zealand was 35 years and they had been in the country for an average of 1.6 years when they started the PIS course. The majority (about 80%) of the participants in this study come from Asian countries. Mainland China in particular (about 50%), is strongly represented. The vast majority have tertiary qualifications, professional experience, had some school English before arrival, and came under the General Skills immigration category.

The questionnaire created a profile of the subjects' backgrounds and information on their: post-course destinations, future plans, satisfaction with English in general, study and work situations, progress in terms of language and the role the PIS course had played, and progress made in the settlement process. The response rates were very good, 20/23 for Group 1 (1 had returned home to Hong Kong, 1 had moved to Australia and 1 was untraceable) and 18/19 for Group 2 (1 was untraceable). The interviews were semi-structured with a few broad questions regarding their lives in New Zealand and how the PIS course may have helped. In choosing the subjects for interviews, a greater weighting was given to those studying in mainstream courses, particularly at post-graduate level (6 were studying: 3 at Masters level, 1 Diploma, 1 Certificate, 1 ESOL), while still including enough non-studying subjects to provide representation of the entire population (4 were working, 1 was a trainee and 1 had just bought his own business).

The interviews were recorded and written up in a narrative rather than a dialogue form. Thus the author has taken what was said and turned it into a more grammatically acceptable form, being careful not to alter the meaning. This was then checked for accuracy by asking subjects to read it and confirm that it was in fact what they wanted to say or make changes where it was not. The subjects found this less threatening as they did not like the idea of having their language mistakes transcribed. The names used in the interviews have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Results

Current activity

It was found that 52.6% of respondents were studying (including 2 from each group who were also working part-time), 28.9% were working (and not studying) and 18.4% were neither working nor studying. It is clear from Table 1 below that considerably more respondents from Group 1 were working than from Group 2. This is what might be expected given the longer period of time which has elapsed since the end of the course.

Current Activity	Group 1	Group 2	Total
No work or study	3 (15%)	4 (22.2%)	7 (18.4%)
Study (including work)	9 (45%) Masters: 4 Diploma: 1 Certificate: 4	11 (61.1%) Diploma: 1 Certificate: 3 ESOL: 7	20 52.6%
Work (no study)	8 (40%)	3 (16.7%)	11 (28.9%)

Table 1: Summary of current activity

The PIS course

The respondents were asked "What things did you learn on your PIS course which have been helpful?" and "What things do you wish you had learned on your PIS course but didn't? (Is there anything extra which we could have taught you on the course?)" (See Table 2 below.) Most replies could be categorised with reference to particular skills. They showed that work on writing (61%), listening (58%) and reading (50%) had been most helpful. This is not really surprising given the focus of the course but it is of some concern that only six (16%) mentioned speaking. Further, when asked how the course could have helped them more, nearly 32% felt there was a need for more work on speaking.

How PIS helped	Group 1 n=20	Group 2 n=18	Average	Suggestions for PIS	Group 1 n=20	Group 2 n=18	Average
Writing	12	11	61%	Speaking	4	8	32%
Listening	14	8	58%	No changes needed	6	5	29%
Reading	9	10	50%	Other	2	4	16%
Speaking	4	2	16%	More culture	4	1	13%
Vocabulary	2	1	8%	Writing	1	2	8%
Culture/Customs	2	1	8%	Listening	2	0	5%
Grammar	2	0	5%	Reading	2	0	5%
Confidence	2	0	5%	Computers	2	0	5%
Study skills	0	2	5%	Vocabulary	0	1	3%
Note-taking	0	2	5%				
Other	0	1	3%				

Table 2: How the course helped and suggestions for improvements.

The interviews also underscored the need for a greater focus on speaking, with one-third specifically mentioning that they were happy with the work done in this area. This was discussed in terms of gaining confidence or having confidence to speak. However, the same interviewees also said that they would have needed a lot more help with speaking. They suggested more work on pronunciation, more contact with native speakers through guests joining them in group discussions and having smaller classes.

Over half of the questionnaires which commented on listening referred specifically to listening to the news. This was supported in the interviews where half specifically focussed on the value of this activity. They said it had been beneficial in terms of developing general listening skills, note-taking skills, gaining cultural and social understanding through acquiring background knowledge, good listening strategies and the habit of listening to the news after the class had finished. Similar comments were made about work done in reading the newspaper.

Study situations

In terms of how well they had managed with their further studies, most were at least partly satisfied and all of those who were interviewed felt they had coped quite well with their courses. It is interesting to note from data reported in Table 3 that Group 1 was on average slightly less satisfied. This may well be explained by the fact that - as was shown in Table 1 - those from Group 1 were attending higher level courses.

	Group 1	Group 2	Overall
Following lectures	2.1	2.73	2.40
Participating in tutorials and other discussions	1.88	2.45	2.15
Writing assignments etc	1.89	2.36	2.11
Sitting exams	2.14	2.6	2.36
Talking to lecturers and tutors	2	2.27	2.13
Dealing with administration	2.44	2.3	2.37

Table 3: Satisfaction with English in Study Situations 1 = Not satisfied 2 = Partly satisfied 3 = Well satisfied

As already mentioned, speaking was of primary concern. Sometimes this involved classroom discussions, for example:

Betty says they have lots of group discussions in class but she often feels uncomfortable because she has an idea she wants to express but is unable to explain it clearly enough for her class mates to understand it. Sometimes she doesn't understand the ideas they are trying to express because they speak very fast and their 'speaking style' is totally different.

Thus, the issue is not just about understanding the language for study but also having the language and skills to deal with the interactions involved with group-work, which is often an important part of courses. For a course such as PIS there is the implication that there is a need to help with social language and to provide other support in the socialisation process. Carol also commented on these social needs:

She still feels it's very difficult to understand her fellow students when they are chatting. Often

they laugh and she doesn't know why they are laughing. She feels there may be cultural and background things which she still doesn't know about, but she seems to be worried they are laughing at her. She is finding it hard to develop friendships because she can't really talk in depth to explain her thoughts.

It is important, therefore, to provide as much cultural and social background as possible. In particular this involves doing as much as possible to improve learners' informal conversation skills and their cultural understanding. Eric expressed similar concerns:

Sometimes the lecturer makes a joke and everyone's laughing but you, and you feel bad, even though it's not part of the class, it's still very important. Eric says what is a problem is understanding social language both outside the class and when doing group work.

Helping learners to understand humour is of course something which is very difficult and an understanding of humour can really only be arrived at after one has achieved a certain level of cultural understanding. This implies that teaching cultural background would be a good starting point.

Most of those interviewed who were studying mentioned that the PIS course had helped them to develop skills and strategies. As can be seen below these were used to advantage:

Eric says that listening to the news and taking notes of keywords was good because it got them into good habits because they didn't just listen but they had to take notes and get something out of it, they had to interact with it. He says it was also good because it helped them to understand what was going on in the society around them. As far as developing listening skills was concerned he feels that the same skills can be used when listening to lectures, "Just different topics but I feel it's the same skill".

There is an implication here that skills can be transferred. Even though the genres may appear to be different there is often enough in common to allow for a transfer. This is especially the case where learners are already familiar with the content of the lecture, either because they have already studied the subject in their own language, as is sometimes the case, or because they have been very studious. Thus Betty has no problems when listening to lectures because she always does all the reading beforehand so she is familiar with the content which makes it easier to understand.

She also employed a similar strategy when she wanted to talk to her tutor:

When she has an appointment with her tutor, she is usually able to communicate quite well but she always writes all her questions down first so that she can show them to him if he doesn't understand her.

As has already been seen, the writing work covered on the PIS course was important preparation for further study. Most felt quite confident about their reading and said the course had provided them with a great deal of support in this area.

Again, good strategies were used to great effect in overcoming reading and writing difficulties. For example:

Betty really enjoys the reading she has to do for the course because she doesn't know much about Western theories so she is really interested in finding out about them. She says she learned really good reading skills from the PIS course and they have been very helpful. When reading, she uses a highlighter, sometimes she writes down problems and questions or, if necessary, she writes a summary.

When she writes assignments she does it very thoroughly. She says her writing is not very good but it's not a problem because she organises all the assignments for every paper so that she has them ready a month before they are due. Then she goes to the language learning centre where they are very good at helping her to revise her draft. Of course she has to do a lot of extra reading around the topic too.

As well as good strategies, there is a realisation that lecturers tend to be very tolerant of language mistakes as long as the idea is clear. For example:

Helen says writing is not a major problem because the lecturers don't mind if you make grammar mistakes as long as they can understand what you are trying to say. She knows that the main thing is to get her ideas across so she uses short simple sentences to make sure he understands.

In other words there is a lot of support for those with language difficulties and lecturers are quite tolerant of such difficulties so those who are prepared to put in the work are able to get by with quite

limited writing skills. In this regard the PIS course was able to provide them with sufficient skills. However, it clearly failed to provide them with the informal spoken language skills which would have eased their way considerably, both in terms of study in particular and the settlement process in general. Study is an important step in the settlement process, but for the people in this survey it was no more than a means to an end. That end being to re-establish themselves in their former professions.

Work

The questionnaires showed getting a job was the single most important step in settlement. This was especially so for Group 1 where, of the ten who had some kind of work, 8 said this had been one of the best things which had happened to them. It doesn't seem to matter what type of work it is. Any type of work is a sign of making progress towards settlement. Only 5 respondents from Group 2 have some work and 2 of them mentioned this as a good thing. In the interviews too, the positive things mentioned tended to involve being accepted for jobs:

Dawn didn't think she would get the job. She is still in training but now she feels more positive and she feels her life now has some direction.

The problems with English at work generally involved informal spoken English. The major problem was of course that one needed a good level of spoken language before one could even get a job, as Len said, "His major problems have been with English, because to get a job you have to get through the job interview."

In terms of the PIS course, this implies yet again the need to focus more on spoken language, in this case on language which might help with job interviews. Thus one must consider what spoken language skills one could work on in a study-focus course which would be transferable to other situations. The most obvious one is pronunciation, but one can also practise things like talking about past work and study experiences and future plans. There were many stories of the sense of failure and despair arising from unsuccessful attempts to get work, for example:

Carol applied for lots of menial jobs such as cleaner, baby sitter, check-out operator etc. She was always rejected. She says that usually halfway through her first sentence they would say the job had gone. Some companies were polite and took her name saying they would call when they had a vacancy but they never did.

Many had unrealistic expectations about getting work and had not expected to have to take on work outside their original professions. They found a lack of recognition of qualifications and experience and that they were unable to break through language and cultural barriers:

During the job interviews Fred had, quite a few people said he was over-qualified for the job and that he should apply for a better job, but when he applied for jobs commensurate with his qualifications and experience he would get told that he needed to have local knowledge.

Fred has the feeling that people in New Zealand don't accept that overseas qualifications and experience are just as valuable. He feels they need to be more open and also that some prefer people with local experience as they see it as being a lower risk.

The PIS course cannot do much to change local attitudes but it can at least offer help in terms of language and cultural understanding.

Settlement: Confidence and positivity

Generally, as can be seen in Table 4 below, it was found that people became more positive over time. Initially, on arrival, there was a wide range of levels of positivity but this range narrowed during the PIS course, which also provided a great boost to positivity. This has continued since finishing the course.

Group	Arrival NZ	Start PIS	End PIS	Now
Group 1	-0.45	-0.35	+0.65	+1.15
Group 2	-0.44	+0.167	+0.667	+0.778
Total	-0.447	-0.105	+0.658	+0.974

Table 4: Average levels of positivity according to Group and Time.

2 = Negative, -1 = Slightly Negative, 0 = Neutral, +1 = Slightly Positive, +2 = Positive

Confidence is a major issue in both language learning and settlement. Positivity rose significantly during the PIS course. This suggests that one of the most important roles of such ESOL courses is to instil confidence and hope and make students feel more positive about their lives in their new country.

These findings were born out in the interviews:

Fred thought the course was good because it helped him to gain confidence in himself. That was the most important benefit.

Eric says that by the time he had finished the PIS course he had more confidence and was better equipped to find his way into society. He knew how to get information and was able to do important things like listening to the radio.

Joan says she now feels quite confident about speaking to New Zealanders. After completing the PIS course she felt more comfortable, it made her feel more comfortable and confident when speaking to people. Before, she didn't like speaking to people in English.

Thus the course can increase confidence by fostering opportunities and encouraging learners to make contact with and speak to New Zealanders. Teaching learners about how to get information and how to do things which involve contact with what is happening in society, such as listening to the news can also help.

Other key settlement issues

From the questionnaires and the interviews it became clear that the PIS course played an important role in helping new migrants make sense of the world around them. To this end topics related to New Zealand politics, culture and history were helpful as was work done with the news, for example:

Carol was surprised at how much the course helped her. By the end of it she felt she understood much more about New Zealand society and was much more a part of it. In particular, she felt that all the work on the newspaper had made a big contribution to her understanding.

Fred also found it very useful that he didn't just learn English, but also about the Maori, about life in New Zealand and that it gave him a good understanding of New Zealand culture.

The interviews involved some discussion of adjustments and how expectations have changed in terms of the time necessary to complete the settlement process. They talked about difficulties in establishing

social communication with New Zealanders, with half of those interviewed saying they didn't have many New Zealand friends. This again underscores the role an ESOL course could have in helping to overcome problems with jobs, language, and cultural and social adjustment.

Over half of those interviewed described situations in which they appear to have been exploited as immigrants or were subjected to racial abuse. They also described situations which they had found difficult to understand, and were not sure if they were somehow being exploited or racially abused. They also expressed difficulty in understanding the thinking of politicians with respect to immigration policies. These subjects were dealt with on the course, but perhaps they could be dealt with more thoroughly, and in particular more attention could be paid to the actual language involved and in determining whether or not exploitation was going on. This would require the collection of a bank of real life situations and the analysis of what is actually happening.

Another theme which comes through is not wanting to complain for fear of giving immigrants a bad name:

Carol and her husband wanted to complain but they said OK because they didn't want to create a bad impression for all Chinese. They were worried that people would think the Chinese never pay. 'We don't want people to think bad of us. We don't want to argue.'

This might suggest the need to teach the language of complaining, but this is dealt with by other general ESOL courses and therefore has been left out of the PIS course.

One of those interviewed stressed the need for more orientation services.

Dawn says it would be very useful if someone could tell immigrants what they should study and what sorts of jobs they could get at the end of it, and if there are any jobs in that field.

This is also an area worthy of more attention, but it is probably beyond the means of the PIS course. It is something which could be of great value if provided on a broader basis for all students (eg by The Careers Centre).

Another issue which tends to be overlooked is the pressure placed on family and marital relationships.

Of those interviewed only two were single. The remaining ten had been through varying degrees of marital and family disruption.

Networks can play an important role in settlement. This can be fostered by an ESOL course:

Carol also says that the class itself became a sub-society which formed a wonderful support group. The psychological support which they all gave each other, and continue to give each other, has helped her a lot.

It is important for teachers to be aware of this phenomenon and do all they can to facilitate it. The networking in Group 1 appeared to be much stronger than in Group 2 and it may just be coincidence but Group 1 was more positive about life in NZ than Group 2.

Discussion

The end goal for the typical learner in the PIS course is to enter the professional work force and gain long-term career oriented employment. It is only then that one can say that they have achieved settlement. Thus, the survey has shown that learners may have shorter term survival needs to cope with academic courses, longer term needs in terms of finding work and social needs in terms of feeling comfortable in New Zealand society.

The survey found that the work done on writing, listening and reading skills was very useful but it also found that there was a need for more work on speaking. Here it was suggested that there be more contact with native speakers, more work on pronunciation and smaller classes. There is little that the teacher can do about class sizes but efforts can be made to invite other native speakers into the classroom or organise meetings and other contacts outside of the classroom. One can also set up task based activities which require learners to talk to native speakers. There could be more attention given to pronunciation and in fact a very successful pronunciation syllabus has since been established for the class.

It was found that the work done on listening to the news and reading the newspaper was very useful in terms of developing skills and strategies as well as increasing cultural knowledge and understanding.

Consequently this has been continued and expanded upon by getting learners to do a mini-research project on a topic which has come out of the media.

In terms of the survival aspects of study, learners were adequately prepared but they had difficulties with spoken language, especially informal language in classroom discussions. A lack of focus on speaking skills in EAP classes was also reported by both Ferris (1998), and Clennell (1999). A survey of the needs of ESL students at Auckland University (Gravatt et al 1998) also found that students had particular problems with understanding informal idiomatic language. This supports the findings that there is a need to increase the attention paid to informal spoken English.

The need for support in social needs and the socialisation process also became apparent. This implies the importance of teaching not just informal spoken language but the social and cultural background that goes with it. The social function of language was also stressed by Christison and Krahne (1986), who found that while listening and reading were the most important skills for academic survival, interacting with Americans, something these students found difficult, was vitally important for them as social human beings.

It was found that good use was made of the available language support services and when this failed the lecturers could be relied upon to be very tolerant of language difficulties. This was born out by the results of the survey by Gravatt et al (1998) which found that lecturers were lenient on language and structural weaknesses in ESL students' writing as long as it could be understood. The implication for the PIS course is that sufficient is being done in this area.

Work was found to be the most important step in the settlement process. An Australian study by Burnett (1998) came to the same conclusion. Further, language is the major hurdle to employment. This is supported by Ho et al (1997) and the New Zealand Immigration Service (1998) who both found those with weaknesses in English language skills were not faring well. The greatest language problem is in getting the job, ie the job interview. Here, while PIS is not an employment course there are certainly useful applicable skills which are worked on, such as describing previous work and study experiences and plans and expectations for the future. Then there are other more general language skills such as pronunciation which will have a positive impact.

The lack of recognition of qualifications and experience, and inability to break through language and cultural barriers, was commented on by Daley (1998) in her study of NZ migrants. The PIS course can make a positive contribution by helping to build confidence and helping learners to break through these cultural and language barriers.

Generally immigrants are poorly prepared and they find it hard to meet New Zealanders. This was also found by Cooke (1999). The lack of opportunity to make social contact is not just a New Zealand problem as it was also discussed Cooke and Hunter (1999), who relate findings of Canadian research on the place of the ESOL migrant in a university in Toronto.

Learners need help in a whole array of areas such as: identity affirmation, getting a job, success in study, feeling more comfortable in society, finding friends and knowing what is happening in the society around them. Thus they need to be empowered by an ESOL course which will increase their confidence through a greater social, cultural and linguistic understanding. Finally in terms of syllabus design, there is the issue of face validity and one must consider the extent to which one is going to focus on language for study and how much on the general communicative and social requirements of language. In considering the effectiveness of Professional Employment English Courses, Chile and Brown (1999) also found themselves in a similar situation. As with all things it's a matter of finding the right balance.

Conclusion

This study has provided valuable insights into the needs of learners and it shows that such an approach to needs analysis provides far richer data than is normally obtained during a pre-course survey. Therefore others should be encouraged to undertake similar studies, whether it be for an individual class or a whole institute.

A number of implications were discussed in the previous section but the most important one is that regardless of the supposed aims of the course it must be remembered that learners are also social human beings. They need to be able to communicate and interact with the society around them and to

have the feeling that they are making a positive contribution, often through being engaged in meaningful employment. This opens up the question as to the role of ESP courses and how narrowly they should focus on language for specific purposes, implying a change of focus for the PIS course.

Related to this are the social networks that such groups sometimes form. The role and dynamics of these networks would be worthy of investigation.

The most pressing need was in terms of spoken language. To this end a specific pronunciation syllabus has been introduced but what is more difficult is to increase understanding of informal New Zealand English. More work needs to be done on practising this, but unfortunately there is a lack of appropriate learning and teaching materials, making their development an urgent priority.

Another important facet of speaking is having the confidence to speak. This is a critical factor which one would expect all good teachers to keep in mind, but the way course assessment is structured will also have an important bearing on this. This tends to support the argument for formative competency based assessments in which the aim is for the learners to succeed through the careful breaking down of tasks into achievable sub-goals.

The positive feedback on the content of the course as it related to NZ culture and society demonstrates the role of culture in language learning. In particular, activities related to listening to the news and reading the newspaper were highlighted for both their help in improving language and in gaining greater understanding of NZ. Therefore it is strongly recommended that this focus on topics relevant to NZ and the use of the news media be maintained.

It would also appear that the work done on study skills, writing, reading and listening was very effective in helping students improve their language skills. In particular those who had gone on to further study commented on this. They also found that either their lecturers were very tolerant of their writing deficiencies or they could get help from language support services.

In conclusion, ESOL learners have many needs but regardless of the focus of the course the most pressing need is empowerment.

Note: A copy of the questionnaire used in the study is available from graeme.couper@aut.ac.nz

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ⁱ The nine languages are: Ndebele, Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, Swati, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa, and Zulu.

ⁱⁱ PRAESA is the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa, directed by Neville Alexander and based at the University of Cape Town. The team at Battswood Primary School includes one PRAESA staff member (Carole Bloch), assisted sometimes by a post-graduate student, a Xhosa speaking teacher, Ntombizanele Nkence, and a resident Battswood teacher, Erica Fellies (Bloch and Alexander forthcoming)