

FACILITATING THE CULTURAL CAPITAL CONTRIBUTION OF IMMIGRANTS: WIDER RESPONSIBILITIES FOR ESOL TEACHERS?

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Introduction

To promote economic growth and development, New Zealand immigration policy since the early 1990s has targeted skilled, qualified immigrants wherever they may be found. The result has been increasing numbers of people from non-traditional (i.e. non-British) countries. These new immigrants have brought with them, in addition to work-related qualifications and experience, cultural capital by way of the values, skills, knowledge, tastes and appreciations that they developed through immersion in their native cultures (see Barker, 2000; De Bruin, 1998; Morrissey, 1997; Smith, 2000; Trueba, 2002). A number of important questions arise from this shift in immigration policy: How has the inflow of people from diverse cultural backgrounds impacted on New Zealand life? Has their cultural background been valued and appreciated by the host society or has it been seen as something of a threat? Have the professions, and in particular, the teaching profession welcomed their input? What implications are there for ESOL teachers? These are some of the issues that we would like to explore in this paper.

Our discussion is based on a study conducted in 2003 which formed part of the research activities of the New Settlers Programme at Massey University. In this project, we investigated the perceptions and experiences of senior staff members in tertiary institutions in relation to the cultural contribution of immigrants. We chose this particular group since tertiary education establishments have experienced very considerable changes in the composition of their student body in recent years, particularly in the growth in numbers of international students and permanent residents from non-English speaking backgrounds. Serious shortages in some specialist areas (such as Information Technology) have also increased the need to recruit staff from India, China and other non-Western countries.

The study involved firstly a questionnaire which investigated the following:

- perceptions of the general contribution of immigrants to New Zealand's cultural capital
- perceptions of the contribution and influence of immigrants to teaching, training and professional practices

The questionnaire was completed by heads of teaching units (HTUs) in tertiary institutions throughout New Zealand in March-April 2003. A total of 351 questionnaires were posted out to HTUs and in response to the first request to fill in the questionnaire and follow-up reminders 159 completed questionnaires were returned (a response rate of 45.3%). Of these, 90 were from universities, 54 from polytechnics and 15 from other higher education

institutions (private training establishments, colleges of education not attached to universities etc.). The second phase of the study comprised in-depth follow-up interviews with 17 HTUs in different institutions. Participants were selected from among those questionnaire respondents who indicated they were willing to reflect further on the ways in which immigrant staff members in their institutions contributed to New Zealand's cultural capital. (More detailed information on the methodology employed in the study can be found in Watts, White & Trlin, 2004.)

Drawing on the findings of the study, we will look first at perceptions and attitudes towards different groups of immigrants who have settled in New Zealand in recent years and then discuss some implications for the TESOL profession.

The impact of immigrants on New Zealand life

An overwhelming majority of the HTUs (152 out of 159 or 95.6 per cent) indicated that they considered that immigrants had made a positive impact. This is, perhaps, not surprising as in many cases the HTUs had lived or studied overseas and had direct experience of other cultures. The HTUs were not convinced, however, that their opinions were shared by the public at large. Less than half (74 out of 159 or 46.6 per cent) considered that New Zealanders welcomed this cultural impact to at least a "moderate" extent. In their view, the potential benefits of immigration were undermined by the lack of policies and programmes to assist new immigrants in their settlement and help them to obtain appropriate employment. They also felt strongly that the government had failed to promote public understanding of immigrant contributions. Only 17 of the 159 participants (10.7 per cent) considered that the current level of promotion of public understanding of immigration was "helpful". It was felt that failure to publicise effectively the positive advantages of immigration had contributed to immigrant contributions not being fully understood by New Zealanders.

The main area in which the HTUs felt immigrants had made the most obvious impact on New Zealand life was in cuisine and hospitality. Many of the participants pointed to the increasing number of Chinese, Indian, Thai, Malaysian and other ethnic food outlets and the wider range of food products available not only through specialist shops but also on supermarket shelves. But while the HTUs felt that New Zealanders had generally welcomed the increasing diversity in food preparation they considered that they were less prepared to recognise and accommodate many other immigrant cultural inputs. As one HTU observed:

I believe New Zealand is ignoring any cultural capital they [immigrants] bring. Any impact is accidental.

Another forthright comment was that:

New Zealand society has some way to go before there will be widespread acceptance of the fact that it has become multi-cultural. New Zealand is still largely mono-cultural in its mores.

In general, the responses suggested that New Zealand may be missing out on the advantages of receiving people with a wide variety of experiences. As Florida (2002) and Snowman (2002) have asserted on the basis of their research in the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively, and as Cope and Kalantzis (1997) have argued in Australia,

celebration of diversity creates a more stimulating and enriching environment. When people from different backgrounds feel that they are accepted and valued they are more likely to share their perspectives, ideas and insights. A situation in which individuals are encouraged to share and compare different viewpoints provides fertile ground for innovation and creativity not only in the arts, but also in the sciences and in industry and commerce (Rogers, 1995).

Skilled, qualified NESB immigrants

A particular concern of the HTUs was that many of the highly qualified, immigrants who had come to New Zealand in recent years, particularly those from Asia, had not found New Zealand the land of opportunity that they had expected. Overall the exchange rate for their overseas qualifications and experience had been disappointingly low. In the interviews a number of examples were supplied of well qualified, skilled immigrants who had experienced extreme difficulty in securing appropriate employment. An example, provided by the head of a design course, was the case of a young architect with a degree from Lebanon:

He had an amazingly good portfolio, a really good range of skills, was incredibly employable and I gave him a whole lot of contacts because I thought it was really important. He had been trying to find a job and was packing boxes in New World. He ended up going to Australia because he couldn't find work here.

The HTUs also noted the professional registration problems that had blocked the entry into employment of some overseas trained doctors and engineers. They believed that better information should have been available to alert prospective immigrants to New Zealand requirements in different professional areas.

A further barrier faced by skilled immigrants was reluctance by employers to appoint people who had not worked previously in New Zealand. Some employers tended to consider that "outsiders" would find it difficult to fit in to the organisational culture of New Zealand firms and organisations. In the view of one of the HTUs cultural adjustment was problematic for many immigrants:

People coming from different cultures have different expectations in terms of professional responsibilities, approaches to be used, styles of management. All have to learn these different styles and ways of functioning that may not be equivalent to their prior experience. People either basically learn to accept how to function in this new work culture or they don't.

The consensus among the HTUs was that competence in English was a key issue. In their view low levels of English were handicapping the prospects of some immigrants from regions where English is not the main language:

One of the difficulties that most of them [NESB immigrants] have is the ability to communicate well enough in English... If you can't speak idiomatically or understand all of the nuances of New Zealanders then it's going to be difficult.

However, there was also a recognition that a number of the problems that immigrants faced

were linked with the unhelpful attitudes of host society members. They criticised the lack of tolerance for difference in New Zealand society and the heavy pressures on newcomers to assimilate and conform to the host society's norms and values. A HTU who was himself an immigrant described his experience in terms of pressure to change, on the surface at least, evidence of his own cultural identity:

To participate you always get the feeling that people are saying: "Lose something of what you bring with you, some of that package, to be accepted fully by us". A lot of immigrants, new arrivals unfortunately, have been hoodwinked into believing that you need to lose part of your language, part of your culture to be fully accepted.

But even if immigrants did make every effort to fit in, their physical characteristics or their accent could still mark them out as different and lead to social marginalisation:

I think that what tends to happen is that immigrants, particularly those who have a language barrier, are marginalised by society. In other words, society is quite happy for them to be here but doesn't make much effort to include them and expects them to mix with their own ethnic groups. Koreans with Koreans, Chinese with Chinese and so on.

Some of the HTUs went even further and attributed such negative attitudes to cultural difference to racism in New Zealand society. The head of a social work unit pointed to anti-Asian sentiments as evidence of deep-rooted racist views in society and cited, as an example, double standards in relation to traffic offences:

There have been recent cases of Asian drivers having accidents and the schools deciding they must have special licences. Now at the same time a Chinese girl was killed just along the road from here by a young guy travelling at 170 km an hour with no lights on in the middle of the night, but nobody said that white boys should have a special licence. So there is a double standard. You think back to the 1800s when Chinese migrants were regarded as Mongolian filth and you say to yourself "What has changed?"

NESB tertiary teachers

A majority of the HTUs (61.6 per cent) agreed that their main teaching area had been influenced by the cultural capital of people who have come to New Zealand from countries where English is not the main language. The consensus was that immigrant staff members provided a rich source of fresh ideas and experiences in education. More specifically, the HTUs considered that staff recruited from overseas helped to challenge existing approaches and to add new insights into the teaching/learning process. Their input widened intellectual horizons and increased understanding of other ways of life. In addition, the presence of immigrant staff facilitated access to teaching and research developments overseas. The knowledge and experience of such staff enabled New Zealand institutions to keep up with international trends in programme design and delivery and in cutting edge research developments.

Despite this endorsement of the value of immigrant staff as bearers of different insights and experiences, less than a quarter of the HTUs (37 out of 159 or 23.3 per cent) reported that

their teaching unit actually had a policy on recruiting staff members from countries where English is not the main language. Those who had such a policy tended to be teaching in areas where overseas staff were sought for their particular skills, such as in foreign language teaching.

Perhaps this reluctance to actively pursue the concept of a more diverse staff can be attributed in some part to a perception that staff appointed from overseas have problems adjusting to teaching roles in New Zealand tertiary institutions. Indeed the demands of an English-medium teaching environment was identified as the major challenge faced by NESB staff members. Some of the HTUs were openly critical of the English language competence of some Asian staff members is seen in the two following comments:

English language problems limit the options of Asians. On the staff some have good English, some have relatively poor English.

The obvious problem is the language, it's an ESL problem.

As evidence of this perceived language "deficit", the HTUs cited complaints from New Zealand students that their studies were affected by difficulties in comprehending the accented English of some overseas-born lecturers. According to them international students also preferred to be taught by native speakers. The comment was made that:

We receive complaints by them [international students] when teachers are not native speakers. I think it's because they feel hard done by it. One of the points of studying in New Zealand is so that they are exposed to native speaker English.

These reservations about the English language ability of NESB staff members were apparently also shared by some of their colleagues. A particular issue was the employment of non native speakers as teachers of English. One of the HTUs interviewed commented on the reluctance of some New Zealand staff to work in conjunction with bilingual tutors:

There's a negative perception of that because, you know, the bilingual teachers might teach things which you then have to unteach because maybe their English isn't good enough so there is very easily a sense of deficit.

The other main perceived problem for NESB staff members related more generally to difficulties in adjusting to the culture of New Zealand tertiary institutions. Some staff recruited from overseas (from English speaking countries as well as those in which English is not widely spoken) could be unfamiliar with the management structures, the styles of delivery, the assessment systems and the more open and informal nature of staff-student relations in New Zealand tertiary institutions.

The response of tertiary institutions to the perceived problems of adjustment faced by NESB staff members was, however, not particularly helpful. Of the 110 teaching units with immigrant staff members, slightly under half (53 out of 110 or 48.2%) took specific measures to enhance their contribution, such as special induction programmes to orient them to different aspects of the New Zealand teaching/learning environment, mentoring systems that provided support by experienced staff members for newly appointed staff members from overseas, or English language assistance when required. The clear impression was that

by and large tertiary institutions were not doing enough to assist NESB immigrant staff to feel at home in the new environment and to encourage them to share their knowledge, insights and experiences with their native speaker colleagues. As a result, New Zealand tertiary institutions may be missing out on the "diversity dividend" which, according to Cope and Kalantzis (1997), is most likely to be produced in inclusive environments where different viewpoints and ideas are valued and people from different backgrounds are encouraged to learn from each other.

Implications for ESOL teachers

The findings of the study do raise questions concerning the roles and responsibilities of ESOL teachers in assisting immigrants to contribute economically and socially as well as culturally to New Zealand's future.

Facilitating the development of English language competence amongst NESB students is, of course, our primary concern, and ESOL teachers have a responsibility to do their best for their students in this respect in order to help them engage with and participate successfully in New Zealand life. We are well aware that English language competence is essential for positive economic, social and cultural contributions. However, it can be argued that our role extends well beyond ESOL programmes. ESOL teachers possess expertise that needs to be shared with colleagues in other teaching areas to help them meet more effectively the language and cultural needs of NESB students. This professional advice and assistance should also extend to those involved in the administration of our educational institutions. Administrators are often eager to increase the numbers of NESB students (particularly those who are full fee-paying) and to recruit staff from overseas in areas where there are real shortages of well qualified teachers, but they do not always take into account the resource issues involved in providing effective linguistic, social and cultural support for new arrivals.

In addition ESOL teachers should be advocates for a more inclusive institutional environment: for example, they may contribute to professional development programmes for teaching and administrative staff. Such programmes would include a strong focus on developing workplace cultures and practices which recognize and respond positively to diversity. An important and complex issue in this regard is the question of 'agency', and who has the right to interpret and represent outside cultural capital, and to become an advocate for particular groups or cultures. It is critical for the TESOL profession to explore such issues, and to share perspectives and expertise about the roles and responsibilities we can assume as committed professionals within our own institutions and within increasingly diverse workplaces.

Beyond our institutions there is a further role for ESOL teachers as attitude changers in the local community and in society at large. Because we deal on a daily basis with people from different cultural backgrounds we have the knowledge and experience to speak out on immigration issues, particularly on matters relating to resettlement and ways in which immigrants can be assisted to participate fully in society. We have an important role in helping to develop greater awareness amongst New Zealanders of the assets that people from other countries bring to New Zealand and which, if properly recognised and utilised, can contribute very considerably to this country's cultural capital.

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