

# THE INTENSIVE ENGLISH COURSE AT HAGLEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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## INTRODUCTION

The Intensive English course to be described here was established in 1981, at the time of the arrival of the first Cambodian refugees to New Zealand. The class was originally taught by Yvonne Fox at the Technical Institute but for these young adolescents who had missed out on normal schooling, it was felt a school environment would be preferable. The principal at Hagley High School (as it was called then) offered them a room and made them welcome.

Since then classes have grown until, at the beginning of 1995, there were six. The course seeks to provide for the needs of new refugees, new migrants and overseas students of secondary age who arrive with a minimal level of English, classified by the Ministry of Education as Category One or Two<sup>1</sup>. Students usually stay from one to two terms - some stay longer - and in this time, they may progress through two or three classes until they are ready to go to a mainstream classroom. They usually choose to go to their local school at this time. An intermediate step before full mainstreaming is partial mainstreaming in one or two classes while still continuing in a home room ESOL class for the rest of the time.

The length of stay at Hagley is determined by both the teacher and the student. When the student feels confident in her or his use of English, it is time to go. There is no exit level required. Because of the length of time it takes to learn another language, at least five years and possibly even ten years for academic competence (Cummins, 1984; Collier, 1989), students will still have difficulties and need help when they are mainstreamed but it is hoped that they will have learnt some coping strategies.

An objection often made to full-time English courses for students of school age is that these young people cannot afford to miss out on their regular schooling while they wait to acquire the language (Cummins, 1984). It is preferable therefore for such students to learn English through content. This belief is also held by teachers at Hagley, although it should be tempered with the recognition that there needs to be some basic understanding of English before it is possible to learn any subject matter. There are also certain survival skills in English that need to be taught initially. On the whole, however, the Intensive English course at Hagley Community College teaches English through content. Bilingual instruction has never been an option because of the cost and the number of language groups, but that is not to say it should be ruled out as an option in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Category One: Cannot understand greetings, simple instructions, questions.  
Category Two: Able to converse a little in English but have minimal reading and writing skills or have some reading and writing skills but have minimal oral English.

Another objection to offering separate English classes is that young people need to mix with their native-born peers, both to help them learn the language and for social reasons (Cummins, 1984). It is true that intensive classes do separate students but this is not an insurmountable difficulty. There are opportunities for mixing in sport and with partial mainstreaming. However, even when students are fully mainstreamed, they still find it difficult to mix with native-born students. One of the reasons may be the difficulty of communicating satisfactorily without fluency. Even the most willing native speaker may lose interest in trying to establish a friendship when communication breaks down. It takes time to learn a language, and a few months in an intensive English class can give students a flying start.

The Intensive English course offered at Hagley Community College gives students 12 hours of English and two hours of Social Studies a week with their own home room ESOL teacher. They also have four hours of Mathematics, two hours of Science, two hours of Physical Education, two hours of an option subject and one hour of First Language Maintenance, all with subject-specialist teachers. They stay with their home room group for all subjects except Mathematics, which is streamed across the six classes, and First Language, where they are divided according to their home language.

It should be noted that teachers in the Intensive English classes have specialist training and are full-time, career teachers. When they are not teaching their home room ESOL class, they teach a mainstream ESOL class. Yvonne Fox has a time allowance as Head of Department and some others have special duties.

## **OBJECTIVES**

While teachers have a great deal of flexibility in what they teach so that they can cater for particular needs, there are overall guiding principles and methods that are used to meet the objectives of the programme, which are as follows:

- 1 To help students adjust to the New Zealand educational system.
- 2 To value students' own culture.
- 3 To introduce students to New Zealand society and culture and thus help them adjust to their new way of life.
- 4 To develop students' academic knowledge and skills.
- 5 To provide a secure learning environment with maximum opportunities for practice.
- 6 To increase students' English language skills as rapidly as possible.

### **1 To help students to adjust to the New Zealand educational system**

Most students who come here from another country are used to a very different style of learning; they are used to regarding the teacher as the font of all knowledge, knowledge which must be memorised at home and tested the next day. In addition, students are not usually expected to take an active part in class, to question, to solve problems, to perform their own experiments in Science, to co-operate in groups, to talk in class with other classmates about the work or to take any initiative in their own learning, apart from studying hard. This learning style may be appropriate for the large class sizes that are the norm in Asian countries but it differs from the approach to education stressed in New Zealand schools.

Although some Asian countries are now beginning to adopt western learning styles, it is still true to say that our classrooms are alien places for new immigrants.

At Hagley, students are introduced gradually to all kinds of experiential and co-operative learning. Because class sizes are smaller (an average of 15) than the regular New Zealand classes, different learning and assessment techniques can be introduced and the students' reactions monitored, all in the space of a few weeks. While the approaches are similar to those used in all New Zealand schools, an intensive course offers the advantage of gradual introduction with support and opportunities for corrective feedback, as well as a wide coverage of the kind of techniques students will encounter in mainstream classes. Nothing is taken for granted. The activity may be modelled by the teacher first, then practised by the students, or examples of a finished product may be shown to students so that they know what is expected. Various assessment methods are used, from self-assessment or peer assessment to teacher assessment using predetermined criteria. More importantly, teachers introduce the concept of independence in learning rather than relying on the teacher to assess everything.

The formal assessment associated with NZQA qualifications, such as the distinction between internal and external assessment and which subjects they are applied to, is much harder to convey to students from a different educational system. In fact, teachers have not always been successful in this and on occasions students have turned up to an exam room when the subject was internally assessed. Perhaps future developments with the Framework will make this easier.

The Intensive English programme at Hagley includes two hours a week of Physical Education and many students take part in extra-curricular sport on a Wednesday afternoon as well. Sport is a very important activity for many of the students, who may be found in the gymnasium or on the sports fields at lunch times and after school.

All classes also have two hours a week of an option class like Home Economics, Graphics and Design or Art. Students who move through the classes, as most of them do, will have a taste of several different options.

Apart from different subjects, there are many other things to learn about a New Zealand school, like the necessity to use the teacher's name (this is disrespectful in some Asian countries), changing rooms for different classes, understanding the role of staff such as the school counsellor, bringing absence notes, giving an excuse for being late, not smoking on the school grounds, going on field trips, returning permission slips and many more. These things are part of the orientation role played by the Intensive English programme. They are taught directly and any uncertainties that the students have are dealt with.

Some students also very quickly learn about the discipline system in a New Zealand school such as the penalties for lateness and truancy or for anti-social acts like fighting.

## **2 To value students' own culture**

As part of the programme, one hour a week is allocated to first language maintenance. Currently, the school is able to provide teachers in the following languages: Korean, Mandarin, Cantonese and Somali, while in the past classes for Japanese and Samoan students have been offered. When there are sufficient numbers of one language group, the school looks for a suitable teacher from that language community. Students from other language groups

are put together into one class where they can talk or write about their country, in their first language if they wish, to share with others in the class but this of course has to be in English as the common language of the group.

However, the main way in which teachers show that the students' culture is valued is by using it as a resource. One class, for instance, talked to a regular fourth form class about their country. Teachers frequently ask students to make comparisons with their own culture or experience when studying other subjects. "How is this done in your country?" teachers ask, not merely to show an interest but also to provide a basis for students to add and evaluate new experiences. Materials are chosen to reflect other cultures and countries too: myths and legends from all over the world, making methane gas in India, earthquakes in Japan, the atom bomb, weddings in the Cook Islands. Extensive use is made of Learning Media resources, especially School Journals, which provide excellent articles from a range of countries.

One practical way the school has shown a concern for a different culture is by providing a room for the Muslim students to pray, and by being flexible about their need to pray or to attend the mosque during class time.

### **3 To introduce students to New Zealand society and culture and thus help them adjust to a new way of life**

The students are helped to adjust in two main ways: directly through a Social Studies programme and indirectly through the choice of themes and materials in the English Language programme.

Students have Social Studies for two hours a week and in that time, they study topics like the New Zealand justice system or government, immigration to New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi, and New Zealand geography. The focus is on this country and how it compares with their own. In order to function in their new country, there are certain things students need to learn, things that their native-born peers learn in primary school or through their early life experiences.

In the 12 hours a week devoted to English Language, local topics are often studied and home room ESOL classes have the flexibility to make extended visits, maybe for a whole afternoon. Many places are visited: the public library, court, museum, provincial council buildings, hospital, historic buildings, bakery, Science Alive, the Polytechnic, Careers Expo, Science Expo and the Port Hills. As the school is located in the central city, most of these buildings and displays are within walking distance. These visits are integrated into the English programme with appropriate texts to read, discussion, questions to ask, information to find out, map reading and giving directions, and report writing. It would be true to say that the line between English language and Social Studies is blurred in terms of skills and course content.

### **4 To increase students' academic knowledge and skills**

Students in the programme study Mathematics for four hours a week with specialist teachers who are attuned to the needs of new learners of English. Students who fulfill the minimum time requirements of NZQA are eligible to receive a formal qualification. Marks are transferable to other schools so that students who change schools during the year can still qualify. Many Asian students have excellent mathematical skills, especially in algebra; they

now have the opportunity to learn the English of mathematics and to adjust to the different focus of the New Zealand Mathematics curriculum, which emphasises applications and processes rather than just product.

The following is an official statement of this focus:

A balanced Mathematical programme includes concept learning, developing and maintaining skills, and learning to tackle applications... Rather than remembering the single correct method, problem solving requires students to search the information for clues and to make connections to the various pieces of mathematical and other knowledge and skills they have learned. Such problems encourage thinking rather than mere recall. (Ministry of Education, 1992, p. 11)

Students who have had interrupted schooling, like many refugees, receive Mathematics Skills Development with an ESOL teacher who is a specialist in that area. Some of these students would be very hard to accommodate in a regular secondary school because of the level in Mathematics they are working at, sometimes seven or eight years below that of their age level. Placing these students in mainstream slow learner classes may not be appropriate.

The intensive course also includes two hours a week of Science with a specialist teacher. This provides an introduction to Science in the New Zealand school system, gives students practice at practical work in the laboratory, teaches them safety procedures and some basic scientific vocabulary so that they can take part in a regular Science class with confidence when they are mainstreamed. The home room ESOL teacher and the Science teacher sometimes work together for a more thorough coverage of topics and the associated language structures and vocabulary.

##### **5 To provide a secure learning environment with maximum opportunities for practice**

In a mainstream class of 30 students, it is difficult to provide sufficient speaking opportunities for all students and especially for those who lack confidence. For students who speak English with an accent, who take time to put together the words, who make grammatical mistakes or lack some necessary vocabulary, it can be an ordeal, especially before an impatient or a hostile class. Even when working in groups, new learners need special encouragement to contribute. The reality is that new learners in mainstream classes remain silent for most of the day.

An intensive English class, on the other hand, has fewer students and therefore more opportunities for each student to contribute, but more importantly, it is a comfortable environment in which students are encouraged to take risks and to practise new structures. The atmosphere is supportive because the other students know what it is like to struggle with a language. The teacher is there to provide encouragement and corrective feedback.

## 6 To increase students' English language skills as rapidly as possible

### I *Integrated approach*

The major way in which the content of the intensive English course differs from the content of a language school course is that the focus is on subject matter, which becomes the means by which grammar and other skills are taught.

However, a focus on subject matter does not equate to mainstream teaching. Mainstream classes must cater primarily for the needs of the majority, the native-born students, a syllabus must be followed, examinations must be prepared for and new learners of English do the best they can with what help the teacher has time to give. Teachers of Hagley Community College's Intensive English course, however, aim to provide what Krashen and Terrell (1983) call "comprehensible input", ie. input which is slightly beyond the level of the students to provide a challenge for them but not too difficult to frustrate them. Texts are as a rule easier than those encountered by their peers in the mainstream. Vocabulary and grammatical difficulties are dealt with explicitly since most of the students in the class have the same difficulties. The teacher speaks clearly and adjusts her speaking speed according to the class level. There is no pressure from the demands of a syllabus.

Nevertheless, there are guidelines and methodologies. The needs of the students are uppermost and the course designed around their needs, based upon themes. The teacher may start with a written text, add other resources such as video or audio tapes, then design activities to develop skills that students will need later in their schooling. This then is an integrated approach because all skills, receptive and productive, are taught within a particular topic.

At the beginner level, it is important for students to be able to speak about themselves, give their address, be able to spell it, and learn how to talk about school and classroom routines. They interview their classmates and gradually gain confidence in basic oral skills. They learn how to ask questions, to follow instructions, to build up a paragraph through cloze completion then they use this as a model for another piece of writing. They need a great deal of vocabulary which they learn mostly from a picture dictionary but then they learn to use it in the context of different topics. Topics at this level are: About myself, My class, My school day (reading the timetable), The timetable, My classmates, My teacher, The New Zealand school year, The New Zealand school system.

Reading is also an important part of the beginner programme. Wherever possible, content-based texts are chosen although it is not always easy to find texts that are simple enough yet have appeal to adolescents.

Texts are usually in simple present at first, then simple past. Comprehension questions are worded so that basic structures are practised in answers. Many reading exercises are done orally in pairs before or after they are written at home. Oral work before written work supports students who are not sure of what to do, while oral work following written work helps students to internalise the answers and provides the vocab and structures which help them speak ie. written work is for accuracy while oral work is for fluency. In the same way, re-telling a story after reading it many times, provides some of the vocabulary and grammar as a support. Most work is done in groups and students learn to work together.

There are some students, however, who are not literate in their first language and others who have no knowledge of our alphabet so that they cannot read even the most simple of texts. Both these categories of students put a great strain on the resources of the teacher who has to provide for others in the class at the same time. With the use of a teacher aide where possible or even a listening post to allow other students to continue their learning, the teacher has in the past managed to provide for all needs.

Because of the varied demands at the beginner level, the school has tried to keep this class to a maximum of 12 students.

With a post-beginner group, there is more choice available in texts. The topic *Antarctica* outlined on the next page is given as an example of a theme explored in a post-beginner class, although not all these activities may be covered. The topic does, however, reflect the kinds of skills which are taught. Because of time demands, written work is usually assigned for homework.

## **II Fiction**

Not all texts studied in English classes are non-fiction. There is a place for reading and enjoying fiction. Generally, books are Graded Readers, and while the teaching approach may be similar to that used by mainstream English teachers, the books are at the reading level of these students. Students discuss plot, setting and characterisation, they make posters and write about their responses to the novel. They keep reading records and share their books with others.

Fiction can also be used in the same way as non-fiction, as a means to increase English language skills. If the story is interesting it makes a welcome break from subject-related texts. Students learn the grammar in context, learn to use new vocabulary, talk about the story, and finally write about it.

## **III. Library Skills**

Many students from other countries are unfamiliar with a school library. One function of the intensive English course is to show students that the library can be both a useful resource and a place where they can find books for leisure reading.

Using the library for research is a major challenge for these students as most of the materials are beyond their reading level. Teachers have to help students to find easier resources and to search for main points in more difficult material without worrying too much about details. Left to their own devices, students will copy. One way to overcome this problem is to ask students to give an oral presentation, either to a partner or a larger group. They have to understand before they can talk about something knowledgeably. Another way is to ask students to produce a diagram from what they read, either a time line, a flow chart, a web or some other graphic representation which forces them to find main points and reduces the temptation to copy the exact wording.

Students need to learn how to use the new technology also such as the catalogue on computer and the most recent acquisition of CD-Roms with access to Grolier and the New Zealand Encyclopaedias.

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## ANTARCTICA

This topic is chosen because of the role of Christchurch as the gateway to the Antarctic and because the history of South Pole exploration has now become legendary among New Zealanders.

### SKILLS

**Vocabulary:** Word webs for clothing, transport, cold weather eg blizzard  
Vocab extension eg different parts of speech

**Writing:** Specific teaching of different genre and related discourse features:  
(i) Narrative in chronological order: retelling story from time line  
(ii) Geographical description: climate and physical features  
(iii) Process: food chain in Antarctic ocean  
(iv) Comparison and contrast:  
a) physical features of the Antarctic and the Arctic  
b) clothing, equipment and facilities early 1900s and today  
(v) E-mail questions to personal contact at Scott Base

**Research:** Visit to museum (historical) and Antarctic Centre (contemporary)  
Oral questions to classmates (pairs)

**Reading:** Texts include physical features of Arctic, Scott's expedition to South Pole, how to survive a plane crash in Antarctica, sections of Antarctic Treaty (all easy texts except the last)  
(i) Comprehension skills: questions at three levels: factual, implied, evaluative (based on three-level guide in Morris & Stewart-Dore, 1984)  
(ii) Advantages and disadvantages (of Scott's expedition and Amundsen's)  
(iii) Summary: a) create timeline of early exploration  
b) make notes on Arctic  
c) flow chart for making an ice cave  
(iv) Jigsaw reading: find main points of section of Treaty to tell group  
(v) Reconstruction of text:  
a) match interview questions with answers  
b) arrange paragraphs in order

**Listening:** video - fill in table with details

**Oral:** Partners ask each other questions on text  
Discussion on role of Antarctic and its future

**Grammar:** In context. Examples:  
*What are the items in a survival kit used for? The matches are used for ...*  
Modals for discussing future possibilities: *If oil is found, x might happen*  
Past tense for narration of past events, and simple present for describing physical features or scientific work done today.

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#### IV Writing

Apart from genre writing, other kinds of writing are included in the course. Generally classes start the week with journal writing to record the happenings of the weekend, or an older group may record their thoughts about language learning. Process writing which is popular in mainstream classes has its place in second language writing also. Often computers are used for this to make the process easier and finished products can be displayed on the wall. Writing in the past has covered the range from poetry and other imaginative work to expository essays expressing a viewpoint.

#### CONCLUSION

The Intensive English Language course provides an introduction for new learners of English to the kinds of things they will experience when they start their regular schooling. By that time, they should be able to understand classroom routines, have acquired some academic vocabulary and will have practised typical school assignments. In addition, they will have gained English language skills which should help them to understand most of what happens in a regular classroom and to ask for help with confidence when they do not understand. While it is recognised that this is still well below the level of their native-speaking peers and they will need support in their learning for several years yet, they are equipped to become independent language learners.

Although a course of a longer duration would have merit, there is pressure from a waiting list to encourage students to move on and most of them look forward to that day, albeit with a tinge of apprehension. While in the Intensive English course, they are in a secure environment. They make friends from their own country and from other countries but they often find to their surprise that there are other ex-Hagley graduates at their new school.

The Intensive English Language course at Hagley is unique in New Zealand, although there are models in Australia and other countries. Perhaps its uniqueness owes something to the cost of such a course, which has to be supplemented in some way by the school in order to keep the class sizes down to an average of 15. Although schools are obliged to accept all new immigrants into their classes, it is very difficult to make adequate provision for the needs of these students in the regular classroom. The fact that Hagley Community College usually has a waiting list for students to enter the Intensive English classes, often relatives or friends of ex-students, suggests that parents see the course as fulfilling a need.

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