

# PROVIDING FOR NEW LEARNERS OF ENGLISH IN NEW ZEALAND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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## PROVISION FOR NESB STUDENTS IN NEW ZEALAND

Although New Zealand has had large numbers of migrant students with limited English from the Pacific in the last two decades, and while many of them learn to speak fluently in a social context, their problems acquiring academic English have been largely ignored. Cummins (1984) pointed out the distinction between social English or basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS), which may take two years to acquire, and CALP (cognitive/academic language proficiency) which can take from five to seven years or even longer (Collier, 1989). We now know that Pacific Island students rank near the bottom in School Certificate and University Bursary grades (NZQA Statistics, 1993) and in reading scores (Elley, 1990). Teachers' cries for help from the outposts of Otara and Porirua have largely fallen on deaf ears.

It has been the recent arrival of large numbers of well-to-do Asian immigrants, moving into middle class areas like Epsom and Fendalton, that has created a stir in the media and forced administrators to show an uneasy interest. At the same time, New Zealand schools have been actively marketing overseas with the result that they feel a responsibility to make some provision for the students who are paying fees. These fees have enabled some schools to provide an ESL teacher for at least a few hours a week, although there has been little concern to ensure that these teachers are trained in ESL methodology. Many primary schools, in fact, leave the teaching of new learners of English to untrained teacher aides, and in secondary schools it has often become an extra duty of the reading teacher.

The ESL teachers are used in different ways in different secondary schools. Where there are sufficient numbers, they may teach 25 NESB students together in an ESL class as an alternative to the regular English class. Teachers make up their own syllabus as a rule, although a few schools do offer an accredited Sixth Form Certificate ESL course. Some students prepare for a Pitmans exam while still others take a Fifth Form Certificate course alongside native speakers of English who cannot cope with School Certificate. Where numbers are smaller, students are often withdrawn either alone or in groups for anything from one hour a week to one hour a day. In this case, they would be expected to sit the regular School Certificate, Sixth Form Certificate or Bursary English.

Throughout most of New Zealand, the practice has been to mainstream all new learners of English. Only Mt Roskill Grammar School in Auckland and Hagley Community College in Christchurch have offered a full-time intensive English programme; together they have been able to cater for only a small percentage of new immigrants.

Many visa students in Auckland choose to attend a private language school first before enrolling at a secondary school but language schools are not always the best choice for adolescents: they do not as a rule concentrate on academic language, they cannot teach school

routines, they often tolerate truancy and, because most of their students are older, it can be a lonely place for younger students. The fact that students choose a language school initially in preference to a secondary school suggests that they are realistic about the problems of coping when thrust into a mainstream class.

Where has the policy for initial mainstreaming come from? Has it just evolved from the time when there were few immigrants, insufficient to create policy? Has practice led to policy, does it have a sound research base, or would it be more true to say that provision for new learners of English in our secondary schools is based on ad hoc coping strategies, differing from school to school?

## PROVISION FOR NESB STUDENTS OVERSEAS

Civil rights groups have expressed concern in some Western European countries at the separation of new immigrants in isolated facilities for intensive (or newcomers', or reception) classes. They have argued that this is a kind of apartheid, that children need to be with their native-born peers for social reasons and to help them learn the language more quickly with the aid of these native speakers. There is a rub-off effect. Germany and France wrestled with these concerns and have sought a compromise whereby students are in a reception class for part of the day and a regular class for the rest of the time (McDonnell & Hill, 1993).

Britain, however, has largely rejected special classes for new immigrants. The most influential reports in Britain to affect policy were the Bullock Report in 1975 and the Swann Report in 1985. The Bullock Report stated: "Common sense would suggest that the best arrangement is one where the immigrant children are not cut off from the social and educational life of the school" (Department of Education and Science, 1975, p. 289).

The Swann Report stated this even more strongly. Chapter 7, entitled "Language and Language Education", states:

5.2 We are wholly in favour of a change from the provision of E2L by withdrawal, whether this has been to language centres or to separate units within schools. (Paragraph 2.10);

5.3 The needs of learners of English as a second language should be met by provision within the mainstream school as part of a comprehensive programme of language education for *all* children. (Paragraph 2.10) (quoted in Brumfit, 1985, p. 204)

As a result, very few intensive English classes exist in Britain today, especially as Section 11 funding was withdrawn for separate language centres.

It should be pointed out, however, that neither the Bullock Report nor the Swann Report discriminates between primary and secondary school age students. Nor were these reports informed by linguistic matters; they were political documents, aimed at achieving an integrated society (Troyna, 1987). Before New Zealand uplifts policy from another country, it would be as well to consider whether we have the same social, political and economic conditions.

United States policy has been shaped by the Supreme Court ruling on *Lau v. Nichols* (1974):

There is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education ... We know that those who do not understand English are certain to find their classroom experience wholly incomprehensible and in no way meaningful." (414 US 563)

In spite of that ruling, reception classes are the exception rather than the norm in the United States, partly because of a move towards bilingual classes where possible, but also because of funding problems. McDonnell and Hill (1993), in their study on educational facilities for new immigrants, came to the conclusion that inner city schools in the districts where most of the new immigrants live "are profoundly troubled and are finding it difficult to provide sound educational experiences to any of their students" (p. 54). However the study, which did report on some schools for newcomers in California, recognised that there had been no research into their long-term effectiveness but "they are clearly schools where students like to be" and the majority performed very well when mainstreamed; 55 percent of students earned a B average or better after their first year and 80 percent of the honours students were former newcomer students (p. 99).

In Canada, meanwhile, the thrust is towards mainstreaming and language across the curriculum (a policy in part influenced by the success of immersion in this country); however, they still offer reception classes for newcomers in the cities.

Australia, the country nearest us in location but not in immigration policy, has had intensive English courses for many years. "Government schools systems in Australia rely heavily upon Intensive Language Centres (ILC) to provide initial instruction to high school children, aged 12-20, of Language Other Than English (LOTE) background" (Wren & Johnson, 1992, p. 33).

The provision for immigrants learning a new language, therefore, differs throughout the world. There has been a singular lack of research on the best provision to make. While for Bullock, "Common sense would suggest that the best arrangement is one where the immigrant children are not cut off from the social and educational life of the school" (Department of Education and Science, 1975, p. 289), "common sense" to Australians means an initial period in an Intensive Language Centre (Rhona Thorpe, personal communication). Since New Zealand is not Britain or Australia, common sense might suggest that we make provision for our new immigrants in a way that is appropriate for us and that the effects of such provision be monitored.

## **THE RESEARCH STUDY**

### **The Subjects**

Two groups of 45 students were compared in terms of their English proficiency and adjustment to school; one group in Christchurch had attended the Intensive English course at Hagley Community College before being mainstreamed, and the other group in Auckland had been mainstreamed from the outset.

Students chosen for the study were in senior secondary classes, fifth form and above, since this is the level where the demands of academic language are most felt. In order to control some of the many variables that are inevitable when comparing two groups of people, students were chosen from only two language groups: Taiwanese and Korean.

They all had limited English when they arrived in New Zealand, ie. they were classified by their ESL teachers as being in Category 1 or Category 2. These are very imprecise categories, signifying that the student has no English or minimal English only. There are no common assessment methods or placement tests in New Zealand so that what is labelled "minimal" by one teacher may be seen as "adequate" by another. It was recognised at the beginning, therefore, that vague classification of the students might lead to difficulties in interpretation of results, as indeed it did.

The students had been in New Zealand, attending a school, for anything from nine months to two-and-a-half years. Students who had attended a private language school before going to their secondary school were eliminated from the results, although six of these were included initially before they identified themselves. These six students did contribute to some interesting observations, however, which will be discussed later.

The two groups of 45 students who are the subjects of this paper were matched in a number of areas. They were matched reasonably well for age, length of time in New Zealand and country of origin. They were not so well matched for immigration status, however, with Christchurch having 32% visa students to Auckland's 13%, or for gender, where the Christchurch group had 45% males and Auckland had 71%. These two factors, immigration status and gender, also complicated the interpretation of the results.

The students sat a variety of tests: vocabulary, listening, writing, reading, cloze and an oral interview. In addition they filled in a questionnaire about their adjustment to school and the New Zealand way of life.

### **Test Results**

Although the Christchurch group had higher mean scores on all tests except the vocabulary test, these differences were not statistically significant except in the case of the cloze test. The Christchurch group performed significantly better in this test, which was a measure of reading and grammatical proficiency, as the words omitted tended to be structural rather than content words. The superiority of the Christchurch group in this test suggests that these students had learnt to pay attention to form as well as to meaning. This superiority on the cloze test also showed with older students in Christchurch (compared with older students in Auckland) and those Christchurch students who had been in New Zealand for 18 months or more, which could suggest that this initial attention to form is more meaningful to older students and stays with them as they add to their proficiency in other areas.

When students were compared by age, older students in both locations (17 years and older) gained significantly higher scores on the vocabulary tests, which suggests that these students responded to the greater vocabulary requirements of the upper secondary levels. Another interesting result showed that those Auckland students who had been in New Zealand for less than 13 months performed significantly better on the vocabulary test than the Christchurch students with the same length of residency, which suggests that students who have been mainstreamed initially have to cope with a greater need to learn vocabulary than those who have had an intensive course.

When the two groups of students were pooled and compared according to gender, the female students obtained higher scores on all the tests. These were significant differences in all cases

except for the vocabulary test. Since the Auckland group contained fewer female students, there is a possibility that this group's scores were depressed. When the two groups were compared according to immigration status, those students who had permanent residency obtained significantly higher scores than the visa students on four of the six tests: the vocabulary test, the cloze test, the reading test and the essay writing test. Since Christchurch had more visa students than Auckland, there is a possibility that scores were depressed on those four tests.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that Christchurch permanent residents performed significantly better than the Auckland permanent residents on the listening, vocabulary and reading tests, while the Auckland visa students performed significantly better than the Christchurch ones on the same tests. At this stage, the results of the visa students who had originally been excluded on account of their private language school attendance were compared with those of the other visa students, and while the numbers are small ( $n=6$ ), they may suggest an explanation for the lower scores of the Christchurch visa students. Their results more closely resembled those of the Christchurch visa students. In Christchurch, visa students with weak English skills usually enrol in Hagley's intensive programme in preference to a private language school (it is cheaper), while in Auckland, only those with stronger English skills enrolled initially in a secondary school programme. In the course of the oral interview, some students commented on their friends' or their own experiences in a private language school. These comments are reported later.

## **Adjustment to School**

### ***1. Questionnaire Results***

The questionnaire was devised to ascertain how confident the students felt in their school and how well they had integrated. Because many of the students were tired after the testing, not all of them completed the questionnaire. It is admitted, also, that a questionnaire written in their home language would have been easier for students, especially if they had been able to answer in that language.

A question which asked the students to identify which problems were major ones when starting at the school where they were mainstreamed showed that the Auckland students rated many factors as major problems whereas the Christchurch students were able to approach their mainstream school with some prior knowledge of things like "the teaching style". "Understanding what people said" was rated as the biggest problem by Auckland students. The comparative ease with which Christchurch students adjusted to their new school is not surprising since it was their second school but, when coupled with a later response concerning how they felt while at Hagley (they overwhelmingly indicated they had felt secure and happy), it seems they did not have to undergo a period of uncertainty.

It is reassuring that very few students in either location identified major problems at the time of testing. They do cope eventually.

When students were asked to rate their own confidence in a variety of oral communication situations, Christchurch students rated themselves as being more confident in speaking and in listening than Auckland students. This difference did not appear in the oral or listening

test scores, however, and may have indicated a perception of confidence rather than actual competence.

Although Christchurch students indicated that they mixed more with their native-speaker peers than did Auckland students, integration may be more a reflection of the racial composition of the schools and the resulting opportunities to mix than of any other factor. Most Auckland schools have a higher concentration of Asian students than Christchurch schools do. Racial harassment was reported to occur in both locations, although it is not known to what extent, since this was an incidental comment by some students and not a major focus of the study.

In answer to a question about what was most helpful in learning English, the majority of students in both locations identified their ESOL teacher as being most helpful in school; about half of all students acknowledged that they had their own tutor to help them out of school. This latter finding would appear to indicate that students are having trouble coping on their own. It may well be an equity issue since not all students can afford their own tutor; if schools are not providing adequately for NESB students, perhaps something more should be done for them, out of school hours if necessary.

One other area of interest was an analysis of School Certificate and Sixth Form Certificate results of those students who had been in a school long enough to qualify. This analysis showed no real differences between those students who had been initially mainstreamed and those who had had a period of intensive English first. This is significant because opponents of intensive courses maintain that such courses hold students back from success in their school subjects. There was no evidence to show this. What did emerge instead was a very low rate of success with both groups: on average, the number of satisfactory grades achieved by these NESB students (i.e., enabling them to move to a higher level class) was two, and usually one of those was for Mathematics. This is further evidence of the length of time it takes to learn a new language for academic study. Most students, however, are in a great hurry and few will accept that they should delay presenting themselves for formal qualifications until they have a better English proficiency. Their subsequent poor results must affect their morale.

Finally, as reported earlier, an additional question for Hagley students concerning their period in the intensive English course yielded many glowing comments about this experience. Nearly all the students reported that it had been worthwhile for them.

## **2. Interview Results**

The interview was designed as a test of oral competency but it soon became apparent that the students had many things to say that were of interest. In particular, about half of the Auckland students talked about how unhappy they had been when they first attended a New Zealand school. One (male) had been depressed and reacted by being truant on many occasions; three (females) admitted to crying when they got home from school for the first three months. Some had felt lonely, some bored because they could not understand what the teacher said. The period of unhappiness for most lasted about six months and nearly all the students reported that they were "OK" at the time of testing. This initial unhappiness should be contrasted with the initial attitude of the students at Hagley Community College. With only one exception, they reported in positive terms. Their introduction to a New Zealand school had been an enjoyable experience.

Some of the Auckland students were asked whether they would advise a friend to attend a private language school first. Most agreed this would be preferable to going into a mainstream class directly, although one or two saw problems in private language schools. They commented on the lack of discipline, especially in the case of truancy, and on the lack of real purpose for secondary school students. They seemed to suggest that students need to get on with their academic subjects.

Another area that yielded interesting comments in interviews concerned relationships between NESB students and their native-speaker peers. Sadly, some Asian students were harassed, although many may have been too loyal to their school to admit it, and few had made friends with native speakers. Most students in both locations mixed with their own language group or with other Asians out of class, yet a large number of students indicated they would like Kiwi friends. Those who had been at Hagley Community College were unhappy at the few opportunities to mix with native speakers while in the Intensive English classes; on the other hand, Auckland students did not report any greater success in mixing with native speakers. One problem is that large numbers of one racial group who, understandably, find confidence in staying together, are intimidating for native speakers. Another difficulty is that of communicating in conversational English with someone who is not very proficient; even the most well-meaning native speaker may soon give up.

The lack of any real difference in mixing with native speakers suggests that initial mainstreaming does not lead to any more integration than a supposedly "separatist" Intensive English Centre. Integration may come when students have acquired the confidence to move outside their group coupled with some facility in spoken English, and time is the most important factor here.

One further subject covered in interviews concerned how much the student spoke in class. Very few students in Auckland or Christchurch mainstream classes were prepared to ask or answer questions or offer comments. Most students remained silent, which meant that very little language practice took place.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

While test results showed few significant differences between the two groups of students, the lack of a baseline test means that there was no real way of knowing how well the students were matched in initial English proficiency. In fact, the initial inclusion of two Auckland students who had clearly not been beginners (in the interview, they revealed that they had had one or two years schooling in an English-speaking country) suggests that categories 1 and 2 were not well understood by some teachers. It was also not known how many students might have dropped out in Auckland, whereas all but one of the ex-Hagley students were followed up. There may also be differences between families who choose one city over another. In any group of people, there are a number of variables that may skew results. Nevertheless, the final sample of 90 students was of sufficient size to suggest some trends.

An interesting, but not unexpected, result in relation to immigration status supports what teachers have long suspected: on the whole, New Zealand schools do not attract academically able or highly motivated visa students. In order to preserve our international reputation, this is a matter of concern, especially when poor academic performance is matched with poor behaviour and attendance.

Perhaps the major conclusion to emerge from this study is the lack of evidence to support those who claim superiority for initial mainstreaming for secondary school NESB students in New Zealand on the grounds of academic success or social integration. Further, many administrators who make these claims, confuse initial mainstreaming with later mainstreaming. All students want to be mainstreamed ultimately, and teachers would support this. However, according to Krashen and Terrell (1983), "comprehensible input" is the major factor in successful language acquisition. It is a waste of time and demoralising for students to sit in a class all day without understanding.

Another very important conclusion from this study is that an intensive English course can give students security and confidence, while initial mainstreaming may be a miserable experience. Surely students have a right to be happy? McDonnell and Hill (1993) express a similar view: "... newcomer schools provide a more focused alternative that ensures recent immigrants fortunate enough to be enrolled in them a richly integrated educational experience, at least for a short time" (p. 99).

### **Future Research**

This research is a start but more needs to be known about the best provision to make for NESB students. Too often educational decisions are based on pragmatic considerations such as funding, or more commonly, decisions are avoided and new students are accommodated without any real thought as to what is best for them.

A similar study to this one but conducted over a period of years to enable base-line and follow up testing at suitable intervals would be useful; even recording exam results at school and later would provide some data. The use of a structured interview for finding out what students think is a relatively inexpensive form of research and one which could be richly rewarding. Teachers may also provide a resource for researchers using a structured interview. New Zealand administrators need to consider the best use of the ESOL teacher's time. Is the teacher best to work with mainstream teachers, both before and during the class, to help make the lesson meaningful to the NESB students; is the ESOL teacher's time best spent by withdrawing a small group of students and if so, what should the teacher do during that time? Overseas - in Australia, Britain and North America - support for the first option is popular and given such titles as "Language Across the Curriculum" or "Learning in the Mainstream", while in New Zealand the second option is the norm. If intensive English centres were the norm, would this change the focus for ESOL teachers? Would the Ministry of Education allocate extra teachers to work alongside mainstream teachers?

The whole area of provision for NESB in New Zealand indicates that immigration has come about rather too quickly for our educational planners. While overseas experience may provide some guide, the variation between countries and the uniqueness of our own situation suggests that we need to make our own policy.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author wishes to acknowledge the support and guidance given by Professor Warwick Elley and Dr John Church of the Education Department at the University of Canterbury. The study was undertaken while the author was a Research Affiliate in the Education Department in the winter of 1994.

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