

# **IMMIGRANT AND PROVIDER PERCEPTIONS OF ESOL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**

**Noel Watts, Cynthia White and Andrew Trlin**  
**New Settlers Programme, Massey University**

## **Introduction**

A number of recent studies and reports have examined different aspects of English language provision for NESB children and adolescents (see, for example, Education Review Office, 1996; Kennedy and Dewar, 1997; Barnard, 1998; Vine, 1998; Barnard and Rauf, 1999; Johnston, 1999; Ministry of Education, 1999; Barnard et al., 2001). However, less attention has been paid to ESOL provision for adult NESB immigrants and refugees.

This article is based on two studies carried out in 2000 that examined the learning opportunities available in New Zealand for such groups. The first of the two studies focused on the informal and formal English language learning experiences of adult NESB immigrants and refugees and will be referred to as the Learners' Survey. The second study (the Providers' Survey) examined the kinds of ESOL programmes provided for adult NESB immigrants and refugees in educational institutions and training establishments. It sought also to tap the providers' perceptions of the needs of ESOL learners and their views on ways in which English language provision for adult immigrants and refugees might be improved.

## **Methodology**

The Learners' Survey involved exploratory interviews, a postal questionnaire and a stakeholder response procedure. As a first step in the study, in-depth interviews were held with recent immigrants in Palmerston North and Wellington in order to explore their expectations prior to arrival in New Zealand concerning English language learning opportunities in this country, their experiences of language learning post arrival, and their response to such experiences. The findings from these interviews were used as a basis for generating a 29-item questionnaire.

In March 2000, after piloting, 377 questionnaires were sent out to Auckland, Wellington and Tauranga ESOL Home Tutor Schemes. Information was supplied to both home tutors and immigrants emphasising that the questionnaire was to be completed by immigrant learners of

English and that home tutors should take care not to influence their choice of response. Home tutors were also given a sheet to complete in which they could give their own perceptions of immigrant experiences of learning English. Two hundred and forty-eight usable questionnaires were returned, which represents a return rate of 65.8 per cent. Fifty-one response sheets were also received from home tutors.

Stakeholders were given an opportunity to provide further perspectives on the results of the survey. Participants in the procedure were 45 home tutors and immigrants from throughout New Zealand, who attended the National ESOL Home Tutor Scheme Conference in New Plymouth in May 2000.

A postal questionnaire was also the basis of the Providers' Survey. A 30-item postal questionnaire was designed after preliminary interviews with senior ESOL teachers in the Manawatu area and discussions with various groups and organisations in Auckland and Wellington which have an involvement in ESOL provision (Skill New Zealand, Work and Income New Zealand, Ministry of Education, National ESOL Home Tutors Association). The questionnaire was sent in July-August 2000 to 155 organisations: state educational institutions (polytechnics, universities, secondary schools), community education centres and private training establishments throughout the country. One hundred and seven questionnaires completed by ESOL managers or senior teachers in charge of ESOL programmes in the educational institutions and training establishments contacted were returned by the due date. This represents an overall return rate of 69.0 per cent. Follow-up interviews were held with senior ESOL teachers and/or managers in 16 of these institutions during October 2000. (For further details of the methodology employed in the Providers' Survey, see Watts et al., 2001).

## **Results**

### **Learners' Survey**

#### *Profile of the participants*

The participants were mainly recent arrivals: 68.9 per cent had resided in New Zealand for less than one year at the time of the survey and a further 16.5 per cent had been here for only 1-2 years. The largest single age category was 30-39 years and almost three-quarters of the participants were female. They came from a total of 41 countries, with the five main countries of origin, the People's Republic of China, Korea, Taiwan, Iraq and the former Yugoslavia. In

terms of educational background, over half of the participants had tertiary, polytechnic or vocational training. However, only 25 per cent were in paid work at the time of the survey.

### *English language learning experiences*

One hundred and fifty-three of the 248 participants (61.7 per cent) had joined English classes in their first year in New Zealand. These classes included polytechnic classes, social English groups, high school or community education classes as well as tuition provided through the National ESOL Home Tutor Scheme. The participants had, however, somewhat negative perceptions of their rate of progress. Of the 153 who had attended ESOL classes, only 30 (19.6 per cent) reported that they considered that they had made “a lot” of progress in learning English in these classes. The participants identified the following as the main problems they had faced in learning English: the cost of English language classes, the lack of bilingual teachers, the lack of opportunities to speak with native speakers of English in ESOL classes, and the inexperience of New Zealanders in speaking with people of other backgrounds.

The participants were strongly of the view that their English language development could benefit from more opportunities to speak English outside the classroom. Two hundred and thirty-six of the participants (95.2 per cent) indicated that they would value more opportunity for interaction with native speakers of English. Over half of them reported that they had “few”, “very few” or “no” opportunities to use English in social interaction. As one ESOL learner observed:

*We learn English but we have nowhere to practise...[I want to] take part in Kiwi activities so that I can use English and learn Kiwi culture.*

The participants mostly spoke English with people while shopping and with New Zealand neighbours and friends. English was used relatively infrequently in the family domain. An important limiting factor in opportunities to use English with native speakers was that the majority of the participants were not in paid employment. It was noted, however, that for those who were so employed, interaction in the work environment was rated as the most useful means of developing English language skills. Other informal ways of extending knowledge of English used by the participants were television, books, newspapers, magazines, films and videos.

### *Changes needed to enhance language learning*

The participants gave a total of 917 instances of ways in which the English language learning situation for immigrants and refugees could be improved. These can be grouped as follows: individual immigrant responsibilities (376 instances), ethnic community responsibilities (200 instances), wider community responsibilities (202 instances) and government responsibilities (139 instances). The overall distribution of responses suggests that participants recognised the crucial contribution of individual effort and commitment alongside that of the community and government.

As far as individual immigrant responsibilities were concerned, these included engaging with learning sources, communicating with the host society, and using self-management strategies. Engaging with learning sources involved preparedness to locate and make maximum use of formal sources of learning (i.e. classes) as well as informal sources such as the media. The participants also recognised individual responsibility for establishing links with the host society, primarily through establishing social networks and friendships with New Zealanders who are native speakers of English. The third domain of individual responsibility related to intrapersonal aspects of self-management, that is the need for individuals to manage their own affective responses to situations which arise.

The participants also considered that more established members of the ethnic community could assume more responsibility for providing assistance to new arrivals. The single largest group of responses related, not surprisingly, to the provision of English language support, followed almost equally by a focus on the role of the ethnic community in society and responsibilities for developing ethnic community networks. Apart from providing direct assistance to new settlers through English language classes (particularly those with bilingual support), the ethnic community was seen as having a key role in providing contacts for new arrivals, helping them to maintain their cultures, and offering a pool of expertise. A further aspect of ethnic community responsibility that was referred to was providing a bridge to the wider society and to government by acting as a representative of the interests of NESB immigrants and refugees.

The responsibilities of the wider community (which was commonly referred to by the participants as "Kiwi" society) related to four main areas: ESOL support, attitudinal factors, activities, and settlement and employment. The main aspect of support for language skills was providing immigrants with opportunities to take part in and learn from conversational



interaction. The second key area of responsibility for New Zealand society as a whole related to having a positive disposition to newcomers, and a degree of openness and a willingness to include them in social activities. A typical comment made by participants in the Learners' Survey was that: "Kiwis need to be more understanding, patient and welcoming to migrants." A further domain of "Kiwi" community responsibility was more practical in orientation and focused on the need for providing information, courses, training and employment opportunities, again with the aim of enabling immigrants to enter the mainstream of economic life and to settle comfortably in New Zealand.

The government was seen as having an important responsibility for funding ESOL provision, for providing centralised information about New Zealand life and society and providing opportunities for orientation to the new society. Translation services were viewed as a source of concern for immigrants and an area in which the government should place more resources. Government responsibilities were also placed within the context of wider responsibilities for the recognition of qualifications and the provision of employment opportunities as a basis for settlement. Overall, there was frustration at the lack of policies designed to assist the settlement of new immigrants and enable them to make productive use of the skills, knowledge and experience that they bring to New Zealand:

*I want the government to have a goal about what immigrants are going to do in New Zealand. Why give [entry] points to migrants who have skills if we cannot use the skills in New Zealand?*

## **Providers' Survey**

### *Profile of the participating institutions*

The 107 participating institutions were spread throughout New Zealand, though the largest cluster was in the Auckland region. They comprised: 32 secondary schools (29.9 per cent), 29 tertiary institutions (27.1 per cent), 26 community centre organisations (24.3 per cent) and 20 private training establishments (18.7 per cent).

### *ESOL concerns*

The institutions that responded identified a number of areas of concern in the current situation regarding ESOL provision for adult NESB immigrants and refugees. Eighty-seven (81.3 per cent) agreed that changes should be made in ESOL provision for immigrants and 75 (70.1 per cent) affirmed that changes should be made in ESOL provision for refugees. In both the

questionnaire responses and the follow-up interviews the strongly expressed view was that immigrants and refugees have diverse cultural, educational and linguistic needs and require flexible learning arrangements to meet their individual circumstances, including choices of course options at different levels ranging from general to specialised. The institutions were attempting to provide programmes to meet immigrant needs, particularly in areas related to preparation for employment or further training. Indeed, specialised courses that linked English language development with academic study skills, work-related skills etc. made up almost half (47.0 per cent) of those offered by the participating institutions. However, the range of courses that can be offered depends on the level of funding available. Less than a third of the respondents agreed that the level of funding from external sources was appropriate for the ESOL services they currently provided.

The respondents also cited a number of problems faced by NESB immigrants that limited their access to ESOL classes. These included personal factors such as lack of confidence, family attitudes and religious belief. Closely linked with this cluster, and particularly important for female caregivers was child minding. The other three main areas of difficulty were the cost of tuition, transport (especially in areas not well served by public transport) and the time of classes. Selection criteria were seen as a problem by private training providers who were concerned about the eligibility restrictions placed on courses funded/managed by Work and Income New Zealand and Skill New Zealand.

#### *Views on changes needed to enhance language learning*

Although the respondents identified a number of measures taken in their institutions to help overcome difficulties of access for adult immigrants and refugees (such as provision of creche facilities, flexible scheduling of classes, multiple entry points to courses and tuition subsidies), they did not agree that responsibility for facilitating access to English language learning was, or should be, their responsibility alone. Seventy-nine of the institutions made comments on different ways in which ESOL provision for adult NESB immigrants could be improved. They provided 182 instances which ranged from government responsibility for overall policy and direction to matters relating to local arrangements. Sixty-eight respondents also gave 135 instances of areas where they would like to see changes in ESOL provision for refugees. In both cases, over half of these instances related to government policy and resourcing as these have a direct effect on the level of ESOL provision available in educational institutions. In this respect, the results of the Providers' Survey differ understandably from those of the Learners' Survey

where the attention of the ESOL learners focused more directly on their own roles and those of the ethnic communities to which they belonged.

At the government level, the providers wanted action to improve access to ESOL for immigrants. A major barrier was perceived to be course fees, particularly at the tertiary level. Support was expressed for a system in which new immigrants and refugees received an entitlement to free or heavily subsidised tuition as of right up to the stage of gaining functional competence in English. Additional funding was required to meet more adequately the costs of hiring teachers, bilingual aides and assistants and the purchase of essential resources. A further problem highlighted was the lack of overall planning. There was also a view that considerably more attention should be given to devising a central system to ensure quality control in ESOL instruction at all levels. In addition, some providers saw the need for a national clearinghouse for ESOL-related information and research. These points were emphasised in the comments made by a senior ESOL manager:

*There is a great patchwork of provision at the moment, with varying standards of accountability etc. I think we've got to streamline that. Within ESOL a National Advisory body is really needed with good representation of the various sectors, and we need a national languages policy. I think a national advisory body, with a national resource centre, with curriculum development and a small secretariat appointed to do this, would have great merit.*

The providers were also conscious that there were areas within their own jurisdiction that need attention. They felt that ESOL courses could be more relevant to the needs of immigrants and refugees. Some felt that there could be more consistency in procedures concerning the placement of students in appropriate classes and on-going assessment of students' progress. More resources and materials were needed, particularly materials of an authentic nature designed for New Zealand conditions. Some institutions felt that greater recognition could be given to offering different modes of delivery to cater for the different situations of immigrants, ranging from classroom-based instruction to individualised packages and distance learning.

The providers considered that there was also a widespread lack of understanding of the needs of ESOL students outside the profession. While those intimately involved in assisting adult immigrants and refugees realised that for many of the new arrivals progress in acquiring English skills is a long and slow process, funding providers (and the wider public) were often

unaware of the extent to which the personal trauma suffered in their homelands can affect the settlement of refugees in New Zealand. Additionally, people with little or no formal education, who may also not be literate in their own language, face a potentially lengthy period of adjustment in a new language and cultural environment and need special support.

A further related problem was attitudinal. The ESOL managers and senior teachers who participated in the Providers' Survey pointed to negative attitudes towards newcomers in New Zealand society which made it difficult for immigrants and refugees to make personal links with native-born New Zealanders. This in turn restricted their acculturation in the New Zealand environment and limited their opportunities to develop confidence in using English in a range of interactional contexts.

## **Discussion**

The two studies approached the situation of adult ESOL learners from different perspectives. In the first study the focus was on the perceptions of the immigrants and refugees themselves of their English language learning opportunities, needs and difficulties, whereas in the second study the views of providers were sought. The two studies also represented somewhat different orientations to gaining proficiency in English: more informal (and inexpensive) learning avenues in the Learners' Survey as against more formally organised, fee-paying, classroom-based instruction in the Providers' Survey. However, the perspectives generally intersect and the findings are congruent over the two studies particularly with respect to the difficulties faced by NESB adults in accessing appropriate learning opportunities, and the responsibilities of different groups for providing these opportunities.

### *Needs and responses*

The Learners' Survey challenges the notion that immigrants and refugees necessarily assume that the host society is primarily responsible for providing the means for them to improve their English skills. The view that emerges from this survey is that the immigrants and refugees realise that they must play their part by seeking out all means possible to develop English competence. To do so may involve making efforts to socialise and converse with native English speakers, using the media (TV, radio, newspapers etc.) to extend their grasp of vocabulary and idiom, or seeking the assistance of tutors. The Providers' Survey adds support to the view that

immigrants are prepared to take a major role in their English learning by highlighting the effort and sacrifices made by immigrants and refugees to enrol in and engage in classroom learning.

ESOL institutions have an obvious key role in attempting to make classes as accessible as is possible and in providing the kinds of courses that the learners themselves feel that they need. In this regard one can note the efforts being made by a number of institutions to seek out ways to assist a greater number of immigrants and refugees with English language needs to enrol in their courses, as well as the development of courses that are more attuned to the specific learning goals of students. In this respect, the situation has changed considerably from that described by Gubbay and Cogill in their report on ESOL provision for adults in the 1980s when the majority of ESOL courses were broad and general in nature (Gubbay and Cogill, 1988). However, the findings of the Providers' Survey indicate that the institutions themselves are conscious of the fact that there is still much to be done to enhance the range and quality of tutored ESOL provision.

ESOL professionals also have a duty to assist learners to continue their learning outside the classroom. If individual learners are to make the best of other more informal opportunities to improve their language skills, then they need to be helped to develop strategies to do this and to know how and when to employ them. Above all, they need the sympathetic encouragement of ESOL professionals to help them prepare for the transition from the somewhat sheltered environment of the classroom to the challenges of the world outside.

The Learners' Survey pointed to the ways in which ethnic communities can assist immigrants and refugees to settle into the new environment and develop confidence in interacting with the host society. Clearly there is a role for educational institutions in this domain as well. Fostering dialogue with local ethnic groups, employing members of these groups as counselors, teachers' aides or bilingual tutors, and involving them in decision making concerning changes to ESOL programmes are important means of developing and consolidating the interface between ESOL professionals, students and the ethnic communities to which the students belong.

Both surveys have emphasised that the wider New Zealand community should assume more responsibility for welcoming new settlers, befriending them, conversing with them, and helping them to develop confidence and fluency. This applies also to helping newcomers to obtain employment and assisting them to adjust to the new workplace environment. Sadly, refugees



and immigrants may face discrimination in social life and in the workplace on the basis of the colour of their skin, their cultural orientation or their accent (see, for example, Basnayake, 1999; Office of the Race Relations Conciliator, 1999). Clearly there is a key role for educational institutions in fostering positive attitudes to diversity and promoting in New Zealand society tolerance and respect towards those who are linguistically and culturally different. Educational institutions can help to achieve such aims by mounting well designed cross-cultural communication programmes as well as by modeling these attitudes and behaviours in all dealings with minorities.

### *Wider policy implications*

What can be provided by ESOL institutions depends largely on support at the government level. Funding is a crucial issue. A common thread that runs through the survey responses is criticism of the funding of adult ESOL education in New Zealand. This reiterates comments expressed in a number of other surveys and reports (McGillivray, 1996; McDermott, 1997; Ho et al. 2000). The respondents in the Providers' Survey were firmly of the belief that any future improvements in the quality and range of ESOL provision depends on a large increase in the level of funding from central government as well as additional financial support from other sources (i.e. local authorities, community groups, the private sector etc.). The consensus view of the providers was that although the costs of funding a properly organised, nation-wide ESOL service for immigrants and refugees might be substantial, "the [personal/social/economic] costs if you don't are worse".

A further problem identified in the two surveys relates to the lack of a central system for supplying detailed up-to-date information and advice on the kinds of ESOL learning opportunities available to new settlers. Similar criticisms of the difficulties immigrants experience in obtaining relevant information and advice with respect to English language learning opportunities, as well as information on other services, have been made by Ho et al. (2000). The absence in New Zealand of a national network of agencies which could help guide immigrants in their choice of ESOL courses contrasts with the availability of Migrant Resource Centres in some overseas countries, notably Australia, which act as a "one stop shop" to provide information and referral services as well as orientation, communication skills and literacy training (Stevens, 1999).

In addition, the language learning opportunities of adult NESB immigrants and refugees are constrained by the uncoordinated nature of ESOL provision in post-compulsory education. There is a lack of cooperation between the different sectors and a marked absence of an overall strategy for adult ESOL provision. This contrasts with the situation in Australia where the Australian Migrant English Program (AMEP), administered by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, provides for up to 510 hours of free tuition for new arrivals who have not reached a functional level in English (Martin, 1998). A similar model is the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programme (see Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2000). Both the Australian and Canadian nationwide programmes fund accredited public and private organisations to provide basic English language instruction to adult newcomers, allow for a variety of training interventions, and include mechanisms for monitoring courses to ensure quality control and accountability (areas of deficiency identified by participants in the Providers' Survey). They also oversee data collection and research, assist in the development of resources and play a part in the professional development of ESOL teachers - activities which closely resemble those that have been proposed in New Zealand as part of a comprehensive national languages policy but which have not yet been acted upon (see Peddie, 1991; Waite, 1992; Watts, 1997; Shackleford, 1997).

## Conclusion

To sum up, there is general agreement in both the Learners' Survey and the Providers' Survey on two main points: (a) that the English language learning needs of many adult NESB immigrants and refugees are inadequately addressed at the present time, and (b) that key stakeholder groups must share responsibility for ESOL learning and support. The NESB adults who participated in the study recognise that they themselves have major responsibilities for their own learning whether this is in the ESOL classroom or in more informal contexts. Apart from the help provided by ESOL professionals, they also look to their own ethnic communities as well as the wider "Kiwi" society to assist them in their language learning by providing a warm, accepting environment in which English language development can flourish. However, while acknowledging the importance of individual and community responsibility, the survey findings strongly point to the need for government action to review the current state of ESOL provision for adult NESB immigrants and refugees and to establish a national policy to

coordinate the present fragmented system. As one of the ESOL teachers interviewed summed up the situation:

*We have a moral obligation, if we are going to take them [refugees/immigrants] to put money where our mouth is - we cannot just say "OK you're now here, you're a New Zealand citizen, you've got PR, now look after yourself"...There needs to be a centrally driven policy and we need to acknowledge that we must put more resources into [assisting] these people.*

Note: The studies reported above form part of the New Settlers Programme at Massey University, a programme of research into the settlement experiences of recent immigrants that is supported by the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology. For further information on the activities of the New Settlers Programme, please see our website: <http://newsettlers.massey.ac.nz>.

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