

Catering for cultural diversity: Supporting NESB students in New Zealand classrooms

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Introduction

In this paper I will discuss current understandings relating to literacy development in Non English Speaking Background Students (NESB), and discuss the implications of these understandings for New Zealand teachers. I do this from my perspective as a part-time teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in New Zealand for the past nine years, and as a special needs primary and early childhood trained teacher since 1973.

I have responsibility for the care of all NESB students at Knighton Normal Primary School in Hamilton. Minimal English Speakers over the age of seven attend my withdrawal programmes but my main function is to support class teachers in their every day programmes and liaise between school and parents. The majority of my NESB students are refugees from Somalia or immigrants from Asia. Knighton School has become multicultural over the past decade and we now have students from thirty-nine different countries.

In terms of personal and cultural development, students from a Non-English speaking background need a great deal of reassurance and plenty of opportunities to succeed. Many of these students have a strongly based teacher-centered view of learning, and need time to adapt to the New Zealand child-centered approach. They may not be familiar with criticizing texts in any way or questioning teachers. Many have experienced educational contexts where they were not permitted to express opinions or make judgements. Some students have

come from literate backgrounds, but they use a different script such as Arabic, Chinese, Macedonian, Korean or Urdu. Others have had no formal schooling and are not literate in their first language. As these students come from such a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, I have found that they learn best when :

- they are treated as individuals with their own needs and interests
- they are provided with opportunities to take part in communicative use of language in a range of activities
- they are given specific help with language forms, skills and strategies to support language acquisition
- they are immersed in language that is comprehensible and matches their interests

This can be achieved within the supportive atmosphere of a classroom that acknowledges and values cultural diversity and offers a nurturing environment. As Cecil (1989) has observed “...the child needs an environment that is visually stimulating, linguistically enriched, and emotionally warm and accepting.” (p. 13)

Classroom climate

It is possible to create an atmosphere in which cultural diversity is accepted and celebrated in the classroom, but this requires teachers who have themselves developed a range of appropriate understandings and strategies. These include:

- NESB students are often hesitant to speak out in front of large groups, so it is important to plan for small group interaction.



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- Open-ended, non-threatening questions are helpful, as are 'prompts', but the question "Do you understand? is unhelpful because most minimal English pupils will reply that they do. It is rude in many cultures to admit that you don't understand as it reflects badly on the teacher's ability to communicate.
- Providing students with literature and resources in their first language (wherever possible) allows them to relax with something familiar, share something of their own culture and keeps up their interest in reading at their own level of ability. By providing first language resources you are also sending a strong message to the child that their culture and language are valued.
- Allowing the child to write in their mother tongue helps the child's self esteem. It is valuable to get some of the work interpreted and display both the English and first language work together.
- Multi-lingual signs around the room are valuable to the child as a tool to build up vocabulary. It is also a good indication to others, especially parents, that this is a multicultural classroom.
- Simple classroom commands and instructions can be written on card in both languages and used by teachers and students. They are particularly valuable to relief teachers coming into the room for the day.

Cross-cultural issues and 'whole language'

Dunn (1991) suggests that:
... whole language teaching carries its own cultural baggage, and we must be careful how we interpret and implement whole language in cross-cultural classroom situations. (p.199)

She warns that the natural learning conditions as described by Cambourne (1987, cited in Dunn 1991) are specific to our culture and based on a middle class European literate history. She does not believe

that the philosophy of 'whole language' is a problem, but we need the cultural information to interpret its use. "*Maintaining the integrity of whole language philosophy in the classroom therefore means teachers must seek out and use culture specific information*". (Dunn 1991, p.203) For example, patterns of thought from oral cultures, such as Somalia, are very different from our own. Literacy as we know it has had little impact on the refugee students in their own country, as the written word was not introduced until 1974 and since then formal education has been interrupted by war. Furthermore, education in Somalia has not been compulsory. There are bound to be difficulties in introducing literacy to an oral based culture.

Children with few concepts about print or with little experience with having books read to them need pre reading and writing experiences to provide a base for formal teaching. (McNaughton 1999, p.8)

This offers a particular challenge to those teachers with limited experience teaching older children (over eight years of age) who have very restricted knowledge of print. As a Ministry of Education (1992) publication explains

Patterns of talking and listening, reading and writing differ from one cultural group to another. For some children from a largely oral background, there is a special need to see their culture given the status of written as well as oral expression – to see it, as Patricia Grace says, "legitimized in literature" (p.12)

Over the past twenty years there has been considerable research into language variation and its implications for schools. Bernstein (1971, cited in Emmitt and Pollock 1991) described these differences in terms of 'restricted' and 'elaborated' codes. He believed that social class determined the use of these codes and that middle class children were able to use both codes. As the elaborated code was the language of school learning,

middle class children were better equipped to succeed.

I have personal experience of beliefs in these codes, having been born into a working class family in the United Kingdom in the 1950s. My father believed that by sending me to a private middle class school and paying for elocution lessons he was enabling me to lose my 'working class' accent, become more proficient in the 'elaborated code of the middle classes, and therefore to gain advantage. My father perhaps shared Bernstein's view of language, that is, from a deficit viewpoint.

Hopefully, teachers today are better able to accept language difference as a variation rather than a deficiency. William Labov (1969, cited in Emmitt and Pollock, 1991) was an American sociolinguist who argued that all languages and dialects should be viewed as being equal in terms of their ability to communicate; they are not deviant or deficient but different.

As a teacher, I know that it is our responsibility to ensure that students are exposed to a wide range of language models, contexts and audiences and to be aware of the judgements we make about different types of speech. We do not all have to sound like the Queen to be worthy! Emmitt and Pollock (1991) argue that

As teachers we need to appreciate that individuals who possess another language as their first language possess a different culture and a different way of creating meaning and reality. If we want our students to relate to school and school learning, we need to accept what students from different backgrounds bring to school and we should not reject their language and customs as being inferior. (p.39)

Supporting students' writing

What a particular cultural group sees as an important use of literacy has a dominant influence on what children believe and the ease with which they learn. By knowing and

accepting the writer's background, teachers can adapt their own ways of teaching to accommodate the needs of the children.

(Ministry of Education, 1996, p.11)

Teachers are able to support students' writing by encouraging them to talk before and after the process. It is particularly helpful if they can engage in some of these discussions in their first language. Modeling the writing process becomes particularly important for NESB students who may be quite unfamiliar with independent writing.

Providing as much visual material as possible to support writing is essential. Children who have had little experience of writing will benefit from supports such as sequence pictures, caption stories, key words. Providing support in these forms helps to simplify the process, and give writers possible starting points. I find that using rebus stories with children allows them to enjoy the process by combining drawing with writing in an informal manner. My students often start the year by writing in their first language and gradually introducing English words into the text. In a short time they can see how their English vocabulary has grown by the increase in English words. Once the students become confident to express themselves in English they are ready to explore the various purposes and types of writing. Emmitt & Pollock (1991) suggest that we should:

... help students to become aware of the appropriateness of different types of language for different purposes and contexts and ... to become competent in using the language of power. (p.57)

Supporting students' reading

Just as babies need a supportive community of speakers when they are learning to talk, students need to be surrounded by written texts, at home and at school, when they are learning to read and write. They

need a classroom environment which is alive with books and reading matter of all kinds, where their own writing is displayed and shared, and where there is ready access to computers, data sources, and word processors. Reading to students should happen almost every day, in all classrooms, and shared and guided reading should be every day activities. (Ministry of Education, 1996, p.15)

Other approaches which we can use to support the reading development of NESB children include:

- Choral reading, which provides a safe opportunity for the NESB student to practice pronunciation; in this context, mistakes are easily masked. Reading simple familiar texts that contain repetition provides NESB students with predictable patterns of language, which they can gradually join in with.
- Following a text whilst listening to it on a tape at slower than normal speed allows the students time to process information, to replay the tape if they wish and also avoid sensory overload in a busy noisy classroom. Students can take the tapes home and share them with their families.
- Buddy reading allows an NESB student to practice reading in a non-threatening way with a peer. However, the peer tutor or buddy reader should have some instruction in encouraging and affirming the reader, and avoiding over-correction and criticism.

Implications for New Zealand Teachers

If teaching practices are to be inclusive of all learners, they must begin with the explicit premise that each learner brings a valid language and culture to the instructional context. (Reyes de la luz, 1992, p.427)

Helping a growing range of NESB children is a relatively new challenge for New Zealand teachers,

as it is only in the last decade that our classes have become increasingly multi-cultural. Pre-service teachers are now learning more about teaching in a multicultural environment but for many experienced teachers it is a relatively new concept. Having sufficient knowledge of the NESB students' existing ideas and skills can be problematic. On a recent professional development visit to language centres in Melbourne I was able to observe translators assessing children in their first language. Until such time that Ministry of Education funding is available for interpreters in New Zealand classroom teachers, in conjunction with ESOL teachers, must do the best they can in terms of assessment and development of appropriate literacy programmes. Our best resource is a sympathetic and informed teacher who has some empathy with, and understanding of, a child's needs.

Many language centres in Melbourne are recognizing the need for children to learn early literacy skills in their first language. Reyes de la luz (1992) challenges teachers to question the assumption that linguistically different students need to be immersed in English as much and as soon as possible in order to succeed. She states that:

Over-zealous interest in having children learn English as quickly as possible for their own good, does not stand up to the body of research conducted over the past twenty years. These studies indicate that bilingual students attain higher achievement levels when allowed to begin literacy instruction in their primary language before transferring to English literacy. (p.434)

This is supported by Cummins (1981, cited in Reyes de la luz 1992) who suggests that when academic concepts and literacy skills are learned in the first language they are grounded in "the language and schema they comprehend" (p.434) and are therefore more easily transferred into a second language. For this reason many Maori families are choosing total or partial

immersion classes in mainstream, Kura Kaupapa and Te Kohanga Reo.

Most mainstream schools in New Zealand are not equipped to offer first language tuition but they can provide opportunities for children to share their culture by inviting NESB adults to come into the school to work with the children, and by celebrating their cultural diversity.

It would be unhelpful and inappropriate to assume that one method of teaching language/literacy would suit all children. It would also be wrong to assume that "instruction that is effective for mainstream students will benefit all students, no matter what their background may be" (Reyes, 1992, p.435). Adaptations need to be made in integrated or 'whole language' approaches to accommodate children who do not yet have the competencies and understandings required to access information within such approaches. Similarly, adaptations must be made in the ways we assess children, so that NESB students have just as many opportunities to demonstrate what they know and can do as other children.

Assessment

Literacy, your own and my own, is inextricably connected to cultural background and life experiences. Culture free assessments afford, at best, a partial and perhaps distorted understanding of the student. (Tierney, 1998, p.381)

Fairness is an important principle when assessing all students, but when working with those from NESB backgrounds we should be particularly aware that they need time to adjust to the expectations and learning activities of New Zealand classrooms before we expect them to demonstrate their learning in assessments tasks of any kind. Children's perceptions of their own learning ability vary widely depending on their past experiences. I have observed many high achieving Chinese children at Knighton School experiencing

difficulties coming to terms with our forms of assessment. They have come from schools where assessment has been mainly summative and programmes have taught 'to the test'. They and their parents take time to understand that the emphasis in the New Zealand curriculum is on empowering children, encouraging them to take shared responsibility in the learning process. Sometimes the family's expectations for immediate success are not realistic and can have a negative effect on their learning. (Black, 1998) notes that:

Traditional summative practices, and the beliefs instilled in pupils which follow from them, not only miss some very promising opportunities, but actually set up obstacles to better learning. (p.134)

Sutton (1992) suggests that:

Clearly, it is possible for the same assessment to be valid for one child and less valid, even invalid, for another because children have different ways of receiving and presenting information. Some read well, others do not. Some children can explain orally much more successfully than they can in writing, while others would express themselves by diagrams or drawings, using a minimum of words. (p.10)

Sutton's sentiments are significant when we consider the NESB student who does not have the English oral skills to respond during assessment. In schools where an ESOL teacher is employed, the class teacher can call on his/her expertise to suggest possible alternative forms of assessment or modify existing ones. As a qualified ESOL teacher, I see it as my responsibility to provide the class teacher with an overall picture of the child's competency in English as well as providing support for assessment and general curriculum work within the mainstream classroom. Early assessments of students with minimal English must depend heavily on observation and systematic record keeping of these

observations. Socially desirable behaviors are also developing at this stage as children come to terms with the unfamiliar demands of a different culture. It is important to make anecdotal notes about these developments.

Assessment in its broadest sense involves considering attitudes, processes, skills and products. It occurs when we observe children, when we interact with children, and when we analyse their language (Gibbons, 1991, p.21)

ESOL students do not wish to feel excluded from classroom assessments and, if the teacher is sensitive to this, she/he can provide appropriate tasks. A recent publication of the Ministry of Education (1999) suggests that, when assessing students, teachers should:

- Choose activities for assessment purposes that are familiar and part of the normal classroom programme
- Use a variety of contexts and tasks over time
- Decide whether language or content is the focus and ensure the assessment task reflects this focus
- Assess oral language by observing and recording students' interactions with their peers as well as with the teacher
- Choose tasks that have a clear purpose and provide some challenge to the student
- Assess the process as well as the product;
- Collect and record the data
- Measure each learner's progress and development over a period of time (p.40)

These suggestions are consistent with a formative approach to assessment, as described by Harlen and James (1997)

Knowing about pupils' existing ideas and skills, and recognizing the point reached in development and the necessary next steps to take, constitutes what we understand to be formative assessment. (p.368)

The diagnostic 'Oracy and Literacy Assessment in English'

booklet developed and produced by van Hees (1999) has recently been introduced to New Zealand primary schools and provides teachers with ready-to-use resources and instructions for assessment. These procedures are designed to facilitate meaningful formative assessment. Van Hees suggests that the role of formative and diagnostic assessment is to inform and influence other educational provision, and that assessment, planning, teaching and learning should therefore be closely interlinked.

Partnerships with Parents

Immigrants and refugees settling in New Zealand have to adapt to a very different education system. They are simultaneously coping with a different set of expectations, an unknown environment, and a different culture. School can be a threatening place, even for adults familiar with the system. For many new settlers it can be very daunting.

It is my job at Knighton School to welcome these new families and gradually break down some of their misconceptions and fears. For many refugees it is their first experience of schooling. For others it is a strange approach to learning where children seem to be enjoying themselves far too much for learning to take place!

Making parents feel welcome and that they can have a significant influence on their child's development takes time. We achieve this at Knighton with our class open-door policies, empathetic and knowledgeable teachers, and the provision of a trained ESOL teacher who can visit the homes and act as liaison person for the families and an advocate for the children. I provide information about our school in several different languages and encourage the family members to share their culture in various ways in the classrooms.

Many of the refugee parents have missed out on their own education as their countries have been at war. For this reason, some are illiterate and are using the taped stories and home contact books that

come home with their children, to teach themselves English. Family members are encouraged to support homework as much as they can and are welcome to borrow resources themselves. By talking to adult groups in the community I have been able to reach out to Somali families in a way that would not be possible during the busy school day. Support Services (such as Migrant and Refugee Services) co-ordinate day classes and courses for home tutors and families, and these have provided opportunities for me to reach the families who are generally too apprehensive to approach schools directly.

Knighton also has a Chinese parent support group that meets to discuss school related topics and arrange fund raising events. We are gradually building up relationships with our NESB parents. It takes time and effort on the part of the school but the positive impact it has on the children is evident. Parents are attending parent/teacher talks, coming to support cultural events, and supporting homework. They are beginning to allow their children to take part in out-of-school events, such as camp and sports days.

My experience indicates that successful partnerships between teacher and parents depends on empathy, a child centered focus, a multilevel teaching approach, and a relationship of trust.

Conclusion

... even when their (NESB students) language puts children at a potential disadvantage at school, they continue to have the same capacity for learning as all other children. Given appropriate school experiences and intervention, and high expectations by their teachers, they can and do achieve at the same levels as their peers who are already familiar with the language of the school. (Gibbons, 1991, p.7)

As teachers embrace cultural diversity they can see what a richness it brings to their classes. My observations have shown that

successful teaching of NESB students starts with an attitude of high expectation, and an ability to adapt programmes and expectations to the needs of the child. Teachers who prioritize good relationships with their students, and make behaviour and learning expectations clear, are the best teachers of both English first language and NESB students. I agree with Gibbons (1991) who concludes that

All children have the right to leave school with the skills which will put them in control of their own lives, Their life choices will very largely depend on the skills, attitudes and values they have acquired at school. (p.119).

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