

Non-English Speaking Background Learners in New Zealand Schools

Essay Review of Kennedy, S., and Dewar, S. (1997) *Non-English speaking background students: a study of programmes and support in New Zealand schools*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, Research and International Section.

ROGER BARNARD

University of Waikato

ABSTRACT: *Kennedy and Dewar provide a report of programmes and support for some of the NESB (non English speaking background) learners in New Zealand schools. The report provides some useful information and practical guidelines for action but it is argued that there are broader, more crucial issues involved than those considered. It is necessary to appraise the intercultural implications of school curricula, provide appropriate teacher development, and conduct appropriate research. A national languages policy which would embrace appropriate language-in-education policies is also required.*

KEYWORDS: *New Zealand; schools; cultural differences; intercultural programs*

INTRODUCTION

As a result of changes in the immigration policies of successive governments over the past fifty years, there are large numbers of NESB (non-English speaking background) learners in New Zealand schools. Although an increase in targets for immigrants in the business category announced by the Minister of Immigration in December 1997 may have the effect of adding to that number over the next few years, the present economic crisis in East Asia may also temporarily deter potential immigrants from that area so that the number of NESB learners may stabilise in the short term before rising again. This presents an opportunity for educational planners in all sectors of the system to review the present situation, and develop strategies to cope with what will undoubtedly be an even more common phenomenon in our schools during the 21st century than it is now - multilingual and multicultural classrooms.

In 1992, there were reported to be 41,194 NESB students in New Zealand schools - one in every fourteen students - of whom over 31,000 were considered to need assistance with English (Atkinson, 1992, pp. 26-28). The national curriculum for English (Ministry of Education 1994, p. 15) points out that "students from language backgrounds other than English should work towards the same objectives for English as native speakers" but adds, "they will approach the objectives differently and may at times be working at different levels from most of the class." (ibid). It is worth noting that, in the extensive 'Teaching, Learning and Assessment Examples' which follow this statement (pp. 44-138), no specific mention is made of different routes or levels appropriate to NESB learners, nor suggestions made to teachers about how the planning and execution of their lessons may be varied to better take these learners into account.

A decade ago, Richards and Hurley (1988, p. 52), after reviewing relevant research in other countries, pointed out that there was a clear need to carry out empirical studies in New Zealand to facilitate the planning and evaluation of appropriate programmes for LEP (limited English proficiency) students. Nevertheless there has continued to be relatively few New Zealand studies carried out in this area. There have been some studies of Pacific islands learners' performance in relation to Maori and Pakeha children in terms of reading (Townsend & Townsend, 1990) and in general scholastic achievement (Fergusson, Lloyd & Horwood, 1991). Smaller projects with groups of learners were also carried out into shared reading by Cambodian mothers and children (Glynn & Glynn, 1986), responsive reading by bilingual readers using computers (Glynn, 1990), bilingual peer tutoring (Chai, 1990) and the benefits of first language use among Samoan high school students (Lameta-Tufuga, 1994). Two very interesting case studies of schools were reported in the late 1980s: Peddie and Penfold (1987) evaluated the work of the English Language Teaching Unit at Mount Roskill Grammar school in Auckland; while Cazden (1989) and May (1992) reported a very different approach to the treatment of multilingual learners at Richmond Road Primary School in Auckland. On a somewhat broader scale, Syme (1995) surveyed and tested about 90 students in Auckland and Christchurch with a view to ascertaining whether intensive language provision was more suitable than mainstreaming NESB students in secondary schools. More recently, Chu (1997) considered stereotypes of Asian-Chinese students in secondary schools and the reality they faced. On the whole, however, given the increasing numbers of these students in our schools, it may be fairly said that not enough research of the sort recommended by Richards and Hurley (1988) has been undertaken.

KENNEDY AND DEWAR'S RESEARCH

In these circumstances, Kennedy and Dewar's (1997) addition to the body of local research is entirely welcome. Theirs is a report of interviews conducted in 1995 with just over fifty educational professionals working in fourteen primary, intermediate and secondary schools located in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. The schools had been identified as having good ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) programmes and policies in place in respect of NESB students. Distributed to all schools in the country at the end of 1997, the report is clearly targeted at school teachers both in the mainstream and in ESOL units, but is equally - if not more - crucial reading for principals and Boards of Trustees. One hopes, too, that others in the community, such as parents, politicians and government agents (such as those responsible for placing refugee children) will digest the contents and take appropriate action to review attitudes and practices.

The first chapter sets out the rationale for the study, and provides details of the methodology and research informants; it concludes with a reminder of the relatively small-scale nature of the study, and the strengths and weaknesses of its largely qualitative approach. The next three chapters briefly describe the social and individual factors which influence the NESB students' ability to learn English, and the points which need to be taken into consideration in the planning and provision of ESOL programmes. The heart of the book lies in chapters 6 and 7; the former describes the programmes provided by the schools in focus in the report and the latter draws from data on the characteristics of good programmes for NESB students. The next two chapters outline what needs to be done in, and by schools, to bring about such programmes and the resources required. The report

ends with several short chapters dealing with issues such as the maintenance of the first language - a matter more fully discussed by Shameem (1997) - as well as the problems of balancing different needs within schools, and practical tips for schools with NESB students.

The immediate implications

Of considerable practical value to teachers and schools are the fifteen 'exhibits' presented in the central chapters of the report. These include suggested policy statements, questionnaires, job descriptions, course outlines, advice for in-class support of various kinds - all of which can be used to stimulate negotiation and decision-making within schools to enable them more appropriately to deal with the multilingual and multicultural reality that many of them face. The need for proper negotiation about appropriate provision and programming within schools is lent urgency not only by the increasing numbers of NESB learners in our schools, but also by the practical consequences of the very recent changes to the Ministry of Education's resourcing in this area. For several years, the Ministry operated a five-point scale, according to which students in the first four (and, since 1994, only the first three) categories attracted discretionary funding. In 1997, this funding amounted to a maximum of \$225 for each NESB learner in his or her first half year in New Zealand, and \$75 in each year thereafter. As Franken (1995, p. 7) has remarked, this amount "would barely cover the cost of a year's supply of school newsletter for that one student."

Kennedy and Dewar report (p. 4) that in the June 1997 Budget it was announced that there would be an increase of funding for NESB students over the next three years. These changes are summarised in the *New Zealand Education Gazette* (Smith, 1997). A sum is now available which could provide an annual ceiling of \$500 per NESB student deemed to need English language support for a maximum of three years, with an additional sum of \$500 allocated to schools for each quota refugee student in the first year of residence in New Zealand. The five-point scale has been replaced with a more comprehensive and potentially more accurate set of assessment procedures; these were piloted in late 1997 and will be fully trialed in 1998. While these procedures will require more work by teachers, both ESOL specialists and their mainstream colleagues, the increase in funding should enable schools to provide considerably more assistance than hitherto. For example, a school with thirty NESB students may be able to afford a full-time teacher aide with the funding it receives. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that this amount of financial assistance will be enough to do more than put a band-aid on what, in some circumstances, may be a festering wound. In the words of the refugee child whose account is given by Kennedy and Dewar (1997, p. 289):

To begin with, I felt very alone and cried a lot, and there were some girls there who didn't like me. Once, one of them came up to me and said, "I hate your guts". At the time I didn't know what this meant, but when I found out, I felt very bad.

Wider Issues

The above anecdote signals the problem that the problem is only partially one of providing adequate language support for NESB students. Deprecatory attitudes towards speakers of languages other than English are widely held in New Zealand, frequently aired for instance in letters to newspapers, and on radio and television programmes. To counter such attitudes and their negative impact on NESB learners in particular, there is a need not merely for linguistic support, but also a concerted effort to review the intercultural knowledge, attitudes and practice of all learners, whether NESB or otherwise.

The national curriculum document for English makes it clear that NESB learners add valuable language resources and experiences to the classroom and that "the prior knowledge, first language, and culture of each student should be respected and incorporated in English programmes" (Ministry of Education 1994, p. 15). However, neither this document nor the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education, 1996) specifies the schools' obligation in developing these elements in their programmes, nor practical suggestions for inculcating such respect among their learners. The capability of schools to deal with these matters depends on a number of factors, of which perhaps the most important is the general cultural - and intercultural - ethos of the school. In addition, the number and distribution of minority-language students is important, as is the provision of appropriate learning materials, and the availability of trained teachers who are attuned to the culture and/or speak the language of NESB learners.

One resource brought by some NESB learners which was neither mentioned in the Curriculum Framework nor specifically discussed by Kennedy and Dewar is their direct financial contribution. An increasing number of schools in some areas derive funds from foreign full-fee-paying (FFPS) students, and some schools are aggressively marketing themselves both within New Zealand and abroad. According to Dale and Robertson (1997, p. 221) the number of FFPS students in secondary schools almost trebled between 1992 and 1995: almost 4,000 enrolled in secondary schools in 1995, with a smaller number in primary schools. There are various options available for net funds derived from fee-paying students once the \$700 levy for each student has been paid to the Ministry: the money could be included the consolidated school fund and generally disbursed; it could be deployed to benefit only the fee-payers themselves - perhaps by the provision of a special suite of rooms as well as teaching staff; the funds could be used for the benefit of all NESB learners in the school - for example by paying for ESOL specialists throughout the school, thereby reducing the amount for ESOL programmes otherwise diverted from operational grant monies; or the money could pay for one-off projects - possibly capital outlays on plant or equipment.

While any or all of the above strategies could be justified, it would be very unfortunate if fee-paying NESB learners are seen merely as milch-cows providing additional finance for schools. It is incumbent on schools to provide educational, rather than merely financial, justification for the recruitment of overseas students in order to ensure that they - and the rest of the school - derive tangible curricular benefit from the multilingual and multicultural diversity which they offer. Without responsible policies in schools, NESB students - whether fee-paying or otherwise - may get caught in the crossfire of disputes about the derivation and allocation of resources. As Kennedy and Dewar (p. 5) make clear, if NESB students are not properly integrated and seen as valued members of the school community in their own right, they will become emarginated both to their own detriment and to that of the school as a whole. Moreover, the reputation of New Zealand education will suffer if fee-paying students, their parents and the home communities do not feel students are getting real value for money.

As Kennedy and Dewar's report also points out (ch. 8), there needs to be systematic professional development for teachers with particular reference to language and culture across the curriculum, which should include guidance on how conditions might be created for reciprocal intercultural awareness-raising in their classrooms. An opportunity for proper consideration of this matter was missed in the recent Green Paper on teacher education (Ministry of Education, 1997). Reference was made to the challenge to teachers created by the increasing proportions of Maori students, students from Pacific islands

and 'other ethnicities'. This "requires them [teachers] to take on changing roles and responsibilities in response to the diverse needs and expectations of the communities from which these students come" (Ministry of Education, 1997, p. 13). However, while noting that the teaching profession should reflect the cultural diversity of New Zealand (p. 7), the Green paper has very little to say on the matter of linguistic and cultural awareness-raising among teachers, other than the need to increase the number of Pacific Island teachers (p. 23), and a vague reference to teachers having a "functional competence" in, among other things, the ability to relate knowledge of cultural and linguistic diversity to teaching (p. 31).

The development of policies of language across the curriculum and the linguistic education of teachers should also be part of a wider national languages policy. Such a policy - including, but not limited to, language in education - would seek to identify linguistic priorities, rights and obligations, as well as provide direction and establish and allocate resources. The idea of a national languages policy has been floated for some time now. A decade ago, Corson (1988, p. 45) considered that "this country has every prospect of developing a national language policy that could be a model for other small countries to follow". In 1990, the Ministry of Education announced the development of a comprehensive language policy "which will be a set of nationally agreed principles to enable decision-makers and the community to make choices about language issues in a national comprehensive and balanced way" (Hollis, 1990, p. 12). The ensuing report (Waite 1992a, pp. 18-21), set out the priorities for public policy in terms of: (i), the revitalisation of Te Reo Maori; (ii), second-chance adult literacy; (iii), children's ESL and first language maintenance; (iv), adult ESL; (v), national capabilities in international languages, and (vi) provision for services in languages other than English. Kaplan (Kaplan, 1992), a senior Fulbright scholar, who had also been commissioned by the Ministry of Education to investigate the language situation, reported independently, but contemporaneously with Waite. He urged the government as a whole - not merely the Ministry of Education - to define and implement a comprehensive language policy. The following year, Roger Peddie submitted the second of two reports (Peddie, 1991; Peddie, 1993) to the Ministry of Education, in which he discussed in more detail than Waite or Kaplan ways by which a comprehensive languages policy could be articulated at national, regional, systemic and institutional levels (Peddie, 1993, pp. 95-112).

Despite all these steps, a national language policy for this country has never been developed. Shackelford (1997) has documented the history of the language policy project and suggests two reasons for its failure: firstly, the design and management of the project itself; secondly, the educational reforms which have been taking place during a period of broader political and economic change.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it has been shown that some steps are being taken to ameliorate the traumatic situation faced by some NESB learners. It has, however, also been suggested that many of the measures highlighted by Kennedy and Dewar may be missing the real point, which is not one of language support but of greater intercultural awareness. Many of the NESB learners do manage - sometimes very rapidly - to acquire sufficient English to enable them to cope with the academic demands of school, but there is a need for a systematic appraisal of the socio-affective implications of current school practices. Perhaps one small measure might be the formal re-identification of the students who are at the

heart of the issue; acronyms such as NESB, LEP, ESL, etc. tend to focus on a deficit situation, and the adoption of terms such as 'bilingual learners' or 'multilingual learners' would not only be more accurate but also promote a positive image of what we would wish all our students to become. (While beyond the scope of this article, it is equally appropriate to ensure that the positive attributes of the term 'bilingual' apply also to those learners in our schools who are following programmes in Te Reo Maori.)

Clearly, there is an increasingly urgent need for more empirical research into the actual learning contexts in order for curricula to be designed, evaluated and improved. Some studies may well focus on specific ESOL programmes, but others should consider the means by which language and culture are transmitted and received within the classrooms at all levels of the school system - to examine what Agar (1994) has termed the 'langaculture' of the school. More interdisciplinary collaboration is desirable between educationalists and linguists, so that insights from educational theory - for example, neo-Vygotskian concepts of the zone of proximal development, scaffolding, and appropriation - might be incorporated by applied linguists in studies of second language socialisation.

In the meantime, many schools - including, but not restricted to, those reported by Kennedy and Dewar (1997) - are implementing their own language-in-education policies. There are grounds for supposing that the wheel is often being reinvented, and national coordination of such local policies is needed to avoid considerable waste of effort and time. This leadership could be included in the remit of a national languages research institute (Crombie & Paltridge, 1993), which would also undertake a major role in the formation of a more comprehensive national language policy along the lines suggested by Waite (1992), Kaplan (1992) and Peddie (1993). Only when there is sufficient, explicit and effective political support for such a policy may we expect all New Zealanders to be properly proud of our multicultural and multilingual heritage as we enter the 21st century.

CORRESPONDENCE

Roger Barnard, Department of General and Applied Linguistics, University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton, New Zealand.

Email: rbarnard@waikato.ac.nz

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