

Meeting the needs of English language learners: How well prepared do beginning New Zealand primary school teachers feel?

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Abstract

The New Zealand Curriculum (2007) and other recent Ministry of Education publications have stated that effective teachers attend to the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners, many of whom are English language learners (ELLs). A small-scale survey of Provisionally Registered Teachers (PRTs) who had completed primary teacher training within the last four years was carried out. It was thought that these teachers would be most able to recall any preparation for teaching ELLs in their Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme. The teachers were asked whether their ITE had provided them with knowledge about second language acquisition, specific learning needs of ELLs, and resources and strategies for teaching ELLs. The data obtained indicated that the PRTs felt underprepared to meet the needs of ELLs, particularly in some areas. This paper presents the results of the survey, and suggests implications, directions for further research and recommendations for teacher educators.

Introduction

New Zealand is an increasingly multi-cultural society, and this is reflected in the school population. A recent OECD report found that the percentage of students with an immigrant background in New Zealand schools had increased by five per cent or more between 2000 and 2009. (Ministry of Education, 2012a). The Ministry of Education has recently identified 161 ethnic groups, from 158 countries, speaking 116 languages, present in New Zealand primary and secondary school classrooms (Ministry of Education, 2012a). The Ministry estimates that immigrant-background learner numbers have grown in this period from 20 to 25 per cent of the student population (Ministry of Education, 2012a), a figure which is supported by statistics of students from non-European and non-Maori ethnic backgrounds. These students numbered 175,909 in 2012, (Education Counts), and it is likely that a majority of these are also English Language Learners (ELLs).

However, in 2012 only 32,487 students were deemed to have a level of English entitling their schools to receive ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) funding assistance. The large majority of these, numbering 25,789, were found in primary schools (Ministry of Education, 2012a). The Ministry acknowledges that the number of ELLs in New Zealand schools is much greater than the number who receive funding assistance, as it includes a range of other students in addition to ESOL-funded students among those who may be considered as ELLs: previously funded ESOL students; International Fee Paying (IFP) students; students from homes where a language other than English is spoken; students transitioning from Māori-medium to English-medium learning environments; students from bilingual education settings; some students with specific, identified language learning needs (Ministry of Education, 2011).

The comparatively low numbers receiving ESOL funding assistance can be explained by the Ministry's system of determining which learners are eligible for funding: Learners who exceed a benchmark of 112 points according to the Ministry's ESOL Funding Assessment Form are not eligible for funding, yet a chart shown in the Assessment Guidelines shows that a student is considered 'close to cohort' only when a score of 135 is reached (Ministry of Education, 2004, p.98). The funding system therefore renders ineligible students who are above the benchmark, but who are still below the level of their cohort. It is perhaps not surprising to learn that "Students who are learning English as an additional language are over-represented in the group of students who are not achieving at expected levels" (Ministry of Education, 2011).

With significant numbers of ELLs, and limited funding available, demands are placed on teachers with ELLs in their classroom, whether or not these learners receive ESOL funding. If funding is provided, learners may receive some extra assistance in the classroom, which is most likely to come from a teacher aide. However, teacher aides need to receive direction from the classroom teacher, a specialist ESOL teacher, or other teacher in charge of ELLs (Ministry of Education, 2008a), and specialist ESOL teachers are usually only available in schools with larger numbers of ESOL-funded learners. As a result, "EAL [English as an additional language] students may receive only a few hours of additional help a week, and the majority of their time is spent in the mainstream class" (Haworth, 2009). If ELLs are not eligible for funding, teachers themselves may be solely responsible for meeting their needs.

Over the last decade, the Ministry of Education has produced a number of resources for working with ELLs, designed to assist mainstream teachers to take on the major responsibility for teaching ELLs. For example, the English Language Learning Progressions (ELLP) document “explains what ESOL specialists and mainstream teachers need to know about English language learners in order to maximise their learning and participation” (Ministry of Education, 2008b, p. 2). The ‘ESOL Online’ web site opens with the words “Welcome to ESOL Online - a site for teachers to respond to the needs of their English language learners” (Ministry of Education, n.d.). Similarly, the Ministry has provided an online professional learning module ‘Meeting the needs of English language learners’, designed for school leaders to use with their teachers. (Ministry of Education, 2011). There are also a number of other resources available for teachers (see Ministry of Education, 2012b). This situation is also found in other countries where numbers of ELLs have increased in recent decades. In the US, it is noted that “As numbers of ELL students increase, general education teachers are expected to assume greater responsibility for the learning and educational progress of these students” (Elfers et al, 2009). In the UK, Cajkler & Hall (2009, p. 154) report that “The teaching of EAL is the responsibility of all teachers through the policy of mainstreaming”.

It was decided to carry out a survey of Provisionally Registered Teachers (PRTs) in primary schools, teachers who have completed their ITE but are not yet Registered Teachers. Most PRTs gain full registration within a three year time frame, although this can be extended to six years (New Zealand Teachers’ Council, n.d.) These teachers were selected for three reasons: the majority of learners receiving ESOL funding are found in primary schools; beginning teachers are most likely to be able to recall any preparation for teaching ELLs that was in their ITE programme; and the authors had heard anecdotally, through working with teachers in schools and in a specialist ESOL teacher training programme, that ITE programmes may not adequately equip new teachers to work with ELLs. The research question asked was: How prepared do beginning New Zealand primary teachers feel they are to meet the needs of English language learners?

What should beginning teachers know about teaching ELLs?

The New Zealand Teachers’ Council, the body responsible for the initial training and registration of teachers in New Zealand, has published a list of seven Graduating Teacher Standards (2007). Of these, only one subsection of the first Standard explicitly refers to working with ELLs, stating that graduating teachers should “have content and pedagogical content knowledge for supporting English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners to succeed in the curriculum”. Of the remaining six Standards, four refer to the teaching of ‘diverse learners’, ‘diversity’ and/or ‘cultural factors’. In new Zealand, the term ‘diverse learners’ can cover a wide range of learners, including special needs children, gifted children, and many others. Nevertheless, there is a clear expectation from the first Standard that teachers will gain the necessary knowledge in their ITE programme to enable them to begin working with ELLs with some confidence.

Review of ITE programme

The research participants reported that they had completed one of two ITE qualifications at one university in the location of the study – the Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) and the Postgraduate Diploma in Education. The authors conducted an online search of the papers offered in these programmes, with the aim of identifying any that included the teaching of ELLs. All paper titles and paper descriptions in these programmes were examined for the

terms 'English language learners', 'ELLs', 'ESOL', 'English as an additional language' or 'EAL', and whether papers were required or optional.

It was found that there were no papers in either qualification which included these terms in the title or paper description. However, there were two papers listed which appear highly likely to contain content relevant to teaching ELLs. These papers were: 'Working with Cultural/Linguistic Diversity' (Required, Bachelor of Teaching), and 'Second Language Learners and Learning in Mainstream Classrooms' (Optional, Postgraduate Diploma in Education) (The University of Waikato, 2013a, 2013b). There were also papers offered that included the term 'diverse learners', and these may also include the teaching of ELLs, but time constraints meant that it was not possible to determine this.

Previous research

Although the authors are not aware of other New Zealand research in this specific area, there have been similar studies conducted elsewhere. In a small-scale qualitative study in Northern Ireland, Skinner (2009) investigated the perspectives of 15 primary and post-primary teachers, some recently qualified and some experienced, on their preparation for teaching EAL. Recently qualified primary teachers commented on the lack of EAL training, as well as their lack of basic skills to cope with EAL learners, while experienced teachers reported that they had learned skills for working with ELLs through school-based professional development. Teachers reported that they wanted practical strategies to help them to teach and assess ELLs, as well as a better understanding of second language development.

In England, Cajkler & Hall (2009) conducted surveys and interviews with 139 newly qualified primary teachers over three years, focussing on their experiences of initial training for EAL. Less than 50% of the teachers felt that their ITE programme had been 'very good' or 'good', and there was a wide variation in the teachers' perceptions of their ITE programme's effectiveness. The researchers concluded that 'initial training was strong on raising awareness of issues', but "less effective in offering examples" (p. 165).

In the U.S., Serna and Meier (2010), conducted a study with 15 pre-service teachers about to exit their ITE programme. The study's aim was to explore candidates' perceptions of their preparation to teach ELLs, and found that teachers felt "reasonably well prepared to work with English language learners"(p. 2772). However, teachers also reported that they felt concerned about their ability to teach beginning ELLs, that they did not have enough observation of good practice in teaching ELLs, and that they needed more opportunities to practice teaching ELLs.

Overall, there seems to be "a lack of systematic training for EAL at ITE level" (Skinner, 2009, p. 76). It is suggested that "schools of education typically prepare their prospective teachers to work with amorphous 'average students' – who are by implication middle class, native, English speaking, and White (Cummins & Miramontes, 2006, p. 240). In other words, "Teaching ELLs is considered a matter of applying 'just good teaching' (JGT) practices developed for a diverse group of native English speakers" (de Jong & Harper, 2005, p. 102). Murakami (2008, as cited in Skinner, 2009, p. 76) suggests that this belief is also "grounded in the idea that pupils will 'pick it up' as they go along". However, this has been largely discredited by the research of Cummins (1979, as cited in Skinner, 2009), whose distinction between everyday informal English (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills, or BICS), and formal academic English (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, or CALP), is known by teachers who receive specialist ESOL training. These teachers are aware that while

BICS develop over two to three years, CALP develops over a much longer period of time, from five to seven years. However, teachers who receive general teacher training may assume that ELLs who have become fluent in English after two or three years do not need additional assistance.

Without a focus on teaching ELLs in ITE programmes, there is also an expectation that teachers will learn how to work with and meet the needs of ELLs ‘on the job, by adapting their general teaching skills (Skinner, p. 76). Murakami (2008, as cited in Skinner, 2009, p. 76) asserts that this is inadequate, as teachers without specialist training “can only act upon what they feel is right – even though it may fundamentally be wrong”.

Research Methods

Participants

‘Convenience sampling’ was used to obtain the participation of 20 PRTs, beginning with any we personally knew, and with teachers we knew who had PRTs in their schools. Of the 20 participants, 16 reported that they had completed the three-year Bachelor of Teaching (Primary), and four had completed the one-year Postgraduate Diploma in Education. Fourteen teachers had completed their qualification within the year prior to the research, with the remainder having graduated within four years prior to the research.

Survey

The content of the survey, containing 34 items, was largely determined by the content of A the online professional learning module, ‘Meeting the needs of English language learners’ (Ministry of Education, 2011), which outlines expected teacher knowledge and behaviour in regard to ELLs. Each item began with the words “My initial teacher education programme provided me with”, and ended with a brief description of an aspect of teaching or working with ELLs. Participants were asked to rate items on a five-point scale from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. Items in the survey were grouped under the following headings: Knowledge of second language acquisition; Gathering information about ELLs; Knowledge of the specific learning needs of ELLs; Knowledge of resources for teaching and assessing ELLs; Knowledge of strategies for teaching and assessing ELLs. The survey ended with an invitation to make comments about how well their ITE programme had prepared them to meet the needs of ELLs, which 17 participants responded to. The survey is available from the authors on request.

Findings and Discussion

Survey results

When ratings were converted to figures (5 for ‘strongly agree’ through to 1 for ‘strongly disagree’), total scores ranged from 34 through to 117, out of a possible of 170, with a mean of 86.2. It was found that the lowest possible rating of 34 was given by two teachers who had completed the one year Post-Graduate qualification. When we looked at the scores of the two other teachers who had completed this qualification, their total scores were also low, with totals of 73 and 74.

As seen in Table 1, the overall pattern of responses was in the neutral and ‘negative’ area, with more PRTs disagreeing and strongly disagreeing with the survey items than agreeing or

strongly agreeing. None of the PRTs strongly agreed that their ITE programme provided them with skills or knowledge for teaching ELLs, and only 25% agreed that any aspect of their ITE programme provided them with relevant skills or knowledge, and that was only in two of the five areas asked about.

Table 1: Summary of Survey Responses

Sections of survey	Percentage (%) of PRTs who responded:				
	Strongly agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly disagree (1)
1) Knowledge of second language acquisition	0	25	35	25	15
2) Gathering information about ELLs	0	10	55	25	10
3) Knowledge of specific learning needs of ELLs	0	25	50	15	10
4) Knowledge of resources for teaching ELLs	0	5	35	45	15
5) Knowledge of strategies for teaching and assessing ELLs	0	0	40	50	10

A further indication of this pattern was seen in the responses to items asking PRTs to give an overall rating for each section. For example, the item at the end of Section 1 was: “Overall, I feel that my teacher education programme provided me with adequate information about second language acquisition.” As seen in Table 2, the mean responses for these questions were consistently lower than half of the possible score of 5, with only one section reaching half of this.

Table 2: Mean Rating of Overall Items

Sections of survey	Mean rating (out of a possible 5)
1) Knowledge of Second Language acquisition	2.35
2) Gathering Information about ELLs	2.20
3) Knowledge of Specific Learning Needs of ELLs	2.50
4) Knowledge of Resources for Teaching ELLs	2.15
5) Knowledge of Strategies for Teaching and Assessing ELLs	2.15

Areas of most preparedness

Next, we looked at the items which received the highest and lowest mean scores, indicating areas where participants felt most and least prepared for teaching ELLs. Only five items

in the survey received a mean rating of more than 3 out of a possible 5. As seen in Table 3, four of these items were from Section 3 of the survey (Knowledge of specific learning needs of ELLs), which also received the highest mean rating overall (Table 2). However, the highest mean rating of 3.85 is still only in ‘neutral’ to ‘agree’ area. The authors also noted that three of these items (2, 3, and 4) relate to literacy and oral language skills, which would naturally be a core focus of any primary ITE programme.

Table 3: Aspects of ITE Programme Rated Most Positively

Mean rating	Item	No. of PRTs who rated this item as:				
		5*	4	3	2	1*
3.85	1) My teacher education programme provided me with an awareness of the need to cater for English language learners in the classroom. (Section 3, Item 1)	5	11	2	0	2
3.10	2) My teacher education programme provided me with information about the difficulties that ELLs may have in the development of their oral skills. (Section 3, Item.4)	1	9	3	5	2
3.25	3) My teacher education programme provided me with information about the difficulties that ELLs may have in learning to read in English. (Section 3, Item 5)	1	10	4	3	2
3.10	4) My teacher education programme provided me with information about the difficulties that ELLs may have in learning to write in English. (Section 3, Item.6)	0	10	4	4	2
3.10	5) My teacher education programme provided me with strategies I could use to gather information about the cultural background of ELLs. (Section 2. Item1)	0	10	4	4	2

*5 = Strongly agree; 1 = Strongly disagree

Teachers’ Comments

Some of the comments made by participants supported the finding seen in Table 3 that they felt that they were given an awareness of ELLs during their training. However, the following comments also reveal that their training lacked specific knowledge about meeting the needs of ELLs.

- “I feel I was made aware of the difficulties in teaching ELLs and the struggles they may have in a mainstream class, but I feel I have not had enough information on how to best plan and teach them in a classroom that my have children with their own learning difficulties.” (Teacher 1)
- “I do have a limited understanding of ESOL students and their needs but not at a level where I am prepared and skilled to meet these students’ needs.” (Teacher 5)
- “I feel that you were made aware of learning needs for ELL and resources including assessments and why and how ELL learn, but were not given enough in-depth

knowledge of specific ways of helping these learners, rather we were given – this is an ELL learner, they have different needs.” (Teacher 6)

Areas of least preparedness

Finally, we looked at the areas where the PRTs indicated that they felt least prepared. As seen in Table 4, there were two items which received a mean rating of less than 2. Almost all of the PRTs (18 and 17 respectively) gave these two items a rating of 1 (strongly disagree) or 2 (disagree).

Table 4: Aspects of ITE Programme Rated Most Negatively

Mean rating	Item	No. of PRTs who rated this item as:				
		5*	4	3	2	1*
1.85	1) My teacher education programme provided me with knowledge and skills which would enable me to use the ESOL Assessment Form. (Section 4, Item 4)	0	0	2	13	5
1.95	2) My teacher education programme provided me with knowledge or skills that would enable me to use the ESOL Online web site. (Section 4, Item 6)	0	0	3	13	4

*5 = Strongly agree; 1 = Strongly disagree

Although the first of the two areas above, using the ESOL Assessment Form, is often the responsibility of a specialist ESOL teacher, it is clear that mainstream teachers are also expected to have an understanding of assessment processes for ELLs (Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 4). Similarly, the second area, the ‘ESOL Online’ web site, has information and resources for all teachers, including units of work which integrate language and content learning.

Both of these areas were in section 4 of the survey, which focussed on PRTs’ Knowledge of resources for teaching ELLs. As seen in Table 2, this section and section 5 – Knowledge of Strategies for Teaching and Assessing ELLs – received the lowest overall ratings. These findings clearly indicate that PRTs felt least prepared in these two areas.

Teachers’ Comments

Some of the comments provided by the PRTs supported the overall result seen here, and they also seem to indicate that they were made aware of resources and strategies for teaching and assessing ELLs in the context of learning about literacy or cultural diversity:

- “We were introduced to ELLP but not taught how to assess or cater for the needs of ELLs in the classroom – which I think needs to be taught.” (Teacher 7)
- “English Language Learners was a topic covered only briefly as part of the literacy paper one year. They certainly made us aware of the issue, but didn’t provide us with enough specific information regarding strategies or assessment.” (Teacher 9)

- “I believe literacy taught us a little and we discussed the cultural backgrounds of English language learners. Resources were shared although I feel there could have been more learning for us.” (Teacher 16)
- “Did a lot of focus around the cultural difference within the classroom but less on the languages themselves and practical resources/approaches to meet the demands of learning English for these students.” (Teacher 17)

Overall preparedness to teach ELLs

The results seen in Tables 1 and 2 above point to an overall lack of preparedness to teach ELLs, and participant comments confirm this. Seven PRTs asserted that they had learned nothing or very little about ELLs during their ITE programme, with two of these coming from the PRTs who had strongly disagreed with every item in the survey (Teachers 12 and 18). All seven of these comments are included here, as the authors feel that the PRTs’ words reveal the extent of the lack of preparedness felt by the teachers:

- “I do not feel as if my teacher education programme prepared me to meet the needs of my ESOL learners.” (3)
- “During my teacher qualification the only time ELL or ESOL was discussed and referred to was only in one literacy paper and only for one week. The second paper was an inclusive education one in which ESOL again was discussed for only one week.” (5)
- “English Languages Learners was a topic covered only briefly as part of the literacy paper one year.” (9)
- “Unfortunately this issue wasn’t formally addressed (at all) during my course despite there being ample need and opportunity (during lectures and class time) for this. The course has left it up to the school who employs their graduates to educate and inform their teachers on the best way to teach ELL ☹ ” (12)
- “Can’t remember spending much if any time learning about English language learners” (11)
- “Extremely under prepared to help ESOL children. Everything I do has been by talking/asking others and searching myself. ” (18)
- “I was/am really disappointed by the lack of information we were provided with. I came into teaching blind with how to teach/work with ELLs apart from using my own common sense.” (20)

Some of the teachers expressed a desire to learn more, with the following comments being made:

- “I feel enormously guilty that I am not adequately catering for their needs. I am now going to speak to my mentor teacher about how to cater for their needs more effectively. Thank you for bringing this to my attention.” (2)
- “I intend to go to PD as it becomes available.” (18)

Limitations of the study and further research

The authors are aware that the results of the study are not generalizable, and that a larger sample, more representative of the general population of PRTs, is needed to ascertain whether the trend seen in the results applies to PRTs in general. The study is also limited by the fact that participants attended only one institution, and a survey of teachers who had completed a wider range of ITE programmes would add to the reliability of the results. Purposive

sampling of PRTs to include equal numbers of one-year and three-year graduates would also confirm whether there are differences between these two groups. In addition, there were no comments from the PRTs referring to their teaching practicum experiences, so participants may have assumed that they should refer only to the theoretical learning experiences in their ITE programme in completing the survey.

Given that most PRTs in the current study felt underprepared to teach ELLs at the end of their ITE programme, a useful area for further research would be to investigate PRTs' experiences during their first year of teaching. How much do they 'learn on the job' about ELLs? How confident do they feel after their first year of teaching about meeting the needs of ELLs? The learnings from 'first year experiences' could feed into both ITE programmes and induction programmes for PRTs.

Conclusion, implications and recommendations

Although the number of PRTs surveyed was small, a clear pattern has emerged from the data obtained. While the PRTs felt that they were made aware of the needs of ELLs, they also felt that they were not provided with enough knowledge or skills for working with ELLs, especially in regard to resources and strategies for teaching and assessing ELLs.

This has implications for beginning teachers, school leaders, and those who train teachers. The teachers themselves are faced with a steep learning curve if they are to work effectively with ELLs, if they receive very little knowledge or experience of working with ELLs during their ITE programme. School leaders such as Principals will need to ensure that beginning teachers undertake professional development in this area. The results also point to a need for changes in ITE programmes, if teachers are to feel prepared to meet the needs of ELLs.

The authors therefore recommend that ITE programmes in New Zealand, whether undergraduate or postgraduate, consider including more core papers about meeting the needs of ELLs, with a particular focus on resources and strategies for teaching and assessing ELLs. There are guidelines and recommendations related to preparing all teachers to meet the needs of English language learners readily available in the literature, based on research surrounding pre-service teachers' or new graduates' views of their ITE programme (e.g. Samson & Collins, 2012; NALDIC, 2012; Skinner, 2010; Calkjer & Hall, 2009), and changes made to existing ITE programmes to increase pre-service teachers' knowledge about teaching ELLs (e.g. Costa, McPhail, Smith and Brisk, 2005). Teaching Practicum periods could also be designed to include a specific focus on, and opportunities for working with, ELLs. These changes would acknowledge the significant presence of ELLs in our schools, and help prospective teachers to feel better prepared and more confident about their ability to work with ELLs.

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