



## What Do New Zealand Secondary Mainstream Teachers Know About Their English Language Learners?

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### ABSTRACT

*Recent New Zealand Ministry of Education publications have made it clear that mainstream subject teachers in secondary schools are expected to play an increasingly important role in the English language learning of English language learners (ELLs), rather than this being the concern of specialist English language teachers. The first step for mainstream teachers is to obtain information about their ELLs, and a number of resources have been provided for teachers to use. This paper reports on the results of a survey of the knowledge that secondary mainstream teachers have of their ELLs' background and their level of English proficiency. The findings showed that secondary mainstream teachers' knowledge of their ELLs varies, but nearly all of the teachers perceived that knowledge of their ELLs is important, and they reported that they would like to know more. The research has implications for secondary mainstream teachers in general, and for those who train or provide professional development for secondary mainstream teachers.*

### INTRODUCTION

The education of English language learners (ELLs) is an area that has received some focus in New Zealand in recent years as the number of ELLs in New Zealand schools has increased. Recent statistics show that almost 23 percent of students in New Zealand schools are likely to be learning English as a second or additional language (total numbers of Pasifika, Asian, 'Other' and International students) (Education Counts, 2010). This figure alone would seem to warrant a particular focus on ELLs. However, students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are also 'over-represented in statistics of under-achievement' in New Zealand (Price, 2008, p. 8). This is confirmed by the Ministry of Education (2010, p. 30) statement that 'New Zealand [also] has the largest gap in achievement in the OECD for English Language Learners (ELLs)'.

Most New Zealand secondary teachers work 'in the mainstream', that is, with pupils whose learning needs, it is considered, can best be met by the

'regular' classroom environment. In the case of ELLs, this means 'immersing language-minority immigrant students in all-English curricula, with or without special support' (Wang, Many & Krumenaker, 2008, p. 66). Benefits for ELLs of mainstreaming are said to include 'access to the regular curriculum, integration with language-majority students, and an authentic context for learning academic English' (Clegg, 1996, as cited in Wang, Many & Krumenaker, 2008). The extent to which ELLs are mainstreamed in New Zealand seems to depend partly on the English language skills of the ELL and partly on the resources of the school to provide specialist English language teaching. However, the most common situation for ELLs who are above foundation level in secondary schools is to be placed in mainstream classes for some or all of the time and for some to perhaps be 'withdrawn' for ESOL support.

The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p. 16) states that 'students who are new learners of English or coming into an English-medium environment for the first time need explicit and extensive teaching of English vocabulary, word forms, sentence and text structures, and language uses'. There are, therefore, pressures on mainstream teachers to 'provide appropriate teaching environments and strategies which are effective in engaging culturally and linguistically diverse students' (Price, 2008, p. 9).

A number of teacher professional development resources have been developed to assist teachers to work with ELLs (see Ministry of Education, 2012). Foremost among these is the English Language Learning Progressions (ELLP) document (Ministry of Education, 2008a), published in hard-copy and online, which has been designed to 'explain what ESOL specialists and mainstream teachers need to know about English language learners in order to maximise their learning and participation' (p. 4). It is suggested that the progressions be used 'to identify stages and patterns of progress in the language development of English language learners in years 1–13; to analyse the complexity of oral and written texts; [and] to monitor and report on English language learners' progress' (p. 4).

The Ministry of Education also maintains the ESOL Online web site, which is described as 'a site for teachers to respond to the needs of their English language learners' (Ministry of Education, n.d.a). The site includes a sizeable collection of resources relating to student needs and teacher needs, information about reporting progress, and online teacher forums. Another key resource is the ESOL Funding Assessment Guidelines (Ministry of Education, 1999a), which include the ESOL Assessment Forms. These must be used by all schools applying for additional funding for ELLs, and mainstream and/or ESOL teachers are required to assess the language skills of ELLs against a national cohort. There are also several DVD and print resources which provide suggestions for and examples of principles for working with ELLs (Ministry of Education, 2004, 2007b, 2008b, 2008c).

Borg (2006) has reviewed a large number of studies in the area of teacher cognition, which he defines as 'what teachers think, know and believe' (p. 1). Borg suggests that 'understanding teacher cognition is central to the process of understanding teaching' (p. 1) and that teacher cognition research has 'provided evidence of the way in which teachers' beliefs and knowledge influence what teachers do in the classroom' (p. 40). However, he also cautions that there is no direct link between teacher knowledge and classroom practice as there are 'social, psychological and environmental factors which exist in

schools and which teachers may perceive as being beyond their control' (p. 40). The framework formulated by Shulman (1987, as cited in Borg, 2006, p. 19) for classifying teacher knowledge includes 'knowledge of learners and their characteristics' and it is this area of teacher knowledge that the current study is focused on.

The principle of knowing the learner is considered of such importance that it is listed as the first of seven principles of effective teaching and learning for ELLs recommended by the Ministry of Education (n.d.b). It is summarised as, 'Know your learners – their language background, their language proficiency, their experiential background'. It is reinforced in the New Zealand Curriculum document (Ministry of Education, 2007a), which states that the curriculum puts 'students at the centre of teaching and learning' (p. 9). Knowledge of learners' background is important because 'it is essential that teachers respect and value students for who they are, where they come from, and what they bring with them from their experiences' (Ministry of Education, 2011). Knowledge of ELLs' English language proficiency 'will help teachers to choose content, vocabulary, and tasks that are appropriate to each learner's age, stage, and language-learning needs'. (Ministry of Education 2008a, p. 2). The implication of this principle is that mainstream teachers 'need to develop a rich knowledge and understanding of who their students are, what they bring with them, and their learning strengths and needs' (Ministry of Education, n.d.c).

## **THE PRESENT STUDY**

Knowledge of their ELLs is the starting point for mainstream teachers in working with these learners and is therefore a valuable area for research. To the best of the author's knowledge, this is an area that has not been investigated to date. The research reported here, therefore, addresses the following questions:

- 1) What do secondary mainstream teachers know about the background of their ELLs, and how important do they perceive this knowledge to be?
- 2) What do secondary mainstream teachers know about the English language level of their ELLs, and how important do they perceive this knowledge to be?
- 3) How do secondary mainstream teachers obtain knowledge about their ELLs?
- 4) Do secondary mainstream teachers think they know enough about their ELLs?
- 5) Are there any factors that have prevented secondary mainstream teachers from obtaining knowledge about their ELLs?

Secondary mainstream teachers of English, Science, Mathematics or Social Science were sought to participate in the research. It was hoped that teachers from these subject areas would be likely to be aware of the importance of knowledge of their ELLs as professional development materials have been

produced for teachers of these subjects (Ministry of Education, 2007b, 2008b). Of the eighteen participants, ten reported that they were English teachers, two Social Science, three Mathematics and four Science. Two teachers reported teaching more than one subject and two teachers skipped the question.

The participants had between 18 months and 35 years of teaching experience, with seven having 20 or more years. Seventeen held a Bachelor's degree and/or a Graduate Diploma in Teaching, with one holding a Master's degree. Five participants reported having completed all or part of a specialist TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) qualification. Eight participants reported that they had completed some professional development for teaching ELLs. However, they all reported that this was obtained as part of their Teaching degree or TESOL qualification; only one reported having done a course related to teaching ELLs in their subject area.

Participants were asked to complete an online questionnaire. Questions were of two types: those which asked participants to select from a list of possible answers and those which asked participants to provide short answers. It was not compulsory to answer every question and one or more participants chose not to respond to some questions. The number of participants responding to each question is indicated in the Findings section below, and percentages are based on the number of responses.

## **FINDINGS**

### **1) What do secondary mainstream teachers know about the background of their ELLs, and how important do they perceive this knowledge to be?**

As seen in Figure 1, the aspect of learner background that was most well-known was 'country of birth' (13 teachers). However, 16 teachers rated this knowledge as being very or somewhat important knowledge. Next well-known was whether their ELLs were receiving ESOL tuition at school (11 teachers) but 17 rated this as very or somewhat important. 10 teachers knew their ELLs' first language, but 18 rated this as very or somewhat important. Eight teachers knew 'some' aspects of their learners' culture but 17 also rated this as very or somewhat important knowledge.

The remaining areas were known by very few of the teachers. Only three teachers knew about their ELLs' educational background and about the length of time they had been living in New Zealand. Only one teacher knew if their learners were receiving ESOL tuition out of school hours and none knew about their learners' home living situation. However, a high proportion of teachers rated these areas as very or somewhat important.

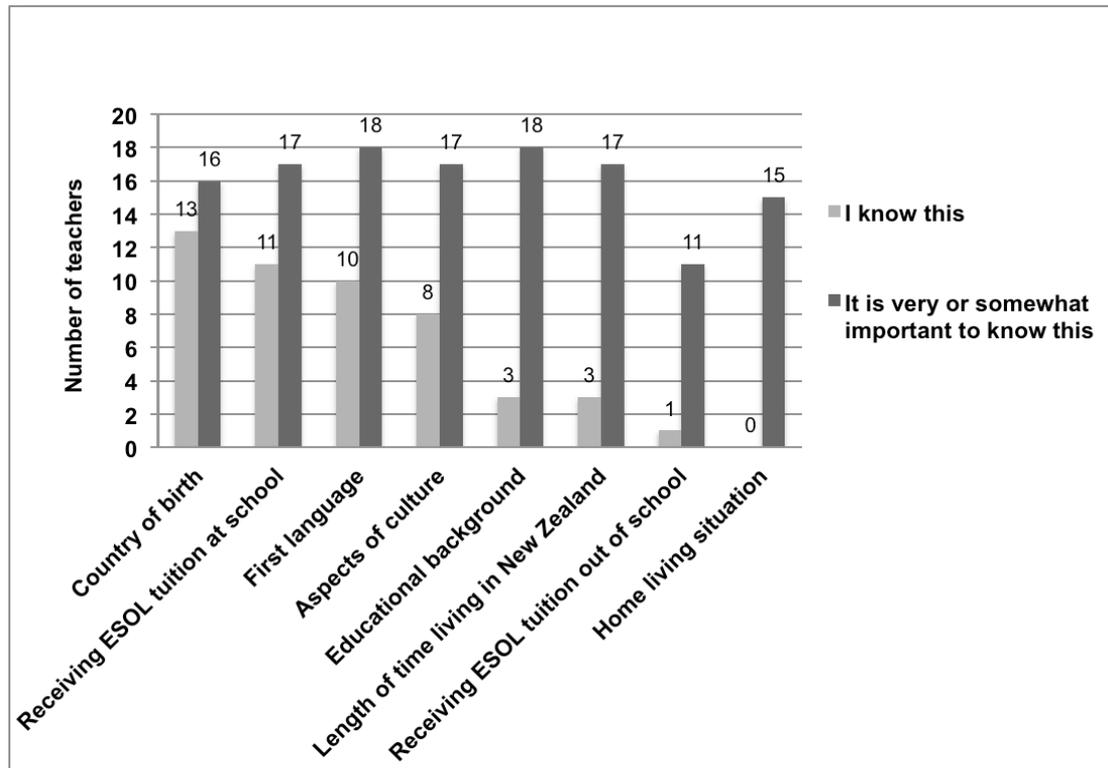


Figure 1. Teacher knowledge of ELLs' background and its perceived importance

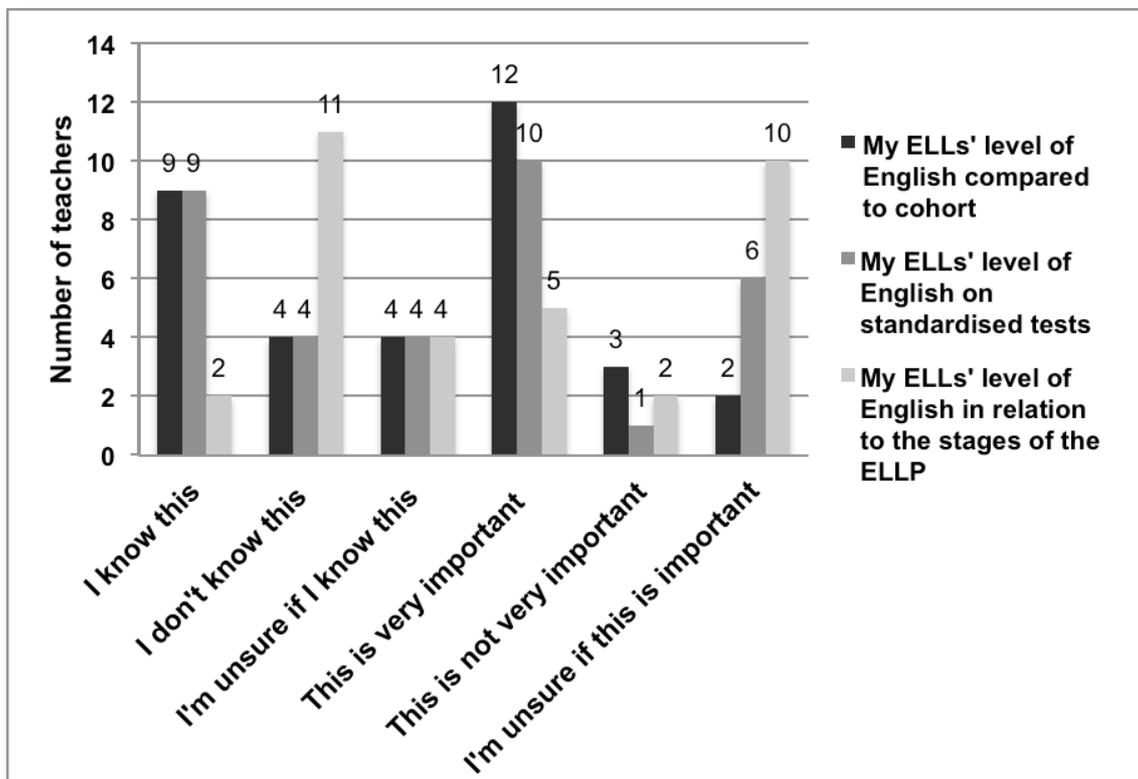
Teacher awareness of the importance of obtaining knowledge about their ELLs was supported by responses to an open-ended question asking teachers about how information about ELLs' background had helped them. Eight of the twelve teachers who responded indicated that that this knowledge enabled them to better cater for their ELLs' learning. Comments about this included: 'Good starting points on whether students can handle mainstream English requirements or will need a more individualised programme'; 'It has helped with understanding the level to pitch the subject at'; 'Educational background has been helpful as it allows scaffolding'; and, 'It helps me respond to their needs in the classroom'.

## 2) What do secondary mainstream teachers know about the English language level of their ELLs, and how important do they perceive this knowledge to be?

Only five of the 17 teachers who responded to this said they have 'a good knowledge' of their ELLs' general level of English while 11 said they 'have some knowledge' and one reported 'very little knowledge' of this. 14 reported that it was 'very important' to know their learners' level of English although the other three were 'unsure' how important it was.

Teachers were also asked to indicate whether they knew what their ELLs' level of English was in relation to their cohort on standardised tests and according to the stages of the English Language Learning Progressions (ELLP). These findings are shown in Figure 2. While nine of 17 respondents reported that they knew their ELLs' level of English compared to their cohort, 12 felt it

was 'very important' to know this. Two teachers were 'unsure', and three reported that this was 'not very important'. Nine teachers reported that they knew their ELLs' results on standardised tests, with four responding negatively, and four unsure, and 10 teachers reported that it was important to know the results of standardised tests for ELLs. One said it was not very important but six were unsure if this knowledge was important. Only two teachers reported that they knew their ELLs' level of English according to the stages of the ELLP with 11 reporting that they did not know this and four unsure. Five teachers thought that knowledge of their ELLs' level of English according to the ELLP stages was 'very important' with two responding that this was 'not very important' and 10 teachers reporting that they were 'unsure' if this was important.



**Figure 2.** Teacher knowledge of ELLs' level of English and its perceived importance

### 3) How do secondary mainstream teachers obtain knowledge about their ELLs?

Fifteen of 18 teachers reported that they had obtained information about their ELLs' backgrounds from the students themselves and the same number reported that it had been obtained from the ESOL teacher while only six teachers had obtained information from school records. When asked where they would go to find out more information about their ELLs, 15 teachers reported that they would go to the ESOL teacher with 14 also going to the students and five to school records.

Sixteen of 17 respondents reported that they had obtained information about their ELLs' level of English from their own observations in class and the same number from assessments in class. 12 had obtained information from the

ESOL teacher and only three had used school records. Unfortunately, they were not asked where they would go to find out more information about their ELLs' level of English.

#### **4) Do secondary mainstream teachers think they know enough about their ELLs?**

When asked if they felt they knew enough about their ELLs' backgrounds, only 5 of 18 teachers reported that they knew enough with the remaining 13 reporting that they did not know enough about their ELLs (8 teachers) or were unsure (5 teachers). In regard to whether they would like to know more about their ELLs' level of English, 13 responded positively, with only two teachers stating that they did not want to know more about this, with two unsure.

#### **5) Are there any factors that have prevented secondary mainstream teachers from obtaining knowledge about their ELLs?**

Ten of the 16 teachers who responded to this open-ended question indicated that 'time' had prevented them from finding out more about their ELLs' backgrounds. While four teachers said that there was 'nothing' that had prevented them from finding out more, three indicated that the 'language barrier' was a problem and two reported that poor school records (as a result of information not being supplied by families) were an issue. Regarding knowledge of ELLs' level of English, nine of the 15 who responded simply wrote, 'time', 'lack of time', or 'the time factor' had prevented them from finding out more about this. Four teachers said that there was 'nothing' that had prevented them from finding out more and one reported 'a lack of knowledge concerning ELLP stages'.

## **DISCUSSION**

Two overall patterns emerged from the findings regarding teacher knowledge of ELLs' backgrounds. Firstly, there were varying degrees of teacher knowledge in this area. Although between half and two-thirds of the teachers knew about their ELLs' country of origin, their first language, and whether they were attending ESOL classes at school, it is disappointing that this easily obtainable information was not known by all the teachers. Other aspects of background were known by less than half the teachers and some information was not known by any. This is also disappointing given that various Ministry of Education resources contain lists of the type of background knowledge which is important for teachers to obtain (e.g., Ministry of Education, n.d.b, 1999b, 2008a).

Secondly, teachers' reported knowledge of their ELLs' background lagged behind their perception of what is important for them to know. Overall this can be seen as a positive finding as teachers may be open to finding out more about their ELLs, having identified all aspects of learner background as being important to know. This is supported by the finding that almost three-quarters of the teachers reported not knowing enough or being unsure whether they knew enough about their ELLs' backgrounds.

Regarding teacher knowledge of ELLs' level of English, it is perhaps a concern that the highest number of teachers who reported knowing anything about this was ten; this was in regard to standardised tests. The finding that only two teachers knew about their ELLs' level of English proficiency in relation to the stages of the ELLP, and only five teachers felt it was important to know about this, may also be a concern given that this document had been disseminated to all schools at least 18 months prior to the survey for use by all teachers. In addition, more than half of the teachers reported being unsure about whether knowledge of ELLs' level of English in relation to the ELLP was important. However, a positive finding of the research was that three-quarters of the teachers said that they would like to know more about their ELLs' level of English.

Another finding to emerge from the research was the role of ESOL specialist teachers in schools. It appears that mainstream teachers in the survey see ESOL teachers as being important sources of knowledge about ELLs but mainstream teachers also obtain as much information directly from their ELLs. This may reflect practical necessity rather than a preference for either source of information and would seem to be borne out by the finding that a slightly higher number of teachers reported that they would go to the ESOL teacher than to their ELLs to find out more information about their ELLs' backgrounds.

A further key finding of the research was that 'time' was consistently reported as the main factor that had prevented teachers from finding out more about their ELLs' backgrounds and their level of English. Although this may not come as a surprise to teachers reading this report it is nevertheless something that clearly needs to be reckoned with if teachers of mainstream subject classes are to utilise available resources to obtain information about their ELLs.

A limitation of the study is that the data obtained was self-reported and teachers may have under- or over-estimated their knowledge of their ELLs. The study is also limited by the fact that a majority of the survey questions were 'closed-response'. Although this type of question is quicker to complete and analyse than data from interviews or other open-ended instruments it also does not allow participants to 'add any remarks, qualifications and explanations to the categories, and there is a risk that the categories might not be exhaustive, and that there might be bias in them' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 382). Supplementing the questionnaire with interviews or other ways of gathering more qualitative data would have enabled a fuller understanding of mainstream teacher knowledge of their ELLs. It would perhaps also have helped to fill in any gaps that there may have been in the design of the survey questions. For example, teachers were not asked what *helped* them to obtain information about their learners, only what *prevented* them from finding out more about their ELLs.

It would be useful, some 18 months to two years later, to conduct the survey again with a different group of secondary mainstream teachers to see whether their knowledge about the background and the English level of their ELLs is higher than that found in the present study. Perhaps over the intervening time there has been sufficient professional development to raise teachers' awareness of the principle of 'Know the learner' in relation to their ELLs and of key resources such as the ELLP. Further research could also include interviews with teachers, which could provide more in-depth information

about their responses, including underlying causes of teacher knowledge or lack of it.

A logical extension of the research in this paper would be an investigation aimed at determining efficient and effective ways for secondary mainstream teachers to obtain the information about their ELLs that they need and which they have acknowledged is important for them to have. This could in turn lead to an investigation into the type of ongoing professional support that secondary mainstream teachers would most prefer in working with ELLs given the constraints that they face. Some valuable work has been done in this area with learners of different ages by Vine, Alton-Lee and Klenner (2000), Price (2008), Haworth (2009) and Feryok & Barkhuizen (2008) in the New Zealand context. In the international context, some who have investigated this are Mittica (2003), de Jong & Harper (2005), and Wang, Many & Krumenaker (2008).

## **CONCLUSION**

Teachers of mainstream subjects in New Zealand secondary schools are fortunate in that there are a number of resources available to them if they wish to acquire knowledge about their ELLs. However, the current study, although it is relatively small, has found that these resources are under-utilised. Secondary mainstream teachers have indicated in this study that they acknowledge the importance of obtaining information about their ELLs, and they would like to know more, but they have also indicated that a lack of time (and to a lesser extent other factors) has prevented them from learning more about their ELLs. This creates a challenge not only for teachers but also for school leaders and school management.

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Sue's current research interests are focused on investigating the knowledge that teachers in schools have of their English language learners (ELLs) and strategies for teaching them, and the preparedness of beginning teachers to work with these learners. One of her goals is to determine ways in which the professional development needs of teachers for teaching ELLs can best be met.

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