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# A CHANGE FOR GOOD: ADVOCATING FOR BETTER SUPPORT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS. PART I: LANGUAGE AS A BARRIER

**Daryl Streat, M.A. - Lincoln University, Canterbury, New Zealand**

## **ABSTRACT**

This article is the first in a two-part series. The first focuses on some issues facing ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) support for international students in English-speaking countries, such as New Zealand. This includes a focus on the TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) practitioners who are tasked with providing this support. The second part will aim to offer some solutions for institutions that wish to move towards a more inclusive model of support that overcomes the language-as-barrier mentality and begins to provide ESOL support which is more inclusive and effective. Part I highlights the lack of support for international students (at the secondary and tertiary level) within New Zealand. Current models have enabled New Zealand institutions to reap the economic benefits of international students, while in some cases failing to provide sufficient ESOL or academic support for these students. In addition, this model has fostered working conditions for TESOL practitioners which are marginalised and under-resourced. Given that existing professional bodies claim to advocate for students and staff alike, it is proposed that a shift in leadership within the ESOL sector is required.

## **KEYWORDS**

International student support - ESOL - Education Leadership - TESOL

## **RESUMEN**

Este artículo es el primero de una serie de dos. El primero se enfoca en algunos problemas relacionados al apoyo de ESOL (por sus siglas en inglés, English Speakers of Other Languages - Hablantes del inglés pero cuya primera lengua es otra) para estudiantes internacionales en países de

habla inglesa, tal como Nueva Zelanda. También incluye énfasis en los profesionales TESOL (por sus siglas en inglés, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages - La enseñanza del inglés a hablantes de otras lenguas) quienes son los encargados de proveer este apoyo. La segunda parte buscará ofrecer algunas soluciones para instituciones que desean avanzar hacia un modelo más incluyente de apoyo que supera la mentalidad de la lengua como barrera y empieza a proveer apoyo ESOL el cual es más incluyente y efectivo. La Parte I enfatiza la falta de apoyo a estudiantes internacionales (en los niveles secundaria, preparatoria y superior) dentro de Nueva Zelanda. Los modelos actuales han posibilitado a las instituciones de Nueva Zelanda cosechar los beneficios económicos de los estudiantes internacionales, mientras que en algunos casos han fracasado en ofrecer apoyo ESOL o académico para estos estudiantes. Además, este modelo ha fomentado condiciones laborales para los profesionales TESOL quienes están marginados y carentes de recursos. Dada la demanda de los profesionales de abogar por los estudiantes así como por el personal afín, se sugiere que es requerido un cambio de liderazgo dentro del sector ESOL.

## **PALABRAS CLAVE**

Apoyo para el estudiante internacional - ESOL - Liderazgo Educativo - TESOL

## **International Students - The New Zealand Context**

Over the past 25 years, there has been a massive increase in international student mobility, from 1.3 million students globally in 1990 to 5.0 million by 2014 (ICEF Monitor, 2015). While an increasing number of international students are choosing to study in Asia,



many still choose destinations in which English is the medium of instruction. 53% of all international students worldwide originate from Asia (OECD, 2015, p. 360) and will probably have a first language other than English, necessitating some form of language support. In fact, of the 5 million international students in 2014, two-thirds studied English in some form (ICEF Monitor, 2015).

New Zealand has experienced a similar growth and has a very high number of international students. More than 1 in 5 entrants into a bachelor's qualification are international students, far exceeding the OECD average of 9% (OECD, 2015, p.341). For doctoral students, 48.7% of all students in 2012 were international students, with 41.5% of those were originating from Asia (Ministry of Education, 2012a). There is also a significant diversity within New Zealand's international student population. In New Zealand schools, there were students from 158 countries speaking 116 different languages in 2012. (Ministry of Education, 2012b).

While not all institutions have witnessed international student growth on the same scale as that of post-graduate students, the past couple of years have witnessed gains in overall numbers of international fee-paying students. From a high of 126,503 enrolments in 2003, New Zealand experienced a 28% drop by 2008 (to 91,388) (Ministry of Education, 2015a, p. 6). However, over the past 7-8 years there has been substantial recovery in these numbers to a 2014 total of 103,321 enrolments (p. 6).

International students offer huge value to the New Zealand economy. The economic value added from these enrolments in 2012 stood at \$2.6 billion (Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 4). Given this worth, it is essential that enrolled students be supported in achieving their academic goals. One of the ways in which these students can be supported is through ESOL programmes (such as ESOL support in secondary schools and EAP (English for Academic Purposes) in tertiary institutions). In terms of schools, 6,462 students commenced ESOL funding in period 2, 2016; an increase of 28% compared to the same period in 2006 (Ministry of Education, 2016). As for university ESOL programmes, 2007 to 2014 saw a 12% increase to a total of 1,575 students (Ministry of Education, 2015b).

All in all, international students are a highly valuable (and in some contexts growing) resource for New Zealand. Quality language support is required if these students are

to be successful in attaining their academic goals.

## **ESOL: Teachers, Tutors & Programmes**

For New Zealand to maintain a healthy international student market which results in successful students, quality ESOL programmes are critical. It goes without saying that an essential aspect of quality ESOL programmes is the teachers, tutors and aids that directly address student needs.

The quality of teachers can have a significant impact on educational outcomes. Some studies have shown that teachers, in a given context, can result in student educational gains of one half to one and a half years (Hanushek, 2011). In addition, ongoing on-the-job training of teachers can result in significant gains for students (Harris & Sass, 2011).

Just as important as teacher quality, is the way in which support is delivered. For ESOL programmes in schools, support in mainstream classes has been identified as one of the best ways to aid learners (Millett & Vine, 2000). This may involve dedicated ESOL support classes or one-to-one support from a teacher aide. Such support can help remedy certain problems when ESOL learners enter into mainstream classes. Without adequate support, international students may sit in silence as they attempt to absorb an immense amount of new information, in a new language. As such, ongoing support helps learners to parse the knowledge they are expected to acquire. (Barnard, 1998).

While ESOL students in schools may receive ongoing support for mainstream classes, international students entering tertiary institutions often receive no ongoing, structured support. Many international students do take part in ESOL (or test preparation) courses prior to beginning their undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications. Upon meeting the minimum English language requirements of the institution, they can commence their programme of further study. For example, at one New Zealand institution, upon achieving an IELTS<sup>1</sup> 6.0 overall, these students are given full access to all undergraduate courses. As IELTS 6.0 is stated as a minimum required level for participation, it would stand to reason that ongoing support should be provided. However, the only form of specialist ESOL support is through learning advisors who are not subject-area experts and may lack the required knowledge to effectively explain content. In comparison, other tertiary

1 International English Language Testing System - <https://www.ielts.org/>

institutions have illustrated that subject-specific support for international students can be very effective in helping these students achieve outcomes (Baird, 2012).

The New Zealand Education Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care for International Students (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2016) lays out clear, required outcomes for education providers and agents. Some of these requirements are for evidence of English language ability (p. 10), a relevant orientation programme (p. 17), cross-cultural training for staff (p. 21), and provision of ongoing support (p. 29). However, at universities orientation programmes often consider international students as a uniform group, staff do not receive sufficient training, and ongoing support is sometimes less than adequate. In addition, given that an argument can be made that universities are accepting students based on insufficient English language criteria (Feast, 2002; Yen & Kuzma, 2009), the case could be made that the provisions within the Code of Practice are not fit for purpose. After all, if students are struggling with English language in their university courses, and ongoing ESOL support is not provided, then they cannot be realistically expected to succeed (without significant strain on the student).

### **Advocating for Teachers and Students**

In order to provide professional development, set standards for programmes and advocate for students and staff involved in the types of programme mentioned above, professional associations for ESOL have been set up around the world. In the U.S.A. the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages International Association (TESOL<sup>2</sup>) has been heavily involved in advocating for ESOL learners in American schools. In addition, the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL<sup>3</sup>) fulfils a similar role, primarily in the United Kingdom. IATEFL and TESOL have numerous affiliates around the world, including the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages in New Zealand Association (TESOLANZ<sup>4</sup>).

Each of these associations have mission statements or strategic goals articulating advocacy for support of ESOL students and teachers.

#### **The Purposes of TESOLANZ**

- To promote the professional interests of its members

- and cater for their needs
- To promote the interests of learners of English as an additional language and cater for their needs.
- To co-operate with community language groups in identifying and pursuing common goals.
- To publish research, material and other documents appropriate to the association's aims.
- To affirm the maintenance of Te Reo Maori under the Treaty of Waitangi.

<http://www.tesolanz.org.nz/Site/About/default.aspx>

#### **TESOL 2015-2018 Strategic Plan**

- Increase the association's demonstrated expertise in, and resources for, language education policy.
- Enhance the leadership and advocacy skills of TESOL professionals.
- Increase advocacy for, and improve the professional status of, English language professionals worldwide.
- Increase resources and tools for TESOL members to enable them to engage in advocacy.

<http://www.tesol.org/about-tesol/association-governance/strategic-plan>

Finally, part of IATEFL's stated mission is to 'link, develop and support English Language Teaching professionals worldwide' (IATEFL, 2016).

As each of these associations' stated intention is to strive to improve the professional status and interests of ESOL professionals, as well as support them, one would hope to find a secure professional situation for English language teachers and tutors. However, in many secondary and tertiary contexts that is not the case.

### **Trends in TESOL**

As many ESOL teachers are painfully aware, the trends in the sector are largely towards marginalization, privatization, and difficulty in building a viable career.

At the secondary level, we see a situation in which ESOL teachers are somewhat side-lined. ESOL teachers are often required to fulfil varied roles across schools and assist in many aspects (academic assistance, teaching, course development, pastoral care, administration, funding applications, and professional development). Despite this, ESOL teachers often report having poorly defined roles, which creates a lack of clarity when collaborating with

2 <http://www.tesol.org/>

3 <http://www.iatefl.org/>

4 <http://www.tesolanz.org.nz/>

mainstream teachers (Froemming, 2015). In some cases, it has been indicated that ESOL has a lower 'status' and that there is a distinct lack of guidelines and policies (Bland & Farshadnia, 2016). Consequently, there is a lack of institutional support for ESOL and those in the field may experience difficulty in gaining support for teaching and learning activities (McGee, Haworth, & Macintyre, 2015). In addition (or perhaps symptomatically), students themselves often attach a lack of importance to ESOL and fail to view it as a crucial aspect of their overall achievement (Bland & Farshadnia, 2016). Overall, such marginalization in secondary schools occurs "when teachers, those in leadership, and other educators do not see the ESOL area as their responsibility and subsequently ESOL becomes marginalized to a small team or individuals" (McGee et al., 2015, p. 106).

ESOL in the tertiary sector (commonly termed EAP) has faced similar issues of marginalization, although perhaps for different causes. ESOL and EAP programmes do provide international students with pathways into university study, but such programmes (and the international students within them) are increasingly viewed as a revenue stream (Fulcher, 2009). Such income is even more valuable when it can be used to cross-subsidize other activities within the university. In many universities, commercially successful activities (such as TESOL, EAP, and business programmes) are frequently used to subsidise those programmes which are perceived to hold a greater degree of academic prestige (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2013). In effect, when commercially successful enterprises (like EAP) bring in revenue, they are not empowered to utilize that income to raise their own prestige within the university and thereby argue for better resourcing and support.

In American tertiary institutions, ESOL teachers have reported a lack of institutional support as well as being deemed unequal to other academics (Jones, 2008). Similar situations have emerged in Australia where providers of international student support services are critical in attracting international students, but are under-supported within the wider university; leading to increased tension between senior managers and front-line staff (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2013). In the UK (as in many other contexts), the trend at the tertiary level has been for outsourcing of English language programmes to private providers as it is viewed as a commercial activity (Fulcher, 2009), further undermining the academic nature of the ESOL field.

## Looking to the Future

Across the sectors, the future seems to hold increasing levels of marginalization, under-resourcing, and privatisation. At the same time, the potential value of international students to countries involved in the international education market continues to be highly significant.

Of all these trends, the one towards privatisation is very worrying for tertiary staff. Commercial operations will frequently seek to employ lesser qualified staff on lower wages as these low costs (in accompaniment with their recruitment networks) make private providers an attractive proposition to universities (Shepherd, 2007). If such a trend continues, then lecturers and teachers in non-privatised ESOL/EAP programmes should have real concern.

In terms of under-resourcing and marginalisation, this trend is of significance for both tertiary and secondary teachers of ESOL. If ESOL support is left to a few standalone sessions per week and mainstream teachers are not involved in the development of such support, then international students who require ESOL support will make slower progress. Similarly, in universities, if ESOL and EAP are consigned to pre-degree level, then students and lecturers will not take seriously the continued language development that is required in order to be successful.

There is a clear case for the value of well-contextualised ESOL instruction which addresses the needs of teachers (subject and ESOL) and international students alike (Long, 2005). This has been highlighted through the English in the Discipline approach at Hong Kong University in which (rather than being consigned to support or pre-degree) the value of in-session, subject-specific, ESOL instruction was organizationally supported within the institution (Hyland, 2013). It goes without saying that a path riddled with marginalisation, under-resourcing, and privatisation will struggle to achieve such a goal.

## Conclusions

From the perspective of those involved with the support of international students, the current situation poses a dilemma. If international students are of such value to the economy, and we have professional organisations which advocate for stakeholders within the ESOL sector, then why has the current situation developed? The best way to grow an important industry (which international



education surely is – New Zealand’s fifth biggest export industry and second biggest services sector – Education New Zealand, 2016) would seemingly be to ensure that New Zealand remains competitive globally. Ensuring quality education pathways (and creating conditions for quality staff to perform at a high level) would be one way to do so. However, given that current approaches have resulted in a situation in which ESOL teachers are under pressure, it could be asked if the current situation can deliver the highest quality in English language education.

If New Zealand’s ESOL teachers were properly resourced and given a central role within the provision of education to international students, then they would be well on their way to delivering the kind of quality academic support

which would ensure New Zealand’s international education remains viable. Given that current systems and advocacy approaches have not achieved this, it is suggested that a different approach is required. Hackman (1985, p. 75) stated that support units (like ESOL) need to focus on broader institutional needs and emphasise their ability to attract revenue which benefits the institution as a whole. In order to meet the needs of international students, a shift in leadership approaches are needed. Part II in this series will look at how this might be achieved.

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