

Inquiry 2012 The Major Factors that Affect Second Language Learning

By Sonya Van Schaijik

As part of my inquiry for 2012 I chose to investigate the major factors that affect second language learning, in particular those that are most significant to English Language Learners (ELL) in our school. The other part of the inquiry is to outline ways in which these factors could be used to assist their learning of English.

I will use SOLO Taxonomy to frame my inquiry so that I can visually see what I am investigating. First of all I will define second language learning, then follow on by describing the children at Newmarket School and list the major factors that affect the English Language Learning children of our school. I will focus on the positive factors and make links with the two children that I choose to investigate. Finally I will reflect on my investigation and outline ways in which these factors could be used to assist our children in their learning of English as a second language. This investigation will be distributed before our final English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL) staff meeting and I will ask staff to give me feedback because I would like to then share this investigation with our area cluster meeting.

Second language learning is a person acquiring knowledge of an additional method of human communication.

In 1994, Ellis defined second language learning as learning that is linguistic and focuses on the process by which learners build up their linguistic knowledge. You can read a longer [definition here on Wikipedia](#). The Wikipedia definition is strong because it references several pieces of writing from the work of Dr. Rod Ellis who is an academic on second language acquisition from the University of Auckland.

Background and description of our children

School records show that our school is a state school with a population of 300. Of that population, 77 children in term 4 2012 have been identified as ESOL according to the [New Zealand Ministry of Education's ESOL funding assessment guidelines](#), (Ministry of Education, 2009) to completing the English Language Learners (ELLs) student profile and ESOL Assessment Form (ESOL/AF). Of that, 35 are female and 42 are male. This is 26% of our school

roll up from 20% two years ago. In addition to that, 28 further children have been identified as English Language Learners but are no longer eligible for funding. The site defines English Language Learners (ELLs) as 'students, who have English as an additional language' and offers guidelines to how this funding is used to 'help students develop their English language skills so that they can start meeting the achievement objectives of English in the New Zealand Curriculum.'

Not all children are involved in ESOL support at Newmarket School. Even when our children are no longer eligible for funding, they continue to require assistance particularly with literacy. At Newmarket School, this support is provided by a literacy support person and with some teacher aide support. Over the past four years, Newmarket School has experienced a rapid increase of ELL children on our school roll. At present 69% of children on our roll identify as having another language at home. 27% are Chinese, 24% are European, 15% Other Asian, 9% South East Asian, 5% Maori, 15% Polynesian and 8% Indian, 3 % are Tongan, 2% are Samoa, 4% are Other European and 3% are other Pacific. (Education Review Office, 2010). The school, under the International Code of Practice (Ministry of Education, 2010), welcome up to 10 % students and as from term 4, 2012 we have 12 children.

Newmarket School is rated as Decile 8 and several of our families live in inner city apartments. (Auckland Transport, 2012).

Factors affecting Second Language Learning.

The major factors that affect our ELL children at Newmarket School are as varied as the schools' population. In this inquiry, the factors of focus have been selected for their positive effects supporting second language learning.

Research for this inquiry has been conducted at the school in the following ways. The main one has been with accumulated records of data held within the school and with teacher discussion. I am the teacher with responsibilities for the ELL funded children. I have chosen two children for my focus because I have worked consistently with them over 12 months and have background knowledge of them, their learning and their families. Information has been gathered through the New Zealand Ministry of Education's guide to completing the Application

Form for Resourcing of ESOL Programmes (ESOL/AP- NZ & Migrant) and The Assessment Form - ESOL/AF. (Ministry of Education, 2012c).

Children selected for the purpose of this investigation, are part of the ESOL program and have scored in the lower bracket under the Ministry of Education guidelines using the criteria in the Assessment Form – ESOL/AF. They have been analysed according to theorist’s views that I think are positive.

What are the similar factors that these children have in common and why are they successful second language learners?

In Gardner’s socio-educational model, discussed in 1998 by Baker, the social and cultural background are important factors to take into account. At Newmarket school, the two children chosen for this inquiry are making rapid gains in their reading over 12 months. Both children display similar positive factors.

First of all, these ELL children have maintained cognitive applied language proficiency in their own language and home support is evident. (Cummins,1996)

Secondly they have instrumental motivation for learning a second language. (Holmes, 1984).

Thirdly, they are generally from middle class backgrounds.

In addition these children are female and display a positive attitude towards the target culture. However there is little similarity between their own culture and the target culture yet they possess motivation to learn the second language. (Ellis, 1994)

Finally, the ESOL teacher they have had since immigration into New Zealand has had theory and knowledge in second language learning and has provided second language learning within the class learning environment. These children have not been subjected to withdrawal. (Collier, 1995). Collier’s graph visually shows that withdrawal is the least effective method of second language acquisition. According to the Ministry of Education, 2012b ‘one of the most effective approaches is to fund an extra teacher to work alongside teachers in the classroom, giving in-class support so that the English language learners can learn alongside their peers.’

I have gone into their class and have worked with a small group of children who need language and learning support. I have focused on reading as is stated by Ellis in 2008 in principle 6.

‘Successful instructed language learning requires extensive second language input.’ (Centre for

Applied Linguistics, 2008). 'This can be achieved most easily by providing extensive reading programs based on carefully selected graded readers suited to the level of the children.'

The children have a reading log which has been monitored daily and in addition their reading progression is supported visually using a goal sheet.

Examining the first factor, these ELL learners have maintained cognitive academic language proficiency in their first language and home support is evident. One example of home support can be seen by the regular home, school reading log that arrives each day signed by a parent. Both children arrived in our school with some cognitively academic demanding language proficiency in their first language. There is compelling evidence in research and practice to support the benefits of learning bilingually. In 1996, Cummins stated that 'first language strength facilitates learning a new language'. Previously Collier, 1995 had also supported these views as can be seen from her research of how long it takes to learn a second language. Home support is also evident with these children and parents encourage after school activities that support language learning. For example, sports activities, club and musical activities and both children belong to regular groups where they are able to communicate in the home language of Mandarin and Korean.

The second factor is a similarity between their own language and culture and the target language and culture and how this has a positive factor for second language learning . At Newmarket School School, Chinese makes up the greatest number of ESOL funded children with the greatest number at 32% of the children in the ESOL funded programme. When there is a similarity in school ethos between the home and school then this factor is a relevant positive affecting factor in second language learning. In language, English and Asian languages do not have a similar alphabet with similar sounds. However Asian cultures do have intrinsic motivation in learning English as a second language. 'English is useful to them, indeed indispensable, if they aim to make academic and occupational progress.' (Holmes, 1984). In displaying a positive attitude towards the target language. Spolsky defines this as 'Condition 54' or 'the integrative orientation, a cluster of favourable attitudes to the speakers of the target language.' (Spolsky, 1989, p.20). A positive attitude to the speakers of the target language has a positive effect on the learning.

The third affecting factor that supports second language learning, are children from the middle socioeconomic bracket. 'There is a strong relationship between social class and L2 achievement.' (Ellis 1994, p.21) and he follows on with an interpretation being that these advantaged children had a better chance at learning English in the classroom because they had more developed L1 CALP. Again, this backs Cummins' and Collier's theory of children second language learning and how long does it take to learn a second language.

The fourth factor identified is a gender factor. The gender factor is an interesting affecting factor for second language learners. Of the 77 children in the programme 45% are female and 55% are male. From the top 20 children, 55 % are female and Ellis (1994:26) explored research related to the linguistic differentiation of men and women and concluded 'Women might be better at L2 learning than men and are more open to L2 input.' Investigating further, the senior children e-asTTle test results exhibit similar findings. ELL female children continued to outperform their male counterparts in test scores.

As an aside, in the group I worked with there was one child whom I can identify as having a negative attitude to learning English. Her learning has been affected in the following ways. Basic interpersonal communication skills in L2 are well below research suggestions. In 1995, Collier discussed how long it took to learn a second language. She wrote that it took two years for an ELL learner to speak as much English as their friends. Then a further 5-7 years to catch up, to the national standards academically. This child appears to be more confident in English orally yet her progress in reading has plateaued for over a term. Furthermore this child does not appear to have cognitive academic proficiency in her first language. Her writing in her first language is not as confident as the other language children who arrived at the same time in New Zealand as she did.

The difference observed between her and the two successful ELL learners is that the other two learners actively seek opportunities to practice English. They make friends with children of the target language and regularly complete homework. Brown (1994) concluded 'that learners will achieve their fullest potential when they are driven by their own need for gaining competence in a language.'

Additionally, the positive attitude of the other children towards the second language learners is another effective factor. At Newmarket, the school has conscientiously developed this factor. This year, the school is celebrating a cultural evening at the end of the year. The outcome of this collaborative event will raise the profile of our ELL learners as we share and celebrate all our cultures, and drawing our parent community together in a shared experience. The focus is on all cultures. At the beginning of the year in conjunction with the Confucius Institute of Auckland the staff took part in learning more about our 26% children who are Chinese. We took part in Yum Cha and had the Shanghai performers dance at our school. Newmarket are also in our second year of hosting a Mandarin Language assistant. The school offers after school lessons in Mandarin and this programme is strongly supported by our community. Thereby providing our children with the opportunity of developing cognitive academic learning proficiency in their first language.

Finally, teacher development in the knowledge of second language learning facilitates the learner in their role. Graduate Diploma of Teaching English in Schools to Speakers of Other Languages (GradDipTESSOL) offered at Auckland's University supports this factor with course content and a focus on teacher development in second language learning. I completed my Diploma of TESSOL in 2002. In 2011, I attended several course days held at the Auckland University on the English Language Learners Progression Resource. I returned to school after each session and shared the information by including the resource as part of ESOL staff meetings, (Van Schaijik, 2011). The school has taken part in a full in-service day on ELL teaching issues in 2011, and has had staff meetings timetabled in and were facilitated by me the teacher with ESOL responsibilities. Furthermore, I have taken part in webinars and follow successful linguists such as Krashen and educators who have identified themselves as linguists on twitter as part of my personal professional development. In addition I have taken part in the area cluster meetings held each term with other ESOL teachers. (Ulimasao, 2012). Therefore my ongoing professional development in the area of ELL and ESOL has included a variety of blended learning. This included online learning, face to face learning and up to date readings.

The school acknowledges that all children should have teachers of the highest international standard and 'empowers all children to learn and achieve personal excellence, regardless of

their individual circumstances. (Ministry of Education, 2007). With second language learning, Newmarket School has employed me with a TESSOL qualification and who has been a verifier for the Ministry of Education, to support and coordinate the ESOL programme for 77 children and 12 international children. I am given a fixed term unit with some administration release as part of my ESOL role within the school.

The factors identified in the introduction of this study as having an influence on ELL children's ability to learn English, need to be viewed collectively and have important implications. Research by Cummins (1989), Kennedy and Dewars (1997), Ellis (1992 & 1994), Ellis, (2005 in Education Counts, 2005) and Alton Lee (2003 in Education Counts, 2003) suggests ways in which these factors could be used to guide school policies and staff development. These will have implications for ongoing staff development and support, the relationship between Newmarket School and its community and the extent to which parents/caregivers have input into their children's learning. The following are my suggestions and next steps for Newmarket School.

Ways in which our ELL learners can be supported.

1. Teachers doing everything possible to make learners believe that their L1 is important and that the success of learning an L2 is not dependent on abandoning their LI.
2. Teachers helping learners to understand the differences between their own culture and that of the target language and to realise that the difference need not to be viewed qualitatively- that is, that different cultures often achieve similar ends in different ways.
3. Teachers doing everything possible to stimulate and maintain the learners' personal engagement in language learning tasks. It is probably easier for teachers to influence motivation at the level of task than at the socio-cultural level.
4. Teachers developing well defined strategies for identifying individual learners who are clearly unhappy in their learning situation, for diagnosing the causes of their unhappiness and remedying them.
5. Teachers maintaining an unrelenting focus on student achievement and learning.
6. Teachers displaying confidence in being successful with second language learners.

7. Teacher's communicating directions clearly, pacing lessons appropriately, involving children in decisions and goal setting, monitoring children progress and providing immediate feedback. Strengthening their SOLO Taxonomy practice.
8. Teachers integrating aspects of a children's home culture and values into classroom activity to build trust and self-esteem as well as promoting cultural diversity and cultural pluralism.
9. Teachers promoting a curriculum that has coherence, balance, breadth, relevance, progression and continuity of development in terms of cognitively demanding academic language. Aiming for SOLO relational and extended abstract thinking.
10. Teachers learning 'how long it takes to learn a second language' and use this knowledge when assessing children against the National Standards.

Relationship between Newmarket School and its community and the extent to which parents engage in their children's learning

1. Learn to greet the parents in their own language and learn their names.
2. Whenever possible involve the learners' parents in the educational process, helping them to understand the factors that have been shown to promote successful L2 learning.
3. Incorporate the learner's language and culture into classes. Learn how to greet the children in their own language.
4. Promote self-motivation by using the learner's language to gain original knowledge and ideas to show that their prior knowledge is valued. Eg: Language discussion groups.
5. Focus on what the school can do to help when assessing learners with academic challenges.

These suggestions do not guarantee success, but they provide a basis for helping individual learners to manage the social factors that have been shown to influence language learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the major positive factors affecting second language learning that are most significant for the ELL learners at Newmarket School have been, maintaining cognitive applied language proficiency in their first language. These learners possess intrinsic motivation to learn the second language and home support is evident. They are from middle class backgrounds.

These children are usually female. They display a positive attitude towards the target culture. Finally, the ESOL teacher they have had since immigration into New Zealand has had theory and knowledge in second language learning and has provided second language learning in class and has not withdrawn the children.

The staff at Newmarket School have previously discussed some of these factors in relation to our second language learners and the school has already implemented some suggestions, for example 'Our Cultural Evening', an assembly where the greetings were conducted in the first language.

Our school continually seeks ways in assisting ELL children in their learning of English. One particular factor cannot be isolated from another. This inquiry selected the factors that appeared common with the higher achieving ELL learners. A variety of other factors need to also be considered as well. Learners do have a wide variety of factors that continually require investigating. Furthermore the attitudes and beliefs that adults and other children hold about cultures, languages, and language learning are not always well informed or helpful to bilingual children,' (Ministry of Education, 2003). Therefore the social, cultural and political environment in which a school operates also needs ongoing reflection and consideration.

As our school population data shows, our ELL numbers will continue to grow. What will you do to learn more about the acquisition of English as a Second Language in your class? How do you currently support ELL learners in your class? Can you greet every learner in your class in their home language? Finally, how confident are you at assessing ELL learners against National Standards? (Ministry of Education, 2012a)

References

- Auckland Transport (2012) Newmarket School Travel Report – Summary for Working Group (draft), TravelWise School
- Baker, C. (1988) Key Issues in Bilingualism and Bilingual Education.
- Brown, H. Douglas. (1994) Principles of Language Learners and Teaching. 3rd edit. Prentice Hall.
- Centre for Applied Linguistics (2008) *Principles of Instructed Second Language Acquisition*. [online] Available at: http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/digest_pdfs/Instructed2ndLangFinalWeb.pdf [Accessed: 18/10/12].
- Collier, V.P. (1995) Acquiring a second language for school. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education. [online] Available at: http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/files/rcd/BE020668/Acquiring_a_Second_Language_.pdf [Accessed: 20/10/12].
- Cummins, J. (1989) *Empowering minority students*. Sacramento: California Association for Bilingual Education.
- Cummins, J. (1996) *Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society*. Los Angeles: California Association for Bilingual Education.
- Education Counts (2003) *Quality Teaching for Diverse Students in Schooling: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration*. [online] Available at: http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/7705/bes-quality-teaching-diverse.pdf [Accessed: 20/10/12].
- Education Counts (2005) Instructed Second Language Acquisition, a Literature Review. [online] Available at: http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/6983/instructed-second-language.pdf [Accessed: 25/10/12].
- Education Review Office, E. (2010) *Newmarket School 13/09/2010*. [online] Available at: <http://ero.govt.nz/index.php/Early-Childhood-School-Reports/School-Reports/Newmarket-School-13-09-2010/2-Newmarket-School-s-Curriculum>. [Accessed: 19/10/12].
- Ellis, R. (1992) Second language acquisition and language pedagogy. Multilingual Matters.
- Ellis, R. (1994) The study of second language acquisition. Oxford: Oxford University Press .
- Holmes, J. (1984) Bilingual Education. Occasional Publication 11. Wellington: Victoria University English Language Institute.

Kennedy,S., & Dewar,S (1997). [Non English speaking background students](#): A study of programmes and support in New Zealand schools. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

(2003) [Language Enhancing the Achievement of Pasifika](#), Wellington: Learning Media.

Ministry of Education. (2007) *The New Zealand curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media.

Ministry of Education (2009) *ESOL Funding Assessment Guidelines*. [online] Available at: <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/Schools/EnglishForSpeakersOfOtherLanguages/FundingSupportInitiatives/ESOLFundingAssessmentGuidelines.aspx> [Accessed: 20/10/12].

Ministry of Education, (2010) *Code of Practice*. [online] Available at: <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/~media/MinEdu/Files/EducationSectors/InternationalEducation/ProvidersOfIntEd/CodeOfPractice2010.pdf> [Accessed: 20/10/12].

Ministry of Education (2012a) *Fact sheet 9: English language learners*. [online] Available at: <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/National-Standards/Key-information/Fact-sheets/English-language-learners> [Accessed: 1/11/12].

Ministry of Education (2012b) *Guidelines for using ESOL funding*. [online] Available at: <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/Schools/EnglishForSpeakersOfOtherLanguages/FundingSupportInitiatives/ESOLResourcingInformation/GuidelinesForFundingUse.aspx> [Accessed: 1/11/12].

Ministry of Education (2012c) *Resourcing*. [online] Available at: <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/Schools/EnglishForSpeakersOfOtherLanguages/FundingSupportInitiatives/ESOLResourcingInformation/Resourcing.aspx> [Accessed: 20/10/12].

Spolsky, B, (1989,) *Conditions for Second Language Learning*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.

Ulimasao (2012) *Professional Development*. [online] Available at: <http://ulimasao.wikispaces.com/Professional+development> [Accessed: 19/10/12].

Van Schaijik, S. (2011) *Ulimasao Presentation*. [online] Available at: <http://www.slideshare.net/ulimasao/ellp-staff-meeting-3> [Accessed: 20/10/12].