

All the World's a Stage! But How Many of Our NESB Students Are Players?

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Abstract

Marsden State High School, located in Logan City, south of Brisbane, Australia, reflects the extensive cultural and linguistic diversity characterising population shift into this fast-growing, multicultural area where most families are within low socio-economic bands and where many home languages are different from the English medium of instruction used in all Australian schools. Over fifty different cultures are represented in the student body where nearly one in three students has a non-English speaking background. Many such students struggle to cope with written language demands of the curriculum although substantial numbers present as orally competent. This source of additional diversity challenges both teachers and students. Ways in which the challenges are being addressed are outlined in this paper. Particularly, the authors have described a model underpinning academic and personal success with these students.

Introduction

Marsden State High School is the largest high school in Logan City south of Brisbane (Map 1) and is the centre of a very multicultural community. The range of cultural groups, as at March 2006, includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (4.4%), Asian (10.9%), European (5.9%), Polynesian (15.8%) and Anglo Saxon (62.3%). In the Department of Local Government and Planning (2002) demographic profile of Census data, 85.6% of the population of Logan City reported that they spoke English at home. Yet school community data (Girdwood & Gilmour, 2004; Girdwood, 2005) present a different story. These show that nearly one in three of the students are from a home where a language other than English is the main language spoken. The rapidity of changes in the cultural profile within this school community is represented in Figure 1 (Marsden State High School, 1997-2004; Girdwood & Gilmour, 2004).

Map 1 – Australia



Diversity within the school community is both cultural and linguistic with the latter posing particular challenges for teachers many of whom have little formal training in relation to accommodating differences for NESB learners. The real challenge facing teachers is to see the NESB students as real players on the world stage and to accord them opportunity to interpret and contribute to the script. Only when teachers willingly relinquish the lead role and allow these students to take centre stage in their own learning will such understanding occur.

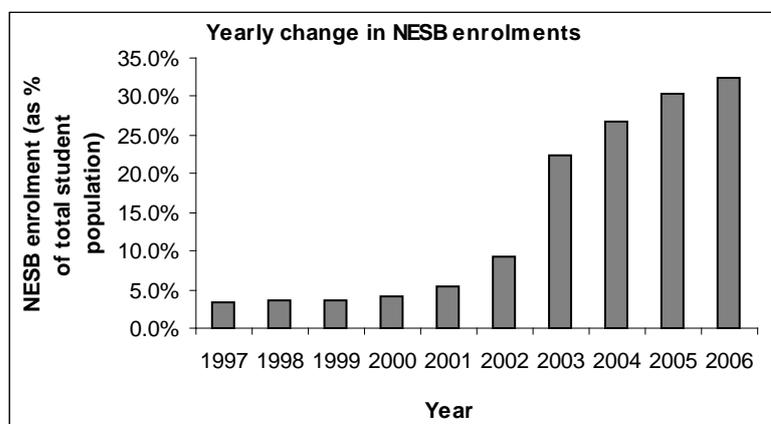


Figure 1. Percentage NESB enrolment.

Throughout this paper, the term, *Non-English Speaking Background (NESB)*, is used to describe a student who comes from a home where a language other than English is the main language spoken. The term is used to indicate that the student's language background is not English. It does not indicate the depicted person's knowledge of English or willingness, competence and confidence to use it. The term, *English as a Second Language (ESL)*, is used to define those who first learnt a language other than English, and who later in life, learnt to speak and write English.

The journey

An overarching linguistic and educational issue for many students on entry to Marsden State High School is that they have poor functional literacy. This limits their participation in high school curriculum. Practices to improve this dilemma in the past have included in-class and withdrawal literacy support from visiting specialist remedial teachers. In 2002, a highly structured and scaffolded program in the content area of English was designed so that classroom teachers might address some of these literacy problems students were presenting. According to teachers' discussions, it showed that two years later there was no significant change, with many players still struggling with the basics in literacy.

In Semesters 1 and 2, 2005, Year 8 students were surveyed in an attempt to establish accurate data about their linguistic backgrounds. At the beginning of the year ($n_1 = 315$), 85 were NESB students. In Semester 2 ($n_2 = 326$) there were 94. Languages spoken at home across the NESB sub-samples included Hmong, Khmer/Cambodian, Albanian, Arabic, Bosnian, Hindi, Spanish, Thai, Romanian, Samoan and several other Polynesian languages. In Semester 1, seven students (i.e. 8.2% of the NESB cohort) reported no competence in speaking the dominant language of the family. All others spoke it with some fluency. Comparable data for Semester 2 were that nine of the 85 subgroup did not speak the first language of the NESB home. A repeated survey in Semester 1 2006 indicated that these trends for proportion of NESB students, overall increases, range of home languages and participation in home language continue.

The pedagogy of the willing

Teaching NESB students requires a willingness to move beyond espousal about commitment and process and into deliberate action on such knowledge. This is an important shift first theorised by Argyris & Schon (1978) in industry to explain the difference between knowing what to say about what should be done (a theory of mind) and actually doing it. The latter requires a theory of action – of what one knows needs to be done if action is to proceed and succeed – in addition to a theory of mind. The distinction has important implications for educators (Bartlett & Fletcher, 2003a, 2003b).

As with other schools of the State, the theory of mind notion for teachers at Marsden State High associates with what general knowledge they can bring to mind about language, NESB and alignments both have with learning and teaching. It links also with specific knowledge about how these things apply in the specific contexts of their thinking and working at Marsden State High School. These are their theories of mind as *self and context* which exist in a learning, language-using community of students and the specific assets and needs that they have.

Teachers' theories of action build on how well they recognise and respond to these things, and from thinking constantly about how to witness and cater for such response with customized accommodations. Knowing is not enough. It is the intelligent action on that knowledge that underpins the quality function in how teachers interact. For example, knowing that some students will have a restricted sense of audience as part of their entry experience, how might a teacher act? One way might be not to act at all, but to use this knowledge to explain away ineffective instruction. Another might be to check what individual students do know, and to draw their attention explicitly where it is needed to language options about how an idea is expressed for listeners rather than speakers. A third is to invite students to analyse and react to effects that different word choices have on signaling one's intended meanings as an author/speaker. As the NRC (2000, 2005) warned when identifying principles of learning important to helping students in developing expertise, ways in which teachers engage students' preconceptions of the way the world works will determine how well, if at all, they understand new concepts and information and change.

The theories of action reflect what teachers do to accommodate what they problematise in instruction. In relation to the work at Marsden State High, the accommodations represent what teachers do in acting on mental scaffolds of their own and students' cognitive awareness of language at work. They may also be seen as representations of what and how they think about controlling such work, including the respective roles of teacher and students and how they will play out, and what metacognitively they will do to help students toward independence (Bartlett, 2003, 2002; Comber, 2005; NRC 2000, 2005).

Accommodations include teachers' own practices, such as adjusting a timeline to ensure understanding of a concept rather than to short-change the students by not doing the explicit teaching needed. An experienced teacher of ESL classes in the senior school of St George's Girls' High in Sydney emphasized the importance of pedagogical style for ESL students in things like vocabulary use and sentence structure (Brown, 2000). To convert teacher intention into student achievement and ownership requires what Bartlett (2003, 2002) described as establishing a shared language through mutually-understood and enacted metacognitive control. The language and shared ownership assist efficiency in building effective content knowledge, and for establishing deliberate instruction in soft skills (Beireiter & Scardamalia, 2006) discourse, understanding and memory build for particular content, including the content of learning and of oneself as a learner. In accord with his and others' advice (Bartlett, Barton & Turner, 1987; Brown, 2000) to teachers, the teacher described her teaching style as spending more time on the *how* and not just the *what*.

Gay (2000) defined culturally responsive pedagogy as "using the cultural knowledge, prior knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them; it teaches to and through the strengths of these students" (p.29). To do so requires teachers to take pedagogical responsibility, looking at learners as having potential to learn about learning of the subject and of the process of learning itself (Bartlett, 2003). Thus teachers' awareness in relation to teaching NESB students needs to be explicit about constructing from students' background knowledge and predispositions to learning. To teachers who consider this as good pedagogy in relation to all students, a focus on teaching NESB students well will heighten rather than impede recognition and response to the needs of other students. In this way, these students are encouraged to take hold of the script and become more active players as language learners. Where NESB students' language needs are extreme, there may be some threat to teachers' assurance and staff ideally will be supported toward confidence, with in-class assessment and resources for particular students, assistance in planning work for such students, and in understanding assessment and developing appropriate tasks.

Re-writing the script for NESB players

Cultures value and approach education in different ways (Bartlett, 1987; 1993) and this plays out when several different cultures are represented in any one classroom. For example, in many South East Asian

and Polynesian cultures, children, and children-as-students are taught to cooperate and avoid one-upmanship. Paterson (2005) reported that Hmong students are inclined to work diligently, ask questions and try hard, yet they can feel threatened by competitive activities in the classroom.

Cultures like the Polynesian and Hmong are dominantly oral cultures. Many who begin schooling orally competent in their first language may not have the core elements that make up their first language's written form or the process of writing. In such cases, both writing and reading will prove challenging as media for communication, learning and teaching. Further, students' competence as listeners in their first language, may not necessarily transform to L2 contexts without special guidance and support. The basics of the grammar of the first language are often quite different to English. For example, students with L1 in either Asian or European languages confront major differences in sentence structure in English. Use of articles is not common in Asian languages and the concept of tense in a verb is not familiar. Pronoun usage also differs between languages, if indeed pronouns feature.

Curriculum demands versus student needs

Students in Queensland schools are required by Queensland Study Authority(2005) (QSA) to “develop knowledge and show deep understanding of the relationships between discourse, cultural context, social situations and choices of textual resources when interpreting and constructing texts” (p.4). To meet this demand requires support from the system and its representatives with appropriate physical and material resources and willingness, capacity and action in recognising and accommodating students' needs as learners. As noted in the introduction, the cultural and linguistic diversity of this school community has changed dramatically from six years ago when the student body was predominately first-language English speakers. Presently, around thirty-three percent (33%) do not have English as their first language.

Marsden State High has used the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (2000) to guide its alignment of support for NESB students. The Report of this study provides a concept of Productive Pedagogies (2001) as a balanced theoretical framework to be used for critically reflecting on teachers' work and particularly the strategies they use in their professional practices. Its four key aspects are *Supportive Classroom Environment*, *Recognition of Difference*, *Connectedness* and *Intellectual Quality*. The framework aims to engage teachers in substantive conversation about the link between students' outcomes and pedagogy. At Marsden, the preparation of work programs as educators, the implementation and progressive adjustment of these programs and the learning, assessing and reporting elements of the work are framed to create supportive classroom environments, to recognise the diversity of learners and teachers, to connect learning with past and future histories for individuals and to stimulate rich intellectual growth as students engage in learning and teaching opportunities.

However, institutional intention may not always match with realities at classroom level. Problems relate to differences between espousal and action as noted earlier, and even where teachers have viable action models in place, there are inherent language-related alienations that characterise school for many students. These are about how to approach, engage and benefit from learning opportunities – perhaps whether to engage intellectually at all.

Curriculum programs are written to fulfil syllabus requirements, often with little consideration given to the cultural diversity of learning communities or to systematic ways of accommodating the prior learning and knowledge of the NESB students (Girdwood, 2005; Girdwood & Gilmour, 2004). The prescribed English language script of the class room can be an obstacle for these players. As Australian speakers of English, these youngsters return from school to homes where the language and traditions of their own cultures are paramount. In relation to NESB students, the great majority of the one in three who start their secondary schooling at Marsden State High School confront across their schooling what Dobrenov-Major & Ashwood (2005), Lo Bianco, Liddicoat & Crozet (1999) and Kramersch (1993) call “the third place” or “the third space”. This place / space is a language and culture world where they are caught between demands as students to use English in the tradition of Australian schools during school hours and as family members to use the language and traditions of their own cultures at other times.

The Year 8 (12 to 13 years old) English program existing in 2004 was based on the English Syllabus: Queensland Department of Education (1994). It had been designed and implemented in 2002 with a strong language focus and was highly teacher-centred. There had been minor revisions the following year in line with an emerging new syllabus, but the teachers' approach had not been affected greatly. However, this changed when the first two authors, in collaboration with other teachers on an action

theory, changed their pedagogical approach and made their language focus more explicit while featuring participatory involvement from students.

Each term's work was redesigned around a unit focus, still incorporating the explicit teaching of language. For example, the focus for Unit 1 (Term 1, 2004) was coping with the transition from primary to high school. The content included expectations in subject English, exploring genres of their choice in a novel study and basic lexical items such as vocabulary and elementary sentence structures incorporating the language relevant to learners' language needs to address requisite tasks constructed around this theme. The expectation was that while approaches would vary across teachers and classes in general terms, there would be consistency around the determination and teaching of functional language associated with the tasks of learning in each unit. This consistency was to be a key entry point in assessing what language-for-communicating/learning/demonstrating that students understood and could use when beginning their learning work. The starting content was basic as testing (Girdwood & Gilmour, 2004) revealed the mean functional language of Marsden's Year 8 students was around Years 4 – 5 (8 to 10 years old).

Teachers progressively adapted their common list of such items, for example the term's Language Booklet, as the year unfolded and students made their own contributions. Along with the work program for learning, the teachers' preparation included an analysis of assessment tasks and a deconstruction of the objectives and instructions on task criteria sheets. Planning sheets were prepared to highlight the generic structure within which study and assessment was set and word limits guided students in scoping the extent of their responses. Preparing these sheets was the crucial process through which teachers conceived, expressed and jointly constructed their action theory. For them it was action learning as well as action in teaching.

The Language Booklet resource grew across terms. It began with teacher-informed lists of vocabulary, parts of speech and basic sentence structures, and progressed over time. As students became more active players, their suggestions led to the inclusion of construction elements to guide sentence writing or to emphasise main/ subordinate clauses, assisting them to understand content and form in such aspects as punctuation that had been commonly confused.

The first two authors reported that substantive conversation flowed from the activities structured within themes, some of which is reflected as a record in developments in the Language Booklets. This appeared to teachers to be greater and more widespread than among past NESB students. It suggested that more were working towards a deep understanding required in subject English if they were to be at an intellectual quality level preferred under the Productive Pedagogies (2001) framework. The students' use of metalanguage in discussion of such aspects as audience and purpose indicated to teachers that speakers knew the language associated with tasks and assessment, encouraging them to push ahead with the substantive content matters, and to experiment with songs, dance and games that students from different cultures suggested. In term 2, the unit was themed around the topic *Shipwrecked*. It generated great enthusiasm and academic engagement as students worked in groups to design and build a model shelter as shipwrecked survivors in addition to completing instructional tasks. The intellectual quality of students' work again was evident in such aspects as their understanding of tasks and criteria sheets, their questions and joint working with the semantic/genre focus and syntax/grammar of tasks and their ready contributions to their *Shipwrecked* booklets. In these, personal journals reflected on a range of activities including the plight of being isolated on a tropical island, scavenging for food and resources, fire making, and storytelling which was culturally specific. Throughout this range of activities, the NESB players constantly rehearsed and replayed specific aspects of the genres.

The shift away from a content focus proved successful for those NESB students who were still coming to terms with *language* as a construct. Most students did their work on time and at appropriate word-limit requirements. In both written and oral work, even lowest achievers attempted tasks. Students who continued to experience difficulty were assisted further with modified tasks (easier language, reduced word/ time requirements), knowing that they would be operating within grade restrictions. The academic performances were a fillip for students and their teachers and this manifested in a view amongst the teaching group that students – NESB and others – had elevated self-esteem by the end of Term 2 as task completions and grades provided evidence of capability and reward for effort. The applause for roles well played had begun.

Applying the pedagogy of the willing in the classroom

Marsden's 2004 Year 8 English classroom environments were now being managed systematically for NESB students. The real difference from earlier years was that deliberate attempts were being made to

have students' interests as a central organisational plank in the structure of pedagogy (Comber, 2005). This was happening with increasing effectiveness and efficiency from a small group of committed staff. Teachers felt they were becoming better through their action learning at knowing and remembering that many of their NESB learners had particular literacy challenges associated with the different building blocks for their language skills now emerging in English. These are real examples of teachers acknowledging the developing skills of the cast before them in the classroom. They improved also in common management issues such as allowing time for students to form and give responses, lifting their own flexibility in dialogic turn-taking, knowing that for many there was need to translate and understand classroom matters between L1 and L2.

In 2005, in consultation with administration and interested teachers, a Year 9 (13 to 14 years old) English class was created for NESB students and a qualified English/ ESL teacher appointed. The students chosen were mostly those who achieved a low grade of achievement in subject English. Akin to auditions, this new beginning was the first step towards NESB students taking the stage! Further adaptations were made to the action plan for teaching, the main differences were flexible time lines in relation to content and assessment. Thus the script was adapted without "dumbing down" the content, to address the specific skills needed for these students and rehearsals began – practice and improvement were the aim. The work remained highly-structured and most written tasks were set to be completed in class time. Instructions were given orally and in writing (e.g. OHT, board, handout) in a step-by-step fashion and students were encouraged to question and share their understanding of the lesson content.

The opening unit of the year was a study of Elaine Forrester's *Graffiti on the Fence*, chosen for its simple and descriptive language, interesting characters and a storyline divided into short chapters. The teacher read in class and scripted chapters as plays so that students could act out sections. Students received this enthusiastically. Basic "what happened" types of exercises kept students up to pace with the storyline while vocabulary exercises were staged to guide them in finding meanings of words and alternatives to those of the script that had similar meaning. A model was provided for each genre, ideas were brainstormed with the class as a whole or in small groups, until students were familiar with the report genre. It students were to take the stage, the demands of their assessment were analogous to an opening night performance. The written outcome drew on class work as well as student research, where planning, drafting and producing a word-processed final draft was required. The oral assignment demanded that in pairs, they would write and present an interview of a character. All presented, some reluctantly. All submitted assessment and received a passing grade. The unit proved a successful way to begin the year, results showing both the students and teacher that this work could be done, given explicit instruction and support structure in the study.

Oral assessment is an essential element of the State's English syllabus. The first author, as teacher, reflected that the beginning of confident performance was when shared, meaningful talk started to happen in the lesson. Conversation in any classroom between teacher and student is vital in creating an active learning environment in which learners can acquire skills which are transportable to the world outside the classroom (Liddicoat, 2000; Roberts & Simonot, 1987). For NESB students it promotes confidence to participate within a classroom, notably in seeking and being receptive to language support when it is necessary. The skill of adapting discourse to suit particular social contexts is thus built on simultaneously as learning the language wherewithal of the Year 9 classroom, so that when tasks for oral assessment arise inside or beyond school, students have a *how to* basis for responding. In addition, specific Language Booklet work was completed by students at their own pace and with assistance when requested. This feature was a deliberate part of the teacher's action plan to continue to monitor and address the state of language skills emerging differently for many of the Year 9 NESB students.

Comber (2005) suggested that to acknowledge and use all aspects of the language learners' first culture enables them to move from a "deficit" position. There was support for this notion in a task that required the Year 9 students to retell and illustrate a traditional story from their own culture. Some worked with a parent, providing a story in their own language. Others had their story translated by members of the community. The class combined its work, producing an illustrated, bi-lingual book of stories from its many cultures. This work was a source of great pride for most students, even those who saw their art work as "not too good". The culmination activity was a storytelling session to classmates for assessment purposes, with each student presenting their own story. Several opted also to tell their story in their first language. Students revelled in this work, and their success illustrated the instructional importance of student-teacher collaboration in utilising and celebrating the relevance and richness of students' cultural background. English results for this group of students across Semester 2, Year 8 and

then in Semester 1, Year 9 are shown in Table 2. There is a noticeable shift from the lower-end scores of Year 8 for the students in the following term.

Table 1. NESB students' English results: Semester 2 2004–Semester 1 2005

	VLA*	LA*	SA*	HA*	VHA*	TOTAL
Year 8 Sem 2	5	12	12	0	0	29
Year 9 Sem 1	0	1	25	3	0	29

*VLA = very low achievement = E; LA = low achievement = D; SA = sound achievement = C; HA = high achievement = B; VHA = very high achievement = A.

Success in Year 9 (Table 1) involved constantly revisiting and revising the action plans of pedagogy—with the lead actor role swapping regularly between teacher and student players. The ultimate change in this on-going process was about role reversal – if the classroom is a stage, then the teacher must step aside and learners assume the leading role.

Conclusion

There has been some success for Marsden State High's NESB students associated with a deliberate pedagogical shift from teacher-centred classrooms to those where students' interests are the major organisational plank and participatory learning is possible for all. In 2006, teachers' willingness to shift pedagogy increased following the reporting of data from 2004/05, enabling the program to be extended at Year 9 and Year 10 levels with additional NESB English classes. In essence this pedagogical focus has been promoted as educators actualised and turned their theories of mind into action plans to address systematic inclusion in classroom activity of NESB learners' cultural richness. Results from 2004/05 showed that doing so had been accompanied by greater participation, academic performance and satisfaction from students. With such successful engagement, the promise for students moves toward more widespread play for NESB students as members of the literate societies of school, home and beyond. There are gains also for teachers attuned to this potential and willing to do the hard work that literature in our profession and motivation to action from theories of mind direct. Where such things happen to the advantage of NESB students and their teachers, then truly all the world becomes their stage.

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