Chapter 4

Factors which Influence NESB Students' Ability to Learn English
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Key Points

The following list summarises the factors that those we interviewed in the course of the study identified as having an influence on NESB students’ acquisition of English and other learning.

According to participants, NESB students’ ability to learn English is influenced by:

- the amount of encouragement and support students receive in their home to do well at school;
- the students’ previous educational experiences (for example, the amount of formal schooling they have had, or the type of schooling environment they were exposed to);
- the students’ previous life experiences (for example, children coming from countries where there has been war often need time to put traumatic experiences behind them before they are ready to learn);
- the students’ health — both physical and emotional;
- the students’ motivation and attitude to learning, which can be influenced both by intrinsic and extrinsic factors;
- the age of the students when they enter a school in New Zealand — generally, it was felt that younger NESB children learn English more readily than older children;
- the students’ competency in their first language(s);
- the extent to which students are exposed to ‘good’ language models, whether this be their first language(s) and/or English;
- the level of the students’ confidence to use and practise English and the extent of the opportunities they have to do so;
- the extent to which there is a positive classroom and school environment where the students feel welcome and secure;
- the extent to which teachers are flexible, warm, and innovative, and are committed to meeting the needs of NESB students;
- the extent to which teachers have an expectation that NESB students can learn and will succeed;
- individual differences in personality, behaviour, ability, and attitudes.
Introduction
As can be seen from the ‘Key Points’ on the previous page, participants in the study identified a diverse range of factors which they felt impacted, directly or indirectly, upon NESB students’ ability to learn English. Each factor listed is enlarged upon in the discussion and quotes presented throughout the remainder of this chapter.

The Student’s Home Environment
All children need support and encouragement if they are to develop both academically and socially. The teachers that we interviewed as part of this study felt that the level of parental support and encouragement to achieve at school influenced the rate at which NESB students develop English language skills. It was felt that parents or caregivers who read and talk to their children, and discuss with their children their school work and what they are doing, contribute significantly to their children’s language acquisition and learning in general.

Teachers did, however, acknowledge that socioeconomic factors often dictate the level of support which parents/caregivers can provide and this in turn influences the rate at which students learn. For example, those parents or caregivers from lower socioeconomic areas who work long hours may not have the time to devote to reading and talking with their children, whereas more affluent families may, if they choose, be able to afford personal tuition with language tutors for their children. As with socioeconomic factors, the level of parental education and parental attitudes and skills can also have a strong influence on a child’s home environment in terms of how conducive it is for learning.

“An [important] factor is their home environment — some children’s parents really want them to achieve and they encourage [their children] and that’s a big help. I give [the children] books to take home every night and [have] the parents tick a card [showing that] the child has read to the parents. [When] the parents are really supportive, that’s a real help.” [ESOL coordinator, primary school.]

“Definitely their home background [is important]. That would include factors such as whether their parents spend a lot of time with them — [some of] our parents come from lower socioeconomic [backgrounds] and they would [generally] spend a lot of time at work in a factory job. So [the parents] don’t get a lot of time to spend with them [their children]. I don’t think that [the children] get a lot of books read to them at home [either].” [Classroom teacher, primary school.]

“Parent support [is very important]. What I have found with the groups that I have had — some of them have been a mix [of different cultures] — [is that some] children don’t get that [necessary] backup and support at home. Material gets taken home and it gets lost because...”
they haven’t got that backup, whereas [other] children have got that support at home which makes a heck of a difference.” [Teacher aide, primary school.]

“I think the home factor [also influences a student’s ability to learn English]. A lot of kids are under stress because their family is split — the father is back working in the home country and the mother is here and sometimes, I think, finding it hard and lonely. Or we have this awful situation when we have a big brother or a big sister minding younger siblings and there is no help present. I [also] had a child a few years ago whose father owned a restaurant, and she used to work till all hours of the night [in the restaurant]. All these sort of outside things can influence the way the child comes to school. As they do with Kiwi kids too.” [ESOL coordinator, intermediate school.]

“ Their language development has to be looked at as part of the overall development [of the student]. You can’t isolate language from anything else. But in terms of their overall development, I think, yes, the children who come from the more stable backgrounds are going to fare better than those who don’t.” [Principal, primary school.]

“A lot depends on the home environment, the parents’ ability, how much education they have had, what educational background they have had prior to coming to New Zealand. And I think a lot has to do with the socioeconomic background of the family. In some of the Asian families here, the children are probably acting as translators, interpreters for their parents because their parents speak very little English ... so I think this makes a big difference to the ability of the children to learn English. [Also], I think a lot has to do with how fluent, how literate they are in their own mother language — the more fluent they are, the easier it is for them to learn English.” [Principal, primary school.]

“I think the most important factor [in the successful acquisition of English] is the educational experiences [the students] have had [prior to coming to New Zealand], and the motivation and support they have from their parents. The ability of the parents to read, write, and speak English and read, write, and speak their own language and the level of the parents’ education is also important. I think the greater the level of educational background experience the family and the child have had, the easier it is for the child to learn English.” [Principal, primary school.]

A Student’s Prior Educational Experiences

Another factor, in many ways closely interlinked with that of home environment, which teachers in the study considered influences an NESB student’s ability to learn English is the educational background and the type of learning environment NESB students have been exposed to prior to coming to New Zealand. Teachers felt that the more knowledge that
they were able to gain about their students’ backgrounds, the better prepared they could be to provide appropriate programmes and allow students to work at their own pace. They also felt that this knowledge made them more aware of the extent to which they needed to teach new NESB students about basic routines and procedures. These comments are consistent with the observations of Ovando and Collier (1987), Davison (1993), and others, cited in the literature review earlier in this report.

“I guess one of the hardest things for our [NESB] students to learn is how to initiate their own study. I mean, they will say, ‘What’s for homework?’, and [the teacher might reply], ‘But I’ve told you to read this and find the information’ [and the student will reply], ‘But which PART do I read?’ You see. Whereas our students [in New Zealand] are generally taught from quite a young age, ‘You’ve got a test tomorrow, you’ll need to know all the information here, here, and here.’ They don’t all do it, I know, but they’re familiar with the routine, whereas when I was at school, [and as seems to be the case for some of the NESB students], it was, ‘This is what I’m telling you, and when you write the test, I want you to tell me the same thing, I don’t want any independent thought.’ Whereas we ask our kids [today] to be independent thinkers, and that’s hard [for some of the NESB students].” [ESOL coordinator, secondary school.]

Research suggests that the greater the difference between the language and culture of the school and that of the student’s home, the more difficult it is for an NESB student to learn English (Ministry of Education, Victoria, 1990). Teachers in our study held similar views, commenting that they felt it was easier for students from European countries to learn English because the languages spoken in such countries had similar structures to the English language, whereas Asian and Arabic languages, for instance, use quite a different language structure.

“Their schooling background is important. Some have had good schooling [before coming to New Zealand] and some haven’t had anything much. And linked in with that is their cultural background — it’s to do with the type of language. If they come from Europe, a lot of things are similar, mostly the same alphabet, and a lot of the sounds are similar. So [these children] already know a lot of symbols and sounds of letters and that helps a lot, whereas the Sri Lankan and Somali and Chinese children I have had have a totally different language system, a totally different set of sounds, so that is a big drawback [for them].” [ESOL coordinator, primary school.]

“I think that greater recognition needs to be made of the differences and the different categories of the NESB children that we have in this school — the children who have had previous education experiences and the children who have had very little. I have just had enquiries about three Somali children who are interested in coming to this school. Now, these children have come from the war zones of Somalia and they have been in New Zealand less than a week. The previous Somali children we have had came from the villages of Somalia and had
had very little formal education and they found it quite difficult [even with things like] using a ruler and pencil, which we found that we [usually] took for granted for children arriving at school. Now these [Somali] children found it quite difficult to manipulate those things, yet when it came to cooking and food preparation, they were very, very capable. So the different cultural backgrounds that these [NESB] children come from [is a vital consideration]. I have said this over and over, that the children who have sound education experiences, and the background, they only need [comparatively] short-term support to learn English and to be quite proficient and quite capable in handling the classroom programme.” [Principal, primary school.]

“Every child is different, for example, we have a twelve-year-old boy here who has been at a European school, and [many] schools in Europe are similar to those in England, [whereas] for our Sri Lankan students, their schooling is very formal [in their country] and is very different [from schooling in New Zealand].” [ESOL coordinator, primary school.]

Previous Life Experiences

In addition to many of the other factors identified in this section of the report, many of those who participated in the study also mentioned that the life experiences students (particularly refugee students) have had prior to arriving in New Zealand and the emotional and psychological consequences of those experiences influence how well and how quickly they learn (English). Participants felt that it was essential for them as teachers to be aware of the background of these students. Such comments are consistent with the observations of Ovando and Collier [1987] and Stewart [1993] cited in the literature review who noted that teachers could more adequately meet the needs of NESB students if they were aware not only of their students’ educational background but also of major aspects of their previous life experiences as well.

“Health, trauma before they arrive, their parents’ acceptance of being here [in New Zealand] — whether [the parents] are happy to be here or whether they feel they had to leave [their country] suddenly and leave everything behind are all important factors in the children’s learning. [The latter is particularly relevant for] refugees but immigrants also leave a lot behind. It depends on how they feel, on how ‘powerful’ they see the people that are teaching them — [if] they [the parents] perceive you as being someone who is putting them down or thinking of them as being a problem, then maybe they don’t feel so giving towards the school. A safe, friendly environment [in the school is vital].” [Special needs coordinator, primary school.]

“I think just generally their background and where they’ve come from, the reason they’re here [is the major influence on their learning]. A lot of them are refugees [and] the reasons they are here are not particularly happy ones — I mean, they haven’t really come here by
choice so I think that has to be kept in mind when you’re dealing with them, and that does affect their learning. Most refugee children, and adults, go through a grieving period — it’s like a death — so you’ve got a period of anger and sorrow and denial, and these different phases are quite pronounced in some children. And it takes longer in one phase for some children than it does for others — and then they quickly rush through the other phases. That is the most important thing for them really, [for us to be able] to tune in to where they are emotionally and remember that they are actually going through a grieving process as well as trying to adjust. And [things] may appear OK on the surface a lot of the time, but there’s always that underlying thing that can tip the scales; the slightest little thing can either upset them or make them angry or affect them in a way that maybe you wouldn’t expect. So I think that is one of the most important things, to be very aware of how they feel.” [ESOL coordinator, primary school.]

“I think the first thing [that must be considered] is, ‘Why is this student here?’ ‘Are they here because they have been forced to come or is it an option?’ ‘Are they coming here to try and get themselves a place at university, or are they here for a better life?’, or whatever. I think those kinds of things probably influence a student’s ability [to learn English].” [Principal, secondary school.]

“In the Somalian [refugee] camps they were in, there was no order, it was a free-for-all. It was, you know, fight for the Red Cross food that comes in, and so these children are often still operating on that basis [when they first arrive]. And so that affects their behaviour and their willingness to conform.” [Classroom teacher, primary school.]

Health of the Student

Some participants in the study stated that both the physical and emotional health of a student play a key role in the learning process. While the literature (for example, Stewart, 1993) supports their assertions that the emotional and psychological experiences of refugee students influence their ability to learn, participants also felt that particular health problems such as glue ear, which are more frequently found in families of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, can hinder a student’s progress.

“I think [the] health [of the students] is important as well. If a child has problems with their ears or they have brought some awful trauma with them [as is the case for many refugee children] and they can’t cope, this will all affect their learning.” [Special needs coordinator, primary school.]

“We find a lot of children have health problems and other socially-related problems that can hinder their progress at school. The families where there is enough food, where there is enough money, for those children their progress is perhaps more advanced than those of our...”
children who come from backgrounds where there isn’t any stability, where there are poor financial resources and where the health factors in the family aren’t good.” [Principal, primary school.]

The Student’s Motivation and Attitude to Learning

Participants in the study also pointed out that, closely interrelated with such factors as level of encouragement and support received at home, extent of prior schooling, and the nature of previous life experiences, student motivation was integral to effective learning. They had found that students who were motivated to learn and displayed a positive attitude towards school would progress much faster in acquiring English language skills than those who were not motivated.

“I think the children’s attitude [to learning] is the most important factor [in their success]. I think if they have a nice environment in here [in class], a non-threatening environment, then they are not afraid to try the language. If they want to learn, if they have got a keen, good, happy attitude towards it, they usually do [learn successfully].” [ESOL coordinator, primary school.]

“I think [the student] wanting to learn in the first place [is crucial] — the parents and the child being motivated to learn. [The student] not seeing any barriers to the learning, seeing learning as a fun thing to get into because there are all these resources there that they can use, and that there are people there who they can sit with on a one-to-one basis and talk to in their own language, as well as in English. A lot of it has to with role modelling as well, having the right role models within the school. [Also], apart from the attitudes of the teachers, the attitudes in general of other parents and other children towards these families is really important too.” [Special needs coordinator, primary school.]

“There has to be a perceived need to be able to speak good English. For example, we had a young Somali boy who said nothing [until] another boy said to him, ‘Don’t you Somali just love Saddam Hussein!’ This boy, who had never said a word, spoke for 15 minutes. He had something important to say! He had said nothing [before] because he hadn’t seen a need to say anything — there has to be a perceived need. It has to be important. In front of the class he took the map and he showed us where things were [in Somalia].” [Classroom teacher, secondary school.]

While intrinsic motivation is largely to do with individual differences, according to participants in the study, an important aspect of any programme of support for NESB [and all] students is therefore to maximise likely extrinsic motivation factors by, for example, ensuring that students and their families feel welcome on arrival at the school and that students’ transition into the school and classroom occurs as quickly and as smoothly as possible. Participants
felt that steps such as these give the student the best possible opportunity to become motivated and/or feel confident enough to participate in activities and to learn.

**Age of the Student**

Generally, teachers in the study felt that it was easier for younger NESB students to learn English than it was for older NESB students. The reason for this was, in part, attributed to the teaching techniques used in the junior primary school area which encourage student learning through hands-on activities and participation. Teachers felt that this approach was more conducive to second language acquisition than the more structured learning environment often encountered by older students.

“It [the student’s ability to learn English] can also depend on how old they are and on what stage of education they were at in their own country. I’m sure that five- and six-year-olds especially find it a lot easier because the learning and the patterns and the groupings, and the types of teaching [used here], are similar to the teaching of young children anywhere. As they get older, I guess it is more structured.” [Special needs coordinator, primary school.]

“The younger they come in the better it is because you can use all the junior school programmes and you do exactly what you do with any kid learning reading and writing, you just have to do it better. In fact, you can use the same resources and make the most of them, whereas the higher up [the school] the kiddies are, they don’t want the baby books even though a lot of them are appropriate [in terms of difficulty level], especially the non-fiction ones. The wee ones who come here at years 1 and 2 are making really rapid progress.” [Principal, primary school.]

“You know how difficult it is for us [as adults] to pick up different things. Five-year-old children are lucky because they’re more receptive to learning. And I think the experience-related learning in the junior school makes it easier for them to pick it [English] up because they’re doing hands-on experience learning. Whereas [schooling] gets more formal at the older level and it is more difficult [for them] to learn.” [Classroom teacher, primary school.]

Other explanations of why older students may find it more difficult to learn English include the fact that they have to contend with learning not only social English but subject-specific language as well. They may also find it more difficult to fit in with their age peers (more self-conscious, for example). Previous formal education is also much more critical for older students — if they have missed a lot of schooling they will have a lot to catch up on in all subject areas over and above trying to learn English.

“The younger they are the quicker they learn because they have fewer hang-ups about it and they just learn along with all the other five-year-olds coming in. I think if they get the
extra support now, by the time they get higher up in the school they will be well on their way because they are learning the alphabet and reading and everything along with their peers. The older ones [ie, who come as new arrivals to a New Zealand primary school] don’t get a lot of help before they start intermediate — from intermediate on they must find it very difficult. Their oral language very quickly becomes quite good because they need to be able to communicate with friends but it’s the written work that remains the problem.” [Teacher aide, primary school.]

A teacher aide at one of the primary schools we visited described how difficult it can be for older students when they come into the school unable to speak English and therefore relate satisfactorily with their age peers.

“They need friends, and they need to be able to talk to people. We’ve had some children here, who came in a bit older, having been in a wee school [in Apia, Samoa] and had had very little schooling, and because they didn’t have English, and they couldn’t relate to the kids, they tended to hit and fight and so on. And therefore they didn’t make friends, and even the other Samoan kids didn’t relate to them because they thought they were stupid, and they were slow in learning and so I think that being able to make friends within your class is very important. We find that the older ones who come in without any English tend to gravitate to play with the younger ones, and often they [these are the ones who have come from Samoa] are doing things here — like playing on the forts in the junior playground where they’re not allowed to go — that they wouldn’t have done in Samoa and are really exciting for them because they thought they haven’t experienced before. They’ve climbed coconut trees and they’ve fished and they’ve been in boats and done all these neat things that kids [here] have missed out on, but suddenly there are all these [other exciting] things — [but this results in their being] continually for being in the junior playground or something of the sort.” [Teacher aide, special needs, primary school.]

Another teacher also felt that a problem for some older NESB students (who enter our schools with some English) is that they have previously been taught inappropriately and find themselves (particularly those wanting to pursue an academic path) in the position of having to unlearn ‘bad habits’.

“I think that the 13- and 14-year-olds are going to cope better because obviously they’re going to have longer at secondary school before they need to go to university. But it’s the students who come in [at sixth form level, say] who think they have got good English [but] in fact a lot of the English that they’ve been learning is not the way we use it here at all. And so they come with [what] in language terms are called ‘fossilised problems’, and it’s very hard to defossilise those things, to make them unlearn something they’ve already got there. And one of the hardest things I find at sixth form level is to try and
teach that if you’re going to do formal writing, you don’t write in contractions, that you
don’t write ‘don’t’. If you’re going to write for university, you really ought to be writing fairly
formal English, and that’s very hard for them to do. It’s actually quite hard for native speakers
to do, too. They are taught ‘I’m’ instead of ‘I am’. They know it means ‘I am’ but they are
taught quite an informal type of English, and I don’t mean colloquial English, because that
creates another problem for them — so I find that that’s quite hard and if you’re teaching
academic English I think you’ve got to start looking at structure [and so on].” [HOD, ESOL
Department, secondary school.]

First Language Competency

It was evident from the teachers and others we spoke with during the study that whether or
not students have a strong first language base can have a major influence on their ability to
learn English. Many participants had found that students who are fluent in their first language
acquire competency in a second language more quickly than students who are not fluent.

“I think a lot has to do with how fluent, how literate, they are in their own mother language
— the more fluent they are, the easier it is for them to learn English.” [Principal, primary
school.]

“I think that there are students in any group who have better language ability than others.
The richness of their own language, their first language, is clearly going to be a factor. [And]
whether they’re living in some kind of situation where they need to communicate in English
— [eg] whether they’re ‘home-staying’ and living with an English-speaking family — that
would clearly have an effect. And we try to encourage maintenance of their own first language.
... I think the richness of their own first language is probably the most important factor in
students’ ability to learn English; secondly, the amount of English they use either at school
or at home would [also] be important.” [Principal, secondary school.]

“[Students] won’t make as much progress if they are having problems in their first language
— that often affects their attitude to learning too. Competency in [their] first language is a
strong indicator of how they’re going to learn English.” [ESOL coordinator, intermediate
school.]

“That’s a message that we constantly put to our parents — to keep their own language.
Because the hardest children to teach are the children who aren’t fluent in any language.
And we also have parents [of some of the children] who aren’t competent or fluent in the
language of their culture and they speak a pidgin-type language. It is very difficult for these
children because they haven’t got any language rules to bounce their English learning off.”
[Deputy principal, primary school.]
“Good solid grounding in their first language base is essential for good English language acquisition. I taught in Tokoroa for a long time and there were Pacific Islands children there whose parents’ first language was, say, Samoan or Cook Islands Maori, and the language of the home was that language. But the kids were not fluent [in that language] so they didn’t have a good first language base at all and they didn’t have good English either. And as a consequence of that they were really disadvantaged language learners in two settings.”
[Principal, secondary school.]

“It is very important for NESB students to have good role models in English language to listen to.”

“Some of our children have come from refugee camps and had a really mixed preschool life — I find the ones who learn English the most quickly are the ones who are the most fluent in their own language.” [Classroom teacher, primary school.]

“Children who are not literate in their first language — even little ones — when they come here, find it very difficult. I’ve got a [Chinese] student who would say that English is his first literate language — he speaks Mandarin, but he can’t read it, and he can’t write Mandarin, but it’s the language he uses, and he has difficulties with English, and I think it is because he hasn’t got anything he can sort of, you know, attach it to and say, ‘Oh, it’s the same as this and this and this — it’s how we do it in Mandarin’, because he can’t do that. He’s got nothing to base it on. Our Cambodian girl has real difficulties too, because she has missed out on so much formal education.” [HOD, ESOL Department, secondary school.]

**Exposure to Good Language Models**

In addition to having a strong first language base, teachers felt that it is necessary for NESB children to hear good English being modelled if they are to become proficient in the language. Similarly, students need to have opportunities to practise their English, as well as the confidence to do so. Teachers felt that this could be greatly facilitated by NESB students socialising with English-speaking friends [one of the rationales for establishing buddy systems or using peer tutoring as a teaching strategy, discussed later in the report]. Participants felt that schools providing opportunities for students to hear good English modelled was particularly important in light of their concern about the paucity of language — both in quantity and quality — in some of their students’ homes.

“It is very important for NESB students to have good role models [in English language] to listen to, and to be working with a group that is speaking English. [Also], modelling [by teachers] in reading and writing, in everything you do — and that’s not just for those kids who have got minimal English, for a school like this, it’s across the board — is ultra-important.” [Classroom teacher, primary school.]

“The fact that they come to school and they are not getting good language models [at home] is one factor [which influences their ability to learn English]. At home they may not even be
particularly fluent in their own language. That happens because their parents feel that in order for their children to learn English at school it is a good idea for them to speak English at home, so the parents are speaking English at home but it is not good English. So the children are never really in a situation where they are exposed to hearing good English models. If they have got a good base in their mother tongue, then I think English will be much easier [for them] to acquire than if they haven’t got a good base in their own mother tongue.” [Principal, primary school.]

“I don’t think [the students] are getting modelling of the English language of the variety that you would like [them to receive]. I think a lot of it would be very basic English that they probably hear from their parents and whatever else they hear on TV. So in terms of modelling the English language to give them a good [language] base, they probably wouldn’t get a lot of that in their homes.” [Classroom teacher, primary school.]

“There are families which are striving and doing their best to be Kiwi and be New Zealand, and they end up speaking pidgin English and it doesn’t make sense to anybody because their grammar goes, their plurals go, all that syntax [etc]. It is very difficult because the child is hearing however many different [forms of] language from grandparents’ pidgin English to school English. It is very confusing for five-, six-, seven-year-olds.” [Special needs coordinator, primary school.]

“Lack of communication [in the home] puts children at a tremendous disadvantage. [In some homes], adults just do not talk with or to children. And these children come to school ... with nothing. The language they’ve picked up is probably the language from the television, and so they don’t have the structures, and if you don’t have the structures (a) you can’t communicate well, effectively, and (b) you also can’t learn to read, because reading is understanding language structures and concepts. It can make it very difficult for a teacher who is taking a new entrant classroom — [you might] have a group who have really good oral language, so they’re away, and you [might] have a group of NESB children who have no English at all, maybe good Samoan, but no English, and you [might] have a group who have no language at all. So the [last-mentioned] group are the most disadvantaged. The Samoan children, if they’ve got good Samoan, will learn good English. And it happens very quickly. [For example], one little boy had superb Samoan and his English now has just blossomed. I’m just startled sometimes when I hear his English, and he started here at the beginning of the year — so in just a few months [he has developed good English skills]. But had he not had that good language background, he wouldn’t have been able to transpose so quickly. So the children who don’t have a language are tremendously disadvantaged, and that disadvantage will continue through.” [Special needs coordinator, primary school.]

“Having experienced, committed teachers is crucial [to NESB students’ ability to learn English]. And I think the sort of models they get outside of school [are also crucial]. There is
a feeling there [among some of the students and their families] that if you get enough English so you can survive and make sense of the world you are in, and get enough English to have a fair idea of what the teacher says and understand what’s going on in the playground, and have enough English to be beyond the level of being ostracised by the other kids for your lack of English (and there is a fair bit of that goes on), you don’t need to take the next step to improve beyond that. So there has to be some sort of motivation for them to improve.” [Principal, primary school.]

In the following quote, the participant illustrates how, for students at some schools, where there is a very high proportion of non-English-speaking background students on the roll, teachers have a particularly vital role in the modelling of good English.

“A problem we have here is [that] because virtually all of our children are NESB, the children often don’t progress here from one category to another [ie, the Ministry of Education categories of NESB students’ English language competence, which schools use to apply for discretionary ESOL resourcing] as quickly as they might because they are not getting good modelling of English language. The main source of good modelling is actually the teachers because the other students here are not really good models of the English language. In a way, the children are disadvantaged and these categories tend to drag out or become more obvious in a school like this because the children don’t seem to progress as quickly as they might in a different setting. I don’t have any difficulty with the categories themselves as I think they describe the different stages of language development quite adequately, but we find that a lot of our children seem to be stuck at maybe Category 2 for a long, long time and one of the reasons for that is possibly because they are not in an environment where they are exposed to [enough] good language modelling. So that is an overall problem we have here — because we seem to attract large numbers of NESB students, the setting is not really conducive in a way to good language learning.” [ESOL coordinator, primary school.]

Opportunity to Use and Practise English

Running alongside the need for NESB students to be exposed to good English is the need for these students to have the opportunity to use and practise English regularly.

“Constantly hearing [English] modelled — reading, being read to, being spoken to, being able to use it with peers and others — [is essential]. You’ve got to hear it and use it [in order to become proficient in English].” [Classroom teacher, primary school.]

“The language in the home [is important]. We have students here whose English has not progressed as one would expect and, when you talk to them, you find out that mum and dad don’t want to lose Samoan so they don’t speak any English at home, which is laudable, but it makes it difficult for the child to achieve fluency in English no matter how much they are
surrounded by it at school. When the rest of their day is surrounded with Samoan language, it becomes difficult. And, of course, in some of the homes, there are family members who can’t speak English, so that makes it even more important that they speak Samoan.” [Principal, primary school.]

“The fact is, and you can’t blame them, they mix more with their own kind and not with the Kiwi kids until they are more confident [which can delay progress in learning English a little].” [ESOL teacher/classroom teacher, intermediate school.]

“Theyir listening skills and also their confidence to practise orally what they learn [influences their ability to learn English]. I’ve got one boy in my class who had no English at the beginning of the year and he has made staggering progress. He has surpassed others in the class and I think that is only because he is confident, he practises his English all the time. Whereas I have a couple of girls in the room who never speak, they never say ‘boo’. And because he is willing to listen and practise orally what he has learnt, progress is much quicker. Even in written language he is progressing more quickly.” [Classroom teacher, intermediate school.]

“The opportunity to be able to practise their English [is vital]. Always testing them and modelling [correct English] back to them [is also vital].” [Classroom teacher, primary school.]

As well as the opportunity to use and practise English, students must feel confident and secure enough to try out their English in front of others. As indicated below, school and classroom environment can influence the extent to which a student feels confident about learning and practising new skills.

The School and Classroom Environment

Study participants felt that another necessary component in the successful acquisition of a second language for NESB students was the provision of a learning environment which supported diversity and, specifically, the needs of NESB students. The development of school policies which addressed the needs of these students, a welcoming atmosphere in both the administration areas and the classrooms of the school, and sympathetic staff who are committed to working with these students, were considered to be important factors which impact on an NESB student’s ability to learn English.

“A very positive school environment — where the child feels protected and welcome in the school, where they feel they can speak their first language (they start speaking English as a second language much faster when they can do that), where they know that making mistakes is OK and it is OK to be human, where parents are welcome in the school, and there is an acceptance of all types of humans — [facilitates the ability learn English]. ... A systems-type of approach from the school is very important [here]. It is very important that the principal and the administration support that. If that doesn’t happen, then what happens in the
classroom happens through luck alone. And usually you will get very good teachers who will do that [raise the children’s expectations of success], and you will get others who couldn’t give a toss about the kids and they won’t expect them to succeed at all. ... To me [the most important factor influencing a student’s ability to learn English] is the way the children are treated as human beings. That also relates to the way the children [already] in the school treat the children who come in. If those children are treated as sub-human and not competent, then they will develop incompetence. But if they are treated well and with respect and helped to learn the language, then they will probably learn it [English] more quickly. So if you have good systems in place, a lovely environment, a welcoming environment physically, emotionally, and socially, that’s probably the most important indicator of success for me.” [Principal, primary school.]

“The school environment is really important. It must be an environment that is supportive of the [student’s] own language because it has been proven that if a child is confident in their own language then they will be confident [in English]. Bracketed with that is the teacher’s skill in providing that [supportive] environment.” [Deputy principal, intermediate school.]

“The classroom environment you create is really important — for example, a Somali child who has come from a very unstructured life in a refugee camp is not going to learn any English in your class until he or she is settled and has learned to sit and listen and conform to things they have never had to do before. So the structures that you set up in your classroom are of paramount importance for children like that. ... They need a very structured environment [initially] because then they know where they are very quickly. Because what is fine for a really well-adjusted New Zealand child, who is used to making choices and coping with those, is not at all appropriate for these children.” [Classroom teacher, primary school.]

“They have to feel comfortable in the classroom. If they are not comfortable, if they are scared or worried or it is a threatening environment, then they are not going to try.” [Classroom teacher, primary school.]

“How comfortable they feel in their class is really important — [whether or not] they feel they can take risks quite happily. We place huge importance on praise and positive reinforcement.” [Classroom teacher, primary school.]

**The Role of the Teacher**

Literature in the area of second language learning suggests that teachers who work to ensure a supportive classroom environment, and who are in tune with the needs of their NESB students, are an important ingredient in students’ successful acquisition of a second language.
Participants in this study reiterated such views, commenting, for example, on the importance of teachers finding out as much as possible about the background and interests of NESB students in order to help tailor their lessons to suit the needs of these students.

“I think if you are looking at factors [which influence an NESB student’s ability to learn English], it is important that you have a good supportive classroom where they are looked upon as an equal, they are not deemed to be anything lowly, and the others in the class like to help them. So it’s really a matter of having a supportive, caring classroom where they are hearing good English because you are trying to model the very best at all times. And giving them work that they can capably achieve in and feel good about themselves. Because none of us are going to achieve if we feel really rotten about where we are at and how we are doing. So all the time [it’s a matter of giving them] lots of praise and just giving them all the support that they deserve. And, honestly, most of them are such incredibly hard workers, they are a privilege and a pleasure to work with. So they do get lots of care and support and attention and they all just seem to learn.” [Classroom teacher, intermediate school.]

“One of the most important things [as a teacher] is to be aware of how students feel and to make absolutely sure, especially in learning situations, but also in social situations where they are interacting with other children, that you are totally sure that they understand what the situation is about and where they fit in. And to make sure from the start that they understand what the theme is that you are talking about and that you’ve got simple aims and objectives they are able to achieve.” [ESOL coordinator, primary school.]

The Other Students in the Classroom
Teachers in the study also explained that, as well as their own role in creating a supportive classroom environment for students, other students also provide support within the classroom for NESB students, not only in the formal role of peer tutor but by simply befriending them and including them in group activities.

“I think, too, the support of the children in the class [is important for helping NESB students learn]: our kids here get an awful lot of pleasure out of watching the new learners of English learn.” [Principal, primary school.]

Teachers’ Expectations that Students will Achieve
The expectation on the part of the teacher that NESB students can and will achieve academically was another factor which participants in the study identified as influencing an NESB student’s ability to learn English.
There has to be an expectation of success from the teachers. If teachers assume that NESB children are not as good as middle-class, English-speaking children, they will not succeed as well. The teachers have to come from the point of view that the [NESB] child will succeed the same as the [child] next to them, and expect that to happen. That raises the child’s expectations.” [Principal, primary school.]

Individual Differences

Some of the teachers interviewed pointed out that, as with any group of students, individual differences [eg, in ability, personality, behaviour] must be taken into account in relation to the teaching and learning of NESB students.

“And there is the ‘intelligence quotient’ — some children just have the ability to quickly grasp things [whereas] for others it is just a big slog. I think a lot of that may be environment, but it is often hard to judge just what it is, why some children catch on so quickly, [and others don’t].” [ESOL coordinator, primary school.]

“And their personalities have an effect on learning. They all learn at different rates, they’ve all got different abilities, it’s just a matter of finding out where those strengths and weaknesses are. It might take a wee bit longer because of the language, but they’re just treated like our [other] children in that regard, but maybe with a bit more empathy and a bit more understanding, I think.” [ESOL coordinator, primary school.]

“Often their personalities, how outgoing they are, [affect their acquisition of English]. Oracy is probably the most difficult part. The written [work] and the reading are not so difficult. But it is getting them to try orally — the more outgoing ones get on to this quickly.” [ESOL teacher/classroom teacher, intermediate school.]

“We’ve got two Somali boys here at the moment and probably before I met these boys, I would have said educational background is very important [as a factor influencing NESB students’ ability to learn English]. Now these Somali boys had been to school for six months before they arrived here and they are 12- and 13-years-old. And they have picked up English — I guess I’m looking purely at conversational English, like just surviving in an English-speaking environment, without getting into the conventions of the thing — very, very quickly. Their reading is not particularly good and that is where you see the educational background of the children coming in. Because they are just not used to sitting down and taking stuff in, or handling text or anything like that. But their English, it is just astronomical how it has taken off conversationally from first coming in here, when no matter what question you said, they would say ‘thank you’ and try and shake your hand. Obviously, that is what they were told to do when they arrived. Now you can ask them what they have done in the morning, and they have read a book and done this and done that, played a game. And yet...
their educational background would only be classified as deprived, I guess — they have come in as refugees from Somalia.” [Deputy principal, intermediate school.]

Concluding Comments

As shown throughout this chapter, the teachers and others who were interviewed for the study mentioned many, often complex, factors which they considered influence NESB students’ ability to learn English and settle into life in a New Zealand school. These factors included the nature and extent of the support students receive from home, previous educational experiences, a student’s motivation to learn, first language competency, and a positive school and classroom environment, to name just a few. Also, most participants indicated both that many of the factors are closely interrelated. For example:

“Many students have refugee status and are poor. Their self-esteem is low and their living conditions have changed from their home country — these things affect learning. [But] refugees have a different attitude and education is important to them. Such things as low self-esteem, low communicative skills [from, for example], speaking English and Samoan in different settings [and not learning either language well], the lack of books in the home, the attitude to school and learning of both parents and students, general parenting skills, physical violence, health needs, differences in home and school expectations, linguistic deprivations, lack of preschool education, large class sizes, the fact that many [families] are itinerant [all influence a student’s ability to learn English]. Poverty [in particular] has a big impact and affects so much else — health problems, physical violence. It’s a cycle.” [Principal, primary school.]

The factors identified by participants in the present study as having an influence on NESB students’ ability to learn English closely reflect those repeatedly raised in the literature (see Chapter 2: Review of Literature, beginning on page 20). All of the factors identified need to be viewed collectively when considering designing strategies to help NESB students acquire English language skills and adapt well to life in a New Zealand school. The factors identified also have important implications for issues such as teacher training and support, for the relationships between schools and their communities, the extent to which parents/caregivers need to have input into their children’s learning, and for the nature and extent of resourcing for schools to cater for NESB students.