Chapter 10

The Importance of First Language
Key Points

- Many participants identified the fostering and maintenance of first language as playing a key part in NESB students’ acquisition of English and in learning in school generally.

- A particular concern was expressed about students who had not, for whatever reason, had the opportunity to develop competency in their first language; this, it had been found, often led to a situation of students not having an adequate grasp of any language.

- There was a suggestion that, at times, consideration needs to be given to whether some students enrolled in Reading Recovery or classified as having ‘special needs’ would be better catered for if they were included in programmes and support specifically designed for NESB students.

- The issue of first language maintenance and development is very complex and has many resourcing and other implications, not least of which would involve the recruitment of (more) bilingual or multilingual teachers and securing the cooperation and support of parents/families and, sometimes, the students themselves, to pursue first language maintenance within the school.

Introduction

A strong theme which emerged during interviews with participants in the study (it is also an issue identified in the literature — see, for example, the views of Waite, 1992b, and Davison, 1993, referred to on page 28 of this report) was the belief or realisation that students having a good grasp of their first language was critical in the subsequent successful acquisition of English (and, of course, any other language). However, participants also often mentioned that some NESB students have not, for various reasons, had the opportunity to develop strong language skills in their first language. Such students are therefore in the position of not being fully fluent in any language. This has many implications for the sorts of programmes that need to be provided to best cater for these students and also for the importance of involving members of the students’ families and wider community in these students’ education.

Teachers reported that they felt that some of their NESB students had significant difficulties in gaining the most from school because of background circumstances — such as low family income, a lack of books and other educational materials in the home, heavy reliance on television as entertainment (which does not require a child to speak and therefore practise language), and lack of early childhood experiences and/or other opportunities to broaden their range of experiences.
In some cases, teachers felt that such background circumstances in large part contributed to poor language development — that the students in question appeared to receive limited language input from significant adults in their lives, and appeared to have limited opportunities (prior to school) of interacting with children who could model ‘good’ language. It was also reported that, in some cases, the parents of these children were not, for various reasons, fluent speakers of their first language, nor had they been able to develop a thorough grasp of the English language. Instead, they had reportedly developed a sort of pidgin language — a combination of their first language and English. Teachers felt that this made it very difficult for the children from these families to enter the New Zealand school system, where English is the predominant language of instruction, with any degree of confidence. [Participants also pointed out that as English is the predominant language in all other interactions in New Zealand society those who do not achieve a good grasp of the language are at a disadvantage in many situations integral to everyday living.]

“[One of our students here], a five-year-old little girl, does not have enough English language, or enough Samoan language either, to be really effective. [Our part-time Samoan teacher] who comes in on a Friday, looked at this little girl and said that if she was in Samoa, she wouldn’t be able to take part fully in the classroom [there either] because of her lack of Samoan. So it’s not as though she’s developed a good oral Samoan language at the expense of the English. She doesn’t have either [language], so that’s really, really worrying, I think, and that’s an area I feel needs to be addressed. ... [Our Samoan teacher] can’t sit down with her and translate from the Samoan to the English for the child, so the child can learn the English, because she doesn’t have either language. And we’re [also] finding it more and more here [at this school] that many of the Samoan children with parents born in Samoa are speaking Samoan at home, but it’s becoming a pidgin Samoan, and [the children] are not hearing English, and consequently they come to school and they haven’t developed the concepts in either language. And it makes it very, very difficult. There are some children further up the school, standards 3 and 4, who we’re finding with this problem: they can read, but there’s [almost] no understanding at all. In two cases, they are good readers, but [with minimal] understanding. It’s a tremendous concern, I think. It’s something that I’m looking to really bring up and try to have addressed somehow, but I don’t know. It’s money, of course, [that is the limiting factor]!” [Special needs coordinator, primary school.]

“We’ve got children here who have come from Samoa and children who have been born here, and it’s very difficult putting them together, because you see the same things happening in a sort of crossed-over way with the children, because quite often the ones who have been born here don’t seem to have their own language as well as the ones who have come from Samoa, so although they’ve had experiences here and lived with things, they haven’t got the language to express it. I think it’s important that they’re secure in their own language. If they’re going to be bilingual, they need to be secure in their first language — I have met so many people that weren’t fluent in either language, they couldn’t express themselves really
in either language. We have [a bilingual teacher aide] here who is making sure that some of [our NESB students] who have already got written Samoan language are using that as well as they can — they can write things [in Samoan] for me, but I don’t know if they’re writing them correctly or not. [In some cases], the kids will take things home that they’ve written in English and the parents will translate it into Samoan — or vice versa. But we need more [bilingual staff], Samoan or Cantonese, or whatever language is needed, so they can give that language to the children. Because the kids who are not fluent in either language are missing out. [And] they can put on a show [ie, a pretence of being able to understand]. I think they’re OK probably up to about standard 3, standard 4, and then it starts to show that they haven’t got the language.” [Teacher aide, special needs, primary school.]

“We learnt first of all [on the professional development contract for assisting NESB students] that security in their own language [is very important]. [This was] something that never entered my head before we went on the contract. [We were puzzled about why] some kids were not learning, [but] once you discover that they weren’t secure in their first language you realise why they weren’t learning — they had nothing to hang it on.” [Principal, primary school.]

“If they have a good knowledge of their first language, if they are fluent in their first language, personally I think it helps them. [And] I have seen it definitely modelled with seven of the children in my class who are fluent in their first language and definitely found English much easier to pick up [than some students who were not fluent in their first language]. And this is closely related to children who have parents who are encouraging [first language fluency].” [Classroom teacher, primary school.]

“What hasn’t yet worked well, but is starting to work [now], is fostering the belief in these children that retaining their own language is still important. That hasn’t got through to them all, it hasn’t even got through to their parents. So that is something that we are still trying to work on. We think it is just as important, if not more important [than learning English], that they maintain their own language. I think we can perhaps try and keep that going by bringing bilingualism into the school. Get people [from their community in who can demonstrate to the students] that it is important to retain their first tongue. Educating the families and so on that what they have is very important and that it is important that it is retained.” [Classroom teacher, intermediate school.]

“Sometimes you have to argue with the parents when they say that they don’t want them to do that [learn their first language]. They say, ‘I came here to learn English, you stop letting my child speak Mandarin and write in Mandarin.’” [Special needs coordinator, primary school.]

Sometimes schools have mistakenly [according to the views of some] enrolled students, who, for some reason or combination of reasons, have not had the opportunity to learn
either their first language or English well, in Reading Recovery or defined them as special needs when they should really be classified as NESB students and treated accordingly.

“I think that there should be a category which allows for funding for children who are caught in both cultures and are not proficient in either English or in their own language — they have a problem because they are caught between two different languages. And there should be some [ESOL] help given to those children rather than the children being seen as children with learning deficiencies in the classroom, which is how they are usually labelled, because of the fact that they may go home to [for example] a Samoan-speaking environment but they only speak Samoan half the time and English half the time. Then they come to school with token English and it is quite confusing. There should be money put aside for those children because there are quite a few of them who sit in schools but they are actually classified under a different label [than NESB].” [AP/classroom teacher, primary school.]

“There is a general feeling here [in this school] that if Reading Recovery actually kicked in a bit later as their [the NESB students’] vocabulary grows it might be a bit more successful. We have used our ESOL teacher [this year] to give some of our eight- and nine-year-old ex-Reading Recovery [NESB students] booster sessions, a short intensive burst [on reading and language], and that has been a real asset.” [Principal, primary school.]

Concluding Comments

If it is accepted that first language maintenance is crucial for those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, then this presents a considerable challenge for New Zealand schools.

For example, not all teachers necessarily understand or are convinced of the importance of first language maintenance, nor do many feel they have the confidence or skills to assist NESB students with first language maintenance. Ovando and Collier (1987), referred to on page 27, report on the recommendations of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages [TESOL] organisation in the USA which include that there should be bilingual programmes for all NESB students. However, Ovando and Collier further report that such barriers as student numbers, the total number of languages represented in a school, and the availability of teachers or tutors with the necessary language skills considerably limit the opportunities to offer such programmes to the extent that is required.

In addition, the matter of schools offering opportunities for first language maintenance is not likely to be straightforward in other ways either: not all NESB parents or students wish to maintain their first language as they feel that they should devote their energies to perfecting English in order to maximise their opportunities for success in New Zealand society and in the workforce.

“What hasn’t yet worked well is fostering the belief that retaining their own language is important. So that is something we are trying to work on.”