

# **Culture and Classroom Communication: A Case Study of Asian Students in New Zealand Language Schools**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper reports findings of a qualitative study conducted from December 2002 to March 2003 at two New Zealand English language schools. Forty Asian students participated in the survey. The study reveals that, in spite of the positive learning experiences in the schools, there also exists a significant mismatch with Asian students' learning expectations. The recurring themes that reflect Asian students' negative perceptions and experiences relate to issues of teacher competence, teacher quality, teaching approaches, course content and learning materials. It was found that the interactive teaching methods adopted by New Zealand teachers are culturally incompatible with Asian students' learning conceptualisations. The findings suggest that some teachers' adoption of the communicative or interactive teaching approach led to Asian students' negative learning experience in New Zealand. The paper recommends that New Zealand teachers develop three sets of interrelated skills in order to cope with the complex ESOL teaching situations and to ensure quality teaching: linguistic skills, pedagogical skills and intercultural communication skills.

**Key words:** export education, intercultural communication, ESOL, TESOL, English language teaching, Asian students, perceptions, teaching methods, pedagogy

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Export education has become one of the key industries in New Zealand, the 4<sup>th</sup> largest service export earner. According to the New Zealand Immigration Service (NZIS) statistics<sup>1</sup>, the number of international full fee-paying students increased by 24.6% from 79,632 in 2002 to 99,196 in 2003. Over 80% of these international students came from Asia, especially China, South Korea, Japan and Thailand. There was a 39.5% increase in the number of Chinese students, from 41,927 in 2002 to 58,467 in 2003. In other words, of the total number of international students (115,129) in 2003, over 50% were Chinese. The statistics also shows that in 2003, 23,738 visas were issued to students coming to study at New Zealand language schools, a 43% increase in the number of visas issued in 2002 (16,608).

Over 1,200 providers, including 178 English language schools<sup>2</sup>, participate in the industry. English languages schools, though a small sector (approximately 15% of the total number of providers), accounted for 51% (41,725) of the total population of the international students enrolled with all providers nationwide in 2002 (Ministry of Education, April 2003).

New Zealand is claimed to be “a leading international centre for English language-based education” (Groser, 2001). It is believed that it is internationally recognised educational standards, safety, security (LaRocque, 2003), education sectors’ national identity and brand (Laurenson, 2003) that have made the New Zealand’s booming industry possible. The survey in nine international markets undertaken by Lawrence (2003) during May and June 2003 indicates that New Zealand is ranked ahead of Australia by potential students for education reputation, academic standards, prestige, and “British-based” institutions.

The industry, however, is facing serious challenges in maintaining its reputation as a provider of high quality export education (Mallard, 2002; Sinoski, 2003; Rotherham, 2003; Education NZ, 2003) and the New Zealand image as quality education provider has plummeted in some Asian countries, especially in China (Perrott, 2003). Language schools have been hit the hardest (Rotherham, 2003). The collapse of the Modern Age Institute of Learning did further damage to the vulnerable industry (Evans, 2003b).

There had been some complaints about the New Zealand education quality in language schools well before the closure of the Modern Age Institute of Learning. McFedries, for example, surveyed 144 Asian fee-paying secondary students in Canterbury in 2002. She found that these students were very isolated and she warned parents not to send their children to New Zealand schools where they would receive no support (Haines, 2002).

In February 2002, the *New Zealand Herald* reported that the International Educational Appeal Authority had been dealing with steadily increasing complaints about the quality of education in New Zealand<sup>3</sup>. Some international students felt they had been cheated and that they had become

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.immigration.govt.nz/NR/rdonlyres/4A4745DD-1838-49BC-A5D1-7259A2C8277B/0/R1.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> *English Schools New Zealand*. Retrieved September 29, 2003. <http://www.english-schools.co.nz/>

<sup>3</sup> *The New Zealand Herald*: Fee-payers speak out about poor deals. 18 February 2002. Retrieved 25 October 2003 from: <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/storyprint.cfm?storyID=939788>.

“cash cows” (McLeod, 2003) of New Zealand’s failing educational system.<sup>4</sup>

Mao (2002) also gave warnings in June 2002 that the unchecked growth of the industry was causing a severe shortage of qualified ESOL teachers and the consequent poor quality of education. Her report of Chinese students’ complaints about poor quality in some language schools did not attract much attention.

In November 2002, Chinese officials in the Chinese Embassy lodged thousands of complaints from Chinese students about the poor standards of English language teaching and lack of qualified teachers in English language schools (Quirke, 2002). Chinese students’ dissatisfaction with their education services began to attract media attention.

Having surveyed some Chinese students studying in New Zealand, Chen (2003) found that some Chinese students studying in New Zealand language schools had been involved in prostitution, gambling, kidnapping, extortion, car accidents, and drug taking, the reason being that the host institutions did not care about these students. Chen coined *liuxue lajie*, an expression to describe the Chinese students being reduced to “dregs of society” in the host country. Chen’s report, which first appeared in *the Chinese Youth Online* on 2 January 2003, was published by almost all other major online Chinese media. Chen claimed that although the number of Chinese students with such bad experiences was very small, the impact on Chinese perceptions of New Zealand’s quality of education was devastating.

Chen’s coinage was adopted and further elaborated on by many Chinese official online media, particularly the *People’s Daily* and the *Xinhuan News Agency*. The *People’s Daily* described the situations with Chinese students studying in New Zealand as “shocking and horrible”<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, the *Xinhua News Agency* advised Chinese parents and students to think twice before they made their final decision to study in New Zealand:

There is a severe shortage of qualified teachers and necessary infrastructure in New Zealand because of the influx of international students. Educational quality is severely watered down. In addition, many Chinese students are clustered in language schools. In some schools all students are from China. There is no learning environment conducive to language learning. It is the same as in China. As a result, the disadvantages outweigh advantages for young Chinese to study at New Zealand language schools (Huang, 2003, my translation).

From late July to mid-September 2003, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued six warnings to the Chinese who are interested in overseas education, two of which were related to New Zealand’s educational quality and student security.<sup>6</sup>

The mandatory Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students, including its revised edition and other relevant documents, has been in place to protect foreign students, but the issues of quality control should cover more than welfare (Butcher, 2002; Evans, 2003a). One of the key issues for consideration is teaching quality which involves teacher competence, the

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<sup>4</sup> “Fee-payers speak out about poor deals”, *New Zealand Herald*, 18 June 2002.

<sup>5</sup> *The People’s Daily*. Chinese students’ bad behaviour all over the world. 27 August 2003. <http://www.people.com.cn>.

<sup>6</sup> Jiaoyu Shewai Jianguan Xinxi Wang, Data retrieved on 5 October 2003. <http://www.jsj.edu.cn/yujing/index.html>.

course content, curricula, teaching pedagogies and learning resources.

For most international students, the focus of overseas education is their academic progress (Barron, 2002). Their needs are centred around academic quality (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003). Students' level of satisfaction in language learning is related to students' perception of the quality and fulfilment of students' expectations (Walker, 2001). It is acknowledged that perception of quality, especially academic quality, is the key factor in student choice of study destination (Hyam, 2003). The way the quality is perceived is largely determined by each student's learning experience (McCurdy, 2003) and the degree of their matched expectations (Li, Baker & Marshall, 2002). If student needs and expectations are not satisfactorily fulfilled, or if students hold negative perceptions of the services they have received, then the business or the industry will end up losing students and in the end the market (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003). Quality assurance and the quality of outcomes become the benchmark of the export education industry (Hyam, 2003). The whole industry will suffer if quality assurance and control suffers (Asia 2000 Foundation, 2003).

Language education in New Zealand seems to have become the weakest link in the export education industry. The educational quality in the tertiary sector is better accepted than that of English language schools (Evans, 2003b). Some language schools are claimed to have done this country more disservice than service<sup>7</sup>. There have been calls for urgent actions to care for international students and to safeguard the industry<sup>8</sup>.

To the author's knowledge, there is a paucity of systematic and empirical research that may enable the voices of Asian students, especially Asian students in language schools, to be heard and heeded. This pilot research is intended to explore the workings of the interplay between New Zealand teachers and Asian students by carefully documenting students' narratives in an attempt to identify student concerns and to provide some insights into how Asian students have experienced learning and how they have perceived the educational service provision in New Zealand schools. These Asian students' views and perceptions, however subjective, judgmental or insurgent they might be, will enable New Zealand English language teachers to identify the gap between their espoused teaching principles and Asian students' perceptions of their learning experience, to critically reflect upon their teaching practices, to become aware of the issues that are challenging them and Asian students, to adopt appropriate teaching methods to meet the needs of the students, and at the same time to help Asian students to adapt to the school culture in New Zealand.

## **2.0 RESEARCH METHODS**

This study employed a qualitative research method. Semi-structured interviews (individual interviews, focus group interviews) were the main data collecting instruments. The paper takes the premise that systematic documentation of the students' narratives, which may well reflect

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<sup>7</sup> *The Dominion Post* (Editorial): "A bob each way on overseas students". 15 August 2003

<sup>8</sup> *Massey News*: "Urgent effort needed to care for international students". 4 April 2003.

their own learning experience, perceptions and attitudes, can provide valuable insight into the pragmatics of export education in New Zealand. Assessing and measuring perceptions and attitudes go beyond mere quantification.

Permission was obtained from two language schools, one private and another one affiliated to a tertiary institution<sup>9</sup>. The criterion for participant selections was as follows: The participants would be Asian students who were studying English at different levels at the two English language schools.

Forty (N=40) Asian students participated in the survey: 31 Chinese, 4 Koreans, 3 Cambodians, and 2 Filipinos. The proportion of the sampling student population closely matched the student profiles at the two schools. The length of study ranged from 2 months to 2 years. The two schools organised each of the interviews. A week before the interview, each participant was provided with the interview questions which included the student background information, purpose of learning, learning experience, views about the teaching, and recommendations for further improvement (see the Appendix). Except for 11 Chinese students who were interviewed in Mandarin because of their limited English, all other students were interviewed in English by the researcher. With the participants' consent, all the interview data were recorded, coded, transcribed, and translated to eliminate any information that would identify the interviewees and the names of the schools. All students' names in this paper are fictitious.

Of the 40 students interviewed, 23 were categorised as full fee-paying international students, aged between 17 and 24. They were studying English to pass the International English Language Test System (IELTS) in order to study at New Zealand tertiary institutions. Five held Masters degrees and four had Bachelors degrees from their own countries. The rest of the students (N=17) were New Zealand resident students, aged between 21 and 71. There were as many learning goals as there were learners in this group: to find an employment, to understand New Zealand culture and society, to integrate themselves well with the mainstream society and to avoid boredom and a sense of alienation.

### **3.0 FINDINGS**

The data from this research project more or less reflect Asian students' perceptions of their learning experiences at the two language schools. It appeared that different students held different views about their learning in New Zealand. Most students held positive views towards their teachers, teaching methods, and pastoral care. However, a certain number of students did not seem to enjoy their study at the schools. A careful examination of their views indicates that they were not accustomed to the teaching methods, especially the interactive or spontaneous teaching approaches, which were deemed incompatible with Asian students' conceptualization of what constitutes good learning and good teaching. In addition, some teachers' performance was disappointing. Students learning needs and expectations were not fulfilled. There was a strong

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<sup>9</sup> For ethical reasons, the names of the two schools and the participants will remain anonymous. However, the author is very grateful to the principals and teachers of the two schools and all the students participating in the survey.

resentment among some Asian students against the current language teaching practice at the schools.

### ***3.1 Positive learning experience***

The first recurring theme of this research project is Asian students' positive learning experience in New Zealand. Most students were satisfied with their study at the schools. They held a very positive view towards their New Zealand teachers and they expressed their gratitude to those teachers who were very friendly, helpful, and very much committed to their teaching and pastoral care. Equally, they were pleased with their learning environments and their active participation in the New Zealand education system.

Most students agreed that many teachers at the schools were experienced and competent teachers. They adopted different kinds of interactive teaching styles, which they had not experienced before. One of the students, Sylvia<sup>10</sup> for example, believed that such interactive styles were much better than Cambodian teaching styles. Features of such interactive styles included teachers' patience, encouragement, friendliness, understanding, empathy, responsibility, dedication, classroom democracy (compared to Asian teachers' authority), students' involvement, small class size, useful learning materials and course content, and a pressure-free learning environment. Angela pointed out,

I like the small class size. Students have more opportunities to interact with the teachers [than in China]. The teacher does not just teach. She is interested in my feelings. She often asks me about my views on her teaching. This is impossible in China.

The teaching methods used by New Zealand teachers contrast sharply to those in many Asian countries where the transmission style of teaching is still popular (Liu & Littlewood, 1997). Many informants reported that they had made rapid progress in their study. Vanessa was enrolled in the course (Stage 4) for about three months, but she found that her language skills had greatly improved. She gained much confidence in her learning. Frank expressed his particular interest in the way he was being taught at the school:

Teaching methods are quite different from those in China. Some methods are very modern, such as debates. In class, the teacher gives you a topic and you can say the advantages and disadvantages. There are teams and they can challenge each other. I think this is very useful to improve our English.

The data also suggest, however, that not all Asian students were happy with their learning. This should not be a surprise. These students came from different ethnic, cultural and family backgrounds and they held different learning expectations. Also, their conceptualisations about what constitutes good teaching and learning differed from those of their New Zealand teachers. Among Asian students themselves, views also differed sharply. The following documentation of the students' narratives may reflect these conflicting views.

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<sup>10</sup> All students' names in this paper are fictitious.

### ***3.2 Response to the interactive teaching approach***

The second recurring theme of this survey involves the teaching approach adopted by New Zealand teachers: Interactive, communicative or task-based teaching approach that emphasises meaning-based interaction, student participation and involvement, group work, pair work, debates, and discussions and interactive tasks to be “performed “in a pseudo-laboratory-type setting” (Ellis, 2000, p. 207). Student responses to this popular teaching approach appeared to be more negative than positive. While not rejecting the advantages of group work and participation, more than two thirds of the informants complained that group activities were over-emphasised at the sacrifice of linguistic forms.

In spite of her more than one-year study at the school, Margaret still found it difficult to adapt herself to the teaching methods. She found learning at the school boring because teachers were not serious with their teaching. They seemed to spend too much time involving students in group work, discussions, debates, and games. Kevin, transferred from another school, found the “game-loving” teaching approach a waste of time and money. Both students refused to accept the way they were being taught as “teaching”.

Other students, like Tina, Phil, and Angela, agreed with Margaret and Kevin. They were sure their teachers did not know and did not bother to know what student learning needs and expectations were and they routinely organised the class to play games and to engage in group activities that had nothing to do with language learning and the IELTS. Teachers’ routine classroom activities did not seem to change. As a result, Lucy and Jan found such a rigid teaching style unacceptable. Jan complained:

The class is boring. It’s very boring. It is the same every day. All the same: passing a dirty old teddy bear from Student A to Student B and then to Student C. And you talk and talk.

To her, group work was time-consuming and very counter-productive and it was organised for a very good students only. She expressed her frustration with the noise and the many classroom activities that would disrupt her thoughts. In a similar vein, Frances and Sylvia felt that they were humiliated by these teachers who treated them like preschool children by forcing them to play games and to engage in group work and activities that they did not find useful to their language acquisition.

Group work emphasises group participation in finding solutions to the problems that are designed by the teacher but much time is often required to reach a solution satisfactory to the teacher’s expectations. Dennis gave an example to explain why he found the class boring: the teacher asked the students to discuss or guess the meanings of one single photo the teacher had taken. The teacher’s purpose was to encourage the students to talk, but the pedagogical value was not recognised by the students and the linguistic input was minimal.

Similarly Jane reported that her class spent the whole day practising the “what...if” structure in groups. To her it was not worthwhile spending so much time on such a single linguistic item. The time could have been used for some other useful purposes.

According to Winnie, the New Zealand teachers' abuse of the interactive teaching approach slowed and even hindered the process of learning and linguistic internalisation and dampened student enthusiasm for learning. It was her belief that language teaching should emphasise linguistic knowledge rather than meaning-based classroom discussions. Lisa concluded, "I do not like group discussions. There is no room for discussion in language learning because language is arbitrary anyway."

### ***3.3 Spontaneous classroom interaction***

The third common theme of this survey involves Asian students' perceptions of, and response to, some New Zealand teachers' spontaneous teaching which stresses the importance of spontaneous, on-the-spot, un-prepared, instantaneous classroom interaction. Any pre-planned speeches are frowned upon. This approach requires teachers to have good teaching competence and classroom management skills as well as the close cooperation of the students to create a learning-rich environment. It also requires students to have a high level of language skills and a positive attitude towards such a teaching method. Lack of any of these elements would result in unsatisfactory outcomes for both teachers and students.

Unfamiliar with this approach and lacking adequate language skills, Asian students had a sense of being abandoned. They considered this approach as "disorganised", "unplanned", "unstructured", "incoherent", "unsystematic", "purposeless", "ineffective", and "irresponsible". Complaints about this teaching approach became a dominant theme in this survey. The spontaneous discourse gave Asian students an impression that their teachers did not prepare their lessons. Such a perception created a communication barrier between teachers and students because the performance of such teachers indicated that the interests and concerns of international students had not been taken seriously. Winnie explained that she had been taught by three teachers, but it seemed to her that none of them bothered to prepare their lessons. She said,

From my short experience here I feel that they do not prepare their lesson as expected. They teach whatever jumps into their heads.... Teachers should know how much importance we attach to our time and money. They should understand our feelings.

A large number of respondents expressed their strong desire that New Zealand teachers would prepare their lessons and teach in a coherent, systematic, and structured way. They expected to be provided with a detailed plan for the semester, for the week, and for the day. Without a plan or a policy in relation to the course provision and delivery, as perceived so by the Asian students, there could be no shared agenda, no cooperation and no mutual understanding. Trevor, having studied English at the school from Stage 1 to Stage 4, concluded "the number of irresponsible teachers was not small" and he felt it quite humiliating to be taught by such teachers.

The spontaneous teaching approach, which was intended to encourage students to actively interact in class, demotivated the students. To Asian students, such an approach lacked coherence, planning, focus, connections, logic and structure. Jim, for example, felt totally

disoriented because it was very difficult for him to adapt to such teaching. Pauline noted,

We all feel that what is taught this time is totally irrelevant to what is to be taught next time. What is taught today has nothing to do with what is to be taught tomorrow. ... Teachers teach whatever comes out of their minds although I think they have their plans. But my gut feeling is that they do not know what they are going to do. Sometimes, we tell ourselves, jokingly, "These teachers want to give us a surprise [laugh]." Perhaps we still do not know their educational system. Such incoherent and unpredictable teaching, however, is detrimental to our learning.

The spontaneous approach was resisted by Asian students. Their learning enthusiasm was converted to distrust, disappointment, anger, and hostility when they sensed that their teachers did not prepare their lessons and betrayed students' previously held trust.

### **3.4 *Textbooks and course content***

The fourth theme in this survey is concerned with student attitudes towards the use of textbooks in class. As reported above, both interactive and spontaneous approaches required a high level of classroom interaction. Textbooks were not considered as a major source of learning. The research findings show that textbooks were used in some classes but most classes did not use any textbooks. Most handouts were photocopied, such as vocabulary lists, game strips and slips, pictures, word puzzles, road maps, short reading passages, newspaper clippings, and grammar and vocabulary exercises. The survey revealed that most Asian students felt frustrated because their teachers rejected using any decent textbook which, in their view, might enhance their learning.

Denise, unhappy with her learning experiences in a school that refused to provide textbooks, was transferred to the current school. But to her surprise, the same fate awaited her: This school did not provide any textbooks either. She said,

In Korea, you need a textbook to study with, to learn grammar, vocabulary, reading, and writing. But we have nothing here to base our learning on. ... Without a textbook, we do not know what we are doing on the day and what is expected of us. We cannot preview, review and predict our lessons.

Richard also felt frustrated:

In China, every student has his own book. Here I feel it very strange that students are not allowed to have their own books.

Many Asian students, like Denise, liked to have a reputable textbook which they could preview and review at home. They were not accustomed to New Zealand's teachers' use of handouts that required students to study right on the spot in the classroom without any preparation. Pauline and Greg, for example, did not like this way of teaching. They reported that very often the teacher came in, handed out a story from a newspaper, and asked students to read. They felt hopeless because the story often contained too many new words they did not know. Yet, the teacher did

not allow them to use bilingual dictionaries. They argued that to them learning was impossible without a textbook. Similar complaints were evident in Diane's following account:

There should be a textbook. Currently we are given one piece of paper this hour, another piece another hour. We believe if we bind these pieces together, it could be a textbook. But for Chinese students, they are accustomed to having a textbook. This is our learning psychology. They are teaching Chinese students. They must understand their learning needs.

In Chris' view, textbooks could enhance all aspects of their learning, such as reading, writing, speaking, and even listening. He felt very disappointed with the current school practice:

What is happening now? ... When I go home, I take with me useless pieces of scrap paper. How can I preview and review my lessons? I cannot.

Lisa believed that teaching without textbooks could never be effective. Teaching as such deprived students of opportunity to involve all their senses and valuable time in learning. Yuan felt helpless because these teachers were more interested in photocopying than in Asian students' actual learning needs and expectations. Some students reported that sometimes two or three teachers would use the same materials copied from the same sources because of the limited resources in the schools. Diane asked, "Aren't we entitled to a decent textbook?"

As many learning materials were provided by teachers, relevance and appropriateness of these selected materials to learner needs and expectations became a serious concern to Asian students. It seemed to Pauline that much of the teacher-student tension was related to the use of course materials and teaching methods. Elaine was eager to pass IELTS but she found what she had been offered was not closely related to her goal:

I want my teachers to tell us more about IELTS, and do more exercises on the IELTS. I do not want to waste my time reading newspapers every day. I know newspapers are very useful, but I do not want [to read] them every day and every hour. I think we have done too much of this. We can read them at home.

Ken felt sad about his teachers' little knowledge of cultural differences, students' existing levels of language proficiency, and students' learning needs and expectations. Some learning materials were either inappropriate or irrelevant to their needs. He expressed little interest in the learning materials that had nothing to do with his life or with his learning expectations.

Not knowing much about their students, these New Zealand teachers, according to Joseph, tended to either underestimate or over-estimate Asian students' levels of language skills. As a result, the course content could rarely meet Asian students' learning needs. Alan and Jim found it quite embarrassing to be treated like preschool children by learning the language through pictures, cards, puzzles and toys. They found it incomprehensible that some teachers spoon-fed students at an advanced stage with very basic grammar and vocabulary. To their surprise, they had been taught present and past tenses from Stage 1 to Stage 4. There were no clear plans and differentiations between stages.

Matching learner needs and expectations was not an easy task. It was especially so for one of the

schools that had enrolled both international and permanent resident and refugee students. As the number of international students was very small at certain stages, both groups of students were placed together in one class. These students, however, had different learning purposes and motivations. International students, as a minority, had to learn the programme particularly designed for resident and refugee students. Ian, for example, felt very disappointed because the teacher did not teach *English* per se; instead, she taught the class how to *cook* New Zealand food which might be useful for resident and refugee students. He lambasted such teaching for being irresponsible:

You know our parents have paid lots and lots of money to send us here to study English. We do not want to know how to cook New Zealand food. I will not become a chef. This is very sad, indeed.

Lorraine had a similar story to tell. She was exasperated with the teaching in school: her class spent two weeks in groups, doing projects on the use of the Yellow Pages. As an international student, what she needed most was acquiring English language skills rather than the use of the Yellow Pages.

It seemed that the schools did not have a teaching curriculum or a policy as a guide for teachers. Teachers were given too much freedom to be of service to international students. It appeared that these international students, who spent their parents' life savings to study in New Zealand, were offered something they did not expect.

### **3.5 *Teacher performance***

The fifth recurring theme that emerged from this survey relates to students' perceptions of teacher competence and performance. It was pointed out earlier that Asian students described their teachers as friendly, helpful, dedicated, responsive, encouraging and understanding, and that they were happy with their study in the schools. Almost every student could name some teachers whose teaching competence and performance were miraculously exemplary. However, not all teachers' competence and performances matched Asian students' expectations. Some students raised serious concerns about some teachers' incompetence and poor performance.

Carol found that New Zealand teachers were very kind and dedicated, but not all of them knew how to teach the English language because these teachers, except for their oral skills, did not know much about their own language, from a linguistic perspective. Some teachers, though with a TESOL qualification, were reported lacking the ability to deal with very basic linguistic issues. Gillian realized, for example, that the teachers who were teaching her class did not know much about grammar. She said,

If you ask them to explain grammar, they do not know. They told us "What I say is right. Do not ask me why. That's the way we speak. That is grammar." They just ask you to speak and read. They do not tell you grammar or some basic linguistic knowledge.

Some teachers' teaching competence fell far short of student expectations. In Ken's observation,

The school does not have a choice and it cannot find good teachers. They grab anyone from the street to teach international students. In fact, they do not teach. They come to have a holiday with the students. They play games. Even those considered being the best teachers here do not know much about the language and teaching. They are not professionals.

Sue also complained about the poor performance of some teachers in her school. She did not find her classroom experience helpful and rewarding. She claimed,

The outcome of their teaching is not what I expected. ... I think if I stay at home talking with the home-stay parents, it may be more helpful than having to come to class.

The survey suggests that some teachers lacked adequate teaching skills and a broad range of teaching approaches to help them cope with the complexity of classroom communication and to tailor their teaching to the needs of international students. Some teachers based their teaching on a very narrow range of teaching methods which might be culturally incompatible with international students' learning preferences and cultural beliefs. When obsessively used, these methods, such as group activities, games, debates, newspaper reading, and spontaneous interactions could not lead to expected outcomes. Victoria reported, for instance, that her teacher focused her teaching mainly on grammatical items, ignoring other language skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Having realised that they could not learn much from these teachers, some Asian students refused to come to school, running the risk of having their visas revoked by the New Zealand Immigration Service. According to Jan and Josie, there were about 20 students in their class, but very often only about one third of the students attended classes. Jan explained that some of her fellow students stopped coming to the school "because the teacher is not teaching" and learning at the school "is a waste of time."

The data from this research showed that Asian students felt very disappointed with the teaching by non-English speaking teachers. They strongly requested that they be taught by English native speakers. They wanted to study "Kiwi English". Chris pointed out that the shortage of qualified ESOL teachers led these non-native speakers to participate in the profession. Winnie was supposed to be studying at a certain stage, but she refused to study in that class only because she had difficulty understanding the teacher's foreign accents.

High teacher turnovers in the schools often disrupted the class. Some relief teachers were available, but, according to Chris, their classes were often of unsatisfactory quality. He said that he had expected to improve his English at a fast pace, but "the school's system has some problem" and "now I realise how little progress I have made."

Student negative perceptions of the educational quality and unhappy experiences at schools had a huge impact upon the students' attitudes towards the New Zealand educational system. Some felt they had made a wrong decision to come to New Zealand to study the language. For example, Elaine, with a Bachelors degree from China, regretted having paid lots of money to study in New Zealand. She commented,

I feel studying English in New Zealand is not very useful for Chinese students. I think it is a

waste of time and money. When many Chinese students were in China, they did not know much about it. They just wanted to go overseas. So when they arrive here they have found things are very different from what they expected. But they cannot change anything. They just have to keep paying money for nothing. ... But if they had studied in a language institute in China, they could have passed IELTS more easily than here. Some students have studied here for many years and yet they still cannot pass the IELTS. Some have to return to China in order to learn to pass the test.

Frank supported her claim, “I would not recommend my friends to come to New Zealand to study the language. I think they can learn more English in China than in New Zealand”.

## 4.0 DISCUSSIONS

This survey, though small in scale, has provided a snapshot of what the life was like in some language schools. Although the student narratives were not representative of all other students in New Zealand, they, however subjective they might be, reflect the partial reality of the language teaching practice in New Zealand.

There is strong evidence to suggest that not all Asian students who participated in the survey were satisfied with their learning in New Zealand. Their articulated voices indicate that their learning expectations were far from being met. A careful examination of these accounts has revealed that these unmet expectations are associated with many complicated issues, but teacher competence, teaching pedagogy and intercultural communication issues have emerged as three key interrelated issues.

Teacher competence and teaching skills are crucial in English language teaching. Educational quality is anchored on teacher quality. It would be unrealistic to expect teachers who are not qualified and who do not have adequate teaching skills and competence to safeguard the quality of the industry.

Compared to the number of English teachers in primary and secondary schools where over half of these teachers do not have TESOL qualifications (Ministry of Education, August 2002), almost all the English teachers who were teaching at the two schools held TESOL qualifications, mostly the Cambridge Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) and the Trinity College Certificate in TESOL (CertTESOL).

The standards for acquiring an ESOL teaching qualification are very relaxed in many training establishments. The TESOL courses are open to people who “have little or no experience of teaching English as a second language”<sup>11</sup>. The training programmes are very short (about 4 or 5 weeks), “prescriptive, limited and shallow, usually influenced by the dominant ideology of the day” (Gabrielaltos, 2003). The qualifying process is the easiest, yet the most popular, of all New Zealand teaching qualifications. Most importantly, these commercialised qualifications are the

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<sup>11</sup> Entry requirements set by one of the Trinity CertTESOL training establishments in New Zealand.

products of “ethnocentrism in TESOL teacher education” that “give little consideration to the millions of ESOL students” (Liu, 1998, p. 4).

Some ESOL teachers hold tertiary qualifications other than TESOL, but most of them do not have any qualifications at all. In many Asian countries and regions (China, Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan), it is illegal for those without a tertiary qualification in the relevant area to engage in the teaching profession (McCarthy, 2003). Being taught by inadequately trained teachers or by teachers without any qualifications would be a loss of face and thus a disgrace (Bracey, 2001) to Asian students who accord their teachers deep respect and authority.

TESOL training, although a big business, is often sidelined in New Zealand. Government support is a rarity. TESOL is still not regarded as a profession. At least, its importance has not been fully recognised as such by the government and the public. There is a kind of mentality that language teaching is an easy job as long as one can speak the language. Being a native speaker is seen as a license to teach. As a result, language schools in New Zealand employ many TESOL practitioners who have not received adequate professional training. Language schools are often reluctant to employ highly qualified, competent and experienced English teachers. In this way schools can achieve optimal profits by recruiting and retaining the services of the lowly paid teachers. Fees charged by language schools are equivalent to, or higher than, those in tertiary institutions where students are taught by teachers with higher degrees. Language teaching has become a one-off business for some “cowboy schools” (McLeod, 2003). Educational quality, if it exists at all, is secondary to profits.

In such a profit-driven business, many ESOL teachers have been treated as money-makers rather than as professionals. They battle for wages, employment and job security. When one is hired for a full-time position, it is rarely tenure track (Krauss, 2002). They have to work hard, very often 25 hours a week, not to mention providing the pastoral care. They rarely find time to carefully plan and prepare their lessons to deliver quality teaching. Some Asian students’ complaints about some teachers’ lack of teaching competence and sense of responsibility are therefore well grounded.

Some language teachers, having gone through the short training course, exhibit a kind of “disciple mentality” (Gabrielatos, 2003) to a particular teaching approach as if teaching is but a wholesale copying of such a pre-packaged approach, such as the communicative approach, the task-based approach, or the whole language approach, without a deep understanding of the philosophies of these approaches. Such teacher preparation programmes emphasise the omnipotent power of teaching methodologies, procedures, and techniques, operating with a notion that all methods will work in all situations, with little attention to linguistic knowledge, language awareness, cultural implications and compatibilities, relevance, students’ life experiences, and the politics that underlie the social fabric of teaching.<sup>12</sup> This “methoditis” (Gabrielatos, 2003) ignores the fact that in language learning, it is the linguistic needs and linguistic input that are central to learner expectations. The teachers’ wide range of linguistic knowledge is no less important than teaching methodologies.

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<sup>12</sup> According to the Trinity College validation criteria (2003), there are five components in CertTESOL: language awareness 13%, teaching skills 57%, the learner profile 11%, the materials assignment 11%, and unknown language 8%.

In addition, some teachers, except for their speaking skills and the little linguistic knowledge acquired during their secondary education, do not have adequate linguistic competence and language awareness to enable them to analyse the language system and structure, to plan and effectively deliver the course, to assess learning outcomes, and to adopt appropriate teaching methods to help students achieve learning objectives. Language analysis, one of the most important language teaching components, requires teachers' awareness of the language learning process, the structure, and the usage of the language. In language teaching, it is the teacher's linguistic expertise, rather than speaking competence, that will facilitate language learning. It is not "who you are" but "what you know" that makes learning and teaching accountable (Rampton, 1996).

This survey shows that some teachers' linguistic knowledge was so inadequate that they were often unable to cope with the complexities of classroom situations. As a result, it is difficult for them to assess and understand students' learning needs and acquisition process enough to make informed decisions about the course materials and content.

It is important to point out that pedagogy is shaped by specific cultural values and ideologies suitable to the society where it originates (Prabhu, 1996). It contains socially approved methods and therefore the enactment of these methods becomes an imposition of cultural values by an arbitrary power (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Cultural compatibility of pedagogical actions is largely responsible for the teaching outcomes.

In spite of the New Zealand teachers' dedication to improving education quality, their success was questionable in terms of the level of satisfaction of these Asian students. The methods adopted by New Zealand teachers, featured by classroom spontaneity, interactions, involvement, participation, group work, democracy, and learner autonomy, seem to run counter to the Asian discourses of coherence, sequence, strict discipline, competition, reflection, precision, concretisation, in-depth and logical analyses (Li, 2003; Aldridge & Huang, 1999; Biggs, 1998; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). Imposing the Western TESOL models upon Asian students without taking into account cultural compatibility could lead to serious pedagogical challenges. Some teachers' lack of intercultural communication skills and their narrow range of teaching approaches have become a barrier hindering them from adapting their teaching to learner needs and to communicate successfully with Asian students in their teaching. Just as one of the Asian students pointed out, "These teachers are very kind, but they do not know how to teach us."

Education export is an integral part of global communication and the internationalisation of education. To meet the challenges of the global marketplace, it is no longer appropriate to restrict the frame of reference to one's own culture. The ability to manage the politics of difference will help ESOL teachers avoid rigidity in teaching practices. To be effective in operating in intercultural communication situations, all participants, ESOL teachers in particular, need to become aware of the impact of cultural influences upon learning and teaching in order to understand and manage the politics of difference, and to address the issues that may become obstacles to effective classroom communication. In short, to be successful in their teaching, ESOL teachers need to develop three interrelated sets of skills: linguistic skills, teaching skills, and intercultural communication skills.

This research is limited in its scope and the sampling population. To some extent, the reported accounts, in a sense, anecdotal, reflected the perceptions and views of some Asian students. However this research did not touch upon teachers' perceptions and views which are equally important. Comparing the views from the two groups would provide valuable insights into the nature of the ESOL practice in New Zealand's schools. Also, this research is purely qualitative. A statistical analysis through a quantitative research would help determine the magnitude of the issues relating to English language teaching in New Zealand.

## **5.0 CONCLUSION**

This exploratory research studied Asian students' perceptions of their experiences in two New Zealand's English schools. The findings indicated that some Asian students held strong negatives views about the education quality in the schools, including teachers' teaching competence, course content, and teaching approaches. Some teaching approaches and methods were considered incompatible with students' learning concepts, such as classroom involvement, participation, spontaneous and interactive teaching, group work, and meaning-focused classroom activities. It was pointed out that teachers' lack of linguistic, pedagogical and intercultural communication skills together with the current ESOL teacher validation process in New Zealand as well as the profit-driven commercialised ESOL teaching practice were largely held responsible for poor educational quality that led to students' dissatisfaction. To safeguard the export education industry, the paper argued, it is important to control the educational quality. Teacher quality should be taken as a priority. To improve teacher quality, issues such as ESOL teacher validation criteria and teacher training standards need careful attention.

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## APPENDIX

### *Interview Questions*

1. Could you tell me something about yourself?
2. Are you a New Zealand permanent resident or a full fee-paying international student?
3. Why are you studying English at this school?
4. How long have you studied at this school?
5. What are you going to do when you finish your study here?
6. Do you enjoy your study at the school? Please tell me more.
7. Do you like the way you are being taught at the school? Please tell me more.
8. How do teachers teach here? Please give me some examples. Do you like their teaching methods? Please explain to me.
9. Compared to English language teaching in your country, please explain if there are any advantages or disadvantages of learning English at this school?
10. Is there any teaching method that you like or dislike most?
11. Do you think you have become accustomed to the teaching at the school? Why?
12. Have your learning expectations been met? Please tell me more.
13. Do you think you have got what you have paid for? Why?
14. Would you like to recommend your friends in your country to come over to study at this school? Why or why not?