ESOL paraprofessionals and English language learners: Working towards sustainable practices

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Abstract

Paraprofessionals are increasingly being seen across the Western world as one way to provide support for school students with additional and high classroom needs. Their work is varied and ranges from playground supervision, to the creation of classroom materials, to sole instruction. Based on a 2007 study of twenty four English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) paraprofessionals working across all levels of the New Zealand school system, this paper considers the issue of sustainability by examining current ESOL paraprofessional practices and identifying where the gaps in effective practice are.

Introduction

With growing linguistic and cultural diversity in New Zealand schools it has become apparent that effective and sustainable systems need to be found to support school students at all levels of the primary and secondary systems in their English language learning. Many migrant students and the children of migrants who have home languages other than English are attempting to learn English while also having to learn and move through the full school curriculum. This situation puts a considerable strain on both the students themselves and mainstream teachers, who are striving to meet a wide range of needs in any one classroom. One way of addressing the challenge has been to use designated ESOL funding to employ paraprofessionals or teacher aides to work with English language learners. These people work with learners from year one to year thirteen in the New Zealand educational system. Increasingly they work in a range of settings. These include assisting mainstream teachers in mainstream classes, working in ESOL withdrawal classes with ESOL teachers, and also working alone (without teacher supervision) either in one-to-one or in small groups with children. The majority of ESOL paraprofessionals begin work in the field with no specific training in English language teaching. Consequently, a challenge for the Ministry of Education has been to gauge the effectiveness of ESOL paraprofessionals and the kind of professional development they require to work successfully with English Language Learners (ELLs). This paper reports on the first stage (2007) of a two year study aimed at evaluating the current sustainability of practices of ESOL paraprofessionals. The second phase of the research (2008) will look at the way one specifically tailored professional development programme, the English Language Assistants (ELA) Professional Development Programme, supports paraprofessionals to work with ELLs and how sustainable this programme is in the long term.

Surveying the literature

The literature on paraprofessionals tends to be focussed in the area of special needs education which is the first field, historically, in which paraprofessionals entered the educational workforce in western countries. We have found that many of the issues identified in this literature are pertinent to ESOL paraprofessionals working with ELLs. Pickett, Likins & Wallace (2003) point out that the majority of paraprofessionals are women who tend to be re-entering the workforce after a period of absence and generally live near the schools they work in. In our study (Harvey, Stacey & Richards, 2008), all the paraprofessionals were women and closely fitted this profile. Significantly, paraprofessionals predominantly teach and provide support in areas of high specialisation e.g. students with learning disabilities, students from very diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and students with high physical needs.
Giangreco, Broer & Edelman (1999) note that one of the biggest concerns with paraprofessionals is their lack of training coupled with the considerable time they spend with high, or at least, extra needs students. Consequently, the issue of ongoing training and education for paraprofessionals has been an area of considerable interest in the literature. This ranges from sharing ideas for school-based inductions and focussed training sessions with teachers (e.g. Cobb, 2007; Hauge & Babkie, 2006) to the analysis of comprehensive career advancement programmes (Pickett et al., 2003). In the United States the latter programmes began in the 1960s as a way of moving paraprofessionals and other non-traditional students into teacher education (Pickett et al., 2003; Kaplan, 1977) at a time of low teacher numbers and in recognition of the need to train teachers more able to relate to the communities in which they were teaching.

Professional development for paraprofessionals remaining in the role, however, seems to be patchy (Giangreco, 2003). Many paraprofessionals have an inadequate repertoire of strategies and the educational theories from which they are derived, for the range of instructional situations in which they find themselves (Forster & Holbrook, 2005; Harvey et al., 2008). Moreover, for many paraprofessionals their work has evolved well beyond the original paraprofessional role of administrative support. Increasingly, the paraprofessional role involves instruction and is often unsupervised (Forster & Holbrook, 2005; Likins, 2003; Harvey et al., 2008).

Another side to the issue of general and specific training for paraprofessionals is the issue of how teachers interact with paraprofessionals. Giangreco (2003) writes that teachers can be so relieved at having a paraprofessional in their classroom to deal with a student(s) with special needs that they disengage from teaching the student(s) themselves. Moreover, if the paraprofessional has had any level of training (or many years of experience) they may well be deferred to as the person with the expertise as far as a particular student or group of students is concerned. In some schools we visited the paraprofessional was referred to as being ‘the resident ESOL expert’ or as knowing more about ESOL than the supervising teacher. Giangreco (2003) warns against teacher reliance on paraprofessional expertise and urges teachers to take responsibility for directing learning for all their students including those with high/special needs. A corollary is that teachers need more training themselves in how to direct the instructional activities of paraprofessionals, either through pre-service or in-service training (French, 2001; Downing, Ryndak & Clark, 2000; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay & Stahl, 2001). An important feature of the English Language Assistants (ELA) Professional Development Programme is that coordinating teachers attend the six day course run over one semester alongside the paraprofessionals that they direct.

**Context for the study**

Since the late 1990s, the New Zealand Ministry of Education has been involved in developing comprehensive language support programmes in schools for migrant children. The current research is part of these developments and was commissioned by the Ministry of Education in order to build an evidence base from which to determine how best to address the professional development needs of paraprofessionals in their work with ESOL children.

Evidence suggests that in New Zealand more than in other western jurisdictions (but on a par with the United States), having a home language different from the school language is a significant risk factor for achieving lower levels of literacy as well as for lower school achievement in general (Wylie, Thompson & Lythe, 2001; OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), 2001). Drawing on information presented in the
Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2001), Franken and McComish (2003) state “The PISA study found that minority language students in New Zealand are more than twice as likely as majority language students to be in the bottom quarter of performance in reading literacy” (p. 15). Importantly, the 2003 PISA study (OECD, 2006) observed that well established language support programmes were a significant predictor of migrant children’s academic achievement:

…it appears that in some countries with relatively small achievement gaps between immigrant and native students, or smaller gaps for second generation students compared to first generation students, long-standing language support programmes exist with relatively clearly defined goals and standards. These countries include Australia, Canada and Sweden. In a few countries where immigrant students perform at significantly lower levels, language support tends to be less systematic (p.5).

As part of a wider response to these findings the Ministry of Education has allocated special funding for resourcing ESOL provision in New Zealand schools. One of the targets for this funding is the employment of teacher aides/language assistants, referred to here as ‘paraprofessionals’ because they are not trained (professional) teachers. In New Zealand, the Ministry of Education (2006) defines paraprofessionals as: “Teacher aides and education, behaviour and communication support workers” and in turn defines teacher aides as “People who help educators support children and young people who have special education needs, also known as kaiaawhina (helpers) and paraprofessionals.”

Those paraprofessionals employed for work with ELL children in New Zealand schools may be from a variety of employment and educational backgrounds and might be bilingual, multilingual or English speaking only. Equally, they may be employed to support the work of teachers in a variety of ways.

**Approach to Research**

At the beginning of 2007, Auckland University of Technology (AUT) was contracted by the Ministry of Education to investigate paraprofessional practice in ESOL programmes in primary, intermediate and secondary schools in a regional study across the Auckland isthmus. The first part of that study required that the team evaluate the practices of paraprofessionals involved in initial reading programmes for English Language Learner (ELL) students.

The brief was to:

… gather data on the practices in a purposive sample of schools which employ paraprofessionals who are supporting new learners of English in initial reading programmes. It will briefly summarise approaches and practices in Years 1-4, and provide detailed information on approaches and practice beyond Year 4 of schooling. It will then make comparisons between the practices and choices of instructional materials in different contexts (Ministry of Education, 2007).

The research was qualitative, aiming to occupy a ‘watching space’. That is, the researchers observed and recorded what happened in selected schools and classrooms without attempting to modify the environment in any way (Nunan, 1992), although unavoidably the presence of a researcher in the room with students and paraprofessionals was in itself intrusive to some degree (Labov’s [1972] observer’s paradox). Observations were supplemented by interviews with supervising teachers and paraprofessionals which served the purpose of contextualising and informing the observations. The focus was on the practices and working context of the paraprofessionals in their daily work in initial reading programmes with ELL students.
Interviews and observations were augmented by ERO (Education Review Office) reports for all the schools involved as well as ESOL verification reports obtained through the Ministry of Education.

For years 1-4, four teachers with responsibility for paraprofessionals working in ESOL and ESOL reading in particular, were interviewed to discuss the organisation and practices of ESOL paraprofessionals in their school. The Ministry was of the opinion that considerable information existed at this level and a more comprehensive study as implemented at higher levels in the school system was not required.

For years 5-13, data was gathered through forty-eight observations of paraprofessionals working in the classroom and twenty-four interviews with the same paraprofessionals and the teachers who directed their work. The interviews and observations were equally divided between primary (years 5-6), intermediate (years 7-8) and secondary (years 9-13) schools. That is, there were sixteen observations of paraprofessionals working in each sector and eight interviews with the paraprofessionals and their associated teachers.

The researchers concentrated on one sector each, so that one researcher worked solely in primary schools, one focussed on intermediate schools (years 7 and 8) and one focussed on secondary schools. All data was recorded as handwritten notes and later written into electronic data files. There was no electronic recording of data during the observations or interviews.

The researchers were asked to focus on researching paraprofessional practices in initial reading programmes. These are reading programmes in schools aimed at improving the English language reading proficiency of ELL children. They are targeted to those children who attract ESOL funding because their scores fall at or below 112 points on the Ministry of Education ESOL Assessment Form. While structured reading programmes are a feature for all children in New Zealand schools in years 1-4, the picture is not so consistent for children after year four.

Analysis

A fine grained analysis of the data was achieved through the coding of themes from interview and observation notes. The analysis was gradual, incremental and initially tentative so that premature explanation and conclusions were avoided. Researchers also reported on several issues which they felt were salient and had arisen during interviews and observations but which were not elicited through the research tools. One example was that of teaching space for paraprofessionals and ELLs which seemed worth reporting on as it impacted on the quality of learning and teaching. At the request of Ministry, analysis and reporting of findings was initially carried out on a sectoral basis rather than being aggregated across all sectors. That is, data for years 5-6, 7-8 and 9-13 were all analysed and reported separately. In this paper, findings have been aggregated across the sectors in the interests of providing an overall picture of practices within the format available. The intermediate and primary sectors have been reported on previously (Richards, Harvey & Stacey, 2007; Harvey, Richards & Stacey, 2007).

Findings

The research team was most surprised by the range and diversity of settings, practices and materials utilised in supporting students in their initial reading and wider ESOL programmes.
The observed range of levels of effectiveness of paraprofessionals across all school sectors also varied widely. Many paraprofessionals worked very effectively to promote successful learning with students, others worked well on some levels e.g. displaying empathy towards students and giving positive feedback, but were less skilled in other areas e.g. questioning and correctly levelling materials. However, some paraprofessionals were working in contexts beyond their skill and experience level. This tended to be where paraprofessionals were working in situations which exceeded the Ministry’s guidelines (Ministry of Education, 2006) i.e. they were working largely autonomously without clear teacher direction or supervision.

Planning and coordination between paraprofessionals and teachers also varied widely with some paraprofessionals being very closely directed by a teacher and others being relatively free to plan sessions and to choose what resources to use. The researchers felt that sessions were more effective and student learning optimised where there were clear routines and guidelines for students and paraprofessionals to follow. Planning was most effective where paraprofessionals were working in dedicated ESOL units with ESOL teachers who incorporated paraprofessionals explicitly into their planning and communicated this with the paraprofessionals. Although there were some successful instances of paraprofessionals working with ELL students in mainstream classes in secondary schools, many mainstream teachers did not understand how to incorporate paraprofessional work into their planning. In many schools, liaison between the paraprofessionals or the ESOL teacher and mainstream teachers appeared to be sporadic, relying on chance meetings in the staffroom or school grounds. Some participants raised the concern that paraprofessionals were only paid for their hours taught and not for any planning time. This tended to mitigate against regular planning sessions between teachers and paraprofessionals.

Complex timetabling and a related ‘flexibility’ as to which students at which time were getting paraprofessional support raised concerns about the continuity of learning for students and the possibility that some students were not getting their maximum time and benefit from the ESOL funding. This was more a concern in secondary schools than for years 7-8. In the earlier years, issues around the timetabling of ESOL withdrawal tended to focus on what other important school activities children were missing out on e.g. fitness, school assembly, school productions and the like. Some of the least disruptive ESOL withdrawal situations were when students were withdrawn for ESOL at the same time as the mainstream class was covering a similar curriculum area. This situation was more efficacious for the students when there was a clear school understanding about the delineation of responsibility between the classroom teacher and the ESOL teacher/paraprofessional as to who was providing take home books and the main reading programme for students.

Paraprofessional interactions with students at all levels were most successful when they were working with groups of four or fewer students, although one particularly successful session was observed in an intermediate school of eight paraprofessionals working with a large group of eighty students (half an hour each morning in the school hall with a preprepared programme). With smaller groups, paraprofessionals tended to be responsive and able to focus on student learning needs as well as give appropriate and more equally distributed feedback. In these settings, the researchers found that students were engaged and very keen to learn. Many enjoyed the extra attention and gained confidence. In larger groups, paraprofessionals had more difficulty with management of student behaviour and focussing on the needs of individual students.

In situations where paraprofessionals worked in sole charge situations with students, the research team felt that there should be an explicit programme for the regular observation of paraprofessional practice.
The use of the home language in the classroom was present in many observed sessions. Many of the monolingual paraprofessionals (and teachers) pragmatically encouraged children of the same language group to translate instructions and explanations for each other, particularly when one might have only recently arrived in New Zealand. However, initial tolerance seemed to move into unease if the translation sessions extended beyond the very succinct. Students were lightly chastised for speaking to their classmates in their home language even when the interaction appeared to be entirely on task.

In terms of paraprofessionals’ use of home languages, one researcher observed what she considered to be extended explanations by a paraprofessional in the home language beyond what was beneficial for the students. This did not leave or encourage many opportunities for student production of English. In another situation where a bilingual paraprofessional was teaching a mixed home language group, the paraprofessional provided lengthy explanations in her home language but only some of the students could benefit from this. Other bilingual paraprofessionals, however, were able to move with ease between English and the home language, providing home language explanation and then moving back into English to ask for student input. In these situations, paraprofessional use of home languages appeared to be very beneficial for student learning.

The range of literacy and specifically reading materials available in all but one school over the entire sample appeared to be plentiful. Many schools were actively engaged in buying new commercial materials, including resources like games and cards, with a view to improving and updating their programmes. In the primary and secondary sectors there was no predominance of one variety of materials being used and a number of commercial readers, some with accompanying worksheets and teacher workbooks were available e.g. Wildcat series, PM Readers, Rainbow Readers and journals. Where paraprofessionals were observed using a programme of commercial materials the texts were more likely to be well levelled for student proficiency levels. Moreover, in the instances where the supporting teacher materials were used these proved to be a positive scaffold for questioning and other work with students.

In situations where students were given mainstream materials to work with the vocabulary load was usually too high, grammatical structures were too complex and the content was often culturally challenging for new arrivals to New Zealand.

The research team was asked to consider the links between initial reading programmes and the writing students were required to do. Researcher observation of the extent of writing by ELL students was limited to the fact that the researchers were supposed to be observing initial ESOL reading programmes. However, many of the observations could more broadly have been characterised as literacy-based and might, therefore, be expected to include a writing component. Little independent, student-generated and extended writing was observed in sessions. At all levels, student writing was characterised by record keeping, filling in of worksheets, word games and vocabulary recording. However, at the primary level and in years 8-9, the Language Experience Approach (LEA)/student-generated writing component of the Self-Pacing Boxes process, where children were able to produce sentences describing their own experiences and thoughts at their own level of English, seemed very effective. It may be that most writing was done with ESOL or mainstream teachers (as opposed to paraprofessionals) as the skill level to give feedback on writing may be considered greater than that required for reading.

Further areas that paraprofessionals needed assistance with were:

- providing an appropriate range of feedback to students
- providing strong visual support for literacy materials
• effective questioning
• selecting well levelled material for students
• systematic record keeping (particularly at the secondary level)
• the effective glossing of new vocabulary
• working appropriately with culturally and linguistically diverse groups of students

The paraprofessionals themselves were a diverse group of people, although as noted previously, exclusively women. The research team distinguished between two groups. One group were the New Zealand-born and largely monolingual paraprofessionals who tended to have come to the work through mother help roles and had completed general courses for paraprofessionals and some specifically for ESOL. In the primary and intermediate sectors, no New Zealand-born paraprofessionals had completed university qualifications although several had taken university level papers. In the secondary sector, both New Zealand-born and migrant paraprofessionals tended to have university qualifications, including ESOL-specific qualifications. The second group were characterised as overseas-born and largely multilingual paraprofessionals who tended to have tertiary qualifications from their own countries as well as, in some cases, extensive experience as teachers. Several of these paraprofessionals were very skilled educators. The research team felt it was important to recognise the different strengths that the two distinct groups had in supporting student learning. It may well be that some differentiation of training would be appropriate for these two groups. It also seemed that training should address varying levels of experience and skills with ELL students generally, as well as in particular areas e.g. helping with pronunciation and focussing on form.

The issue of career structuring and staircasing was raised a number of times by principals, teachers and paraprofessionals during the course of the research. Most participants believed there was a need for a more explicit career path for paraprofessionals. However, it should be noted that some paraprofessionals liked working in the role *because* it carried no career expectations or pressures and they simply enjoyed the interaction with students. Some ideas for improving the career pathways for paraprofessionals included a training progression through a series of graded steps (beyond the current two) which could count towards a component of formal teacher training. An alternative idea was that training could lead towards a specialised TESOL qualification for paraprofessionals who could work full time on a peripatetic basis between nearby schools.

A problem for several overseas-born paraprofessionals, particularly those with qualifications and teaching experience from their countries, was that they would like to become teachers in New Zealand. However, these people found the requirements for registration and/or retraining overwhelming and expensive. A way of counting their New Zealand paraprofessional work and training towards New Zealand teacher registration would be welcome.

**Further work**

As a result of this study, there are three areas that warrant further investigation. Firstly, it is important to understand more about how mainstream and ESOL teachers work with paraprofessionals. From the current research it seems that ESOL teachers are more skilled at explicitly integrating paraprofessionals into their work programme with children, whereas
mainstream teachers need more training in this area. This is true where mainstream teachers are directing withdrawal work for paraprofessionals and also where paraprofessionals are engaged in in-class support.

Another area for closer investigation is resource selection for use by paraprofessionals with ELLs. There appears to be a propensity to utilise a number of mainstream resources with ELLs without differentiation of approach or support materials. A key factor in the ELA training is that ELLs require differentiated methodologies, resources and materials from mainstream students. This issue is also related to teacher skills in ESOL (are they able to differentiate and prepare materials for ELLs?) as well as teacher understandings of how to work effectively with paraprofessionals.

While the second stage of this research (2008 study) will consider the ongoing effects on practice of the ELA training (up to three months after the completion of the course), there is a need to consider ways to embed and extend the training through networking, clusters, refresher courses and the like. An ongoing issue is gaining formal recognition for paraprofessional training and this also needs to be investigated.

Over the course of this study, the research team met with many dedicated and skilled paraprofessionals as well as those who were keen to develop their skills further. In addition it was clear that many students benefited considerably from the focussed attention paraprofessionals were able to provide particularly when working in well-supervised and planned environments. With more explicit guidance for schools and teachers working with paraprofessionals, as well as more comprehensive training for all ESOL paraprofessionals the use of paraprofessionals in schools could be made considerably more sustainable and effective.
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Acronyms

ELA  English Language Assistant  
ELL  English Language Learner  
ERO  Education Review Office  
ESOL  English for Speakers of Other Languages  
ESOL/AF  ESOL Assessment Form  
LEA  Language Experience Approach  
NESB  Non-English Speaking Background  
OECD  Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development  
PISA  Programme for International Student Assessment  
TESOL  Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

References


