Key messages for teachers: When a new English language learner steps into your classroom

English language learners (ELLs) are not a homogeneous group. They may be:

- students from migrant and refugee backgrounds
- NZ-born students from homes where a language other than English is spoken
- students from bilingual education settings e.g. students transitioning from kura to English medium learning environments
- international fee paying students

Know your learners

Increase your understanding of who your students are, their backgrounds, educational experiences and aspirations. Be aware of their social and emotional needs. Some will be far from family and some will be facing challenging economic circumstances. For example, do you know what language they speak at home? How long have they lived in New Zealand? How literate are they in other languages? What cultural understandings, prior knowledge and experiences do they bring? It may be useful to use the book, New to New Zealand: Ethnic communities in Aotearoa (2011).

How will you find out about your ELLs?

Look for information on your student management system (SMS) and ask your senior managers and specialist teachers of ELLs about the student’s English language learning stages on the Ministry of Education (MoE) English Language Learning Progressions (ELLP). You could survey your class to find out about such information as their literacy in other languages and their educational experiences. Make connections by talking with the students and their families.

How will this knowledge affect your planning?

The ELLP document will provide some information to help create specific language learning outcomes for individual ELLs in addition to NZ Curriculum achievement objectives. ELLs need to access the learning at the curriculum levels of their peers (e.g. engaging in critical thinking). Therefore opportunities that will amplify their learning will need to be planned.

Reading

Reading in home languages should be encouraged and extensive reading in English is vital for ELLs. Graded readers (texts written within a controlled vocabulary range) at the appropriate ELLP stages are useful for fluency, teaching concepts and enjoyment. You can find out more about extensive reading and graded readers for ELLs at http://erfoundation.org/wordpress/. Listening to the text while reading aids comprehension and language acquisition. Many MoE resources, such as the Selections and Choices, will be in your school and new texts can be ordered through orders@thechair.minedu.govt.nz. Connected, another MOE series, promotes scientific, technological, and mathematical literacy and the latest versions can be accessed online.

Scaffolded approaches to reading more challenging texts, such as guided reading, jigsaw reading and three level guides can be used to support ELLs. See approaches and strategies at: http://esolonline.tki.org.nz/ESOL-Online/Teacher-needs/Pedagogy/ESOL-teaching-strategies

Supporting literacy in home languages as well as English literacy

‘Trans-languaging’ is a new term which has been adopted to view pedagogy from a bilingual/multilingual perspective. It refers to the active process of shifting between and across languages that can be encouraged in school. Bilingual and multilingual students perform well academically when their wide language skills are recognised, reinforced, valued and used meaningfully within the classroom learning context. Having the opportunity to share across cultural and linguistic contexts is important.

English language learners are faced with the challenge of not only learning a new language but learning in it and through it. (Gibbons, 2002)