Professional development for bilingual tutors in New Zealand: A pedagogy of support

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Many schools in both New Zealand and Australia employ paraprofessionals to support new learners of English. The New Zealand Ministry of Education has provided funding for a range of projects to support effective EAL provision in school communities. One of these initiatives was a series of professional development workshops for bilingual tutors. The two and three day workshops, conducted over three years, focused on the pedagogies of support between the teacher and the bilingual tutor and the bilingual tutor and the new learners of English. This paper describes the professional development program focussing on the pedagogical support offered, discusses the challenges of this particular type of professional development and looks at the implications for the future support of the bilingual tutors.

Introduction

As a result of continued migration to New Zealand and New Zealand's commitment to the resettlement of 750 UNHCR refugees a year, the cultural and linguistic diversity in New Zealand schools continues to increase. According to the New Zealand Ministry of Education 2007 ESOL statistics,

> there are now 165 different ethnic groups from 160 countries, speaking 110 different languages in New Zealand schools. There are approximately 29,000 students in almost 1200 schools receiving ESOL funding for English language learning support. Approximately 800 schools have fewer than 20 ESOL-funded students and of these, many have fewer than five. A few schools have almost 200 while the remainder cover the range between these numbers. (Ministry of Education, 2008a, p.10)

Since the late 1990s, targeted discretionary funding has been available to support schools with EAL students in improving the literacy outcomes for new learners of English. The July 2000 ESOL Refugee Education policy provides for five years of English language support for each student. For the first two years more intensive support is provided, followed by three years of standard ESOL funding as per the entitlement for eligible NESB students. Schools have a choice in the ways they utilise the funding to support the learning needs of EAL students: "the funding may be used to provide: in-class mainstream support; small group teaching; bilingual resource people; additional ESOL specific resources" (Ministry of Education, 2008). Funding is used in

some schools to provide an extra teacher as an ESOL specialist or paraprofessionals[1] to work in a variety of ways to support EAL learners, but where possible, one of the main thrusts for supporting refugee students has been the provision of bilingual tutors. The bilingual tutors, who are frequently multilingual, come from a range of cultural, language, educational and employment backgrounds. Some have been educators in their countries of origin, while a few have had more limited formal educational experiences. Unlike paraprofessionals in some other countries (Cobb, 2007) working in funded programs, New Zealand bilingual tutors are not required to have a level of post-secondary tertiary qualification.

In the 2008 ESOL resourcing guidelines, schools are reminded that paraprofessionals are not (usually) trained teachers and the Ministry suggests the following ways in which paraprofessionals can be employed to support teachers and new learners of English:

- read to and with a small group of students, with supportive activities and discussion;
- work through the *Self-Pacing Boxes* program with individuals or small group;
- develop key oral and written vocabulary in a specific curriculum, topic or concept area, through discussion and using visual support materials with a group;
- support first language translation and interpretation to aid learning;
- be available in a class to support NESB students in carrying out specific learning tasks set by the class teacher;
- prepare and organise materials and learning support resources under teacher direction;
- supervise learning centres established by the teacher. (Ministry of Education, 2008)

However, a study on the practices of ESOL paraprofessionals working with English language learners in initial reading programs (Harvey, Stacey & Richards, 2008) found that the paraprofessionals worked in a very wide range of settings with varying levels of supervision and support from coordinating teachers.

This paper describes a professional development program for bilingual tutors; it considers the pedagogical support offered, discusses the challenges of this particular type of professional development and looks at the implications for the future support of the bilingual tutors. My role in the development, presentation and teaching of the

[1] For the purposes of this article the term paraprofessional has been used as an overall term for non-trained teachers working alongside trained teachers to support student learning.

professional development program drew on my experience as a practitioner teaching in the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors and my previous involvement with other Ministry professional development initiatives to improve students' literacy levels. Experience in the ESOL department of a secondary school working both in-class and with withdrawal groups, and three years at the AUT Centre for Refugee Education as one of the managers and a teacher on the six-week on-arrival orientation and English language program, underpin the content and my inclusive approach to the bilingual tutor program. More recently my teaching has involved some teaching of adult refugees learning English and my research currently involves paraprofessional training and practices in working with ELA in New Zealand schools.

Background to the bilingual tutor professional development program

Although the study by Harvey *et al.* (2008) did not focus on bilingual tutors in particular, but did include a range of paraprofessionals working in schools, my own experience in working with bilingual tutors on the professional development workshops would suggest that bilingual tutors also work in a variety of roles in diverse contexts which sometimes exceed the Ministry guidelines. The two- and three-day workshops, conducted over three years, focus on the pedagogies of support between the teacher and the bilingual tutor and the bilingual tutor and the new learners of English. The aim of the workshops was to develop the bilingual tutors' knowledge of effective strategies they could utilise in the vital role they have in supporting teachers, and English language development and critical thinking in the multilingual/multi-ethnic classroom. Moreover, bilingual tutors can play a crucial role in connecting the bilingual student and their community with the often monolingual teacher and school environment (Martin-Jones & Saxena, 2003). This role is essential in acknowledging the multilingual identity of many students and supporting their developing sense of identity in a new country. Bilingual tutors are not eligible for professional development in the same way or through the same channels as teachers; however, recently there has been some specific provision for three professional development programs for paraprofessionals: English Language Assistant Professional Development, the Pasifika Bilingual Teacher Aide Programme, and Bilingual Tutor/Liaison Worker Professional Development.

The Bilingual Tutor/Liaison Worker Professional Development Workshops which I developed and taught were first offered in 2006. An invitation to attend the professional development was extended to bilingual paraprofessionals supporting refugee new learners of English in the early childhood, primary and secondary sector, and

community liaison officers and tutors working in homework centres. Potential bilingual tutors, people from the communities of recently arrived refugees or refugees who had become established in their new community and were available and keen to participate more in the community were identified by their local Refugee Education Coordinators and encouraged to participate. In 2006 a series of two-day workshops was provided in three cities. Another series of bilingual tutor professional development workshops was offered in 2007 and as a result of the positive feedback from the 2006 workshops, the program was developed into a three-day workshop. Positive features identified by the bilingual tutors in 2006 included the sections on questioning, vocabulary learning and managing groups, and there were several requests for the program to be repeated and extended.[2] The 2007 three-day series of workshops was presented in four main cities (Auckland, Hamilton, Wellington and Christchurch), with people from the outlying areas attending the workshop in their regional centres.

The targeted group of attendees was expanded in 2007 to include bilingual tutors working with migrant as well as refugee students. Most of the bilingual tutors had English as an additional language but there were some exceptions. One bilingual tutor with French as her support language was an English first language user, and there was a Samoan/English speaker and an English/Maori speaker. At one workshop there were three monolingual English speakers who attended the workshop because their school had a very high proportion of Afghan students and no bilingual tutors. At the same workshop there was one Samoan/English speaker and one Tongan/English speaking tutor, who attended the workshops because the Pasifika Bilingual Teacher Aide Workshops had not yet been provided in that particular city. As a result of the inclusion of different language groups, particularly the fluent English speakers, the dynamics of some of the groups in 2007 were different from those in 2006.

The three days were retained for the 2008 workshop series, but it was decided to spread the three days over three consecutive weeks to allow time for the participants to return to their schools and discuss the workshop and the new learning with their coordinating teachers. As well as this time for reflection, funding was allocated for the provision of in-school support for the bilingual tutors after the workshops for me to provide support

[2] At the time the program was being developed I had not foreseen the benefits of a full evaluation, which would have required full ethical approval. Thus some of the data that informed decisions is unable to be directly reported on. Further research-based evaluations may be undertaken in the future.

in specific areas chosen by the bilingual tutors to be worked on and explored with reference to their specific context.

Program overview

The program for the 2006 series was developed initially in conjunction with a Senior Advisor from the National Migrant, Refugee and International Education Team, and had an overall focus for each day, namely, working effectively with teachers and working effectively with students. The program content evolved during the process of running the series of workshops as the needs of the bilingual tutors became more evident. Adjustments were made as a result of responses and feedback from the participants, my own observations and professional awareness of how valuable the participants found the material. This led to spontaneous adjustments of timing, duration and amalgamation of some of the topics covered. Some changes in emphasis or choice of materials used as examples to illustrate strategies or teaching points were also made.

The program was not intended to be repeated verbatim each year to allow for bilingual tutors who attended in 2006 to attend further professional development. Where effective learning and teaching strategies were repeated from one year to the next, a different text or content topic was selected to illustrate the strategy, so those who had worked in the program before were able to participate fully. Some learning tasks were repeated, for example, a genre sorting exercise, and those tutors who had worked with the activity previously were the ‘expert group’ and encouraged to be a resource for the group as a whole. Offering the workshops three years consecutively provided an opportunity to introduce, as part of the content of the program, current Ministry of Education resource publications to bilingual tutors at the same time they were being introduced to teachers in other professional development contexts.

Some materials from the Pasifika Bilingual Teacher Aides in Mainstream Primary Classrooms workshops were used, but, as the participants were from a wide range of contexts (including early childhood, primary, secondary and homework centres, and some worked primarily as community liaison workers), it was necessary for a wide range of resources and examples to be utilised and to be available for ‘on the spot’ responses to issues that arose spontaneously in the workshops. In general, the content could be grouped under the following main areas but not all topics were covered in the same depth.

- Role of the BT/ liaison worker
- Effective teaching and learning
- Factors that affect individual language learners
- Working effectively with teachers
- Supporting oral language development
- Supporting writing
- Supporting reading
- Supporting questioning
- Vocabulary learning
- Independent learning
- Self access learning
- Use of home languages
- Individual development plans
- Managing groups
- Resources, useful software and websites
- Orientation to learning
- Supporting unmotivated students

Providing pedagogical support

An extremely important aspect of the teaching in the program was the pedagogy of support which I wanted to develop to inform all the activities and create a classroom community of learning. For me this meant:

- developing trust and operating as inclusively as possible;
- discussing the different situations in which bilingual tutors were working;
- drawing on the bilingual tutors' prior knowledge and experience;
- supporting the bilingual tutors to develop their repertoire of skills and strategies and utilise their cultural capital and linguistic knowledge;
- discussing and modelling effective teaching and learning strategies;
- clearly identifying the theoretical background, rationale, purpose(s) and process for each modelled strategy;
- providing 'hands on' experience, followed by sharing and discussion about their experience of completing the learning task;
- providing opportunities for contextualising their experience of the task and how they might adapt or utilise the task or approach with the students they supported.

There were many examples of effective teaching and learning strategies that eventually formed part of the program and they satisfied most of the criteria below. These strategies

- were considered appropriate teaching and learning strategies to support refugee and migrant new learners of English;
- included content on effective language learning as background theory for the tutors;
- were, where appropriate, based on texts for students that are readily available in New Zealand schools;
- utilised materials from Ministry of Education professional development and curriculum support documents;
- were maybe already being used by teachers and possibly by bilingual tutors in their supporting role in classrooms;
- could be easily modified for a range of student levels, ages, topics or teaching and learning contexts;
- could be completed by tutors during the workshop and the experience of 'doing' the learning task could provide stimulus for reflection by the bilingual tutors.

There was also a focus on the importance of developing critical thinking skills, independent learning strategies, and the use of students' home languages where appropriate to support English language learning. The bilingual tutors discussed the benefits of accessing prior knowledge of the concepts being taught, particularly with those students who understood the concepts through their home languages. Learners who have bilingual support can process their ideas in their home languages where appropriate. The importance of working closely with the teachers was emphasised so that tutors know what topics are being taught and they can where practicable pre-teach essential vocabulary and concepts in the home language.

Learning activities

As it is not possible in this paper to discuss the workshop contents in full, two examples of learning activities are described below.[3] The participants in each workshop series did not all know each other and as an introductory, trust-building exercise I finally settled on using a Venn diagram (see Figure 1). Bilingual tutors worked with a partner they did not know to discuss, record and compare their roles in the school(s) they worked in.

[3] Further information on the content of the workshops and examples of the teaching and learning strategies can be found in *Working with English language learners: A handbook for teacher aides and bilingual tutors* (Ministry of Education, 2008b).

This served as an excellent first activity which allowed the tutors to get to know each other and provided a structure for exploring the roles of the tutors in the schools. It strategically modelled the process that was followed during the workshops as outlined below:

- the introduction of a strategy – using a Venn diagram – graphic organiser;
- explanation of the purpose(s)/rationale of the strategy (to promote discussion and record what was different and similar about the role of the bilingual tutors);
- using the strategy to complete a task – hands-on practice using the strategy;
- exploring the content – looking at the range of bilingual tutor roles;
- providing background information as a precursor to referring to the relevant pages of *The Refugee Handbook for Schools* (Ministry of Education, revised 2005) for information on how bilingual tutors work in schools to support new learners of English;
- discussing and reflecting on how it felt as a learner completing this task;
- exploring practical applications – how this type of task with a different focus (e.g., weekend activities, New Year celebrations in different countries, the properties of metals and non-metals) could be used by the tutors with students.

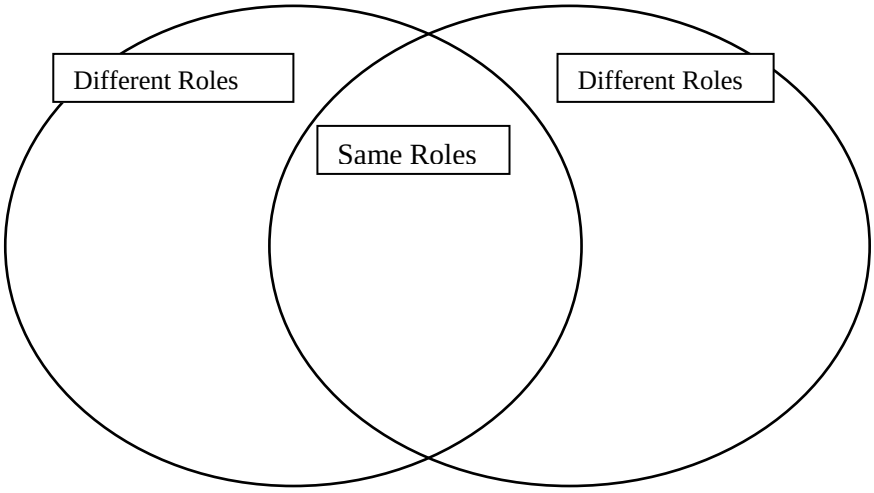

Figure 1. Venn diagram. (Ministry of Education, 2008b, p. 23)

Another example of an effective teaching and learning activity used in the workshops explored the factors that can influence a student's acquisition of a second language. It also modelled a way of encouraging oral interaction and negotiation as tutors worked in pairs and had to justify their rankings. The content for the 'diamond ranking task' was adapted from The Ministry's *English Language Learning Progressions* (MOE 2008a).

The 13 small diamond shapes (see Figure 2 below) containing factors that affect individual language learners were pre-cut before the workshop. Two small blank diamonds were included for tutors to include other factors they may have thought were important. Tutors worked in pairs and were asked to discuss the factors with reference to the students they worked with. The factors were then ranked, putting the most important factors at the top. The pairs worked to negotiate and sort the diamonds onto the blank diamond grid, in the process eliminating the factors that they thought were least important.

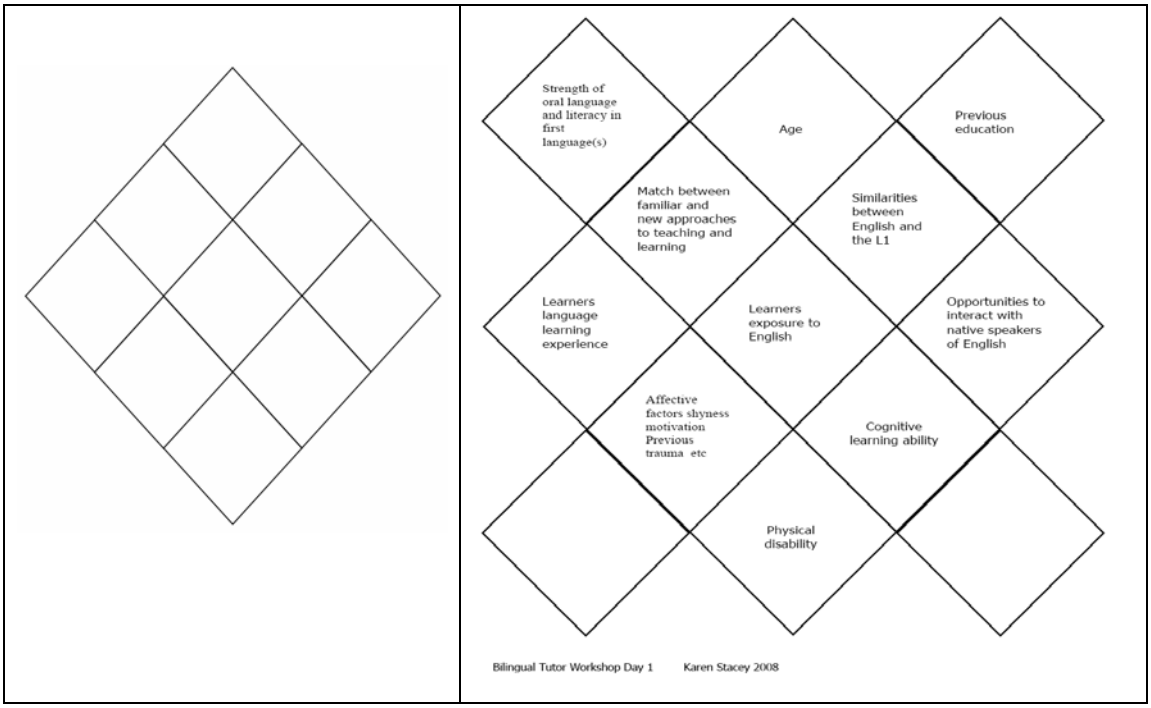

Figure 2. Diamond Grid (Ministry of Education, 2008b, p.29-30)

Each pair of bilingual tutors shared their rankings and the reasons for their choices with the whole group. As tutors had been asked to complete the task with reference to the learners they worked with, there was variation in their rankings. The discussions that ensued encompassed the range of contexts, the diversity of individual students and the related issues. The importance of getting to know the educational background of each learner, their strengths and weaknesses and the importance of working with the classroom teachers was stressed as an essential part of being an effective bilingual tutor. Good practice was emphasised with the need to provide support and input at an appropriate level and to scaffold the support to the learners according to their individual proficiency level.

Discussion

Despite the strength of the strategies, there were some limitations which became evident as the program progressed. One of the challenges was providing appropriate relevant content to meet the needs of all the participants. A similar approach to paraprofessional training outlined by Charlene Cobb (Cobb, 2007) described a form of in-school professional development which stressed the importance of a needs assessment. The needs assessment was completed by teachers, and indicated the instructional strategies the teachers used during reading. This then formed the basis for the training sessions which Cobb ran with the paraprofessionals. Although in the series of workshops I ran the participants were asked to complete a brief survey which included a section where they could indicate the topics they would like covered, this did not prove to be as helpful as was hoped. The tutors came from such a diverse range of backgrounds and supporting situations that sometimes there appeared to be no common threads of specific needs. For some participants who were new to New Zealand and had had no previous paraprofessional training, there was a lack of awareness of what could be covered in a professional development session. Further, as these professional development workshops were run nationally, unlike the local in-school professional development described by Cobb (2007), some of the information did not reach me in time to be considered for the program.

At some workshops a major challenge was encountered in the wide range of supporting roles of the tutors, their different educational sectors, and their ways of working – some were peripatetic and working in more than one school, others were working only in mainstream classes and yet others only in withdrawal situations. There was also a range in the English language proficiency of the tutors in some workshops.

A further challenge related to the diverse backgrounds of the tutors themselves. Workshops with monolinguals or bilinguals with English as their first language appeared to change the dynamics of the group. I tried to make processes transparent and asked bilingual tutors to talk about how they felt completing a shared learning task with a partner or in a small group with someone who was a monolingual English speaker. One bilingual tutor shared what it felt like to work with a partner who immediately began the task because they quickly understood both the oral and written instructions. Further, they were familiar with the learning style and strategy and understood the purpose of the activity. The bilingual tutor shared how she responded to this by

withdrawing from the process: the partner took over and completed the task quickly, so there was no need for her to really engage with the text, the task or the learning. Nevertheless, although working with a group that included English first language participants had the potential to be a challenge, it also provided material for rich reflections within the group. Significantly, it also led to a greater understanding of the realities faced by the new learners of English. These sessions were particularly lively, enlightening and lots of fun, and as a result I felt a greater sense of trust was developed and the tutors participated more fully with the pedagogies of support and with each other.

I was aware at the time that some of the bilingual tutors, because of the way their roles in their schools were structured, might not have the opportunity to use some of the learning strategies covered in the workshops. A tutor, for example, might be mainly supporting groups of students withdrawn from the mainstream or ESOL class for one-to-one reading support in a primary school and not be supporting any new learners with their writing. However, tutors indicated that everything was useful as they were developing their overall understanding of English second language acquisition and could utilise the new learning in a wide range of ways. For some tutors this included use in their own study.

I was also very conscious of my own limitations as a Pakeha (New Zealand European) English-speaking woman working with these refugee and migrant bilingual tutors with an incredible wealth of knowledge and experience as their "funds of knowledge" (Moll *et al*., 1992) as they worked alongside the students supporting their English language development. As Moll points out, all people have "funds of knowledge" based on their life experiences and the bilingual tutors had life experiences that were different from mine and more attuned to the background experiences of the new learners of English. My knowledge of the New Zealand school culture complemented their "funds of knowledge" when we worked together on ways they could effectively support the learners. Martin-Jones and Saxena (2003), in their study in multilingual British primary classrooms, also emphasised the importance of the bilingual tutors' backgrounds:

> Bilingual classroom assistants ... are uniquely placed to make links for children who share a cultural heritage similar to their own. They are able to build on the form of knowledge and the cultural capital that children bring from home in ways which few monolingual class teachers are able to do. (p. 279)

However, Martin-Jones and Saxena (2003) also acknowledge that bilingual tutors do not have opportunities to engage in this type of interaction with the students unless classroom teachers and bilingual tutors work together to plan for occasions where this can happen. The importance of liaising with teachers was covered in the workshops and this resulted in discussions around complex issues relating to the amount of supervision and support the bilingual tutors received and the timetabled opportunities for liaison with teachers.

Despite the limitations discussed above, many aspects of the program worked very effectively to contribute to the professional development of the tutors. Hands-on material, where bilingual tutors were able to work through a teaching strategy and then reflect on how it might be used with students, increased their awareness of the learning process and the challenges the students face. They developed further understanding that tasks frequently have more than one learning purpose; for example, one important aim of a task or strategy might be to promote language use and repetition of vocabulary or concepts, and/or to promote critical thinking through the use of a range of question types that encourage discussion and the expression of opinions, not just to complete a task and get the ‘correct’ answer.

One invaluable aspect of this pedagogy for the participants was meeting other bilingual tutors, talking about their roles in the school and developing networks of support for themselves, particularly as the workshops developed over a couple of days. The underlying philosophical and methodological approach that emphasised support and inclusion supported the development of positive group dynamics and trust over the three days.

Conclusion

Feedback from the participants clearly indicated that the workshops were appreciated by all the tutors. They were positive about the professional development opportunity and felt valued. Most of them had had no previous professional development and were keen to try out the new learning and to participate in future workshops. The pedagogy of support worked well, particularly in providing the tutors with the hands-on experience of trying the learning tasks for themselves. This also worked well for me, as nearly all the points that I aimed to emphasise arose quite naturally in the follow-up sharing and reflection which reduced the need for ‘talking to’ the tutors and increased the amount of

'talking with' and drawing on everybody's contributions. When learning strategies were presented without the opportunity for the hands-on experience, tutors were more able to think through the steps of the process more fully and were clearer about any pitfalls they might encounter in adapting strategies for the learners.

A handbook based on the bilingual tutor training program has been developed (Ministry of Education, 2008b). The handbook is available to schools employing teacher aides and bilingual tutors to support new learners of English and an audio visual resource is planned to complement the handbook. The handbook is designed to be used by the coordinating teacher responsible for the bilingual tutor(s) in the school.

There is a need for research-based evaluation on the longer term effectiveness of the bilingual tutor professional development workshops and a possible comparison with schools that undertake professional development for the bilingual tutors following the procedures detailed in the handbook. An exploration on the employment, practices, effectiveness and professional development opportunities for 'foreign language teaching assistants' in New Zealand schools would also add a greater understanding of how paraprofessionals can be used more effectively in their support of new language learners.

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