



English as a second language

What is this?

English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) refers to the teaching and learning of English by new migrants and refugees in New Zealand.

Why is it important?

Language acquisition is known to be a critical factor in a migrant's ability to integrate into a host community and their ability to earn an income.¹ The ability to confidently speak English in daily life is one of the five outcomes identified in the New Zealand Migrant Settlement and Integration Strategy. The Refugee Resettlement Strategy also includes education and English language skills as one of its goals, to enable participation in society.²

Data

Due to strict visa requirements the overall level of English proficiency among skilled migrant workers in New Zealand is high. The Longitudinal Immigration Survey: New Zealand (LisNZ) showed that 70% spoke English as a best language and 29% had good or very good English. English proficiency differed according to country of origin, with migrants from northern Asia reporting lower proficiency than other migrants 5 years after arriving in New Zealand. It has been noted that north Asian migrants differed from other migrants in regard to their exposure to English prior to migration and their immersion in English after migration while studying, in social life and in employment. This may account for the difference.¹

In contrast to skilled migrants, often when refugees arrive in New Zealand their English language skills are quite poor. Approximately 1200 refugees and their family members come to New Zealand each year through the Refugee Quota Programme, Refugee Family Support Category or through gaining refugee or protected person status as asylum seekers. Refugees have fled from situations of conflict and human right abuses, often in a hurry and with no particular final destination in mind.³

Research has found that only 9% of former refugees spoke English well or very well on arrival, but after 10 or more years in New Zealand, over two thirds spoke English well or very well. Watching television, having English speaking friends and being in an English-speaking context such as a school, university or workplace helped them learn English. Older people and mothers with children found it harder to learn and practice English. Cost, transport, childcare and service location were identified as barriers to learning. After 10 or more years living in New Zealand, 29% still needed an interpreter or someone else to help them with English language. The proportion needing an interpreter increased with age..



Children often appear to learn English more quickly than their parents, especially as they are immersed in the language more through school. However, to become fully proficient still takes good educational support over a number of years.⁴ Their apparent proficiency often means children take on a more supportive role within their families, by interpreting and assisting adults.⁵ Children should never be expected to take on an interpreting role in families however, as this can lead to stress for them, stress on the family unit and risks the professional quality of the service provider for whom they are interpreting. There is a legal requirement to provide professional interpreting services and clear risks associated with not doing so.⁶

Impact on inequalities

There are clear and logical links between speaking the local language and the ability to participate in education, employment and wider society, all of which impact on people's health and wellbeing. The ability to speak English is important for gaining access to services in the community, including health services. A study of GP's looking at the issues of non-English speakers identified the difficulties in terms of both time required but also ensuring any interpretations as complete and accurate to ensure positive outcomes for patients.⁷ Another impact on inequalities is inequitable access to interpreter services. Although there is a legal and ethical requirement for government agencies to use interpreters this requirement is not always applied and some people with limited English may find it hard to advocate for themselves.

Solutions

Having opportunities to learn English early on in the resettlement process is very important. It is crucial that language training is provided to refugees and migrants, including those groups who cannot attend classes.⁴ The Christchurch City Council has developed a handbook for newcomers to the city which includes information on local ESOL providers.⁸ Classes are available at Hagley Community College, Ara Institute of Canterbury, PEETO Multicultural Learning Centre and English Language Partners, which provides home tutors for those who cannot attend classes.

The availability of information in plain English and other languages is important. This was identified as a problem by Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities in Christchurch following the earthquakes. A lot of work has been done to improve the interaction between agencies and CALD communities since then, including the publication of best practice guidelines.⁹ Pegasus Health has also published an explanation of the New Zealand health system in 15 languages to assist migrants and refugees to access the health services they need.¹⁰



Data limitations

To understand the number of ESOL learners in Christchurch it is necessary to contact all providers as the information is not summarised in one place.

Connections with other issues

Migrant and Refugee Support, Racism, Education, Employment.

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References

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- ⁴ http://www.everythingesl.net/in-services/long_does_take_learn_english_55843.php Accessed 27.01.2017
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- ⁶ <http://ethniccommunities.govt.nz/story/why-use-professional-interpreting> Accessed 27.1.2017
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- ¹⁰ <http://www.pegasus.health.nz/new-zealand-health-system-information> Accessed 27.09.2016

Read about the Te Pae Mahutonga Māori Health Model at
<http://www.hauora.co.nz/resources/tepaemahutongatxtvers.pdf>

