Key points

- Build the knowledge and learn the skills to create classrooms that facilitate language and learning for international students
- Get to know the learners well, which may involve something as simple as asking questions about learning
- Organise group work so that international students are no longer "strangers" in the classroom
- Create opportunities for international students to develop social English, perhaps initially non-threatening *Talking Clubs* with other international students
- Tailor ongoing subject and career advice

Abstract

This article explores the experiences of Chinese international secondary school students who were in danger of not achieving NCEA credits. Research suggests schools value the income students bring, but little research has explored the nature of the support such students require. The at-risk students in this study had clear suggestions for change: classrooms where students and teachers know each other so international students do not feel as "strangers" in the classrooms; carefully structured pair or group work enabling academic talk with patient native speakers; social "talking clubs" with other international students; ongoing and intensive subject and career advice.

"Most time I can't understand": Lessons from Chinese international students at-risk of not achieving

Reciprocity

Secondary schools explicitly value the additional income international students have been bringing since the early 1990s. Schools also report valuing the broadening of New Zealand

students' cultural experiences (Wylie & Berg, 2013). Reciprocity, what the schools offer the international students, is less often researched or reported on, especially in the secondary school sector. The notion of reciprocity informs this small-scale study of senior Chinese student experiences. The *Education (Pastoral Care of International Students) Code of Practice 2016* (Ministry of Education, 2016) aims to ensure "that international students have in New Zealand a positive experience that supports their educational achievement." The *Code*'s provisions include an appropriate orientation programme, advice on courses, and assistance to students facing difficulties adapting to the new cultural environment. Why, then, is there a mismatch between the *Code's* provisions, the intercultural exchanges the schools report they value (Wylie & Berg) and the lower level of academic satisfaction among Chinese international secondary school students (Deloitte, 2008)?

This article arose from the authors' concerns about the likelihood of academic failure of a group of students. The findings suggest that it is the very cultural differences reportedly valued by schools that are the key reasons for the under-achievement of a significant number of students from Asian backgrounds. The article begins with key findings from Aotearoa NZ and overseas around the challenges unfamiliar classroom contexts present before proceeding to the current study.

While New Zealand research around international student achievement is sparse in the secondary sector, findings from the Australasian tertiary sector are unequivocal. Students accustomed to a didactic and teacher-centred learning environment with little classroom conversation find the transition to interactive classrooms difficult. International students from Asia are used to more predictable classrooms where the teacher supplies all the needed knowledge. Students avoid oral interaction, often fixated on not making grammatical errors (Sawir, 2005). Research lays responsibility for apprenticing students to a more interactive yet independent classroom at the door of institutions. In particular, research encourages teachers to familiarise themselves with students' beliefs about learning in order to design more effective learning opportunities (Sawir). Campbell and Li (2007, p. 375) highlight the challenges: "It is important that lecturers and host institutions are professionally responsible to equip Asian students with adequate knowledge of academic discourses and to help them transcend the culturally framed borders and subjectivities". In spite of the requirements of *The Code*, teacher knowledge of international

student academic language learning and social needs appears to be worryingly thin in the tertiary sector (Li, Baker & Marshall, 2002; Sawir). The same may be the case in secondary schools.

It is important for teachers to understand and visualise what their helping roles can be. This understanding can be drawn from research into second language acquisition (SLA), which indicates that for learning to occur input must be comprehensible, and for optimal acquisition input should be delivered at a level just beyond the learner's comprehension (Ellis, 2005). To deliver comprehensible input a teacher must know the student's learning needs well and stretch the learning just beyond that, as in Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). This may involve teachers deliberately and explicitly encouraging academic talk in a student's first language. Despite teacher familiarity with ZPD and the clarity of SLA facilitating conditions, international secondary students find academic activities more demanding than tertiary students (Deloitte, 2008). Moreover, in general, international secondary school students do not believe that teachers make a special effort to help their learning (Deloitte).

As well as input at a comprehensible level, successful language learning requires opportunities for output (Ellis, 2005). Leki (2001, p. 63) argues that one of the teacher's roles is to legitimise the participation of bilingual students and to expand the "narrow thinking system" of domestic students. Consideration of Lave and Wenger's (1991) apprenticeship model may encourage teachers to re-envisage their roles as curriculum experts and their students as apprentices, the more expert students and teacher providing support while the students build confidence to participate rather than remain onlookers on the outside. An example would be carefully structured group work where each participant has a critical but manageable role involving academic talk. Sensitising native speakers to their roles as language helpers is one technique. It involves explicitly legitimising voices that sound different and taking the time to ask for clarification. "It is important that mainstream students and teachers learn how to listen to students who are acquiring English, and how to hear above the noise of difference – this remains vital for language acquisition, and for language learners to become audible, with the potential empowerment for all participants that this entails" (Miller, 2003, p. 177).

Teachers occupy powerful positions and tend, probably unconsciously, to use their power to privilege students with attributes similar to their own (Lin, 2008). Teachers often call on students

who are more willing to participate. Less confident international students may fear being called on. Hence, particular students may be neglected. Moreover, it is only *after* class when students from Asian backgrounds often have the courage to ask questions of teachers, one on one (Skyrme, 2010).

THE STUDY

The study arose from a desire to explore ways to more effectively meet the needs of international students in danger of not achieving NCEA. Lisa, a teacher with some responsibility for international students at a large urban school, was studying two research papers as part of a TESOL qualification. Margaret was the lecturer.

Participants

The invited participants were senior international students who had a significant number of not achieved credits in the previous academic year and most were currently lacking literacy credits (see Tables 1 and 2). Ten students responded, all from mainland China. Pseudonyms have been assigned.

Table 1: Year 12 participants (end of term 3)

	Level 1 literacy	L1 Literacy credits	Entry to NZ	Years spent in NZ school
Catherine	Yes	28	Year 11	1.5
Emily	Yes	20	Year 10	3.5
Mei	No	9	Year 11	1.5
Xiulan	No	8	Year 11	1.5

(Note that in order to gain L1 literacy students must gain 10 literacy credits.)

Table 2: Year 13 participants (end of term 3)

	Level 2 literacy	L2 reading credits	L2 writing credits	Entry to NZ	Years spent in NZ school

Debbie	No	16	4	Year 10, term 3.	3
Grace	No	10	4	Year 10, term 4	1 .75
Karen	No	13	0	Year 11	2.5
Jasmine	No	7	0	Year 10, term 3	3
Jing	No	5	0	Year 12	1.5
Liling	No	0	0	Year 11	2.5

(Note that In order to gain UE literacy, students must gain 5 reading and 5 writing Level 2 credits.)

As can be seen from the Tables above eight out of the ten participants arrived at the end of year 10 or the beginning of Year 11. Jing arrived in Year 12. Five of the six year 13 students had gained the required reading credits but all six had yet to gain the requisite five writing credits. Four of the year 13 students had no writing credits. Five of the year 13 participants were taking courses, in addition to ESL, that offer literacy credits such as Environmental Science, Geography, Business and Biology. All of these courses offer reading credits in internal assessments but writing credits are mostly available from externally based assessments. Liling, the only year 13 participant with no literacy credits, was not taking any other courses that offered literacy credits and was depending on ESL for these credits. The other five year 13 students had gained reading credits in subject areas other than ESL.

Questionnaire and interview

The data were collected at the beginning of the third term. The data collection tools were an anonymously completed questionnaire (Figure 1), individual interviews and school achievement data. The headings in the questionnaire were: *Personal Background, Learning Habits, Social, Language Learning, NCEA, Family, and International Department*. Having a Chinese version and being anonymous possibly enabled students to be their authentic selves. The interview questions followed the same headings.

Figure 1: Sample questions from questionnaire: *Survey for international student research*

<u>Learning Habits</u>
1. Please rate yourself on the effort you put in your lessons:
Excellent   Very good   Good   Fair   Poor

2. Please rate your level of participation and contribution to class activities:
Excellent   Very good   Good   Fair   Poor

THE FINDINGS

The findings begin with a snapshot of one student, Jing, and then discuss key themes.

Jing, an exemplary case
Jing entered the school at 17 years of age as a year 12 student with a vocabulary size of 1000 words (Nation & Beglar, 2007). Native speakers' vocabulary size at Jing's age may range from 9,400 to 17,000 words (Coxhead, Nation & Sim, 2015). The more words that a learner knows, the greater the likelihood of comprehension. Jing's writing stage was assessed as 2A (*English Language Learning Progressions,* MoE, 2008).

Jing painted a picture of initially being thrown in at the deep end and drowning because she couldn't understand the teacher talk and didn't have the confidence to ask for help:

> Even didn't can speak. It's like really shy, don't know how to, it's like, it's like, *STOP! STOP! STOP! STOP*!

Jing repeated use of negative verbs and unvoiced but loud appeals for an end to the teacher's English talk (capitalisation indicates the strength of the students' words) are clear. The teacher did not afford Jing the opportunity to engage with Chinese speaking peers who could have helped her access meaning. When asked how she found her classes now, after one year of study, Jing responded that while she strained to understand, meaning often remained inaccessible: "It's difficult. I'm so focused, really focused on each sentence from the teacher but most time I can't understand." Effort was not enough, the English input not being within Jing's range of comprehensibility. Like the students in Skyrme's (2010) NZ study, Jing preferred after-the-class requests for one-on-one time with the teacher over classroom participation:

> I'm afraid to ask question during class . . . If it's just a one to one people it's fine, but when I face to a lot of like classmates . . . I mean I feel really not confident. So when I have a question I often ask the question after class.

Her use of "often" suggests that her teachers saw this practice as legitimate and were prepared to afford her their after-class time, perhaps acknowledging her clear learning focus and effort. Jing did manage to pass NCEA Level 2. However, the year 13 curriculum was a challenge for her, as her cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) had yet to be fully developed and many of her subjects had a large literacy component and specialised vocabulary. When asked about her subjects Jing stated: "My favourite is like Geo . . . I failed all internals." While Jing enjoyed the content of Geography, her elementary writing skills precluded success: "I enjoy to study it but my teacher says my writing is still horrible." Jing gained five Level 2 reading credits but no writing credits. Provision of an academic writing class may help students such as Jing.

The following sections pick up themes that arise across the interviews: orienting to a NZ style of education, and subject choices.

Orienting to a NZ style of education: Self-management

Students were quick to blame themselves for their inability to self-manage, a learning strategy they recognised as needing. In listing barriers that prevented progress in school work, half of the students mentioned poor self-management skills, perhaps indicating that they hadn't been guided

to adjust to the New Zealand curriculum competency of "managing self". Liling was explicit about these barriers:

> I think for people like me need Chinese style education, 'cause I can't control myself very much. . . . because Chinese style education, they will push you to do your homework. . . here you can do your homework if you want and if you don't, it's fine.

All students rated their effort in class as average, all except Emily, surprisingly rating their effort below the level their teachers rated them. While Jing had commented on her consistent effort, half of the students referred to themselves as becoming lazy in a more relaxed environment:

> In New Zealand like sometimes I found the teacher don't care a lot like okay if you do it, it's good if you didn't do it . . . cause teacher don't push me so I can give it up. (Grace)

Mei's response to her NZ classmates surprise about the lack of technology in Chinese classrooms highlights her experience of reliance on the teacher for management rather than self .

> My classmate ask me like, "Can you take your phone to school?" I said "Can't" and my classmates ask me, "What about if you find some question and you have to google it?" and I answer like, "Teacher won't ask us like anything about we don't know or this question is about what we studied. If you can't answer it, it means you not study hard."

Mei was explaining that in China the teacher had always provided the answers. Everything expected of the student was within their current knowledge.

Orienting to a NZ style of education: Participating

Classroom participation flounders for two reasons: for migrants, using English is risky in a public setting, and students are enculturated to thinking that speaking out is insubordinate and inappropriate. All the students wanted to participate more but they couldn't manage it, just as the students in Sawir's study found (2005). Grace would answer only when the teacher directed a question to her. "I don't want to answer the question cause I'm worry about my English so I just, if teacher ask me, I can answer. However, Grace's comments suggest that when teachers do demand interaction and participation she would co-operate. Mei provided another reason for not participating.

> Such as like ESOL class I will like prefer to answer it more, but like in Economics class not usual. Cause for ESOL class all my classmates are people I know, but in Economics class, some classmate for me are like a strange[r] so I don't answer.

In Economics she couldn't participate because the other students were all strangers to her. To overcome this difficulty, she specifically requested that the teacher override students' natural tendency to put themselves in groups with like-minded others.

> It's like you know for some lessons, have more opportunity like you to exchange your idea with another student and maybe just don't let you to choose who is your partner. Let teacher to choose it and put international student with Kiwi student together.

While significant interaction between international and domestic students was not happening spontaneously in the classroom, half of the participants had a positive image of domestic students, describing them as friendly and kind and felt that it was possible to make friends if you tried. All five interviewed students suggested that the paucity of shared knowledge was their main reason for not connecting with domestic students. Karen stated:

> Almost all of them are friendly but you can't just join them because you have different culture and you know different things . . . most Chinese girls are not really good at um canoeing and this kind of things but Kiwi girls are really good at them. Yeah, and that's where we're really different. When some girls talk about "I go camping and I bought blah, blah, blah" and I don't know what to say, and I say, "Oh, where did you go?"

Emily was aware that she was not a very appealing conversationalist for domestic students.

> I think native speakers . . . if they talk to you and you can't understand and they get like bored and also maybe a little bit upset because you just can't get what they're talking about and the point they want to tell you . . .

Grace similarly felt her strategy to give "an easy answer" because of her concern about her English discouraged connections: "so … maybe she not want to stick with me, so you will give up".

Within the classroom the international students in this study seemed to lack the skill of gaining access to networks in the target language; nor could they find opportunities for purposeful

conversation, skills which are considered to be powerful components in L2 acquisition (Toohey, 2001; Swain, 1995).

The participants stated that they would like more opportunities to speak English socially. More than one wanted to create an environment where a range of international students are encouraged to speak English with each other, perhaps a speed talking situation. This they would find doable.

> I think maybe to create some like kind of like talking clubs and to tell them to text all the international students and to tell them to come to maybe after school from I don't know 3:15 to like 4 o'clock and because there is different countries peoples here and maybe to match the partners is from different nationality and they can talk for a while and to swap and to change.

Whether participation in purposeful conversation is inside or outside the classroom, these students would have benefited from explicit teacher help.

Subject choices and career plans:
The second key theme in the data concerned subject choices and career plans. Students misunderstood the nature of some subjects and so missed the opportunity to study an option in line with a career interest. Jasmine, a year 13 student, indicated a career interest in being a digital designer. When asked why she did not take Digital Technologies, Jasmine responded: "I don't know I just thought they make a wood, they make furniture". Arriving as a year 10 student in term 3, Jasmine did not understand all the subject choices available at the school.

Others didn't choose subjects they had an interest in and this affected performance. Mei noted:

> Cause like credit and the grades were not good. I think the main reason is the language but the second reason maybe is like I picked some subjects which I'm not really interested with… Science since I'm not really good at science.

Mei gained 71 Level 2 credits and it seems the subjects she chose enabled her to do this. She dropped Accounting, Physics and Chemistry and picked up Travel and Tourism, Chinese and Design Technology. Mei had achieved academic success but felt her subjects lacked any cohesion.

Of course, I will go to university but I'm still looking for which major I should choose. Cause there is a problem, it's like the subject I picked now is quite, you know, all for different kind of major so I don't know which major can I actually choose.

Like the Pasifika students in Madjar, McKinley, Jensen and Van Der Merwe's (2009) research, international students often lack prerequisites for subjects in the senior school and are limited in their choices. They sometimes don't understand the long-term impacts of particular choices. This is further evidence of the difficulties students face when they arrive with limited English proficiency and acquire only limited local knowledge.

Even nearing the end of high school, the students' immediate futures were uncertain despite a comprehensive career programme being offered at the school. The students in the study talked about the need for teachers to talk to them more and ask how they are going.

I think some of international student they don't like just tell people I need help or ask people for help. They are just like keep them by themselves. Yeah, they maybe just need people to asking "What's problem with you?" (Liling)

Of the six year 13 students, only one had a career plan that had driven subject choice. For example, Year 13 student Karen was still deciding on her plan for the next year which wavered between management, finance and the very different option of art, painting.

DISCUSSION

The key issues arising from the findings around senior school international students enrolling with low levels of English literacy are in many ways inter-related. They revolve around the huge size of the language learning burden and the critical role of the teacher in creating facilitating conditions, the choice of subjects, and the challenges of having their voices heard.

Firstly, the language learning burden is huge when students arrive at senior school level with low English literacy levels. Eight out of the ten participants arrived at the end of year 10 or the beginning of Year 11. Jing arrived in Year 12. A student's ability to cope with the academic language requirements of different subjects requires a long-term commitment to language learning (Cummins, 1979; Coxhead, Nation & Sims, 2015). Jing, for example loved geography

and was motivated and committed, but arriving as a 17-year-old with a 1000 word English vocabulary meant that she didn't have the time to develop CALP, particularly in writing to express her geographic ideas. It may be that all stakeholders need to reconsider levels of language support if enrolling senior students with low English literacy levels.

Teacher-organised facilitating conditions for language learning are essential. Mei's comments could serve as discussion starters around the roles teachers can play in facilitating both CALP and inter-cultural relationships. Mei viewed group work as a venue for academic language learning. Her plea was that teachers should "c together". She was also clear a teacher's role is to create a safe classroom environment where students know each other and so feel confident to participate. Other facilitating conditions include discussion of new ideas and classroom instructions in a student's first language.

Another challenging task for newly arrived international students is to understand subject choices. Examples given here alert teachers to just how intensive and ongoing mentoring needs to be for students, even when, like Jasmine, they have attended sessions offering information about subjects and careers. A strategy could be for senior bilingual technology students to make videos explaining the different courses, showing exemplars of student portfolio work and outlining prerequisites in Mandarin and other languages. These could be uploaded to the school web site or shown at the orientation for new students. Design Technology, for example, is a course that has fewer prerequisites, is university approved and offers writing credits.

These students required close and ongoing mentoring. While this is mandated in *The Code 2016,* and the school in this study implements the code, the inference is that the students in this study required something more. All students highlighted their awareness of the differences between NZ and Asian classroom settings and the critical role of participation in language learning. However, as Mei stated, more could have been done by the teachers to create conditions facilitating of language learning. Correspondingly, if schools really value the broadening of New Zealand students' cultural experiences, then local students could also learn about ways to support international students' language learning. Explicit discussion around the values of diversity meets the national curricular vision of students who can relate well to others. Mei commented

that participation in the classroom is enriched when students know each other, but evidence indicates real barriers to inter-cultural friendships, interests outside the classroom being too divergent. The inference was that native speakers were not interested in asking for clarification, not interested in investing time. Emily and Grace's voices echo Miller's (2003) findings. The students in this study did have a manageable solution to their social isolation – oral language speed talking with other international students.

Findings from this small study confirm that both their low English literacy skills and western culturally-based learning contexts are at the forefront of these students' challenges. These findings suggest that students would benefit from intensive, ongoing support that is fit for purpose as the students progress through school.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study is small and includes only senior international Chinese students at risk of under-achieving, many of whom blamed themselves for what they saw as their failings. However, it is critical that teachers and students learn how to listen to the voices of students who are acquiring English while studying in a NZ school setting.

Tension for schools between generating an income and the financial costs of both increased levels of support for international students and increased professional development for teachers around language and learning

The implications centre around reciprocity – the extent to which schools can offer these international students the intensive levels of support they require, especially when students are enrolling at senior school level. Students as well as teachers need to be cognisant both of the enormity of the learning burden, and of the steps which can be put in place to facilitate learning. The areas that concerned the students in this study have also been identified as critical areas in New Zealand and international literature on students from Asian backgrounds. While teachers are now accustomed to international students in their classrooms, teacher training and teacher professional development has perhaps insufficiently focused on building teachers' capacity to

integrate language teaching and learning with subject teaching and learning. Teachers would benefit from being oriented to the students' need for both talk in their first language and opportunities for output in English, as well as ways to structure classroom tasks to achieve this. *ESOL online*'s resource of teaching strategies exemplifies ways teachers can invite and scaffold participation, thus developing CALP for all students.

Increased levels of support around subject choice and pathways for future study are also needed. Subject choice can limit future options. Meeting the needs of Chinese international students at risk of under-achieving is complex and each cohort of students and teachers will require different interventions. However, interviewing students, understanding their concerns and using the findings to tailor school policy and practice are useful first steps.

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