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Identifying the learning development of students who are refugees

Students who are refugees need understanding and support to settle into learning in mainstream Australian classrooms. Teachers who are not aware of how these students learn may not provide the best possible learning. Without a sound understanding of second language development, students may be at risk of being labelled as having a learning disability.

Australia has long accepted refugees for resettlement. Part of their resettlement is to enrol their children in Australian schools. These students have come from sometimes traumatic home environments and need time to adjust to their new homes, new culture and in many instances a new language. The study focuses on a small group of students who are refugees from Burma and explores the variables that impact on their learning in a mainstream Australian classroom.

Students who have English as a second language (ESL) have unique characteristics to learning not shared by native English-speaking Australian students such as cultural, language, cognitive and learning barriers to overcome. In his seminal work, Cummins (1980, 1991) suggested that while students who have ESL may learn to speak conversational English within the first two years, it may take up to seven years for them to become proficient in academic English. In other words, being able to speak English conversationally is not the same as reading and writing English for school work. It is well recorded that oral language skills are not good predictors of students' mastery of academic skills such as reading (Cummins, 1980; Geva, Yahgoub-Zadeh & Schuster, 2000; Limbos & Geva, 2001). Teachers unaware of the process of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) may expect students to complete the same level of school work as their native English speaking peers and may become frustrated about the lack of progress in students' work and about their own lack of knowledge about how to help these students succeed. Unaware of the underlying difficulties of learning through SLA, teachers may focus on the product of students' work (correct spelling, grammar mistakes, reading pronunciation) rather than the process of learning (Meyer, 2000; Nunan, 1999). These complexities are compounded when students who have ESL are also refugees. Students who are refugees have the added burden of arriving from homelands fraught with political and social turmoil; many have witnessed or have been the victims of trauma. To date there has been a dearth of research exploring the daily classroom interactions of students who are refugees in Australian schools and how these interactions may affect their learning.

Refugees are identified as people who have been forced to leave their country due to a fear of persecution because of their race, religion, ethnicity or political beliefs (Refugee Council of Australia, 2007). As would be expected, refugees arrive in Australia with a range of potential risk factors including the trauma of war, the trauma of being forcibly separated from family members, the stress of resettlement, unemployment and subsequent financial difficulties, social isolation and racial discrimination. In spite of these distressing situations, Derluyn, Broekaert & Schuyten (2008) found little differences in prevalence of emotional and behavioural problems between school children who were refugees and those who were not. However, Derluyn et al. did suggest that students who are refugees may feel less comfortable reporting anxiety because they have been taught to keep emotional and behavioural problems to themselves and this fact may have a bearing on the number of incidents reported. Hjern, Angel and Jeppsson (1998) reported that 46% of students who were refugees were rated as having poor mental health five months after resettlement in Sweden and 44% rated as having poor mental health 13 months later.

Such trauma will manifest as aberrant behaviours but it is important to distinguish these behaviours from those typically associated with a student who has learning difficulties and behaviours typically associated with SLA (Bender, 2008; McKay, 2008) As can be seen by Table 1 (adapted by Bender, 2008) some behaviours overlap between the three domains, such as inattentiveness, withdrawal or anxiety/frustration. These overlapping behaviours compound the difficulty teachers may have in

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determining the essential cause for concern with learning/behaviour and, therefore, the appropriate actions to take to effectively support students who are refugees.

(Insert Table 1 here)

The current study focuses on a group of primary school students who, with their families, are refugees from Burma. This group of people are Karen, the largest ethnic minority group in Burma. Life in their homeland is one of constant threat and exploitation by the Burmese military where refugees may face arbitrary detention, torture and threats of killing. Tight control of food and medical provisions by the military leads to further death and ill-health. To escape such hardships reportedly 200,000 refugees have escaped to Thailand where they live in several camps up and down the Burmese-Thailand border. In the more established camps schools have been set up where students may study Karen, Burmese, English, and Thai as well as chemistry, Physics, Maths, Geography and History. However, schools are spare with few resources and/or facilities. Refugee camps closest to the Burmese borders are under constant threat of raids by the Burmese military. Some camps are supported by the UN in the form of food, clothing and base materials to build homes (Thompson, 2009). In relation to the current study, there were no official records on the students from Burma to determine what background in schooling they had before coming to Australia, or on their personal circumstances as refugees in Thailand. But anecdotal information from parent-teacher interviews and from the students would suggest that they lived in similar circumstances to those described above before coming to Australia.

Methodology

A case study approach was taken for this research in order to explore the various factors associated with teaching students who are refugees in mainstream classrooms. It is believed that such an approach provides evidence that is typical for students and teachers in similar circumstances and so provides insights into events that constitute this kind of teaching/learning situation. A case study provides unique material and evidence for further study in this area. The current case study is observational in nature with data gathered through direct observations and interviews. The data was coded according to patterns of observed behaviour, and against suggested behaviour described by others (ESL teacher, mainstream teacher, parents/caregivers) in order to develop some explanation of teaching/learning for students who have ESL. One instrument, the *Leiter-R*, was also used as a non-verbal measure of cognition.

The School: The P-7 primary school is located in the northern school district of Brisbane, Australia. There are approximately 600 students enrolled; 100 of these are ESL from a range of background including new arrivals from Burma, the Sudan, India, China and Papua New Guinea. There is one full-time ESL teacher on site and one part-time ESL teacher. All students in Grade 3 and above receive three 1-hour ESL sessions per week at the school. The ESL unit uses the "Thrass" series to promote reading and writing.

The full-time ESL teacher believes that over half the students in the ESL unit have special needs. The current paper will focus on three of these students in Grade 6 who the ESL teacher describes as at-risk and in need of extra support. The three students (1 girl and 2 boys) in the case study (and their families) are now settled in the school district and will continue to attend the school and the local high school. At the time of the study, the ESL teachers did not know what students were learning in the general classroom and the general classroom teachers did not know what the students were learning in the ESL unit at the school. The ESL teachers did not use an ESL bandscale to track students' progress through different levels of second language acquisition. The NLLIA ESL *Bandscale* (McKay, 2008) for example, describe learners' English language development and progress to aid in

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promoting valid assessment and reporting as well as to promote professional understanding of SLA of learners in mainstream classrooms. The three students in this case study also attended a special ESL school program every Monday at another local school. At the time of this study, the special Monday ESL program served 31 students from 18 different schools in the area. The teachers of the special program had contact with neither the ESL teacher nor the general classroom teacher of the three students in this study.

Data collection

There were four methods of data collection for this study: an interview with the ESL teacher at the beginning of term 1 2008, parent-teacher interviews at the end of term 1 2008, classroom observations in term 2, 2008 and a *Leiter-R* measure in term 2 2008. The *Leiter-R* is a non-verbal measure used to assess cognitive abilities and consists of two batteries: the Visualisation and Reasoning (VR) battery that examines nonverbal intelligence in fluid reasoning and visualisation; and the Attention and Memory (AM) battery that examines visio-spatial memory and attention. Below results for the three students – Nanda (female), Zayar (male) and Ohnmar (male) (all pseudonyms) will be described.

Results

The ESL Teacher: The ESL teacher identified Nanda (female) as in need of extra support in all areas, particularly in reading. She had tested Nanda's reading level at a Grade 1 level and described her as having made the least progress in her studies in the year she had been at the school. Nanda had no English background before coming to the school. Zayar (male) was identified by the ESL teacher as having developed strong oral English but poor reading and writing skills in English. Zayar was tested to be at a Grade 1 level of reading. Zayar had limited English language instruction background (oral) before coming to the school. Ohnmar (male) was identified by the ESL teacher as bright and quick at mathematics. She felt that Ohnmar was progressing well in this school work and tested as reading at a Grade 3 level. Ohnmar had no English background before coming to the school. It should be noted that none of the students' progress was tracked against an ESL bandscale as this measure is not used at the school.

Parent-Teacher Interviews: Nanda's grandfather attended the interview with an interpreter. In the interview it was revealed that Nanda's mother had died when the children were very young (Nanda's younger brother attended the school in Grade 5). The father worked full-time so the grandparents were caregivers for the children while the father was at work. The grandfather described that while living in the refugee camp in Thailand he had saved his money to bring his family to Australia to give his grandchildren a good education. The teacher said that Nanda was making excellent gains since the beginning of term, especially in mathematics. She was scoring high in multiplication and division but was struggling with addition and subtraction. The teacher described that Nanda showed great courage in delivering a class presentation on her own. For the presentation she wrote her own script and read it to the class. Nanda also completed a proof-reading test, as did the whole class, in which they had to identify words incorrectly used and incorrectly spelt. Nanda completed the tasks successfully, scoring higher than many of the native English speaking students in the class.

Zayar's mother attended the parent-teacher interview. The mother spoke good English and did not use the interpreter. The teacher described Zayar as an active boy with an enthusiastic attitude. Maths was his strength. The mother informed the teacher that she made Zayar practice his multiplication tables at home before he was allowed to watch TV or go on the computer. The teacher said that Zayar had trouble with his proof-reading test, which indicated to the teacher that

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Zayar was struggling with his reading; his oral English was progressing but not his reading and writing. The teacher described that Zayar was popular boy with all the students but would sometimes stop his playing to sit and speak Karen with his friends from Burma. Zayar's explanation, according to the teacher, was that he did not want to forget his first language.

Ohnmar's father, mother and little sister attended the parent-teacher interview. Both parents spoke some English, the father more than the mother. The teacher described that Ohnmar tries hard in maths to keep up with the other students but wants to use his calculator all the time. The teacher wants him to do the calculations in his head. When he does not understand something, Ohnmar is good at asking either the teacher or peers what to do. Once he understands what to do he has no trouble getting down to work. The teacher described that Ohnmar is doing well in his homework, is good at spelling and is neat in his work. For journal writing the teacher scribes for him then he copies the text into his book and reads it back to the teacher. Ohnmar excels in art and sports and was described as having a good attitude towards school. The teacher said that Ohnmar is willing to speak English but needs more practice at reading and writing in English.

The *Leiter-R* Test: Results from the *Leiter-R* showed that Nanda was able to sustain her concentration, stay on task with minimal reinforcement and displayed appropriate behaviour in that she was sociable and demonstrated good affect with no display of anxiety or sensory reactivity. However, there were instances where Nanda appeared to have difficulties understanding what was required to complete a task but did not ask for help if she did not understand. During the Design Analysis subtest, the examiner needed to revert to easier items for Nanda to complete the task. Nanda scored on the lower end of the subtest of the *Leiter-R* indicating a lower range of cognitive abilities in the areas of fluid reasoning and visualisation; however, it was recommended that more comprehensive testing was needed to identify where support is most needed. Results from the *Leiter-R* testing showed that Zayar had sustained concentration during repetitive tasks, did not forget details presented in the teaching trials and was not easily distracted by external stimuli. He thought and planned before beginning activities and generally began tasks independently with an appropriate level of engagement. His scores lay in the average range of cognitive ability in processing visual working memory but with a weakness on the Sequential Order (SO) and Figure Ground (FG) subtests, suggesting that Zayar has difficulties with abstract reasoning and inferential thinking. According to the results, the examiner suggested that successful completion of the FG subtest relies on contextual knowledge, which Zayar may not yet possess in regards to his recent arrival into the Australian context. Results from the *Leiter-R* showed that Ohnmar had sustained concentration on the whole throughout the test but would get restless as the tasks progressed. He was compliant but his approach to completing tasks was not always organised. His mood and affect were appropriate but he appeared to tire at the beginning of the second subtest. He chose to continue with the final two sub-tests when offered a break. Ohnmar displayed difficulty with inductive reasoning and the understanding of analogies and relationships.

Classroom Observations: Because all three students in the case study are in the same class for music, the following describes observations done in this class. The fourth student, Lucy, is also from Brurma but was not identified by the ESL teacher as in need of extra help. The fifth student, Adam, is a native English-speaking Australian boy. Further observations of the students' individual work were done in a Health class, a Geography class and an English class.

Music Class: Ohnmar sat directly in front of the teacher with a guitar in his arms. The teacher gave out music sheets. Ohnmar put his directly in front of him. The teacher then took Ohnmar's guitar and began to play, asking the class to play and sing along. Ohnmar did not sing. Lucy and Nanda sat together on the floor near the back of the class. Lucy held the guitar and Nanda watched her position her fingers. The teacher played a song on her guitar and encouraged the students to play

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and sing along. Lucy did not play her guitar. Neither girl sang. Zayar was sitting with Adam who was holding a guitar. Zayar was helping Adam find the notes. When the teacher played and asked the class to sing along, Zayar did not sing. When the song was finished the teacher showed the class some guitar notes and asked them to practice in pairs. They could choose a space in the class or find a space outdoors. Ohnmar was given back his guitar.

Lucy and Nanda went outside as did Zayar and Adam. Ohnmar walked over to another student who took the guitar. Ohnmar went back to get his sheet of music. He then sat with the guitar. The observer asked, "Can you play some of these notes?" Ohnmar answered, "No." The observer asked if he would like to learn some. Ohnmar answered, yes, and handed over his guitar. The observer showed him how to play a 'D' note then said, "Now, you try." Ohnmar took the guitar and played the note. He then pointed to the 'G' note on the music sheet and said 'G' with a questioning note in his voice. The observer replied, "G, yes, I can show you that," and played the note. Ohnmar took the guitar and played 'G'. He then point to the 'C' on the music sheet. The observer showed him how to play a 'C'. Ohnmar then played it on the guitar. He then said to the observer, "I show you 'D'" and played the 'D' note, "and 'G'" and played the 'G' note, "and 'C'" and played the 'C' note correctly. The observer praised Ohnmar for remembering how to play each of the notes correctly.

Lucy and Nanda took turns strumming on the guitar. The observer asked if they would like some help and Lucy said, "Yeah." The observer demonstrated strumming the 'D' note. Lucy took the guitar and strummed it correctly. Nanda played the note with flat fingers and was shown again how to round her fingers to play it correctly. She then strummed the note correctly. The girls continued to practice with very little conversation between them. The observer overheard Zayar say to Adam, "It is hard for me to play guitar. At home I practice. I go on internet." He and Adam had turns strumming the guitar. When it was his turn, Zayar would strum and sing, "Blah, blah, blah." The class was recalled and the teacher played the guitar and asked the class to sing along. Lucy and Nanda did not sing. Ohnmar strummed on his guitar but did not sing. Zayar sang along with the class.

Health Class: Lucy and Nanda returned from the ESL class. The class was already in session and the two girls were told to get out their books and begin working on a puzzle. Nanda got up twice to put rubbish in the bin. The teacher walked over and asked Lucy, "What do you use to eat an apple?" and tapped his teeth. Lucy said, "Teeth." The teacher said, "How do you spell it?" Lucy spelt out, "T-e-e-t-h." The teacher nodded and walked away. Nanda poked the boy beside her. Lucy continued to work then she glued her sheet into her book. Nanda followed her lead and did the same. Lucy continued to work. Nanda leaned on her arm looking at the teacher then picked up her pencil and started working. She leaned over and looked at Lucy's work then wrote something in her own book. Lucy continued to work and Nanda watched her. The teacher came over and asked them how they were going. Nanda smiled at him. He looked at both their work and said, "Very good, very good." The teacher stopped the class as it was time to go home.

Geography Class: The teacher asked the class to find various places on the map. Zayar did not appear to be looking for these. The teacher asked him what 'As the crow flies' means. Zayar did not answer. The teacher repeated the question. Zayar answered, "Don't know." The teacher then explained what it meant and asked Zayar if he understood. Zayar nodded. The teacher asked the class to find Broken Hill. Zayar appeared to be searching for this on his map. The teacher asked him if he found it. Zayar said, "No." The teacher gave him a couple of hints and Zayar kept looking at the map. Then he put up his hand saying, "Ah, I found it." He was then asked which state it was in and replied, "New South (pronounced Souf) Wales. The teacher gave him praise. Zayar was asked by the teacher to move next to Adam. The boys worked together to complete their task.

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English Class: The teacher told the class that they were all going to do an impromptu oral presentation of approximately 30 seconds to 1 minute of something they had written in their journal book. The teacher called each person to do their oral presentation. Ohnmar sat quietly and watched the others while each person spoke. When his name was called, he came and stood in front of the class with his book and read, "Today I fail (feel) good cause teachers day. Thank you, Mr R. Sometime you angry me, sometime you smilely face." Ohnmar appeared embarrassed but spoke clearly.

Table 2 provides a synopsis of the different data gathered on the three students.

(Insert Table 2 here)

Discussion

At first glance the data suggests that these students have various levels of engagement in learning, as one would expect with any group of students. However, there are a few anomalies in the data that must be considered. Nanda, for example, is described by the ESL teacher as having made the least amount of gain in her learning. Indeed, the ESL teacher has recommended that Nanda be tested for learning difficulties. Her results from the *Leiter-R* testing would tend to support the ESL teacher's concerns. The ESL teacher has Nanda tested at a Gr 1 reading level, although in her English mainstream class Nanda scored higher than some of her non-ESL classmates and is doing very well in maths. What is important to consider from the data is Nanda's classroom behaviour. She is inattentive, exhibits shyness, uses avoidance tactics in her lessons and inappropriately and spontaneously walks around the room (twice to put rubbish in the bin) rather than being seated. While these behaviours can be associated with a learning difficulty, there are other areas to explore.

For example, the NLLIA *Bandscales* (McKay, 2008) break down aspects of students' performance into listening, speaking, reading and writing across seven levels within the three phases of learning: early years, middle years and senior year. If we look at the middle years scales we can find that Nanda appears to be operating at a Middle Years ESL Listening: Level 1: *Watch carefully what others are doing and often imitate them...will join a mainstream activity but may now speak; will watch and listen...will lose concentration and tire quickly if presented with an overload of unfamiliar language, routines, activities and expectations* (p.84). Nanda displayed these behaviours in class. These behaviours may be associated with a learning difficulty, but Nanda also does well in maths and is able to focus on a reading/writing task to produce top results (the proof-reading test). To organise testing for learning difficulties at this stage would be somewhat premature. Nanda is a relatively new student who has had little time to adjust to a new culture and language. It is not known if she attended school before arriving in Australia. Certainly school in a Thai refugee camp would be very different to that of a Grade 6 class in Brisbane, Australia. These factors must be taken into consideration, along with the emotional and psychological challenges she would have encountered as a refugee, before testing occurs.

If we consider the data for Zayar, he is described as having good oral language skills but problems with reading and writing. However, with appropriate scaffolding (the teacher's prompts to find locations on the map in Geography) Zayar is able to keep up with his peers on the set task. This behaviour aligns with Cummins' (1980) findings that oral language precedes academic English. This behaviour is also consistent with that described in the Middle Years ESL Listening: Level 3 which describes behaviours: *Can comprehend...when repetition, simplification and paraphrasing is provided by the interlocutor...will need time to process new language, and to respond to questions in English* (p.86). The fact that Zayar's mother spoke English would, no doubt, have given him further support

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in developing English. Nanda, on the other hand did not have the same kind of support. Her grandparents do not speak English. Ohnmar's parents also spoke English, but not as well as Zayar's mother. However, both Zayar and Ohnmar had difficulty on the *Leiter-R* test in demonstrating abstract thinking skills. This finding may relate to their stage of English language development (they do not have the English to demonstrate their knowledge), or their limited time in Australia (they do not have the contextual knowledge to respond effectively to test items) or their development as pre-teenagers. Both boys attempted to interact with their peers (both English-speaking and Karen), primarily through sport even with their limited English speaking skills. Ohnmar's reading of his journal entry suggests that he might be at Middle Years ESL Speaking: Level 2: *Will use meaningful chunks of language heard from language around them* (p.92). Both he and Zayar would sometimes stop playing during lunch break to sit together with other Karen-speaking students to practice their first language and have a less demanding cognitive effort in speaking. This behaviour is also found with ESL Speaking: Level 2 which describes the following behaviour: *May choose to use L1 (first language) with fellow L1 speakers in classroom and other interactions. Will draw on L1 and previous cultural and linguistic experiences, including L1 knowledge of the world to understand and predict meaning and take part to varying degrees...in school and classroom events* (p.92). Understanding these behaviours can help teachers to better support the learning of students who are refugees. Understanding the role their background plays in their learning and development as well as having some knowledge of second language acquisition would also help teachers in supporting the learning of these students.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a snap-shot of learning considerations for students who have ESL and who are refugees to Australia. The needs of these students are varied and complex but must be understood and addressed in order provide safe learning environments. Students who are refugees have disrupted backgrounds, generally with little formal schooling. It takes time for them to adjust to their new environment and to learn English, particularly academic English. Assessing students for learning difficulties should take other factors into consideration first. For a start, without knowing any background information on a student, testing may be culturally inappropriate, producing highly questionable results.

While waiting for students to adjust to their new environment, language and culture, resources such as the NLLIA ESL Bandscales (and other similar bandscales) provide a picture of the developmental progress students travel through in learning English. Such a resource allows classroom teachers and support teachers (ESL) map students' progress utilising the many staged descriptions of second language acquisition. Teachers gain an understanding of where students are at in their learning and what they can be expected to do in the next stage.

Research in regards to supporting refugees in Australian schools is only at a starting point. There is much more work that needs to be done in this area. Over 13,000 refugees enter Australia each year (NSW Refugee Health Service, 2005); many of these are children destined for mainstream classrooms. It is important that schools are equipped with the resources and support needed to meet the challenge so that they and their student achieve the best possible teaching and learning outcomes and so that students are not mistakenly identified as having learning difficulties.

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Table 1
Comparison of Behaviours

Behaviours Associated with:	Learning Difficulties	Second Language Acquisition	Refugee
	Overactivity, distractibility, aggression, anxiety, reading miscues, fluency deficits, comprehension needs, problem with maths reasoning, vocabulary deficits, falling below expected age/grade norms, long – short-term memory deficits	Non-verbal/silent period, difficulty using English vocabulary, systematic development of English, may appear inattentive, may exhibit frustration / withdrawal from cultural challenges, may have problems responding in English, demonstrates consistent progress in appropriate use of English, frequent grammar errors, may require longer 'wait' time in responding to questions or statements	Tendency to internalise problems, have difficulty making friends outside their first language/ culture, may exhibit fear, anxiety, may have poor motivation to learn, may have poor nutrition, health problems, may have an unstable home life

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Table 2
Summary Data on Three Students

	ESL	Parent/Teacher Interview	Leiter-R	Classroom Observations
Nanda	Needs support in all areas, Gr 1 reading level, least progress of the group	Excellent gains in maths, very good in proof-reading exercise – scored higher than native English speaking peers, shows courage in learning	Sustained concentration, some difficulties understanding what to do, had to revert to earlier items for understanding, in lower cognitive range	Music: took lead from friend (Lucy), when shown how – played guitar correctly, little chat with friend, did not sing with class Health: took lead from Lucy, got up twice to put rubbish in the bin, head in arms – watching Lucy, writing what Lucy writes, responds to teacher’s question with a smile
Zayar	Good oral language, poor reading/writing, Gr 1 reading level	Good in maths – but not abstract maths, trouble with proof-reading test, good social skills, likes sport, likes to practice home language with friends	Sustained concentration, not easily distracted, independent approach, average cognitive ability, weakness in abstract reasoning, may not have enough contextual knowledge to respond to test items effectively	Music: sat with friend (Adam), helping Adam find the notes, says it is difficult for him to play guitar, strums without singing Geography: persistent at finding required locations on the map, able to keep up with the other students
Ohnmar	Bright, quick at maths, Gr 3 reading level, progressing well	Difficulty with maths, abstract concepts, once understands what to do is willing to work, is willing to do the work, sociable, willing to speak English, needs more practice with reading and writing	Good concentration – but restless as test tasks progressed, not always organised in answers, had difficulty with inductive reasoning and understanding analogies	Music: eager to learn new notes on guitar, remembered all correctly, did not sing with class, strummed guitar English: class to present what they had written in their journals, Ohnmar watching the others, when his turn embarrassed but spoke clearly