



Understanding diversity in New Zealand secondary school language classrooms

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Background

- New Zealand is now considered ‘super-diverse’:
 - Thirty years ago, linguistically, NZ was one of the most homogenous countries in the world (East, 2021).
 - NZ is now home to over 200 ethnicities and 160 languages and is considered to be culturally and linguistically ‘superdiverse’ with the 2018 census showing that ‘27.4 percent of people counted were not born in New Zealand’ (Stats NZ, 2020).
 - This trajectory of growth in diversity is expected to continue in the future (Chen, 2015; The Royal Society of New Zealand, 2013) and as a consequence the ethnic, cultural and linguistic composition of students in the New Zealand secondary school system will continue to change (Chen, 2017; Terruhn & Spoonley, 2020).

An inclusive perspective of diversity

- We acknowledge the importance of changes in school cohorts due to migration and increased educational mobility, but take a broader perspective of diversity in line with the education literature:
 - diversity encompasses a wide range of characteristics including ethnicity, home language, socio-economic status, age, gender, special education needs, religion, personality, learning style, attitudes, personal motivation, learning expectations, and achievement and ability levels (Alton-Lee, 2005; Carr, 2005; Krish et al., 2010).
- Diversity is dynamic - each aspect is fluid rather than fixed and can 'have different ramifications for each new teaching situation' (Alton-Lee, 2005, p. 5; Conway & Richards, 2016).
- We recognize the importance of seeing an individual as more than simply a representative of a particular aspect of diversity (Alton-Lee, 2005; Chen, 2017; Liu & Nelson, 2017; Orton & Scrimgeour, 2019).

Expectations of teachers

- The official New Zealand Code of Professional Responsibility and Standards for the Teaching Profession sets out expectations for teachers including ‘respecting the diversity of the heritage, language, identity and culture of all learners’ and ‘promoting inclusive practices to support the needs and abilities of all learners’ (Education Council, 2017, p. 10).
- As part of their professional learning New Zealand teachers are required to ‘be informed by research and innovations related to...teaching for diverse learners’ (Education Council, 2017, p. 18).
- In line with international trends where teaching diverse learners is commonly seen as a core component of teacher education programmes (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

Diversity is challenging for teachers

- Diversity in the classroom presents a substantial challenge for teachers (Author, 2018; Carr, 2005; Mahmoodi-Shahrehabaki, 2017; Orton & Scrimgeour, 2019; Suprayogi et al., 2017).
- ‘Many teachers find it hard to adapt their practice based on the diversity present in their classroom’ (Smets and Struyven, 2020, p. 2)
- Alton-Lee (2005) claims that ‘quality teaching for heterogeneous groups of students ... is a fundamental challenge for New Zealand schooling’ (p. 5).

Diversity in the language classroom

- Traditionally language classes in schools have been fairly homogenous, with learners typically starting with similar proficiency levels and progressing fairly uniformly.
- A paucity of research on diversity from the perspective of teaching and learning an additional language within the secondary school sector:
 - Increases in the presence of native speakers in senior school Chinese and Japanese language classes in Australia, in Japanese classes in New Zealand (de Kretser & Spence-Brown, 2010; McGee, Ashton, Dunn, & Taniwaki, 2013; Orton & Scrimgeour, 2019)
 - Increases in multi-level classes (Ashton, 2018, 2019)

Research questions

- 1) How is diversity perceived and experienced by language teachers in New Zealand secondary schools?
- 2) What do language teachers perceive as the challenges and benefits of teaching diverse learners, and what support is required to better respond to the needs of diverse learners?

Methodology

- An exploratory mixed-methods study combining quantitative and qualitative data
- Survey instrument:
 - Closed demographic and teacher perception questions
 - Open-ended teacher responses – keywords about diversity, challenges, benefits, support needed.
- Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis

Participants: demographic data

Language	Number of participants
Japanese	47
Spanish	15
Chinese	14
French	11
te reo Māori	8
German	4
Samoan	1
Total	100

Years of teaching experience	Number of participants
Less than a year	1
1-3	14
4-6	12
7-8	12
9-11	8
12-14	8
15 or over	45
Total	100

Demographic data about classes taught

Year levels taught	Number of participants
Year 9	83/100
Year 10	84/100
Year 11	72/100
Year 12	71/100
Year 13	71/100

Year levels	Average number of students
Year 9	22.15
Year 10	17.38
Year 11	11.76
Year 12	9.19
Year 13	7.49

Use of language before secondary school

- The majority of students have no or limited use of the language before entering secondary school.

	French	Japanese	Chinese	Spanish	te reo Māori
None or a few	90%	88%	83%	87%	76%
Around half	10%	8%	6%	3%	10%
Many or all	0%	3%	12%	10%	14%

- For Chinese and te reo Māori, a slightly higher number of teachers indicated that 'around half', 'many' or 'all' of their learners had used the language before attending secondary school.

Use this language with parents

- The majority of teachers stated that within their classes ‘none or a few’ students use the language with one or both of their parents.

	French	Japanese	Chinese	Spanish	te reo Māori
None or a few	100%	96%	81%	97%	97%
Around half	0%	3%	7%	2%	3%
Many or all	0%	1%	12%	2%	0%

- The pattern for Chinese stands out with a higher proportion of teachers indicating that ‘around half’, ‘many or all’ of their learners use the language with one or both of their parents. This suggests that within Chinese language classes, there are a higher proportion of students who are heritage learners of the language.

Formally learn this language outside school

- For the majority of students the classroom is the primary place for formal language learning with the majority of teachers.

	French	Japanese	Chinese	Spanish	Te reo Māori
None or a few	100%	98%	92%	100%	100%
Around half	0%	1%	6%	0%	0%
Many or all	0%	1%	2%	0%	0%

- A slightly different pattern is observed for Chinese supporting the above suggestion that within Chinese language classes, there are a higher proportion of students who are heritage learners of the language relative to other languages.

Teachers understanding of diversity

	French	German	Japanese	Chinese	Spanish	te reo Māori	Total
Learner factors	57%	65%	46%	79%	56%	36%	53%
Conceptual aspects	37%	35%	47%	11%	32%	43%	38%
Teaching strategies	2%	0	6%	6%	8%	12%	6%
Other	4%	0	1%	3%	5%	10%	3%

- **Learner factors:** ability levels; cultural backgrounds and understanding; prior learning and experience; ethnicities; nationalities; purpose or goal for learning; learning styles; beliefs, values or perspectives; home life; interests; interest in language; L1 versus L2 learner; gender and sexuality; academic ability; personalities and personal skills; home languages; English language proficiency; age; and religion.
- **Conceptual aspects:** awareness, acknowledgement, and acceptance of others and cultures; benefits of language learning; celebration of diversity; positive social aspects of diversity and interconnectedness; identity; the importance of representation; inclusion and equity; and the personal enrichment that can be gained from diversity.

Diversity in the classroom

- Year 9 considered to be the most diverse class, followed by year 10, and then multi-level classes in the senior school.
- Features of diversity: At lower year levels teachers highlighted **learner interest, attitudes, and motivation**; at higher year levels teachers highlighted **range of ability levels, native or heritage and non-native/background speakers** in the same class, and **multi-level classes**.

- Teachers were most positive about teaching year nine classes, with approximately 60% of views positive, and least positive about teaching multi-level classes in the senior school, with approximately 70% of views negative.
- These negative aspects tended to be emotional responses such as feeling frustrated, exhausted, drained, tired, and to feeling pulled in different directions and finding the teaching challenging.

Challenges

Challenge	Percentage
Single aspect of diversity	14%
Multiple diverse needs	39%
Diverse ability levels, multi-level classes	30%
Social cohesion, teacher knowledge of culture	7%
School level factors	6%
System level factors	4%

Multi-faceted nature of diversity a challenge

- For some teachers (14%) the focus was on a single aspect:
 - *Different learning styles, it makes harder/longer to prepare for the class (Japanese teacher)*
- But more often (39%) multi-faceted:
 - *Trying to keep students with different learning styles, interests and proficiency levels engaged, challenged and covering what they need to cover for assessments. Time pressure, diversity and varied motivation and abilities to self manage all contribute to this. (Japanese teacher)*
 - *Catering to the needs of the individuals. The reason is because 'diversity' is complex - it occurs on many layers and catering to all those layers for each individual and meeting them at their need in each moment in the classroom of today is a challenge. (Japanese teacher)*

Varying language backgrounds and proficiency levels within the same class

- *For me, the challenge is to use the huge range of experiences of the target language the children bring, from native speakers (with the variety of proficiencies in listening, speaking, reading, writing that brings), to those who have had no contact with the language, who may have visited the country, who have studied the language for 2 years at Intermediate... this means that I must adjust my input and teaching to encourage and use all these levels of proficiency (Japanese teacher)*
- *Teaching multiple levels in the same classroom for NCEA is very challenging as you have to prepare twice the work for half the time spent with them. Students have to be motivate to continue working independently when the teacher is with the other level(s). Lack of teacher time leads to frustration and lower Exam outcomes for some students. (Japanese teacher)*

Social cohesion, teacher knowledge of culture

- *Integrating the different cultures and experiences to create a cohesive group of students (Spanish teacher).*
- *There are many cultures in my class and I find it difficult to teach ones I have minimal understanding of (Japanese teacher).*
- *To be aware of different culture and ethnic background that each student has. Sometimes they don't show or tell us (Japanese teacher).*

Most rewarding aspects

- Learner achievement (65%)
 - *When students that have struggled with the language learning realise how far they have come. (Japanese teacher)*
 - *Seeing them connect with their taha māori, asking critical questions about who they are and where they come from, talking positively about themselves in a māori light' (te reo māori teacher)*
 - *Seeing students who think that they are 'dumb' or 'no good at Languages' realise they can do it (Japanese teacher)*
- Personally valued (35%)
 - *The most rewarding aspect is the joy of seeing others discover how other people live, without criticism or feelings of superiority (French teacher)*
 - *I learn from them and I can share that new knowledge. They always blow away all of my assumptions about their race, identity, ethnic background, life, mental health and so on. (Japanese teacher)*
- Professionally valued (5%)

Support needed

- Classroom teaching level - material, pedagogical support, learner information (65%)
 - *Activities that target a variety of learners that are easy to differentiate for different levels (Japanese teacher)*
 - *Deeper understanding about differentiation and how to make it work effectively in the context of the classroom. (French teacher)*
 - *Learners' personal information (background, language they use at home etc) (Japanese teacher)*
 - *Learning about proper etiquette in certain cultures, specifically how to approach the conversation of religion in the classroom, and to discuss Buddhism without offending anyone (Japanese teacher)*
- School-level support - policy and planning, staffing, teaching space, timetabling (30%)
 - *If Chinese teachers could teach Chinese native speakers and non Chinese speakers separately, in different classes, it would be much easier for teachers to prepare lessons. (Chinese teacher)*
 - *Separate classes or at least a time allocation for the increased workload in planning double lessons. (Japanese teacher) – referring to multi-level classes*

Key findings

1. Diversity is complex and multi-faceted

- A single learner can be 'diverse' in many ways, and many aspects are dynamic and fluid rather than static. The interaction of different aspects of diversity within the classroom is what makes things complex for many teachers.
- Our findings highlight the nuanced, fluid and complex way in which teachers need to respond to the multi-faceted needs of each diverse learner within a diverse class in each teaching moment.
- Previous studies have tended to focus on a single aspect, and have ignored the practical implications and complexities of the multi-faceted nature of diversity for classroom teachers.
- Theorisation of diversity is lacking and that additional empirical studies are needed to bridge the gap between theory and practice to better support teachers.

Key findings

2. Highlights professional development needs of teachers

- Teachers need additional support and resources, particularly for teaching learners of different ability levels within the same class.
 - The findings suggest that classes with only a small number of students with different language backgrounds, experience, and proficiency levels pose a significant challenge for teachers.
 - Predominantly this area where teachers specifically stated that they needed additional support.

Key findings

2. Highlights professional development needs of teachers

- Teachers need more professional development to support students with different cultural backgrounds and knowledge.
 - Concerning that several teachers mentioned this as the aspect they found the most challenging.
 - Sense that this was seen as either an issue relating to social cohesion, or as an issue related to language ability, i.e. the impact of having heritage language speakers in the classroom and needing to respond to the diverse range of students' language learning needs, or concern about students' low levels of English language proficiency.

Concluding points

- Teachers were generally positive about diversity and the benefits of having diverse learners in their class.
- Limited evidence of deficit theorising by teachers.
- Diversity is under-theorised in the literature.
- Teachers value and enjoy diversity *but* alongside this they experience some real challenges and seek more support in terms of pedagogy and resources in two key areas: differentiation and culturally responsive pedagogy.

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Thank you!

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