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‘Jack of all trades’: The ambiguous role of the ESOL teacher in secondary schools.

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‘Jack of all trades’: The ambiguous role of the ESOL teacher in secondary schools

Dr Margaret Gleeson

Abstract

Teaching students learning English as an additional language (EAL) in New Zealand secondary schools requires specialist skills. These EAL students compete with English-speaking peers in a uniquely demanding learning environment which requires that they learn English language at the same time as negotiating all curriculum learning in an additional language. Programmes for these learners range from withdrawing students for classes where English language skills are developed, to mainstreaming students into curriculum English. Currently, all teachers are expected to teach the academic language specific to their subject, and the place of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers is uncertain. Schools are expected to balance the skills of curriculum and ESOL teachers to give EAL students the best possible learning opportunities. This study investigates the changing and ambiguous role of ESOL teachers, and the challenge it poses to their professional relationships.

Keywords: English for speakers of other languages; English as an additional language; mainstream teaching; content-based language teaching;

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Background

This study investigates the issue of how the language learning of secondary students with English as an additional language (EAL) is managed in New Zealand secondary schools. These students are variously labelled as EAL, English language learners (ELL) or students who learn English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). In New Zealand, there is no mandated syllabus for systematic English language development so ESOL is an optional, non-curriculum subject. Recently, a new school-wide national curriculum was implemented requiring all teachers to take responsibility for teaching the language forms of their subject, which has complicated the role of ESOL teachers (Ministry of Education, 2007). The ill-defined position of secondary ESOL teachers is considered in this paper, especially in relation to growing curriculum expectations that subject teachers should share the teaching of academic language.

The evolution of ESOL

Increasing numbers of EAL students have affected teaching in New Zealand schools. By late 2011, 33,207 new learners of English in 1,301 schools received funding from the Ministry of Education to support their language development¹. These students, with little or no English proficiency, represented 163 different ethnic groups, coming from 159 different countries, and speaking 116 different languages. Both curriculum and ESOL teachers have been expected to respond to a growing multicultural student population.

Historically, a flow of migrants and refugee students gradually added linguistic diversity to what was originally a bicultural (indigenous Māori and Pākehā, or European) student population in New Zealand. However, by the late 1990s, an influx of foreign fee-paying (FFP) students striving for entry to New Zealand universities dramatically changed the ethnic and linguistic composition of the student body. Although, migrants from the Pacific region, and refugees

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particularly from South East Asia, had been present in schools for many years with little impact upon teacher practice or programmes, ad hoc ESOL programmes quickly developed in response to the needs of FFP students. These included preparation for international English examinations and general English courses for students at lower levels of proficiency (Franken & McComish, 2003). As a consequence of FFP students, the work of ESOL teachers became visible in, and profitable for, schools (Ministry of Education

International Division, 2002, 2011). Since then, the numbers of FFP in schools have declined from an abrupt peak of 17,448 in 1999 to 16,486 in 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2011) but ESOL programmes remain and a significant minority of non-English speaking migrants continue to enter schools. However, despite ESOL teaching achieving recognition in New Zealand secondary schools, an ESOL curriculum has never been formulated.

ESOL for literacy assessments

In the period 2000 to 2011, university entrance requirements for international students changed from an IELTS² or TOEFL³ score to the same National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) literacy assessments required for all New Zealand students. These 'Literacy credits' were designed for students with English as their dominant language and located within the English curriculum. As a result, ESOL teachers were asked to teach sheltered or modified English classes where EAL students could strive for NCEA credits in English.

Changes in national literacy assessments (2011-2012) have added to confusion about the role of the ESOL teacher as functional literacy standards are introduced: In what curriculum contexts should literacy be assessed, who should teach academic language skills, and who should assess the literacy of EAL students? These questions are not unique to New Zealand.

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Every teacher teaches language

At the same time as national assessments in English became a major focus for ESOL teachers, research in educational linguistics stressed the importance of fast-tracking language learning for secondary school-aged EAL students (Stoller, 2004; Walqui, 2000). Creating opportunities for learners to have explicit and extensive exposure to curriculum-specific language would enable them to acquire academic language proficiency and maintain curriculum learning at the pace of their English-speaking peers (Cummins, 2000; Hammond, 2006). The rewritten New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) took this research into account, urging curriculum teachers to take responsibility for teaching language along with subject content. This created an expectation that ESOL teachers contribute language learning expertise to complement their colleagues' curriculum knowledge. Nonetheless, unlike the situation in other countries, policies and structures are not yet in place to structure collaboration amongst secondary school ESOL and curriculum teachers (Creese, 2010; Davison, 2001; Leung, 2005).

There is no specific policy relating to ESOL instruction. ESOL is a non-curriculum subject which may consist of a structured programme for language acquisition, preparation for national English assessments, or point-of-need cross-curricular language support. Nationally, there has been little substantive change since the last review of ESOL provision (Franken & McComish, 2003). However, now there is a prospect for ESOL teachers to share their expertise across the curriculum. These are the contexts in which EAL students are taught in New Zealand secondary schools.

This study considers the role of secondary school ESOL teachers and how they view their relationship with subject teachers. Two bodies of research contribute to understanding this topic: (a) how learners are taught English language in school, and (b) how teachers manage the process of sharing

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language teaching expertise with other teachers. Ultimately, there are few models for effective teaching of EAL learners in a high-stakes secondary school environment, and fewer examples of language and subject experts working collaboratively.

Approaches toward teaching language learners in secondary schools

Possible approaches to promote effective teaching for EAL students include: ESOL classes with some focus on the academic language required in subject areas; content classes where curriculum teachers balance the teaching of content and language; and partnerships where ESOL and curriculum teachers share complementary skills. While each option can be justified in terms of the learner's proficiency (Davison, 2001), none offers an easy solution for how best to support EALs to learn language and curriculum concurrently.

English for higher curriculum learning

ESOL teachers are aware that secondary EAL students urgently need to learn English as a vehicle for curriculum learning. Nevertheless, it is unclear precisely what academic language to teach. Research on teaching EAL learners reveals a continuum of approaches reflecting the language acquisition process from programmes emphasising language with little or no alignment to any curriculum (suited to new learners of English), to those focussing on curriculum content with little specific emphasis on language development (suited to students approaching the proficiency of their English-speaking peers) (Davison, 2001; Creese, 2010). These studies suggest that concurrent curriculum and language instruction enables EAL students to develop academic language concurrently with crucial curriculum knowledge. But how might both be achieved?

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Curriculum-specific language in context

Studies of language forms used in specific subject areas demonstrate that each discipline has individual modes of thinking reflected in particular language structures and text forms (Bunch, Shaw, & Geaney, 2010; Coffin, 2006; Janzen, 2008; Halliday, 1993). but identifying and integrating the language of their subject with its subject-matter may challenge curriculum teachers who have rarely studied how to teach students learning through the medium of a new language. A similar challenge exists for ESOL teachers, who may have specialist knowledge about linguistic issues, but are unfamiliar with thinking about disciplinary-specific language (Pica, 2005). Unfortunately, there are few examples of how effective integration of language and content teaching might be managed.

Sheltered instruction represents one model of combining language and content teaching. The aim is to maintain simultaneous subject and language objectives so EAL students do not learn language at the expense of curriculum learning or vice versa. This approach requires extensive professional development (PD) managed by ESOL specialists to build the language teaching expertise of curriculum teachers (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2008). Ministry TESSOL⁴ scholarships awarded in recent years have taken this approach of extending subject teachers' understanding of language teaching by sponsoring teachers to study TESSOL. At least one New Zealand study suggests that this may be an effective means to develop subject-specific language teaching (Gray, 2009).

The challenges of collaboration: How teachers manage the process of sharing language expertise

Given that individual teachers are seldom equally skilled and qualified to teach language and a curriculum area, collaboration between mainstream teachers and their ESOL teaching colleagues seems a logical solution for balancing language and curricular teaching.

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Partnerships between ESOL and mainstream teachers have been studied internationally and agree that even legislation cannot ensure collaboration when teachers have no experience in crossing the boundaries of their disciplines (Arkoudis, 2003; Creese, 2010; Davison, 2006). Mainstream teachers assume the authority of their clearly defined curricula, whereas ESOL is a relatively new and trans-curricular subject with teachers who lack the status of their mainstream colleagues. Misconceptions about language teaching arise when teachers do not share an understanding of the role of language in learning, the nature of second language learning, and other skills held by ESOL teachers (Harper & de Jong, 2009). Moreover, mainstream teachers and administrators in secondary schools may be unaware of the specific language and pedagogical skills held by ESOL colleagues and thus underestimate the extent to which teacher collaboration could benefit EAL students' learning (Creese, 2006). In schools where there is a power imbalance between teachers, it is rare for programmes placing equal value on language and curriculum learning to be sustained.

This study

Given the interest in how to balance language and content teaching generated by the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) and the lack of successful models available from international literature, I sought the answers to these questions from a group of secondary ESOL teachers:

- How do ESOL teachers in New Zealand see their role in secondary schools?
- How do ESOL teachers view collaboration with curriculum colleagues?

Methodology

This small-scale qualitative study sought the opinions and self-reported experiences of eight ESOL teachers belonging to a regional professional learning

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cluster in order to capture a snapshot of how the teaching of academic language was managed in their schools.

Few of these ESOL teachers had a defined job description and those who did, felt that it did not reflect the scope of their role which ranged from head of department, dean of international students, full-time or part-time ESOL teacher, or ESOL and mainstream teacher.

Once ethical considerations were taken into account, data were collected from a questionnaire requesting information about the nature of the teachers' training and length of time spent as an ESOL specialist; perceptions of role changes in schools; and descriptions of what their ideal role might be. Subsequently, a focus group interview was conducted as a semi-structured discussion following the main points from the questionnaire. After each question had been discussed in full, a note-taker read back the notes to enable participants to make corrections or additions, and also to confirm the record's accuracy. Notes were later coded for salient themes using NVivo software. The main categories were determined by the research questions in the questionnaire and in the interview; but sub-themes emerged regarding roles, subject matter and curriculum, and collaboration.

Results

Given that this study was limited to a small number of participants confined to one professional learning community in a single urban area of New Zealand, the scope of this paper is restricted to offering a non-generalisable snapshot of these ESOL teachers' experiences. Nonetheless, the results may resonate with teachers outside this one community.

The focus group ranked a number of roles associated with effective language teaching (represented in italics), and then described what they considered to be

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best teaching practice for EAL students. They also elaborated on issues involved in working with teachers across the curriculum and the collaborative process. The results clustered under the themes of:

1. ESOL teachers' view of their role
2. Teaching ESOL without a curriculum
3. Preparing EAL students for 'literacy' assessments
4. Collaboration with curriculum colleagues

1. ESOL teachers' view of their role

Most teachers agreed that their most important duty was *Teaching ESOL* as an independent subject. There was also consensus on the importance of 'Assisting ESOL students to manage mainstream subjects and Pastoral care of ESOL and international students'. Two other roles featuring within the top five were: 'Liaising with mainstream teachers' (which aligned with the current management position held by four of the teachers); and 'Planning or co-teaching with mainstream teachers' (which none reported they had yet done in practice). The two teachers who trained as primary school teachers regarded 'Briefing teacher aides to support teaching EALs' as the most important role. Others considered that it was the job of specialists, not paraprofessionals, to teach EAL students.

2. Teaching ESOL (without a curriculum)

When asked to describe role changes, ESOL teachers unanimously affirmed that their role of systematically teaching English language was diminishing as teaching became more assessment-driven. They believed that the requirement to focus on preparing students to pass the standardised literacy credits limited their flexibility to design programmes that would methodically develop language learning. Without a curriculum to guide and validate practice, ESOL teachers' core expertise seemed to have been reshaped into a support role. Nonetheless, ESOL teachers did not appear to regret the absence of an ESOL curriculum but

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appreciated the freedom to design programmes that fitted individual learner needs:

'I wouldn't like too prescriptive programmes which may limit teachers' freedom to do what is best for each student.'

These ESOL teachers expected to teach classes comprising EAL students with varying levels of English language proficiency and at different levels across the curriculum, but different *curricular* expectations within one class challenged their teaching:

'You look at the students in your class with ESOL unit standards at level two. Then you need to look at your students at level one and work with them. There's a lot going on. You can feel schizo – doing different things with different people.'

The pressure to support curriculum learning led one ESOL teacher to describe herself as a jack-of-all-trades. Although these teachers generally reported feeling proficient in identifying language demands in a number of subjects, the pressure to work across different curricula meant they were not always confident that they could mediate complex aspects of content at senior levels:

'Students can bring questions (to us)... With the general level one science I can help, but after that it gets hard. But convincing them that the language is important is difficult.'

3. Preparing students for 'Literacy' assessments

Another theme that emerged was the pressure placed upon ESOL teachers to prepare EAL students for compulsory standards assessing literacy but situated within the mainstream English curriculum. Many ESOL classes were reported as being sheltered English classes where students were prepared for the Literacy

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standards at the expense of systematic support for language development. ESOL teachers remarked:

'You have to do all that with one class [teach language, the English curriculum and other subject curricula]. There's a lot going on in class with those three things.'

The emphasis on 'passing Literacy' provoked mixed responses from the ESOL teachers depending on their experience in teaching the English curriculum and whether they were primary or secondary trained. Some of the group felt confident that their skills in teaching primary learners to read and write (literacy) in their first language were adequate preparation for teaching secondary bilingual learners. They seemed unaware that academic language demands on secondary EAL learners might require specialist skills.

Finally, some ESOL teachers could not necessarily differentiate between first and additional language acquisition. A number spoke as if literacy for English speaking students were synonymous with acquiring English as an additional language. This lack of distinction between first and second language acquisition was an unexpected area of confusion.

4. Collaboration with curriculum colleagues

Most ESOL teachers described how they preferred sharing expertise with mainstream colleagues through either collaborative teaching or providing PD. However, they recognised that this was challenging when teachers did not speak the same metalanguage:

'The initial assessment of students is huge but how do we tell [curriculum] teachers what students need? It is hard to give information without using jargon.'

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This issue surfaced when ESOL teachers tried to share results from diagnostic language assessments, and was exacerbated when placement of new students was under discussion (Ministry of Education, 2008). In addition to speaking different curricular languages, ESOL teachers felt that their colleagues did not understand the process of acquiring an additional language. This had severe repercussions on teachers' expectations of EAL students:

'The perceptions of students' needs by some teachers are sometimes very limited... Alarmingly the correlation is that because their English is not good then they are made to join the non-achievers and behaviour problems'.

In short, curriculum specialists lacked understanding of the role and expertise of ESOL specialists. One ESOL teacher, whose role combined teaching ESOL and curriculum English, remarked:

'We liaise over assessing ESOL students. I'm not sure what they expect of me. Some say, 'When are you going to be a real English teacher?' which, to me, implies they think ESOL is an easy way out.'

Though many of the focus group members were qualified and willing to share their expertise with subject teachers, the complex roles of the ESOL teacher as mediator, facilitator and language specialist appeared to be underestimated by their colleagues.

Discussion

The focus group interview allowed ESOL teachers to elaborate on their role and responsibilities for EAL learners in schools or with curriculum teachers. ESOL teachers felt their positions had evolved from teaching English language to EAL students into an ill-defined support role. Rather than the specialist task of teaching ESOL, they were now expected to do something far broader. New

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expectations included preparing EAL students for high-stakes English curriculum assessments and providing sheltered curriculum support, while taking on a leadership and mentoring role for their curriculum colleagues to explicate the language demands of different curricula. These new roles were rarely articulated or captured in a job description. Issues arising from teachers' reflections fall into the categories of: qualifications and credibility, curriculum status, and school structures.

1. Qualifications and ESOL teachers' credibility

Some ESOL teachers did not feel academically or professionally prepared to perform these critical functions and this disadvantage appeared to be compounded when curriculum colleagues could not perceive the relationship between academic language and curriculum learning.

- Learning on the job

Some ESOL teacher comments betrayed unfamiliarity with educational linguistics. Their chequered body of knowledge appeared to reflect the paths that ESOL teachers had taken to acquire current positions as well as schools' limited understanding of the language needs of EAL students. Less than half of these ESOL teachers had undertaken specialist TESSOL training; a disturbingly small proportion of the group with serious implications for ESOL teachers' practices, status and the messages they perpetuate about learning an additional language.

These ESOL teachers evolved into their school position via professional journeys illustrating the history of ESOL teaching in New Zealand. When the student population began to diversify in the late 1990s, teachers who had taught English as a Foreign Language (EFL) overseas, were primary trained, and/or were English curriculum teachers, were asked to teach EAL students. These default ESOL teachers were expected to meet the needs of EAL students despite having no curriculum to guide what they should teach. With little reference to research on second language acquisition, it was considered best to remove EAL students

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from curriculum classes until they had acquired 'enough' English through ESOL classes to cope with the demands of learning 'content' subjects (Franken & McComish, 2002).

- Academic credibility

Historically, few TESSOL courses investigate second language acquisition in the context of learning in a secondary school. Teachers are not required to be familiar with the language demands of mainstream subjects, which might inform ESOL programmes they devise. A minority of the participants in this study held higher degrees or specialist qualifications which is consistent with an earlier finding that 'on average only about half of ESOL staff in schools were TESOL qualified (Ministry of Education International Division, 2002: 6). When viewed alongside the qualifications of curriculum colleagues, who

almost without exception have specialist degrees in their teaching area, ESOL teachers may lack academic credibility. This is likely to undermine their status in discussions on curriculum language and student placement. Furthermore, this group of ESOL teachers felt that curriculum teachers do not understand what ESOL teachers know and do in schools. Things do not appear to have changed much since Siskin's ESL teacher remarked:

'A lot of people believe that I do nothing. You're not in a real department; what do you do?' (1994:7).

This is not surprising while ESOL teaching continues to be an ill-defined role. Almost half of the focus group ESOL teachers were primary trained. One repercussion of primary teachers holding secondary ESOL positions was these participants' eagerness to devolve ESOL instruction to teacher aides in the belief that teaching EALs was a support task that could be undertaken by a person without a teaching background. Possibly because primary teachers are expected

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to be 'jacks of all trades', they may not appreciate the importance of having a specialist body of knowledge about teaching ESOL.

ESOL teachers are currently expected to support EAL students to acquire English curriculum qualifications: the Literacy standards. Teaching ESOL may thus be perceived as synonymous with teaching literacy skills or curriculum English, a misconception perpetuated when English teachers are still allocated ESOL classes. This consolidates the perception that teaching students to learn an additional language does not require specialist skills, and may feed into systemic and hierarchical misunderstandings about TESSOL, as signalled by Creese (2006).

Recently, the student population has changed again. One teacher commented that fewer international students were coming to study in New Zealand but noted that more immigrants brought new changes. There are increasing numbers of New Zealand-born children of parents from non-English speaking backgrounds, and numbers of graduates from Māori immersion primary schools now join mainstream English-medium schools at secondary level. These indigenous bilingual learners understandably resist being identified as EAL students, but their first language (academically) is te reo Māori and they too need an explicit focus on academic English to manage curriculum learning. This requires collaboration between ESOL and curriculum teachers – an ideal not practised by any of the focus group members.

2. Confusing curriculum status

One obstacle to formal collaboration could be curriculum teachers' beliefs that ESOL teachers have little to contribute to their pedagogical knowledge. Even the best qualified ESOL teachers were reluctant to mark their territory as language experts by using explicit linguistic terms. This parallels teacher behaviour

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captured in other studies (Arkoudis, 2003; Creese, 2005; Harper & de Jong, 2009). Instead, they simplified language-specific information shared with colleagues, which resulted in a loss of technical precision.

Unrecognised specialist knowledge may have been exacerbated by the absence of ESOL tradition in comparison to well-established curriculum areas. ESOL is rightly viewed as a subject without specific content, but ESOL teachers work with teachers who gain prestige from belonging to recognisable curriculum areas (English, 2009; Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995; Siskin, 1994). These ESOL teachers did not regret the authority of a curriculum, yet an ESOL curriculum might validate their specialist knowledge and increase opportunities for recognition as equal partners with curriculum colleagues.

3. School structures

One teacher regretted that ESOL was placed within the Learning Support department in her school, and there was consensus within the focus group that this structure might signal that learning an additional language was a disability to be remediated. Other school structures also play a significant part in relegating ESOL expertise to a general support service that does not require professional qualifications. The experiences of the participating teachers would suggest that many school managers continue to believe that qualifications in the areas of special needs, primary education or English curriculum rather than advanced TESSOL training will suffice for teaching language learners. In accordance with educators in international studies, school managers may not appreciate that EAL students benefit from specialist teachers of English language (Creese, 2005; Harper & de Jong, 2009).

EAL students need English to access their content subjects. They need interventions to fast-track language acquisition so that they can participate fully in mainstream classes (Cummins, 2000). This requires effective collaboration

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between language specialists and content specialists. Despite attending in-service courses and other language PD, non-specialist ESOL teachers often lack the professional confidence to lead curriculum colleagues.

Key questions for schools

This small scale study nonetheless raises questions for educators and administrators who interact with EAL students:

- What qualities and qualifications are required of ESOL staff? Do management teams apply the same rigour to ESOL appointments as to those in curriculum areas?
- What PD opportunities are available to ensure all teachers have sufficient understanding about teaching academic language to bilingual learners? Does PD draw upon the expertise of ESOL staff thus affirming their specialist knowledge to their colleagues?
- Are ESOL and subject teachers encouraged to extend their TESSOL credentials?
- What systems promote collaboration between subject and ESOL teachers? How might co-planning or co-teaching be structured?
- Is the ESOL department appropriately placed within the school structure?
- How might schools differentiate academic support for monolingual students and bilingual students to acknowledge the skills of bilingual learners (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007)?
- Are academic pathways for language acquisition available to EAL students in consultation with staff who understand how additional languages are learned at school?

If issues regarding language teaching responsibilities in schools are not clarified, there is a risk that EAL students will continue to underperform academically (Bourne, 2007).

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Conclusion

This study explored the perspectives of secondary ESOL teachers who agreed that EAL students must acquire both English language and curriculum content knowledge effectively to complete academic qualifications (Walqui, 2000; Fillmore & Snow, 2000). New Zealand educational policy supports fast-tracking of language and subject content by increasing curriculum teachers' knowledge about second language acquisition to enable them to teach language in conjunction with curriculum content. There is a tacit expectation that ESOL teachers will conduct this PD and they are apprehensive but willing to do so. Few teachers and administrators appreciate the specialist skills held by trained ESOL teachers. Without a clear mandate or a curriculum, ESOL teachers do not showcase their expertise, possibly because some lack advanced specialist training. Instead they are complicit in their own invisibility as schools seek expert facilitators such as advisors from the Ministry of Education - outside their school community. This situation could be allayed by sponsoring ESOL teachers to gain further TESSOL qualifications and creating a systemic place for the teachers to collaborate.

Even if ESOL teachers' linguistic skills have developed inconsistently, they are still more likely to possess a greater awareness of how EAL learners can acquire academic language at secondary school than their curriculum colleagues. If curriculum teachers are to manage the language learning of their EAL students, and work collaboratively with ESOL colleagues, teachers need to regard one another as equal partners with skills of complementary importance to their learners. This is a challenge for all teachers of EAL learners.

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¹ ESOL funded students include migrant and refugee students, but not FFPs

² International English Language Testing System

³ Test of English as a Foreign Language

⁴ Teaching English in schools to speakers of other languages

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