

National standardised testing and the diluting of English as a second language (ESL)¹ in Australia

SUE CREAGH

Institute for Social Science Research, University of Queensland

ABSTRACT: The Australian field of English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching is globally respected for its research and practice achievements over a period of some 30 years. However, this essential field of pedagogy is being diluted in the current Australian reform agenda which is firmly founded on a traditional vision of English as first language, and national standardised testing which maps progress in a one-size-fits-all “English as first language” development only. This paper will argue that the de-prioritising of ESL is directly related to the statistical processes which form the architecture of the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test. The paper first explores the economic rationalism which drives the need for standardised assessment, which in turn enables measurement of school performance according to broad statistical categories. Language Background Other than English (LBOTE) are examined, as the only statistical category used in NAPLAN for the apparent disaggregation of language effect on test performance. The limitations of the LBOTE category definition are contrasted with the complex understandings about second language acquisition, which have informed ESL pedagogy and assessment for some time in Australia. The paper draws on the author’s recent PhD research, from which quantitative data will be discussed to show that the LBOTE category hides a heterogeneous group of ESL students and that understanding and responding appropriately to these needs is within the domain of ESL specialist knowledge. The paper argues that the LBOTE category is highly problematic to the Australian education reforms, to the professional knowledge that characterises the work of ESL educators and to the goal of equity for all Australian students.

KEYWORDS: English as a second language, NAPLAN, LBOTE, ESL Bandscales, standardised testing.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the direct relationship which exists between the introduction of standardised testing in the Australian education landscape, and its negative impact on the specialised field of teaching English as a second (or additional) language (ESL). The impact is negative for two reasons. First, standardised testing procedures in Australia do not recognise that English language proficiency, for students who are speakers of other languages, may impact on test performance. These students are in the process of learning English for school and may not have full control of the abstract and complex language skills being tested. However, it is virtually impossible to connect test performance with English language proficiency levels and thus

¹ The term English as a Second language, or ESL, has been replaced in Australia with English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D). Throughout the paper ESL will be used, but is interchangeable with EAL/D.

impossible to substantiate that the best pedagogical response to student test performance lies with ESL.

Second, the capacity to recognise the potential impact of English (as a second) language on standardised test performance is poorly executed because of an inadequate statistical process. The category Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) is used in national testing to disaggregate those students who are speakers of languages other than English. However, it is a crude indicator which provides no insight into English language proficiency.

Together, the underlying assumptions which characterise national literacy testing in Australia, and the statistical processes of mapping test performance, specifically for language learners, work together to hide language impact, and to diminish the recognition that ESL pedagogy is critical in assisting language learners reach their full potential. This *dilution* of the necessity for ESL support has worrying implications for all language learners and especially for those who are disadvantaged in multiple ways related to language, prior limited educational opportunities and low socio-economic status. These students are completely submerged in the testing processes and, while they may struggle in the testing regime, the common response is remedial English as first language literacy intervention.

The paper explores this issue through a number of connecting ideas. In the first section of the paper, I condense the policy dynamics of economic rationalism and the knowledge economy, which underpin and drive the Australian education reforms, and specifically, standardised testing in the form of the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (hereafter and generally) referred to as NAPLAN.

It is against this backdrop that I then provide details about the field knowledge of ESL, outlining those characteristics which differentiate it as a specialist teaching area. In particular, I describe field specific formative assessment tools, which enable recognition of English language development in the context of school learning. This is powerful knowledge, which is integrally related to curriculum and pedagogical choices. I also focus on how ESL learners are classified in NAPLAN, and explain the inadequacies of this. Drawing on my doctoral research, I exemplify the problems with the statistical classification of Language Background Other than English (LBOTE) and associated counting by presenting some disaggregated NAPLAN data sourced from Queensland state schools, as part of a quantitative description of the NAPLAN performance of ESL learners. I also demonstrate the heterogeneity of the ESL learner – a characteristic not readily apparent in the current testing regime. Using these data I argue that ESL teachers need to be recognised as bringing valuable specialised pedagogical and assessment knowledge to the classroom and that, if this is to be discarded, educational outcomes for ESL learners, and particularly those learners with multiple intersecting factors of disadvantage will be jeopardised, along with the notion of equity of outcome for all Australian students.

Australia is a country of diverse cultures and language groups, with a long admired history of providing effective and well-resourced English as a second language programs for those newly arrived migrants and refugees who are speakers of languages other than English. This reputation has developed through a process of education policy evolution – from limited acknowledgement of language learning

needs, in post war migration of the 1950s and 60s, through the era of multiculturalism in education, during the 1980s. During the 1980s and through to the current time, the ESL teacher has performed a specialist role in the school, supporting language learning, and supporting mainstream teachers in making language and content accessible to the language learner. This specialist role is under threat however, as economic rationalism impacts on education policy and transforms the Australian education system into one in which economic principles rather than education principles drive change. As a result we see a narrowing of curriculum (see Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013; Comber & Nixon, 2009, for the Australian context; Stobart, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2010) and a constricting view of literacy as a first language developmental process only.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT: ECONOMIC RATIONALISM AND NAPLAN TESTING

There is now considerable literature pertaining to the hegemonic principles of neoliberalism or economic rationalism (Pusey, 2003). In essence, economic rationalism is nomenclature for belief in the capacity for markets and economies to produce better societal outcomes than states, bureaucracies and laws (Pusey, 1998). In this school of thought, reforms, which are driven on economic principles, are viewed as enhancing Australia's competitiveness in the global market. Economic rationalism has been in ascent in the policy arena of Australian governments since the mid-1970s (Pusey, 2003, p. 8). Its influence is seen in extensive education reform in the Australian and global settings. Primarily, education is positioned, axiomatically, as the driver for economic competitiveness in the global economy.

Symptomatic of this principle, countries around the globe, including Australia, have embraced national testing as a statistical process of measuring the quality of schools and teaching. National testing enables surveillance of schools via cumulative grids of test results, monitored for improvement and compared against other "similar" schools and national test averages. This information is made available publicly on the Australian government website "MySchool" (<http://www.myschool.edu.au>), in the name of empowering parents with choice, as consumers in the education market. Testing also provides a mechanism to effect funding arrangements between the federal government, as managers of the test, and the states and territories, who must demonstrate their commitment to educational improvement, measured in part by test performance. These funding arrangements have impacted on how ESL programs are funded in state education systems.

Historically, since the development of school migrant education programs in the mid-1970s, ESL funding was sourced primarily from the various federal departments responsible for immigration. Through a process of collapsing earmarked funding categories into broader reform targets like literacy and numeracy improvement, dedicated funding for ESL programs is now reliant on the educational priorities of state and territory education departments, but is potentially *de-prioritised* by the current processes of accountability in relation to NAPLAN test performance, central to the education reforms.

In state and federal funding agreements, there are no precise directives about how money must be allocated, but there are broad goals to be achieved, and states and territories have discretion about how that money may be spent. Achievement of the goals is in part measured by NAPLAN data. NAPLAN data is sourced from the centrepiece of the Australian education reforms: the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). The organisation responsible for the design and administration of NAPLAN is the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). ACARA was established in 2008 and is a Commonwealth statutory authority, receiving instruction from education ministers across Australia, and advice from a number of consultative bodies (ACARA, 2010). ACARA is responsible for NAPLAN, the MySchool website and the new national Australian curriculum.

The NAPLAN test is held across Australia, each May, for all school students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9, with minimal exemptions. The NAPLAN test has preceded the implementation of the Australian national curriculum which to date is still not operating nationally, though most states and territories have commenced using it in the subject areas of Maths and English, Science and History in Years P-10. ACARA (2012) advises that in lieu of a national curriculum, the NAPLAN tests are “developed using the nationally agreed Statements of Learning that reflect the core elements of the curriculum documents used in the different States and Territories” (“Development of NAPLAN tests”, para 1). The Statements of Learning represent common English and Mathematics knowledge, skills, understandings and capacities (ACARA, 2011d). However, they are monolingual in design and assume English as first language only. They also assume that for all Australian students learning is a linear and cumulative experience; by the beginning of Year 9, the average Australian student is assumed to be an English-speaking student with 8 years of schooling completed. This experience is in stark contrast to the most disadvantaged of students who, because of their life experiences, may have endured multiple migration, war, limited schooling and little opportunity to develop literacy in any language. Other students may have experienced schooling in other countries and other cultures and may be highly proficient in other languages, but may only be in the early stages of acquiring academic English. The standards and NAPLAN are unable to differentiate these heterogeneous groups of ESL students.

The NAPLAN test consists of five domains: reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy. Aside from the writing task, each of the domain tests consists of multiple choice or short answer responses. The skills and capacities which are being tested in reading, for example, are contained within a range of genres, covering a range of topics. For spelling and grammar tests, there is no evidence of an overriding theme or topic, and an extensive range of vocabulary is drawn on for test questions. Numeracy requires knowledge of Mathematics *and* reading to understand and interpret what is being asked, as a number of questions are constructed as real life problems to be solved.

The NAPLAN test results are disaggregated through a range of statistical categories. The classification system used by ACARA to disaggregate NAPLAN categorises students in relation to gender, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identification, socio-economic status based on parent levels of education and employment,

geographic location of schooling, and language background other than English (LBOTE) status.

The LBOTE category is perhaps intended to recognise language in relation to test performance. Its broad definition states that it represents those learners who speak a language other than English at home, or even more broadly, have a parent or carer who speaks a language other than English (ACARA, 2011a). It does *not* have the capacity to identify level of English language proficiency. LBOTE, like all the statistical categories used to disaggregate NAPLAN performance, produces a numerical output. Such numbers are privileged in government, but they seem to depoliticise that which they represent, because they suggest a kind of technical objectivity and bias-free knowledge which is difficult to challenge (Rose, 1991, p. 674; Jenkins, 2008). Porter (1995) describes these statistical processes as “technologies of distance”, in which the numerical output supersedes the underlying structures which inform about the “how”, “why” and “what” of the data collection processes. However, numbers *are* political and represent political judgements concerning what is counted, how it is counted and how it is reported. As will be shown, LBOTE appears to represent language yet fails to do so in any sense helpful to supporting increased equity of educational outcome for ESL learners.

PRINCIPLES OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND ESL PEDAGOGY AND ASSESSMENT

In this section, I first briefly summarise the principles of the empirical research about the teaching and assessment of ESL learners. I do this to argue that the LBOTE category lacks a strong educational foundation, and that there is empirical evidence which supports a specific pedagogical and assessment approach for ESL learners, which is different to first language literacy pedagogy and assessment. It is these understandings which have informed the choice of descriptive statistics used in the following analysis of ESL students’ NAPLAN data.

In the field of teaching English as a second or additional language, there has been significant and fairly recent development in understanding the processes of second language acquisition in an academic context. Cummins (1981) differentiated between two kinds of language: basic interpersonal skills (BICS), which describe spoken routine survival English, and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) which encompasses the academic language demands of school language, both in speaking and writing. The goal of ESL support is thus to enable the ESL learner to develop CALP in order to comprehend school language through listening, reading and viewing, as well as produce academic language through speaking and writing. Importantly, during the process of developing academic language, input in the classroom (and the NAPLAN test could be seen as an aspect of this) needs to be comprehensible to the learner, otherwise it constitutes little more than noise (Larsen-Freeman, 1991).

Cummins (1981) found that students took from 5 to 7 years to achieve a high level of proficiency in CALP. Thomas and Collier (1997), and Hakuta, Butler and Witt (2000) refined these results and determined that such a timeframe was possible if students

had been educated in their first language for a considerable numbers of years, at least to year 6 level, and thus had achieved a high level of CALP in their first language.

Further research also found a correlation between socio-economic status and *rate* of language acquisition, with students attending schools with high poverty levels progressing more slowly and students whose parents had the highest levels of education performing well above the remainder of the group (Hakuta et al., 2000). Despite these understandings, there is only a 12-month exemption from the NAPLAN test for those ESL students in their first year of residency in Australia, if they or their school believe they have insufficient English to participate in the test. After the first year they are required to participate in the test, regardless of English level, or background educational circumstances.

The second language acquisition research initiated by Cummins in the 1980s enabled the development of Australian ESL assessment tools which allowed the ESL specialist teacher to *identify* the ESL learner, in terms of language learning needs, and *quantify* the level of language support the ESL learner required. The National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia (NLLIA) ESL Bandscales (1994) are a language proficiency scale describing the English language development of second language learners in the school context, and were designed to be used within curriculum based assessment in contrast to standardised government-directed testing (Hudson, 2012).

The focus of the ESL Bandscales is on describing, not an ideal outcome (what *should* be happening), but on describing what *is* happening; this knowledge is contextualised by learner background features and by the context of the task, the interlocutor and the level of support required (Moore, 2005, p. 381). By enabling the ESL teacher to categorise the English language level of the student at a point in time, The NLLIA ESL Bandscales are able to provide guidance on the level and type of intervention required to support ESL learners (Lo Bianco & Freebody, 2001). The pedagogical and policy implications of this knowledge are powerful, because they provide a mechanism which allows teachers and schools to argue for the language learner's right to access appropriate and timely ESL support and they enable the ESL teacher to support the classroom teacher in understanding the processes unique to language learning, in contrast to mainstream English as first language literacy development.

Given the significant developments in assessment based on language proficiency scales, the LBOTE category clearly represents a retrograde choice which harks back to much earlier and inefficient examples of categorisation related to ethnicity or country of birth, which provided little guidance on the kind and extent of language support appropriate to the language level of the student.

The more recent arrival of students of refugee background from African and Asian countries has required further refinement of ESL pedagogy in response to high learning needs within this cohort, characterised by a slower pace of learning, a lack of conceptual foundations on which to develop learning, and a lack of literacy in any language (see, for example, Miller & Windle, 2010; Windle & Miller, 2012).

ESL response to students of refugee background has entailed combining multiple pedagogical approaches in order to support learners who are new to schooling, who

may speak multiple languages but are new to literacy, and who are required to enter school at a level appropriate to their age, despite very limited foundations of school and academic knowledge. This new cohort of learners has challenged existing notions of the time required to acquire academic language and the ways in which ESL teachers and mainstream teachers approach pedagogy to address their learning needs (see Dooley, 2009). In response to the arrival of significant numbers of refugees who have experienced limited educational opportunities, education systems in a number of states have extended ESL programs, and ESL departments have generated suites of information and teaching resources to assist schools and classrooms to respond to the needs of these learners (see, for example, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008). This level of response recognises the unique needs of this cohort, who are well hidden in the problematic NAPLAN testing data (see Creagh, 2013).

In this section, I am building the case that the specialist knowledge of the ESL teacher is strongly founded in empirical research and has developed and evolved in response to both this research and the impact of globalisation and the movements of peoples, both chosen and allocated (in the case of the refugee). This specialist field has served within the mainstream school system, bringing unique and important knowledge to the educational endeavours of schools and teachers.

I want to now consider how this knowledge has been impacted on by the current education reform movement. In short, how has the current neoliberal moment impacted pedagogy implementation for the specialised field of ESL? In the early stages of the Australian education movement, the installation of standards and outcomes generated considerable concern within the ESL teaching and academic community of Australia. Their argument essentially focussed on the failure of the standards to recognise the language learning journey of students who were speakers of other languages, and in the process of acquiring English, entering school systems at any age and year level. The general consensus of the ESL community was that such students would *fail* within the new standardised age, because of the inability of the standards to be able to recognise the kinds of language learnings these students would be achieving. Instead, language development—often recognised by the ESL teacher as the production of “errors” as students innovated with their developing English language—could only be interpreted as failure against “English as first language” (norm) standards (Hammond, 1999; Hammond & Derewianka, 1999). It was feared that the pedagogical response to “errors” and the inability to interpret these as natural and necessary aspects of language acquisition, meant that ESL as a pedagogical response would be replaced by mainstream literacy intervention. For the ESL learner this is problematic, because much of the material developed for mainstream literacy intervention is developed on the basis of a shared spoken language and corresponding spoken vocabulary, which cannot be assumed for the ESL learner.

However, the problem of the “failing ESL student” is not what has eventuated in the new testing regime. Instead something far more potentially damaging to ESL has occurred; the language learner, captured within the LBOTE classification, *appears* to be outperforming the English-speaking students of Australia, when NAPLAN performance is aggregated to a national level. This is damaging to ESL because it appears to negate the idea that there is any interaction between language learning needs and performance on the literacy tests. It undermines the need for states and

territories to allocate funding and resources in response to ESL needs as an aspect of provision of educational service. It provides apparently truthful empirical evidence that closes down the need for ESL programs.

This problem lies in a poorly defined statistical category. The ACARA definition of LBOTE is that the child or their parent speaks a language other than English at home. The problem is apparent in the national data produced by ACARA annually and presented in table 1 below, showing the national NAPLAN results for the LBOTE category, in comparison to non-LBOTE for 2013, in each domain of the test for Year 9.

Test	LBOTE mean	Non LBOTE mean	LBOTE sd	Non LBOTE sd
Reading	577.6	581.3	89.4	61.9
Writing	562.4	552.5	89.4	86.2
Spelling	596.8	579.6	74.6	63.8
Grammar and Punctuation	573.7	573.5	87.5	74.7
Numeracy	601.7	579.4	98.5	76.9

Source: ACARA 2013

Table 1. National NAPLAN test results for Year 9 LBOTE and non-LBOTE students, 2013 (ACARA, 2013)

Two important patterns are evident in these data. First, there is little to differentiate LBOTE from non-LBOTE students when mean scores are compared. Where there is some difference in averages, the pattern suggests that LBOTE is stronger than non-LBOTE *on average*. This pattern has been repeated since 2008 and is similar across all year levels and all test domains except reading, where non-LBOTE is uniformly slightly stronger. The other pattern evident in the data is that LBOTE standard deviations, which represent the spread of scores, are uniformly larger than non-LBOTE. This suggests that there is a far broader range of performance within the LBOTE category. It should be noted that these are national figures, and there is greater variability of LBOTE performance in comparison to non-LBOTE across the states and territories of Australia. However, NAPLAN reporting processes prevent further interrogation of these data, so that it is not possible to break down the heterogeneous LBOTE category in order to better understand both patterns.

These data effectively produce two kinds of potentially damaging “truths” about the ESL student in Australia. The first is that language background appears to not impact upon test performance, on average. Extrapolating from this, secondly, there is little evidence to support the expansion of ESL as a specific program of support, beyond its now much reduced funding levels. This situation is made worse by the installation of national partnership agreements in which there is no mechanism which requires states to improve educational performance specifically in relation to ESL, and the NAPLAN data represented by LBOTE hides any heterogeneity in the language learner population.

In the next section of this paper I draw on empirical evidence from my recent PhD studies to show an alternative picture of NAPLAN and language proficiency. I

demonstrate that there is a clear relationship between the language level of the ESL learner and performance on NAPLAN, and that the LBOTE category in the NAPLAN test data, on its own, is insufficient to identify this. Instead, the tools which constitute part of the ESL teacher's specialist knowledge provide this useful information – information which could be drawn on to inform policy, funding and pedagogy decisions within education departments.

THE HETEROGENEITY OF ESL LEARNERS

This section of the paper focuses on a description of NAPLAN data collected from Queensland urban secondary schools during 2010 and 2011. The sample is drawn from the government school sector and so may be representative of similar populations of ESL students attending government schools in other urban Australian locations. I will be reporting my findings for a year 9 cohort, totalling some 247 students.

When I began negotiating with schools for access to collect research data early in 2010, there was no capacity to identify schools with LBOTE populations. This statistic was included for each school on the MySchool website for the 2010 upgrade. In lieu of this information, I targeted schools which had an ESL population with some level of ESL classroom support, because ESL students satisfy the definition of the LBOTE category. However, this has implications for the characteristics of the sample group, which is entirely within the LBOTE group, but with characteristics which are more specifically “ESL-like”. In fact, the group represents LBOTE students who have *also* been identified as having language-learning needs. Because of the blanket nature of LBOTE, it is impossible to determine whether this cohort is representative of the full range of LBOTE. However, their data provide useful insights into the heterogeneity of this group. I would argue that they represent the hidden ESL learner who requires specific ESL policy recognition, dedicated funding and ESL pedagogical support.

ACARA clearly states on the NAPLAN FAQ website that test results are comparable from one year to the next, achieved through a “rigorous equating process” (ACARA 2011b) so the analysis for year 9 will combine NAPLAN results from both 2010 and 2011. For the purposes of this paper I report descriptive statistics about the group which support two arguments: first, that the LBOTE “eligible” population is heterogeneous and second, that language level is associated with NAPLAN performance.

Schools, students and their parents granted access to enrolment records and academic results for each student in the study. I collected information about gender (58% of the year 9 group are female) and parent education levels (33% have completed year 12, 18% have not completed year 12, and 49% have not provided this information to schools), academic variables (A to E grades in the semester of the NAPLAN test) and language related variables (birth region of the world; visa category; years of education; date of arrival to Australia; and ESL Bandscales for reading in the semester of the NAPLAN test).

Whilst all the students were eligible to be counted in the LBOTE category, due to the inexact nature of identification, not all students were identified as LBOTE. In fact, validity of LBOTE data is undermined by current processes of identification of students eligible for inclusion in LBOTE. In Queensland the variable is generated from the NAPLAN test and relies on teachers identifying students who are LBOTE at the time of the test. It is not a category of data normally collected by the Queensland education department, though language background of the student and their parent/s is collected. Consequently, classroom teachers, or, in secondary school, those teachers who are supervising the administration of the test, may not be aware of a student's LBOTE status, if that status has no impact on their learning. That is, they may be speakers of other languages but are proficient users of English as well, or have not been captured within an ESL program. Current protocols around identification of LBOTE students require teachers to "colour a dot" on the cover of the student's test paper if that student is LBOTE. Somehow, there is an inconsistency in the practice, which has resulted in a large number of "LBOTE eligible" students not being captured in the category, potentially rendering the data for this category invalid and unreliable. For the year 9 group presented here, 18% were not identified as LBOTE on test data. However, each student in these data is eligible to be included in LBOTE, with 80% of the group speaking one language other than English, and 20% of the group speaking more than one other language.

This year 9 group of LBOTE "eligible" students were mostly recently arrived in Australia, with the majority (59%) having been here for less than three years. The majority of the group were currently in an ESL program, or had recently exited at the time of data collection, facilitating the collection of Bandscale information for 79% of the group. 28% of this group had not had the years of schooling commensurate with their age and this was related, in part, to their countries of origin and the availability of educational services in those locations. The majority were of refugee background (43%), and the next largest group (15%) were Australian and New Zealand residents. Skilled, business and family visa backgrounds were also represented in the group at 5%, 13% and 12% respectively. Given the changing nature of migration, particularly in regard to those of refugee status, this year 9 group was probably representative of the current urban ESL population requiring ongoing language support in mainstream classrooms in Australian secondary schools.

The descriptive statistics for this sample, which reveal the heterogeneity of the LBOTE category, are presented in Figure 1. The solid horizontal line running through the middle of the graph (at 497.7) represents the mean NAPLAN score for the whole sample. Each vertical line on the graph represents one variable. In each of these, I am showing how each of the categories in each of these variables compares in relation to their mean score on the NAPLAN year 9 reading test. For example, there is no evidence that gender is associated with test performance with boys and girls, on average, achieving similar mean scores. This is not the case across the other variables, which show considerable variation in average performance for each category. In order to assist interpretation of the spread of mean scores, I have shown the national minimum standard for year 9, as a broken line at 470 and 520. The national minimum standard is a band level, intended to communicate to parents and schools the level at which a student may need additional intervention in order to improve their literacy and numeracy skills (ACARA, 2011c). This band is included to assist in anchoring interpretation of the performance of each of the groups.

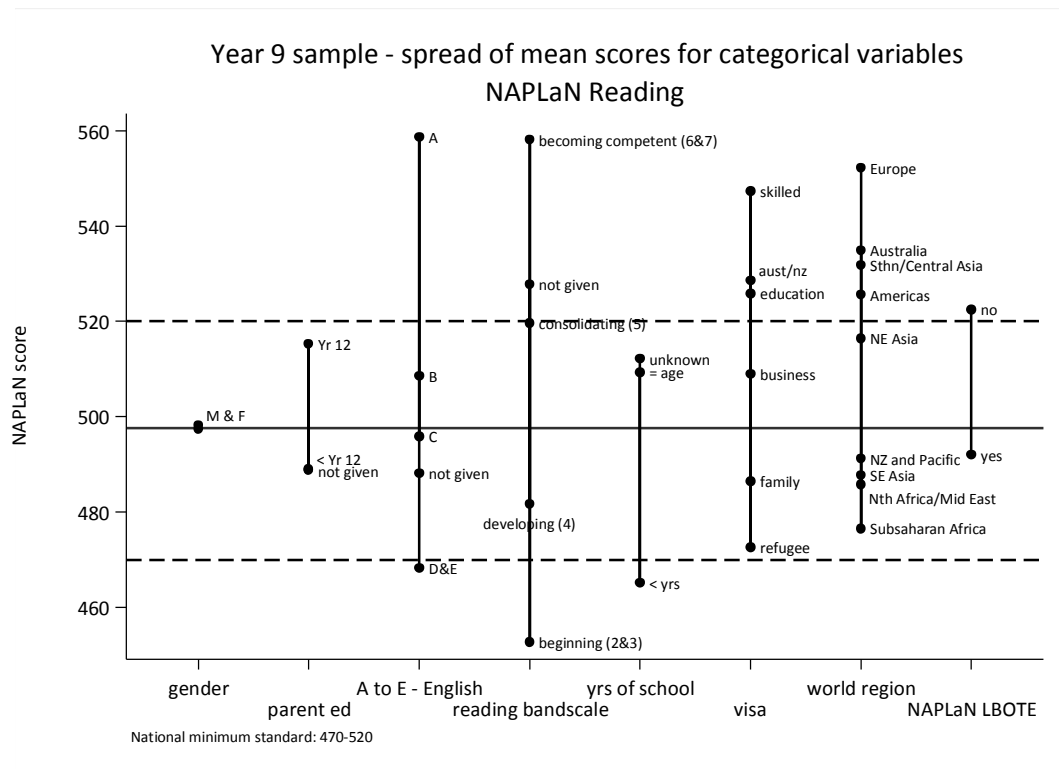


Figure 1. Year 9 NAPLAN reading and spread of mean scores for categorical variables in dataset

For this group, there is a clear spread of mean scores for each of the reading Bandscale levels, and this spread is mirrored by the range of scores for A to E grades. Students who are achieving D or E in the English grades are performing just below the national minimum standard. Students who are described as being in the early stage of academic language development (Bandscale levels 2 and 3) are averaging even lower scores. The graph also provides evidence that years of schooling, visa category and world region of origin are factors which may be associated with NAPLAN attainment and are certainly interrelated.

Further interrogation of Bandscale data, for the year 9 group, clearly supports the premise that there is a relationship between language level, as measured by the ESL Bandscales, and NAPLAN performance. This time I report the statistics showing median scores for each of the Bandscale levels, for reading and for numeracy. Figure 2 provides a visual presentation of NAPLAN results for each of the Bandscale levels. These box plots present a description of the data, which show both the median and the spread. The box contains the central 50% of cases, and the white vertical line in the box marks the median or middle result of the category. The lines which extend from each side of the box show the upper and lower 25% spread of scores. Outliers are depicted by separate circular symbols. Again, to assist in interpreting the median and range of scores, I have marked the national minimum standard band, using vertical broken lines.

Figure 2 shows that whilst the median scores are ascending, students on the lowest Bandscale levels, particularly in reading, are in the lower half, or below the national minimum standard. Even on the highest Bandscales, a small number of students are still performing only within the national minimum standard. The box plots suggest

that language level is associated with NAPLAN performance in both reading and numeracy, and suggests that knowledge of language is important to test performance regardless of whether the test relates to literacy or to numeracy.

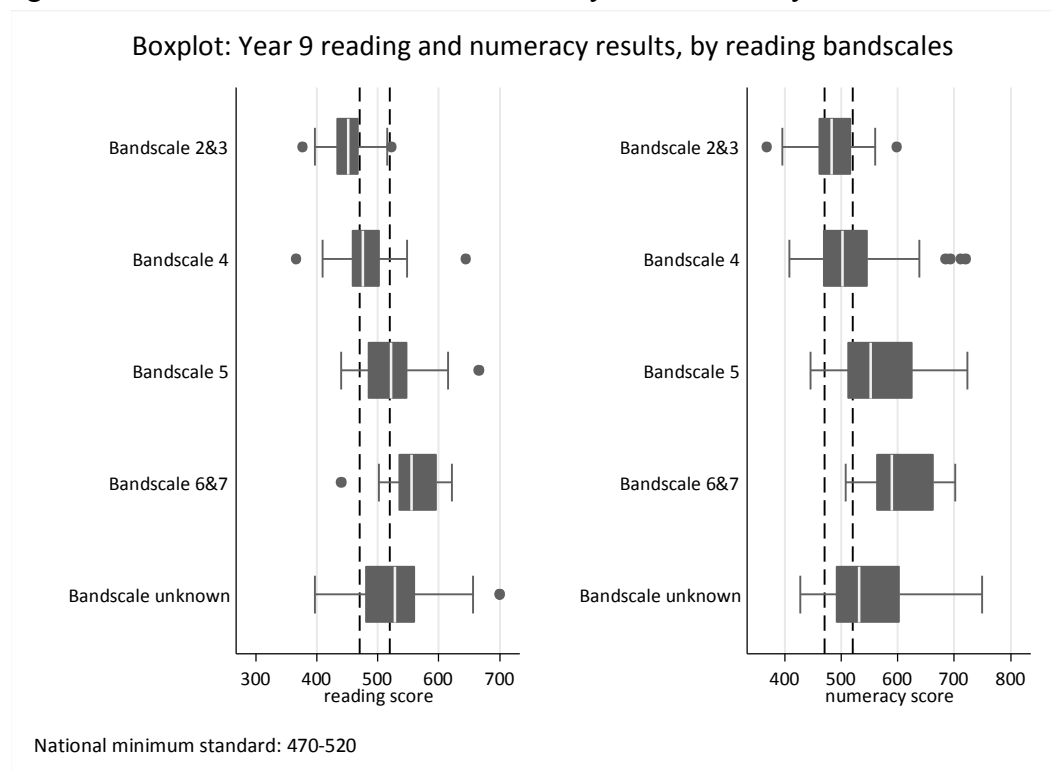


Figure 2. Box plot of year 9 reading and numeracy results by reading Bandscales

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

So far, I have argued that there is an ongoing need for the specialised pedagogical knowledge, which the ESL teacher brings to the classroom, but that the statistical architecture which is built around the current practice of standardised testing in Australia undermines recognition of this need and has potentially dire implications for allocation of resources in education systems. I have flagged that ESL is a well-established aspect of the educational landscape in Australia, and that, given the ongoing migration and refugee settlement programs which exist in this country; there is no decline in the need for this knowledge. Indeed, this movement of peoples characterises the globalised nature of the world now. The most recent Australian Early Development Index indicates that 19.1 % (55,489) of the population of children in their first year of school have language backgrounds other than English and that 75% of these (41,506) children have been identified as ESL (Australian Government, 2013). Instead, our education reform movement seems to mythologise Australia as a monolingual and homogenous nation, and the statistical category used to differentiate language in testing, ironically, supports this vision. Through a different process of data collection, targeting educational resources which embody specialised teacher knowledge—specifically the ESL Bandscales—I have been able to present empirical evidence that our ESL learners are heterogeneous, and that their language level appears to be associated with the NAPLAN attainment. For additional empirical support for this argument, see Creagh 2014.

There are possible ways forward if we are to pursue data and be guided by data analysis for educational policy decisions. First, the ESL population need to be made more visible and targeted as a group with specific needs, rather than hidden in a broad consuming data category like LBOTE (McKay, 2001). This is possible if procedures are established for documenting information related to educational background and English language level. McKay (2001) recommended a more nuanced disaggregation of test data, to enable better identification of disadvantaged learners, recognising that language background other than English is too broad a category to provide useful information, because of the variability contained within it. Better disaggregation of data around ESL students could include language background, education background, including years of schooling and length of time accessing English language programs (Lacelle-Peterson & Rivera, 1994).

Performance standards also should be broadened, so that there is more recognition of topic knowledge, critical thinking and higher order skills, rather than a focus on form (McKay, 2001). Such a recommendation has profound implications for the current test format and would require a shift away from the current one-size-fits-all test format, perhaps offering a suite of assessment activities and flexibility to choose those tasks, which may be more easily aligned with content familiar to the student. This would assist teachers to provide ESL learners the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and understandings, because the test material could match their current learning and its associated vocabulary and conceptual knowledge.

There is more work to be done by the academic community in partnership with ESL teachers. The depletion of funding and the de-prioritising of specialist ESL support need to be scrutinised and documented. How is it occurring in schools and how are mainstream teachers able to embrace this specialist area, in addition to the other demands now made upon them? How is the narrowing of curriculum impacting on ESL specialist time needed to engage with context-specific language work? In the US, Harper and de Jong (2009) describe how the ESL teacher has been rendered invisible in mainstream education discourse (p. 137) and they flag the replacement of ESL by generic, remedial, skills-based approaches in responding to ESL learner need.

This is not a pathway we need support, and if the goal of the education reform in Australia is ultimately about equity of achievement for *all* Australian students, then it is time to review our processes of assessment and counting, and tap into the expertise we have in the ESL teaching community, in order to recognise, support and enhance the learning opportunities of all our students.

REFERENCES

- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2010). *Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority Home Page*. Retrieved from <http://www.acara.edu.au/assessment/assessment.html>
- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2011a). *Glossary*. Retrieved from <http://www.nap.edu.au/information/glossary.html>
- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2011b). *NAP FAQs: NAPLAN Results Reports Performance*. Retrieved May 27, 2013 from

- <http://www.nap.edu.au/information/faqs/naplan--results-reports-performance.html>
- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2011c). *NAP National Assessment Program: Standards*. Retrieved April 12, 2012, 2012 from http://www.nap.edu.au/Test_Results/How_to_interpret/Standards/index.html
- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2011d). *National Assessment Program: Statements of learning*. 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.nap.edu.au/NAPLAN/statements-of-learning.html>
- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2013). *NAPLAN achievement in reading, persuasive writing, language conventions and numeracy: National report for 2013*. Sydney, NSW, Australia: ACARA.
- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2012). *Reliability and validity of NAPLAN. My School Fact Sheet*. ACARA. Retrieved from http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/Reliability_and_validity_of_NAPLAN.pdf
- Australian Government. (2013). *A snapshot of early childhood development in Australia 2012 - Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) National Report*. Canberra, Australia: Australian Government. Retrieved from <http://maps.aedi.org.au/>
- Comber, B., & Nixon, H. (2009). Teachers' work and pedagogy in an era of accountability. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 30(3), 333-345.
- Creagh, S. (2013). Language background other than English: A problem NAPLAN test category for Australian students of refugee background. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*. doi: [10.1080/13613324.2013.843521](https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2013.843521)
- Creagh, S. (2014). A critical analysis of problems with the LBOTE category on the NAPLAN test. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 41(1), 1-23.
- Cummins, J. (1981). *Bilingualism and minority-language children*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2008). *Strengthening outcomes- Refugee students in government schools*. Melbourne, VIC, Australia: The ESL Unit.
- Dooley, K. (2009). Re-thinking pedagogy for middle school students with little, no or severely interrupted schooling. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 8(1), 5-22.
- Hakuta, K., Butler, Y. G., & Witt, D. (2000). *How long does it take English learners to attain proficiency?* Santa Barbara, CA: University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute.
- Hammond, J. (1999). Literacy crises and ESL education. *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 22(2), 120-134.
- Hammond, J., & Derewianka, B. (1999). ESL and literacy education: Revisiting the relationship. *Prospect*, 14(2), 24-38.
- Harper, C. A., & de Jong, E.J. (2009). English language teacher expertise: the elephant in the room. *Language and Education*, 23(2), 137-151.
- Hudson, C. E. (2012). *Teachers write theory: The case of the NLLIA ESL Bandscales* (Unpublished doctoral thesis). University of Queensland, Australia.
- Jenkins, R. (2008). *Social identity* (3rd ed.). London, England: Routledge.

- Lacelle-Peterson, M. W., & Rivera, C. (1994). Is it real for all kids? A framework for equitable assessment policies for English language learners. *Harvard Educational Review*, 64(1), 55-75.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (1991). Second language acquisition research: Staking out the Territory. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(2), 315-350.
- Lo Bianco, J., & Freebody, P. (2001). *Australian literacies: Informing national policy on literacy education*. Melbourne, VIC, Australia: Language Australia Ltd.
- McKay, P. (2001). National literacy benchmarks and the outstreaming of ESL learners. In J. Lo Bianco & R. Wickert (Eds.), *Australian policy activism in language and literacy* (pp. 223-239). Melbourne, VIC, Australia: Language Australia Ltd.
- Miller, J., & Windle, J. (2010). Second language literacy: Putting high needs ESL learners in the frame. *English in Australia*, 45(3), 31-40.
- Moore, H. (2005). *Identifying "the target population": A genealogy of policy-making for English as a Second Language (ESL) in Australian schools (1947-1997)*. (Unpublished doctoral thesis). Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada.
- National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia (NLLIA). (1994). *ESL development: Language and Literacy in Schools Project* (2nd ed., vol. 1). Canberra, Australia: National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia.
- Porter, T. M. (1995). *Trust in numbers: The pursuit of objectivity in science and public life*. Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press.
- Pusey, M. (1998). Economic rationalism, human rights and civil society. *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, 4(2). Retrieved from <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/ahric/ajhr/ajhrindex.html/1998/9.html>
- Pusey, M. (2003). *The experience of Middle Australia: The dark side of economic reform*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Rose, Nikolas. (1991). Governing by numbers: Figuring out democracy. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 16(7), 673-692.
- Stobart, G. (2008). *Testing times: The uses and abuses of assessment*. Abingdon, England: Routledge.
- Thomas, W. P., & Collier, V. (1997). *School effectiveness for language minority students*. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.
- Thompson, G., & Harbaugh, A. G. (2013). A preliminary analysis of teacher perceptions of the effects of NAPLAN on pedagogy and curriculum. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 40(3), 299-314.
- Windle, J., & Miller, J. (2012). Approaches to teaching low literacy refugee-background students. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 35(3), 317-333.

Manuscript received: January 28, 2014

Revision received: April 10, 2014

Accepted: May 31, 2014