Classrooms of possibility
Supporting at-risk EAL students

Edited by
Jennifer Hammond
and Jennifer Miller
Contents

1 At-risk EAL students in mainstream classrooms
   Jennifer Hammond & Jennifer Miller 1

2 Refugees bring more than they can carry
   Maya Cranitch 11

3 Negotiating a place in Australian schools:
   Lessons learned from voices of students
   Jonnell Uptin 31

4 Working with at-risk EAL students in non-metropolitan
   primary classrooms
   Jacqueline Coleman 46

5 Teaching and learning practices with at-risk
   EAL students
   Jennifer Hammond 61

6 Intensive language scaffolding across the curriculum:
   An EAL literacy model
   Jennifer Miller & Miranda McCallum 77

7 Scaffolding multimodal literacies: Learning in and
   out of the classroom
   Karen Dooley 94

8 Classroom strategies for teachers and EAL learners
   Jennifer Miller 109

9 Lessons learned and ways forward
   Jennifer Hammond 121

Glossary 132

References 134

Useful websites 139
Acknowledgements

The author and publisher gratefully acknowledge the use of the following copyright material in this publication:

UNHCR for images on pages 14, 15, 20 and 28; UNICEF for images on pages 17 & 18; Maya Cranitch for images on pages 20, 23 and 28; Cromer Public School, NSW for image on page 28; and Jennifer Miller for images on page 116.

While every effort has been made to trace and acknowledge copyright and ownership of all included works, should any infringement have occurred, the publisher offers their apologies and invite copyright owners to contact them.

The contributors

Maya Cranitch is currently coordinator of the Australian Catholic University Refugee Project on the Thai–Burma Border. With long standing experience working in the refugee sector both in Australia and overseas, Maya has for fifteen years been a Board member of the Asylum Seekers’ Centre in Sydney. She has conducted workshops for the Refugee Council of Australia, mentored several Sudanese university students and presented at a UNHCR sponsored Round Table in Geneva. She has worked closely with the NSW Department of Education and Communities to develop the teacher education resource: Teaching Refugees in My Classroom. Maya also lectures in the area of teaching literacy and English as an additional language in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney.

Jacqueline Coleman is a former mainstream primary teacher who taught in both rural and non-metropolitan areas in Australia. Her interest in EAL-related issues began when she had a lone newly-arrived EAL learner in her composite Year 3 /4 class. As professional learning to support mainstream teachers with at-risk EAL students was not available, she undertook further study to find some practical solutions to working effectively with her EAL student. Having also worked as an EAL teacher of newly-arrived adult refugees and migrants in Australia and in teacher education programmes in Latin America and Africa, she now co-ordinates and teaches undergraduate and post-graduate EAL courses at the Australian Catholic University in Sydney. She researches and publishes on ways to support teachers at all levels of education, including those in rural and non-metropolitan areas, to meet the challenges of successfully teaching EAL students.

Karen Dooley is an Associate Professor in the School of Curriculum, Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology. Karen began her career in Australia teaching in linguistically and culturally diverse schools in high-poverty areas and also taught English as a foreign language in a Shanghai middle school. She currently teaches English Curriculum studies in the primary pre-service teacher education program. Her special interest is in literacy education in conditions of linguistic and cultural diversity. She supervises research projects concerned with language and literacy education for EAL and EFL students. Karen’s Australian Research Council-funded studies have looked at pedagogy for adolescents of refugee background, and print and digital literacies in a high-poverty, high-diversity primary school.

Miranda McCallum is a specialist (EAL) classroom teacher and curriculum leader. She spent two years working on the ARC Linkage project with Jenny Miller and Joel Windle, and has written targeted curriculum material combining science content with language goals. She has presented to pre-service students and teachers, and currently works as an Education Consultant assisting schools to implement Peer Support and other leadership programs.

Jonnell Uptin lectures in Literacy and Diversity at University of Sydney and also coordinates programs for international students at University of Wollongong. Jonnell spent her career as a teacher in ESL, music and as a classroom teacher in Australia, Singapore and Thailand. While teaching in Thailand she spent 8 years volunteering in an orphanage for children living with HIV and worked with refugees from Burma. Jonnell visits Northern Thailand regularly, offering educational expertise to programs that assist both Thai and stateless mothers enabling them to keep and care for their children.
At-risk EAL students in mainstream classrooms

Jennifer Hammond & Jennifer Miller

The purpose of this book

This book draws together recent work from a number of researchers and educators who have focused on the successes, needs, and challenges of ‘at-risk’ English as an Additional Language (EAL) students in Australian schools. In broad terms, the category of ‘at-risk’ students includes those from refugee backgrounds, and EAL students who have had minimal or disrupted schooling prior to arriving in Australia.

The book has three main aims. These are:

- To address the needs of at-risk EAL students once they are integrated into mainstream classes. Although many EAL students attend intensive language programs or specialist English centres when they have newly arrived in Australia, our concern in this book is with what happens in mainstream classrooms when at-risk EAL students must engage in the full school curriculum, and when specialist support may be limited or withdrawn.

- To focus on teaching and learning practices within mainstream classes that are likely to support at-risk EAL students to engage fully and equitably in the school curriculum. By focusing on teaching and learning practices, we aim to provide both theoretical and practical insights, ideas and strategies for primary and middle year teachers working with at-risk EAL students in English and other subject areas.

- To address the specific needs of at-risk EAL students by proposing ways in which teachers can better support such students to develop academic language and literacy. In doing so, we aim to complement the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2012) and its accompanying EAL Resource document (ACARA, 2011). Chapters in the book thus complement the Curriculum as a whole, and they complement, in particular, the English Curriculum, with its strands of Language and Literacy.
Classrooms of possibility

The intended readers of this book are mainstream teachers and specialist EAL teachers of both primary and middle years – that is, teachers who are working with at-risk EAL students in their classrooms. However, we hope that the various chapters will also be of value for administrators, teacher educators and academics in the fields of EAL, TESOL and literacy education. While intended primarily for an Australian audience, we believe the theoretical and practical insights provided by the various chapters in the book are likely to be relevant for those working with at-risk EAL students in other English-speaking countries.

Who are at-risk EAL students?

We use the term ‘at risk’ to refer to EAL students from refugee backgrounds, and to those who have experienced minimal or disrupted schooling prior to arriving in Australia. Such students are likely to be ‘at risk’ of educational failure for two reasons:

1. Their experiences of disruption and trauma prior to arrival in Australia may make their transition to life in Australia, including schooling, particularly challenging.

2. Disrupted or limited access to formal schooling prior to arrival in Australia may mean students have significant gaps in educational knowledge and conceptual development. They are also likely to have limited literacy abilities in their mother tongue or additional languages. On commencing school in Australia, students face the challenge, not only of learning English language and literacy, but also of closing substantial gaps between their educational knowledge and that of their Australian peers.

Every year, Australia accepts an ongoing quota of around 13 000 new arrivals of people on special humanitarian visas (from both off-shore and on-shore streams). In 2012–13, the main source countries were Iraq, Afghanistan, Burma, Bhutan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, Canberra, 2013). Other source countries included Iran, Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia, although this list may change from year to year depending on where the greatest humanitarian crisis is at any one time. While it is difficult to obtain accurate data on the precise numbers of students of refugee background in Australian schools, and to gauge the numbers of refugee-background students as a proportion of the more general body of EAL students, we do know that New South Wales and Victoria accept roughly a third each of Australia’s new immigrant arrivals, including refugees, with the remaining third going to other states and territories.

The political upheaval and conflict evident in the major source countries of people arriving on humanitarian visas makes it certain that the majority of refugee students will arrive with interrupted schooling. In addition, particularly in recent years, some students have fled their homes, seen family members killed, or lived for lengthy periods
in dangerous camps and transition sites (including detention). Many have experienced severe trauma before arriving in Australia. On arrival, they may continue to live in precarious circumstances, with little family support or inadequate resources. As one state government EAL Report notes:

Over the past 10 years, the national origin of refugee and humanitarian entrants has changed substantially, resulting in many of the students who are now enrolled having had severely interrupted schooling or little or no experience of school. The lack of literacy in a first or a second language, little or no knowledge or understanding of how school works, and the trauma associated with the refugee experience, means that refugee students are likely to face substantial obstacles to settling, including learning in our schools (DEECD, 2008).

At-risk EAL students, however, are not a homogenous group. They are diverse in ways that other groups of students are diverse. Some students may have had extensive formal schooling prior to being impacted by war. These students may be highly literate in their mother tongues and have a strong basis for ongoing education in Australia. Others may have had access to some schooling in different countries prior to arriving in Australia. Many will be familiar with at least conversational levels of several languages. The use of terms such as ‘refugee’ and ‘at risk’ can therefore be problematic. Such labels tend to position students as victims and to highlight the problems associated with students’ journeys to Australia and their subsequent settlement in Australia. As is evident in the further chapters of this book, students themselves resist such positioning. Their concern is primarily with the future, and most students look forward with energy and enthusiasm to positive participation in school and in the broader Australian society. However, while some of the specific issues and challenges students face will overlap with those faced by other EAL students, at-risk students differ in the trauma often associated with their journey to Australia, and in the ongoing settlement struggle faced by their families or carers. The result is that issues and challenges confronted by students may be magnified.

In this book, we use the term ‘at risk’ to acknowledge the specific challenges students face as they engage in education in their first years in Australia. These challenges include, initially, the cultural and social adjustments necessary for participation at school and within the broader Australian society. They include, most obviously, the learning of English language and literacy, but also the development of educational concepts that may already be very familiar to their peers.

As indicated earlier in this introduction, our particular concern in the book is with students of a refugee background, and with other EAL students who may have experienced minimal or disrupted schooling prior to coming to Australia. For this reason, we use the term EAL rather than English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) in the book. However, we are aware that other groups of students may be considered ‘at risk’ of educational failure at school. EAL students from lower socio-economic
Classrooms of possibility

Educational challenges for students, their teachers and schools

Educational challenges faced by at-risk EAL students who have: limited or no previous education; and little or no literacy experience in their first language (or in any language) are extensive. Specific challenges include: unfamiliarity with school routines and classroom practices; conceptual difficulties and limited prior knowledge to relate to new topics; minimal print literacy; and embarrassment about comparisons with mainstream peers.

There is consistent evidence that the strongest predictor of educational success for students learning in a second (or additional) language is the level of formal education in their first language (Thomas & Collier, 1997). A key element of formal education is literacy development. For students who are not literate in their first language, learning school English, which assumes so much about previous literate practice, will be many times harder than for those who can read and write their first language. For many such students, their classroom may be their first encounter with print materials. As a result, they may have a range of high-level needs related to second language and literacy, conceptual and content knowledge, as well as behavioural, welfare and social needs.

Despite the obstacles they face, with high levels of targeted educational support, many at-risk EAL students can, and do, make remarkable progress and achieve academic success. The students’ own resilience and determination contribute to this success.

The presence of at-risk EAL students in mainstream classes, however, clearly presents additional challenges for schools and for teachers. As indicated, many students bring very different levels of educational knowledge to the classroom, and often have very different language and educational needs from those of mainstream English-speaking students. The particular challenge for schools and for teachers is to address the needs of these students, while at the same time continuing to meet the needs of other groups of students within their classes. Our aim in this book is to provide support for schools and teachers in addressing this challenge.

It is often assumed that numbers of at-risk EAL students in schools are relatively small, and that their education, at least in their first years of schooling in Australia, is primarily...
the responsibility of specialist EAL teachers. Recent changes in education, migration and settlement policies challenge that assumption.

Changes in education policy at both Commonwealth and state levels have significant consequences for schools and teachers. An emphasis on increased school autonomy and financial responsibility, along with changes in funding and responsibility for EAL programs, has meant that schools across Australian states now have increasing responsibility, not only for overall functioning of schools, but also for the organisation and funding of EAL support. One consequence of these changes is that mainstream class and subject teachers are required to assume a greater responsibility than in previous years for the education of all students in their classes, including at-risk EAL students. This responsibility includes support for all students’ language and literacy learning development across the curriculum in mainstream classes.

Changes in migration and settlement policies have also impacted on schools. For many years, refugee background and other at-risk EAL students have tended to be clustered in disadvantaged schools in low socio-economic areas in major cities. However, in recent years, increasing numbers of students and their families have settled in regional areas of Australia. The consequence is that some schools and teachers with little prior experience of working with EAL students are faced with the need to develop programs and teaching strategies that meet the needs of these students. While the inclusion of at-risk EAL students does not impact on every school or on every teacher, the overall consequence of policy changes is that the majority of teachers, at some points in their careers, will work with at-risk students.

Why the focus on pedagogy?

A quick review of the related literature shows that there has (rightly) been considerable prior emphasis on the wellbeing and welfare of at-risk students (Vickers, 2007; Matthews, 2008). To date, however, there has been less emphasis on the kinds of teaching and learning practices that will best support students in their attempts to engage with Australian schooling (Hammond, 2014a; Windle & Miller, 2012). A consistent request from many mainstream teachers is for information and help regarding the kinds of teaching practices that will better support their at-risk EAL students.

Our overall focus in this book is on the nature of classrooms and pedagogical practices that are most likely to provide at-risk EAL students both with access to key educational concepts, and with the kind of support that makes it possible for them to engage with those concepts and make progress at school. We recognise that without the prior provision of a supportive and positive learning environment where students feel safe and valued, little constructive learning is possible. Chapters of this book build on this
recognition, but focus on students’ educational progress and on teaching and learning practices that make educational progress possible.

**Equity in education, language and learning**

An important principle that guided the development of the Australian Curriculum was as stated here:

One important lesson learned from past efforts to overcome inequality is that an alternative curriculum for students regarded as disadvantaged does not treat them equitably. It is better to set the same high expectations for all students and to provide differentiated levels of support to ensure that all students have a fair chance to achieve those expectations. (ACARA, 2009, p. 8)

This statement reflects the views expressed by the authors in this book – that all students, including at-risk EAL students, should have access to a full curriculum. A modified or less challenging curriculum for any student restricts that student’s access to an equitable education. There is consistent evidence to suggest that like other students, EAL students benefit from high-challenge programs. The work of Newmann and his associates (Newmann, Marks & Gamoran, 1996) provides evidence that programs characterised by high intellectual challenge have a positive impact on the educational achievement of all students, including those from diverse social, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and that, as a result of engagement with such programs, the equity gap between students is reduced. Such evidence is consistent with the extensive literature on teacher expectations that indicates all students, including those who are linguistically and culturally diverse, achieve higher educational outcomes when teachers’ expectations are high (Carrasquillo & London, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Schon, 1996).

While most Australian teachers and educators are likely to support the principle that equitable education requires access to a full curriculum, they are also likely to be very aware of the practical challenges associated with its implementation. A consistent complaint of many teachers, including those from upper primary and the middle years of high school, is that they are forced to balance the pressure to ‘get through the curriculum content’, with attempting to develop programs that genuinely aim for engagement with key educational concepts and curriculum knowledge. This pressure is particularly problematic for those trying to implement pedagogical practices that allow time for at-risk EAL students to engage at a deep level with curriculum knowledge. While we recognise the nature of this challenge, we believe the answer lies in increasing the levels of differentiated support (which for some students, may include initial
modification of tasks), rather than in reducing the expectations of what students can achieve. Indeed there is evidence that students themselves support this view. As one student of refugee background commented when discussing her progress in high school:

... the important thing is, are you going forward or are you going back?

In various ways, the chapters of this book address ways in which students can be supported to ‘go forward’ within the context of mainstream classes. In Australia, as elsewhere, Vygotskian theories (see Vygotsky, 1978) regarding the social nature of learning have impacted on our understanding of high-support learning environments. A key element here has been the role of scaffolding in constructing such environments (Gibbons, 2002; 2009a; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). The concept of scaffolding is taken up by a number of authors in this book to articulate how teachers can build-in differential levels of support for their EAL students, including their at-risk EAL students, to enable students to engage with challenging curriculum concepts.

Chapters in this book also make the point that high-support learning environments require teachers to draw on similar theoretical understandings of language and literacy and of learning as they would for other students. Such environments require teachers to draw from a broad repertoire of teaching strategies and tasks as they would for other students. As a number of authors point out, where responses to the needs of at-risk students differ is in the selection and sequencing of tasks and strategies in small learning steps to ensure students have access to targeted support that pushes them to work just beyond their comfort levels. Pedagogical practices that support at-risk students will require a more explicit and targeted language focus, more emphasis on building cultural and background knowledge, and more carefully paced sequences of learning tasks, but at the same time are not different in kind from practices that support many other students.

Support for academic language and literacy development

The most obvious area of need for at-risk EAL students is support for English language and literacy development, and virtually all teachers recognise this priority. Teachers consistently identify support for English language and literacy development as the most pressing need for EAL students, and especially for at-risk EAL students (Watkins et al., 2013). However, many mainstream teachers lack the necessary confidence and knowledge to provide adequate levels of such support (Hammond, 2008; Macken-Horarik, Love & Unsworth, 2011; Jones & Chen, 2012). While some specialist EAL teachers have extensive knowledge of language and language development, the majority of classroom and subject teachers have had limited access to the kind of professional
support that would enable them to develop such knowledge. Most teachers report attempting to address aspects of language and literacy within programs, however, such teaching is generally limited to the more accessible levels of vocabulary or spelling and punctuation. What is missing is more consistent, systematic and in-depth teaching across the curriculum of different levels of language: at the levels of text organisation; cohesion; paragraph organisation; sentence grammar; as well as at levels of vocabulary; punctuation and spelling (Macken-Horarik, Love & Unsworth, 2011; Jones & Chen, 2012).

The knowledge required to provide this level of support in academic language and literacy development is extensive. As Cummins (2000; 2008), Gibbons (2009), and others have pointed out, English academic language and literacy development is considerably more challenging than learning conversational skills in a language. Most EAL students are able to learn basic communication skills in English relatively quickly. Indeed many at-risk EAL students already have communicative proficiency in the several languages they have encountered in refugee camps and other locations during their journey between their own country and Australia. After a year or so of living in Australia and attending school, most appear reasonably fluent in conversational English – they are able to understand classroom directions, buy food in shops, negotiate public transport, engage in conversations and arguments with their peers and engage in sports activities. They have reasonable control of what Cummins (2008) refers to as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS).

The development of BICS represents an important achievement for any student, but it is not enough. As students engage at deeper levels with curriculum knowledge across the years of primary school and into secondary, they need to develop increasing control of academic language and literacy. In the terms of Cummins (2008), they need to develop control of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). This involves what Gibbons (2009a) refers to as ‘literate talk’, as well as control of academic literacy in discipline-specific areas. That is, students need to develop control of specific registers as well as key genres within subject areas; they need to engage with subject-specific ways of talking about educational concepts; they need to develop understandings of written genres, with their distinctive rhetorical structures and grammatical patterns, and they need to engage with a range of multimodal texts. As students work their way through school they are required to read texts where information and arguments are organised in ways that differ from spoken language (whether that be everyday or literate talk), and they need insights into the increasingly abstract and metaphorical language of academic written texts, and into ways in which language and literacy differ across different curriculum areas (Gibbons, 2002; 2009; Macken-Horarik, Love & Unsworth, 2011; Jones & Chen, 2012). Most students require support to develop understandings of across-the-curriculum academic language and literacy. For at-risk EAL students who have had little prior access to schooling, including literacy development in their mother tongue, the task is that much greater (Miller, Mitchell & Brown, 2005; Windle & Miller, 2012).
The demands of language and literacy development across the curriculum have been acknowledged in the Australian Curriculum. While these demands are addressed most explicitly in the subject English through the Language and Literacy strands (ACARA, 2011), the importance of supporting language and literacy more broadly is also recognised in curriculum documents for other subjects. However, while curriculum documents from subjects other than English acknowledge the importance of language across the curriculum, they provide little explicit support for teachers in how to do this (Hammond, 2012). The chapters in this book thus complement the Australian Curriculum by contributing to understandings of ways in which the teaching of academic language and literacy can be integrated with the teaching of key concepts across the curriculum. They also provide insights into how the targeted efforts of schools and teachers can assist at-risk students to achieve their educational potential.

Contributors to this book

Following this introductory chapter, Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the nature, experiences and voices of at-risk EAL students, especially those from refugee backgrounds. In Chapter 2, Maya Cranitch draws on her many years of experience in teaching and research with students from a refugee background, both internationally and in Australia, to provide insights into their lives and educational experiences prior to arrival in Australia. Her chapter addresses the complexity and limitations of education in a resource-poor context where there are few trained teachers, and no clearly articulated curriculum. It also provides insights into the nature and extent of cultural, social, educational and linguistic adjustment required of students when they begin school in Australia. In Chapter 3, Jonnell Uptin addresses the experiences of students at school in Australia. She highlights the diversity of backgrounds of at-risk EAL students, and the nature of the students’ positive energy and agency in negotiating their own places in Australian schools. The chapter also highlights the role of schools in promoting inclusion for at-risk EAL students, and ways in which teachers can learn from, and respond to, their students. Both chapters respond in different ways to common requests from teachers for more information about the background and experiences of their at-risk EAL students. By contributing to a better understanding of students, and of what students bring with them to school, the chapters aim to help teachers work effectively in their classes with at-risk EAL students.

The remaining chapters of the book, Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7, all address pedagogical practices that are likely to support at-risk EAL students in various ways. In Chapter 4, Jacqueline Coleman draws on her research in non-metropolitan primary schools into the nature of mainstream teachers’ responses to their at-risk EAL students. Since teachers who participated in the research had had little prior experience of EAL education, it was