



An Interview with Jannie van Hees

Carol Watts

Could you talk us through your journey and the pathway towards profiling ESOL in New Zealand schools.

My family immigrated to New Zealand from the Netherlands when I was six weeks old. We sailed out through the Suez to New Zealand, so I suppose even at that early age I was exposed to many languages. I grew up in a Dutch-speaking family where my parents used Dutch with us all the time. Mama could have used English with us once we arrived in New Zealand, as she had studied English in the Netherlands to a high level - not Papa though. He had little to no English on arrival here, so you can understand that Dutch was their chosen family language. So my first language was Dutch and I have no recollection of gradually transitioning to speaking English ... but I guess it must have been when I was two or three years old.

Our gradual initial integration to New Zealand's community was largely through the church. That must have been the beginning of my journey into English, but in most part at home, Dutch was the family language, at least as used by Mama and Papa. As with all children who are the new immigrant children group, we wanted to quickly use the language of our peers – research supports this tendency. Peer has a strong influence over what language the immigrant children choose to use. What most often happens at home is that parents speak in their strongest language but the children begin to use more and more English. My lived experience as a child was as a dual language/dual cultural person. I had a strong awareness that we did things that were not 'the norm' ... me trying to figure out 'the norm' ... and at times, also trying to figure out how possibly my parents could become the same as someone else's because I didn't think they were. That remains a deep well and river inside me – who I am as a New Zealander who is Dutch across generations and time. Where you end up in one's life journey is influenced hugely by the wiring that has occurred in the early years as a child. It is who you are. If I track across my schooling, I now realise I operated in two separate worlds – my family-home world and my outside family-home world.

When I left school, my mind was in the sciences as a career and that was a significant part of my life for the next 3-4 years before my big OE back to my land of origin. Like my older siblings, I had this urge to go back to the Netherlands so I began my travels and stayed away for nearly four years and experienced many, many cross-cultural environments. On arriving back in New Zealand, I had a career 'hiccup': I didn't want to continue to work in science. I woke up one day and decided I wanted to be in education. This was an unexpected turn of mind and direction. So choosing to become a teacher was a 'surprise' even to myself ... but there it was. I was accepted into the graduate course at the Auckland College of Education but as it turned out, what was to be one year training became two when ACE management decided my science qualification was not equivalent to a degree and that I couldn't graduate. I ended up doing two years of training, managing to persuade management that I be allowed to shape my own second year programme. That was unheard of then ... and now. I was able to follow my own research interests, one of which was to deep-dive into how children learn to read, and to follow my own deep interest in language learning and literacy acquisition.

'How do children learn language?' Very early on, this question really mattered to me. My absorption in this critical question included on-going reflection about our family situation and the variance there was/is across the siblings in terms of vocabulary knowledge, grammatical complexity, confidence, and the ability to read and write. I'm still not sure I've figured this variance out – variance in English and Dutch. Why have three children/adults in our family struggled both in Dutch and in English, even though they are highly intelligent people. Two of us have just had a seamless acquisition. I'm the one in the family who has stubbornly held on to my Dutch – speaking and literacy, and am the strongest bilingual, biliterate, bifluent Dutch-English member of our family. Our family's language learning variance sits deeply inside me and is perhaps why I'm so interested in those who struggle with language, whatever that reason - whether it's because there's some kind of cognitive struggle going on or whether it's because there's

language that's somehow not aligning, or is it just this linguistic element of your multi-intelligences that isn't as strong in some as it is in others? It really does preoccupy my thinking in the language learning space, as the consequences of less or more strength in language capabilities is so widely affecting.

The link between how much vocabulary a person knows and can use, and the extent of a person's reading, are fascinating threads that weave through my grappings as to how people learn language and why some people don't learn language as easily or as well, or hold on or manage the complexities of language, as well as others. For some, becoming language-strong is seemingly seamless and easy; for some, the journey is less smooth more struggle. When training RTLBs to become bilingual assessors, I share our family's language complexities. One major goal of bilingual assessments is to open up the capabilities of the child or young person brought to the attention of the BAS assessor ... to gather more informed insights into where learning and language hiccups converge and diverge, and why, and what to do to support the capabilities that become evident alongside opening up new possibilities to 'become' and cope where struggles lie. This is a complex space to be in but when done well, is liberating and freeing ... for student and their family, and for educators involved with them.

I don't know if I had any really strong cultural dimension to my teaching in my first year, but I was strongly socially-orientated in my teaching and general way of life. In that first year, and subsequently, I tried to involve my students in the school's local community – for example, regular visits to a local elderly-care community, and a 'special' school for children with physical and cognitive challenges. To me, understanding others and honouring them as capable and contributory, was to the fore of this orientation of mine. Right from the start in my teaching, how to provide optimal language-learning for children was important to keep to the fore. It was my pedagogical core point of departure. The next two years of my teaching career I spent at Ellerslie Primary where I honed the craft of being a teacher and again grappled with the art and craft of nudging and nurturing learning, and with language variance – some of my students fully at ease with the language of learning, and learning itself, and others just scraping along, or even hugely struggling. By then, at the forefront of my thinking and trialing, was not only growing learners' oral language and vocabulary capabilities, but also two 'stand out' questions: "Why is reading a struggle for some?" "Why is writing a struggle for some?"

With three years of teaching under my belt, I applied for Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) and

was assigned to Atiu - a small island in the southern group of islands of the Cook Islands. That was a really significant growth time for me personally and professionally. I was appointed as a Science/English teacher in the secondary area of the 'all in one' school of Atiu, but we had an amazing principal, Jim Peters, and he quickly saw my strengths in primary education and how great the pedagogical needs were in the primary school. I spent a large proportion of my time developing the curriculum and pedagogy in the bilingual setting of Atiu Primary School. We developed a transition bilingual pedagogical framework from Grade 1 to Grade 6, with the children starting off fully in Atiuian to build their literacy in the strongest spoken language - Atiuian - then gradually transitioning into English across the subsequent years to Year 6 where learning was 80% in English, and 20% in Atiuian. This was in preparation for 100% learning in English at secondary level. Our emphasis was learning language as we learn across the curriculum. It was about using the languages of English and Atiuian to learn the learning. I guess a lot of it was experimental in nature, helping teachers to come to grips with the pedagogy of what it means to use language as the means for learning, not the other way around – learn language then learn.

There were many innovative opportunities for me as I helped write the curriculum, write resources and work side-by-side with teachers endeavouring to implement bilingual and effective learning pedagogy. I experimented with my innovative ideas ... and that was amazingly satisfying, educationally and scientifically speaking. My personal growth by spending two years living on Atiu was immense. In the doings of a tiny microcosm island community you gain deep perceptions about what is culture and what is language. How does one ever fully understand when you're not of 'them'? One's blueprint of knowing is 'in the genes', constructed though one's heritage and the cultural environment in which one grows up.

Returning to New Zealand, I took a position as teacher at Mangere Intermediate - a very diverse school culturally and linguistically. Again, language and language learning as a means for learning was at the forefront of my pedagogy. I became the science specialist and was able to focus on languaging science across the classes in our syndicate. I then applied for a position at Otahuhu College as a Language Support Coordinator. The next four and a half years of my teaching was dedicated to developing language learning and support programmes for students attending this very culturally, linguistically diverse school. I was given room to craft programmes, perspectives on how could you get language learning to occur for all across

subject areas, and support a wide variety of cultural groups of students to be a positive presence in the school. My time there was a rewarding, experimental and impacting period in my teaching career as was my time in the Quzhou Province, China, when I joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade following this. I experienced and learned so much about human strength of mind and action, positive and negative, during this time in China. It underlined my 'never-take-for-granted' respect for the freedom we have and live in New Zealand.

Back in NZ, the position of New Settlers and Multi-Cultural Education Coordinator was offered to me. This was a tremendous opportunity to innovate and develop a vision around ideas focused on cultural and linguistic inclusion and celebration of diversity, but it was also an opportunity to really explore, develop and resource around bilingualism and cultural competency, and language acquisition. In the initial years of my being the coordinator, our team of culturally and linguistically diverse educators worked tirelessly to increase educators' cultural competencies. I knew it was important that our team reflected the diversity it espoused. We were forerunning in that sense - proactive and active to grow cultural competencies and challenge cultural assumptions. I developed, wrote or co-wrote, and produced many bilingual resources – sometimes in a wide range of languages. It was also the time when I wanted as much as we could to have schools see that it wasn't just a quick-fix to support learners' language acquisition and develop cultural competency as a community - that it needed a whole school, holistic, multi-faceted approach. Hence, I developed guidelines for secondary and primary schools to effectively cater for their cultural and linguistically diverse learners – how to effectively transition new arrivals to be able to learn, and learn well. It was the beginnings of my thinking, "How can I deliver these understandings and capabilities in a deeper way?" "How to provide professional learning opportunities that develop educators' deeper professional knowledge?"

How did you become interested in second language students?

With some insights into my diverse background, bilingualism and a deep interest in languages, cultures and multi-culturalism developed, you will realise that language learning seems 'a natural fit' interest area - and it is. I think it was implicitly triggered right from the time I was born. I lived language learning bilingually, and I guess, from at least my teenage years onwards, this bilingual-bicultural reality of mine deepened and became more fascinating and passionate.

As I've already mentioned, I became fascinated about how a person learns; how they learn language and how some, seemingly easily, becoming strongly literate is for some, and yet not for others. I pondered about why, when there was struggle, intervention worked for some, but for many was ineffective, even damaging self-esteem. I was fascinated why seemingly same environmental conditions could affect people's language journeys so differently. I delved deeply into 'multi-intelligences' theory and practices, and became fascinated about the growing evidence from brain science about the inextricable link between available and participatory language and the meshing of brain pathways.

Also at this point, I became immersed in socio-cultural perspectives on language learning – a 'natural fit' for me. I pursued Systemic Functional Linguistics, frequently travelling to Australia to learn and be involved in the SFL community of researchers and practitioners. At the time I began on this journey, I was a lone NZer exploring Hallidayan thinking and grammatical frameworks. This learning underpins all my work.

Where I am now is the cumulated layers of my learnings over time, interweaving to form the whariki of my knowledge, perceptions and thinking – theoretical, research-based and practical. What I now house inside my brain and body is what I've become and is a blessing indeed. One is never there, and so my work in schools continues. This is a privilege. Over and over I learn from being involved with teachers and learners, whanau and educational leaders.

What is one achievement you hold especially close to your heart?

So many standouts. Life's a journey and my professional life has been a journey. In the early stages of being a professional leader, I embraced the opportunities available to me to lead the way, to be a driving force and influencer in consciousness-raising about language-learning students, new learners of English and the need for effective funding. Hand-in-hand with these opportunities through the School Support Services position I then held, Lily Lee was the forerunner at the Ministry of Education in the 1990s. She was pivotal in leading the way for considered ESOL funding, developing ways to assess learners' eligibility for funding, and was instrumental in opening doors for me to take initiatives and also lead the way in the space of ESOL and formal education. It was her vision, coinciding with my arrival into the SSS, that broke new ground in the fields of ESOL and multicultural-multilinguistic pedagogy.

Other key professional leaders and influencers were Helen Nicholls and Don McKinnon. At different time periods, both were highly dedicated at ministry level to drive the opening-up space of ESOL-ness in terms of the ministry and in terms of schools putting a lens on the new reality we were facing – increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of learners and their families in our schools.

What is now known as the Bilingual Assessment Service gives me a great deal of professional satisfaction. Its beginning was in the 1990s when I successfully applied for an ANZAC Fellowship and spent three months in Australia exploring bilingual assessments. I came back and wasn't really satisfied that I'd come back with 'answers' immediately usable, but the fellowship had afforded me much learning, many strong professional connections, and shaped and cemented my thinking about assessment and learners of English, multiculturalism and systemic functional linguistics.

On return, my ANZAC learning and thinking led me to develop and trial what has now become the bilingual assessment processes and resources. At this time, I was flying solo in making available a more informed and insightful gathering of information about bilingual learners capabilities generally and in language. Over at least five years of 'solo flying', bilingual assessment as part of my professional brief, Helen Nicholls, who had been part of our NSME team but now in a position with the Ministry of Education ESOL team, saw that I could no longer continue to handle on my own the number of bilingual assessments requests and needs.

My vision was that bilingual assessments would be available for all new learners of English; that we might establish a one-stop transition education centre where new arrival students and their families into New Zealand could be welcomed, offered support and information, and where, at our end, we could gather a full educational, linguistic and cultural profile of a young person before they enter their chosen school or ECE centre for their child/ren. Somewhat regrettably, this has not come to fruition, and is unlikely to ever become. Perhaps the only place where such an ideal is happening is at the Mangere Refugee Centre where new intake refugees (based on our refugee quota system) are supported to transition into New Zealand before going out to places across New Zealand to establish their new lives here.

Another area of work and development that has given me extreme satisfaction and joy, is the English Language Assistant Professional Development Programme – 2003-2018. Early on as NZME Coordinator, it became evident to me that the people who were often supporting English language learners

were untrained paraprofessionals. I put forward this concern to the Ministry of Education, with a proposal that I develop a training programme for teacher-aides to become trained English Language Assistants. In 2002, I was given the green light to develop a programme. Over one year, working with Jill Evans, DP at Mayfield Primary School at the time, we shaped up what has proven to be a leading edge training programme for teacher-aides to become knowledgeable and effective paraprofessional practitioners. The programme has been twice researched, and over the years 2003 to 2018, has been available across New Zealand in southern and northern regions, and graduated over 1,800 trained English language assistants.

In the early 2000s, I was a single voice, or so it felt, foregrounding the importance of oral language, especially for and with children, and with pedagogy that supported the growth of learners' oral language capability. Oral language pedagogy has now become 'hot topic'. It continues to be a major part of my work and involvement with families, learners and teachers. The Home-School Partnership professional development programme was an early development in this space. This was 'new work' at the time and its impact in school communities was significant. The model I developed was pioneering – training whanau champions from different ethnic groups in the school community to become message-givers to their community - Tongans to Tongans in Tongan, etc. A strong element in the sessions for families was the why and how of quality spoken language by whanau together and with their children.

A last mention was the development and writing of the English Language Learning Progressions (ELLP), which is now embedded into the ESOL funding process and procedures nationwide. For stable implementation to occur, there needed to be 'buy in' by teachers and school management personnel, and by experts in the ESOL field of research and development. It came to pass there was consensus that a thoughtfully, linguistically-sound set of criteria, supported by rubric and exemplars, was needed. Helen Nicholls and I were approached to do this work. It took a year of intense work to write and finalise what is essentially the current English Language Learning Progressions. Its development was a major piece of work and one that most ELLP users at this time would have little inkling about. ELLP processes and procedures have been fine-tuned over time, under the guidance of Dr Helen Nicholls in initial stages, and now, Tjitske Hunter, Senior Advisor ESOL, Migrant, Refugee and International Education, and are now integral to the ESOL funding mechanism by MOE.

What do you see as the major issues facing teachers of English Language Learners?

Many come to mind, including not enough time given over or available for teachers to develop, prepare and carefully scaffold learning delivery and learning resources. In the mix is the complex needs of so many learners, and the increasing social influences that are constraining optimal language-learning time, talking-time and quality books in the lives of toddlers. Digital devices are too frequently ‘stealing’ potential conversational space in families – families engrossed in ‘busyness’ and losing sight of the most valuable gift they can give to their children – their time, attention, and gifting knowledge and language. Being engaged and involved with their children is any whanau’s major responsibility and joy.

A major issue in the ESOL context and in the educational space generally is how to establish dialogic classrooms, where conversation, talking learning together – learners and teacher, in small groups, and in scaffolded ways - is core to what goes on hour-by-hour, day-by-day. We know that language acquisition is enhanced when it’s face-to-face. If we take that as a general principle, which also includes the importance of talk-accompanied interactions with others, then we surely realise that digital devices, although rich potential sources of learning beyond children’s immediate, are no substitute for real and actual, for engaging with people and being ‘in the natural world’.

Are you optimistic about the future of ESOL’s place in New Zealand education and why?

Yes and no. I think we’ve stood still a while in the nitty-gritty of classroom practice. It’s a while since deliberate in-school PLD has been available in the form that it did in the 1990s and early 2000s when I was privileged to be funded by MOE to deliver what was then called NESB (non-English speaking background) professional development learning and pedagogy. It gave teachers and schools in-depth training and support around effectiveness with new learners of English, new arrivals into NZ, and provided them with a wide and varied range of approaches and resources – for new learners and English language learners either born or here a while in NZ,

Unfortunately, with national standards dominating almost a decade of education, ‘seen to be shifting data’ has become so deeply embedded that we’ve perhaps lost sight of what’s core to educational practice – namely, superbly scaffolded learning steps, under optimising conditions, with the lens strongly on languaging the learning. The tools we are using to measure learners’ uptake and capability need a

review. For example, what is being used to measure learners’ spoken language comprehension and expression is not informing at a fine-detailed level. We can be fine-tuned. I know how. Yes, it may take a little more time and require some training, but surely we have an obligation to use tools and interpret data that showcases what really matters.

As I see it, a big gap exists in the language acquisition knowledge and practices of newly graduated teachers. While on the one hand, big gaps as a new graduate comes with the territory, it is more than that. We could do much better in ensuring graduating trainees are linguistically and language learning informed to quite some depth – not only theoretically, but importantly, practically. With this must come a healthy critical eye on what is ‘apparently worthwhile using and doing’, and what actually is. The powerhouse learning areas of science, history and geography, particularly in the primary school, need attention and time. Languaging the learning in these rewarding areas of knowledge, learning and exploration, could potentially bring contexts meaningful and relevant to primary school learners. What better!

In my view, a revamp of how, what and why we deliver learning in Years 9-11 especially, is overdue and urgent. Many English language learners are being inadequately provided for because the system, processes and structure often dictate the need and potential to deep-dive in subject areas underpinned by best practice pedagogy. Hurrying through is vastly different to ‘well-timed learning steps’. A revamp is no easy task, nor has easy or simple answers, but we keep on going in the piecemeal way secondary schooling is now dominantly provided. It is a societal loss or rather, to the detriment of far too many learners who struggle with the language of learning, and learning in bite-size sectioning of a typical school day.

Nationwide vocabulary teaching and learning professional development – primary and secondary would go a long way to potentially closing the comprehension and expressive gap that exists for far too many learners, especially those in low-socio economic communities and families.

What are you doing currently that excites you or inspires you?

All my involvement in education continues to excite me because I can’t think of anything more satisfying than influencing joy in learning, and a sense of ‘Yes I can’ and ‘Yes, I know’ exhibited by learners. A particularly exciting development I am involved in is the Genomics Project happening in Manaiaakalani COL. This COL brings together eleven schools – ten primary schools and one secondary school. Over the

last 4-5 months, an initiative led by Dr Thierry Lints, Auckland University Medical School, has reached a point where funding was successfully procured from South Sci allowing for the purchase of mini DNA analysis kits, housed at Tamaki College. This project is in itself exciting, but especially so when it is being piloted with students who would otherwise be unlikely to be involved with university scientists and learn to analyse DNA structures of plants and animals in the Omaru waterway that runs through Glen Innes and Pt England to the foreshore of the coastal area of this rohe. Growing understandings and being able to showcase their knowledge, wonderings and insights into genes and gene science, is truly inspiring. Given my own science background, I simply love this amazing journey of learning that will surely open up minds and future possibilities for so many learners.

Daring to 'dive' in to setting up my own company is scary and inspiring. Linguaging Minds Limited has taken me on a learning curve I could never have predicted a year ago yet has given me a freedom that I've yet to fully appreciate but I am beginning to see it as refreshing. If you know anything about me, you'll know I'm excited, inspired by and deeply passionate about spoken language as the brain powerhouse, and equally passionate about vocabulary being the enabler of meaning-making. This might be a poignant place to end. Linguaging minds through languaging is at the heart of being human.



Dr Jannie van Hees is a researcher, project director, trainer and facilitator with over 30 years of experience in the field of language development in Aotearoa New Zealand. Socio-linguistic-cultural theory and practice has shaped her strong interest in addressing the on-entry and persistent language gaps of many learners attending low socio-economic schools, and learners who are learning in and through English as an additional language. Her newly-established consultancy, Linguaging Minds Ltd, is strongly oriented towards languaging learning to enable learners as effective communicators.

She has developed and been responsible for a number of Ministry of Education national professional development programmes, including The Home-School Partnership Programme, English Language Assistants' Professional Development Programme, and Bi-lingual Assessments and Training. She was awarded an NZCER Beeby Fellowship in 2005, resulting in her 2007 book, "Expanding oral language in the classroom" (NZCER). Her most recent co-authored publication, 'What every primary teacher should know about vocabulary' (van Hees, J. & Nation, P. 2017. NZCER), captures the accumulated expertise in vocabulary teaching and learning of two highly regarded researcher educators.

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Interviewer Profile:

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