



# Identifying the Learning Development of Students Who Are Refugees

**Donna Tangen**

*Queensland University of Technology, Australia*

**S**tudents who are refugees need understanding and support to settle successfully into mainstream Australian classrooms. Teachers not aware of students' prior learning and the process of second language acquisition may have difficulty providing the most appropriate learning environments to meet these students' needs. This study found that, with no coordination of information on students' learning backgrounds nor of their learning needs and development, students were in danger of being identified as at-risk of having a learning disability, with little support to substantiate such claims.

■ **KEYWORDS:** learning needs, refugee, information sharing

Australia has long accepted refugees for resettlement, including enrolling children in Australian schools. Many of these children have come from traumatic environments and need time to adjust to their new home, new culture and, in many instances, a new language. The current study focused on a small group of students who are refugees from Burma, and explored how teachers are approaching the teaching/learning of these children in a mainstream Australian classroom.

Refugees are identified as people who have been forced to leave their country due to a fear of persecution because of their race, religion, ethnicity or political beliefs (Refugee Council of Australia, 2007). As would be expected, refugees arrive in Australia with a range of potential risk factors including the trauma of war, the trauma of being forcibly separated from family members, the stress of resettlement, unemployment and subsequent financial difficulties, social isolation and racial discrimination. In spite of these distressing situations, Derluyn, Broekaert & Schuyten (2008) found little differences in prevalence of emotional and behavioural problems between schoolchildren who were refugees and those who were not. However, Derluyn et al. did suggest that students who are refugees may feel less comfortable reporting anxiety because they have been taught to keep emotional and behavioural problems to themselves, and this fact may have a bearing on the number of

*Address for correspondence:* Donna Tangen, Queensland University of Technology, Victoria Park Road, Kelvin Grove QLD 4059, Australia. E-mail: d.tangen@qut.edu.au

incidents reported. Hjern, Angel and Jeppsson (1998) reported that 46% of students who were refugees were rated as having poor mental health five months after resettlement in Sweden, and 44% were rated as having poor mental health 13 months later. A common difficulty for many children who are refugees is learning English quickly so they can participate successfully in Australian schools.

Students with English as a second language (ESL) have unique learning characteristics not shared by native English speakers, such as cultural, language, cognitive and learning barriers to overcome. In his seminal work, Cummins (1980, 1991) suggested that while students who have ESL may learn to speak conversational English within the first two years of their arrival, it may take up to seven years for them to become proficient in academic English. In other words, being able to speak English conversationally is not the same as reading and writing English for schoolwork. It is well recorded that oral language skills are not good predictors of students' mastery of academic skills such as reading (Cummins, 1980; Geva, Yahgoub-Zadeh & Schuster, 2000; Limbos & Geva, 2001). Teachers unaware of the process of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) may expect students to complete the same level of schoolwork as their native English-speaking peers, and may become frustrated about the lack of progress in students' work and about their own lack of knowledge about how to help these students succeed. Unaware of the underlying difficulties of learning through SLA, teachers may focus on the product of students' work (correct spelling, grammar mistakes, reading pronunciation) rather than on the process of learning (Meyer, 2000; Nunan, 1999).

These complexities in learning are compounded when students who have ESL are also refugees. Students who are refugees have the added burden of arriving from homelands fraught with political and social turmoil; many have witnessed or have been the victims of trauma. Such trauma may manifest as aberrant behaviours. Therefore, it is important that teachers be given adequate background information on students who are refugees in order provide them with appropriate learning support. Providing such information, though, can be problematic as refugees may arrive in Australia with little documentation or be too traumatised to speak about their past experiences (NSW Refugee Health Service, 2005). Very often, students who are refugees are placed in classrooms alongside ESL students without taking into consideration that not all ESL students have the same needs. Indeed, Sidhu and Taylor (2007) suggested that students who are refugees have significantly different learning needs. It is important, then, to distinguish behaviours typically associated with SLA from those typically associated with students who have learning difficulties and those that may be presented by a student who is a refugee (Bender, 2008; McKay, 2008) As can be seen from Table 1 (adapted by Bender, 2008), some behaviours — such as inattentiveness, withdrawal or anxiety/frustration — overlap between the three domains. These overlapping behaviours compound the difficulty teachers may have in determining the essential cause for concern with learning/behaviour and, therefore, the appropriate actions to take to effectively support students who are refugees. There has been a dearth of research in Australian schools exploring the daily classroom interactions of students who are refugees and how these interactions may affect their learning.

The current study focused on a group of primary school students who, with their families, are refugees from Burma. These people are Karen, the largest ethnic minor-

**TABLE 1**

**Comparison of Behaviours**

Behaviours Associated with:	Learning Difficulties	Second Language Acquisition	Refugee
	Overactivity, distractibility, aggression, anxiety, reading miscues, fluency deficits, comprehension needs, problem with maths reasoning, vocabulary deficits, falling below expected age/grade norms, long- and short-term memory deficits	Non-verbal/silent period, difficulty using English vocabulary, systematic development of English, may appear inattentive, may exhibit frustration/withdrawal from cultural challenges, may have problems responding in English, demonstrates consistent progress in appropriate use of English, frequent grammar errors, may require longer 'wait' time in responding to questions or statements	Tendency to internalise problems, have difficulty making friends outside their first language/culture, may exhibit fear/anxiety, may have poor motivation to learn, may have poor nutrition, health problems, may have an unstable home life

ity group in Burma. Life in their homeland is one of constant threat and exploitation by the Burmese military; the Karen may face arbitrary detention, torture and death threats. To escape such hardships, 200,000 refugees have reportedly escaped to Thailand, where they live in several camps along the Burmese–Thailand border. In the more established camps, schools have been set up where students can study Karen, Burmese, English and Thai, as well as chemistry, physics, maths, geography and history. However, schools are sparse, with few resources and/or facilities. Refugee camps closest to the Burmese borders are under constant threat of raids by the Burmese military. Some camps are supported by the United Nations through donations of food, clothing and base materials for building homes (Thompson, 2009). In relation to the current study, there were no official records on the students from Burma to document what schooling they had before coming to Australia, or to throw light on their personal circumstances as refugees in Thailand. But anecdotal information from parent–teacher interviews and from the students would indicate that they lived in similar circumstances to those described above before coming to Australia.

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■ **Methodology**

Design

A case study approach was taken for this research in order to explore the various factors associated with teaching in mainstream classrooms students who are refugees. It is believed that such an approach provides evidence that is typical for students and teachers in similar circumstances, and so provides insights into events that constitute this kind of teaching/learning situation (Lichtman, 2006). A case study provides unique material and evidence for further study in this area. Data for the current case study were gathered through direct observations and interviews. They were then coded according to patterns of observed behaviour, and against

suggested behaviour described by others (ESL teacher, mainstream teacher, parents/caregivers) in order to develop some explanation of teaching/learning for the three students in the study.

## Procedure

### The School

The P-7 primary school is located in South-East Queensland, Australia. There are approximately 600 students enrolled; 100 of these are ESL from a range of backgrounds including new arrivals from Burma, the Sudan, India, China and Papua New Guinea. There is one full-time ESL teacher on site and one part-time ESL teacher. All students in Grade 3 and above receive three 1-hour ESL sessions per week at the school. The ESL unit uses the 'Thrass' series to promote reading and writing. The full-time ESL teacher believed that over half the students in the ESL unit have special learning needs; however, no ascertainment procedures or formal testing had been carried out to confirm these suspicions.

### The Students

The current paper will focus on three of these Grade 6 students who were described by the ESL teacher as at-risk and in need of extra support. The three students — 1 girl (Nanda) and 2 boys (Zayar and Ohnmar) — and their families are now settled in the school district and will continue to attend this primary school and the local high school. The average (approximate) age of the students is 11.6 years. (Note that with so little formal background information, students who are refugees may have their age calculated from their date of arrival in Australia, or very often from 1 January of the year of their arrival). Each of the three students in the case study spoke Karen and Burmese fluently at age level, Thai less fluently, and English least fluently of their languages. Each had some reading and writing skills in Burmese and had begun to read and write in English. Two other students, Lucy and Adam, are included as classmates who interacted with Nanda, Zayar and Ohnmar during lessons, although these two students are not the focus of the study. Lucy is also from Burma and Adam is a native English-speaking Australian.

### The Methods of Data Collection

There were three methods of data collection for this study: a semi-structured interview with the full-time ESL teacher at the beginning of term 1 in 2008, parent-teacher interviews at the end of term 1 in 2008, and classroom observations in term 2 of 2008. The semi-structured interview with the ESL teacher asked three main questions: (1) 'Describe how student learning is tracked?' (2) 'What particular programming is provided for these students?' (3) 'Are there any students who are refugees who may have other learning needs?' The parent-teacher interviews were not structured but occurred naturally as the need for them arose. Each of the interviews was attended by an interpreter. Observations were conducted at two different times, one month apart. The protocol for observations included recording the interactions of the three students with other students during classtime and in the playground, and recording interactions between the students and their teachers based on the ESL teachers' descriptions of the students, the classroom teachers' descriptions of the students in the parent-teacher interviews, and the behaviours described in the literature for students who are refugees. Possible behaviours

include mimicking the behaviour of classmates, shyness, inattentiveness, and working individually or with only one other partner, especially if that partner speaks the same home language (NSW Refugee Health Service, 2005).

## ■ Results

### ESL Teacher Report

At the time of the study, the ESL teacher reported that she did not know what the students were learning in the general classroom and believed that the general classroom teachers did not know what the students were learning in the ESL unit at the school. The ESL teachers did not use an ESL bandscale to track students' progress through different levels of second language acquisition. The NLLIA ESL bandscales (McKay, 2008), for example, describe learners' English language development and progress to aid in promoting valid assessment and reporting, as well as to promote professional understanding of the SLA of learners in mainstream classrooms. The three students in this case study also attended a special ESL school program every Monday at another local school. At the time of this study, the special Monday ESL program served 31 students from 18 different schools in the area. The teachers of the special program had contact with neither the ESL teacher nor the general classroom teacher of the three students in this study.

The ESL teacher identified Nanda (female) as needing extra support in all areas, particularly in reading. She had assessed Nanda's reading as being at Grade 1 level, and described her as having made the least progress in her studies in the year she had been at the school. Nanda had no English background before coming to the school. Zayar (male) was identified by the ESL teacher as having developed a good grasp of oral English but with poor reading and writing skills in English. Zayar was tested to be at a Grade 1 level of reading. Zayar had a limited English language instruction background (spoken) before coming to the school. Ohnmar (male) was identified by the ESL teacher as bright and quick at mathematics. She felt that Ohnmar was progressing well in his schoolwork and tested him as reading at a Grade 3 level. Ohnmar had no English background before coming to the school. As indicated above, none of the students' progress was tracked against an ESL bandscale because this measure is not used at the school.

### Parent-Teacher Interviews

#### **Nanda**

Nanda's grandfather attended the interview with an interpreter. It was revealed in the interview that Nanda's mother had died when the children were very young. (Nanda's younger brother attended the school in Grade 5.) The father worked full-time so the grandparents were caregivers for the children while the father was at work. The grandfather described how, while living in the refugee camp in Thailand, he had saved his money so that he could bring his family to Australia and give his grandchildren a good education. The teacher said that Nanda was making excellent gains since the beginning of term, especially in mathematics. She was scoring high in multiplication and division, but was struggling with addition and subtraction. The teacher described how Nanda showed great courage in deliv-

ering a class presentation on her own. For the presentation, she wrote her own script and read it to the class. Nanda also completed a proofreading test, as did the whole class, in which they had to identify words incorrectly used and incorrectly spelled. Nanda completed the tasks successfully, scoring higher than many of the native English speakers in the class.

### **Zayar**

Zayar's mother attended the parent-teacher interview. The mother spoke good English and did not need to use the interpreter. The teacher described Zayar as an active boy with an enthusiastic attitude. Maths was his strength. The mother informed the teacher that she made Zayar practice his multiplication tables at home before he was allowed to watch TV or use the computer. The teacher said that Zayar had trouble with his proofreading test, which indicated to the teacher that Zayar was struggling with his reading; his oral English was progressing, but not his reading and writing. The teacher described how Zayar was popular with all the students, but sometimes he would stop his playing to sit and speak Karen with his friends from Burma. Zayar's explanation, according to the teacher, was that he did not want to forget his first language.

### **Ohnmar**

Ohnmar's father, mother and little sister attended the parent-teacher interview. Both parents spoke some English, the father more than the mother. The teacher said that Ohnmar tried hard to keep up with the other students in maths, but wanted to use his calculator all the time. The teacher wants him to do the calculations in his head. When he does not understand something, Ohnmar will ask either the teacher or his peers what to do. Once he understands, then he has no trouble getting down to work. The teacher said that Ohnmar was doing well in his homework, was good at spelling and completed his schoolwork neatly. For journal writing, the teacher scribes for him and then Ohnmar copies the text into his book and reads it back to the teacher. Ohnmar excels in art and sports, and was described as having a good attitude towards school. The teacher said that Ohnmar is willing to speak English but needs more practice at reading and writing in English.

## Classroom Observations

### **Music Class**

All three students in the case study were in the same class for music, as were Lucy, who is also from Burma, and Adam, a native English-speaking Australian boy. Nanda followed Lucy's lead when shown how to play the guitar. There was very little talking between the two girls, and neither sang along with the rest of the class while the teacher played the guitar. Zayar sat with his friend, Adam, helping Adam to find the correct chords on the guitar. Zayar said that he found guitar playing difficult. Ohnmar was eager to learn new chords on the guitar and played them with success. He and Zayar strummed their guitars along with the teacher, but did not sing with the rest of the class.

### **Health Class**

Returning from the ESL withdrawal class to a class in session, Lucy and Nanda were told to get out their books and begin working on a puzzle. Nanda got up

twice to put rubbish in the bin. The teacher walked over and asked Lucy, 'What do you use to eat an apple?' and tapped his teeth. Lucy said, 'Teeth.' The teacher said, 'How do you spell it?' Lucy spelt out, 'T-e-e-t-h.' The teacher nodded and walked away. Nanda poked the boy beside her. Lucy continued to work, and then she glued her sheet into her book. Nanda followed her lead and did the same. Lucy continued to work. Nanda leaned on her arm while looking at the teacher, and then picked up her pencil and started working. She leaned over and looked at Lucy's work before writing something in her own book. Lucy continued to work and Nanda watched her.

### **Geography Class**

The teacher asked the class to find various locations on the map. Zayar did not appear to be looking for them. The teacher asked him what 'as the crow flies' means. Zayar did not answer. The teacher repeated the question. Zayar answered, 'Don't know.' The teacher then explained what it meant and asked Zayar if he understood. Zayar nodded. The teacher asked the class to find Broken Hill. Zayar appeared to be searching for this on his map. The teacher asked him if he had found it. Zayar said, 'No.' The teacher gave him a couple of hints and Zayar kept looking at the map. Then he put up his hand saying, 'Ah, I found it.' He was then asked which state it was in and replied, 'New South [pronounced *Souf*] Wales.' The teacher gave him praise. Zayar was asked by the teacher to move next to Adam. The boys worked together to complete their task.

### **English Class**

The teacher told the class that they were all required to do an impromptu oral presentation, lasting approximately 30 seconds to 1 minute, on something they had written in their journal book. The teacher called each person to do their oral presentation. Ohnmar sat quietly and watched the others while each person spoke. When his name was called, he came and stood in front of the class with his book and read, 'Today I fail [*feel*] good cause teachers day. Thank you, Mr R. Sometime you angry me, sometime you smiley face.' Ohnmar appeared embarrassed but spoke clearly.

Table 2 provides a synopsis of the different data gathered on the three students.

## **Discussion**

Findings from the study indicate that there is little communication between and among the teaching staff at the school about the progress of learning for the three students. For example, Nanda was described by the ESL teacher as having made the least amount of gain in her learning in the eight months she had been at the school. To that end, the ESL teacher recommended that Nanda be tested for learning difficulties. The ESL teacher has Nanda tested at a Grade 1 reading level; however, in her mainstream English class, Nanda scored higher than some of her non-ESL classmates on the English proofreading test. These results may illustrate the different levels of literacy that Nanda has achieved.

What is important to consider from the data is Nanda's classroom behaviour. She is inattentive, exhibits shyness, uses avoidance tactics in her lessons, and inap-

TABLE 2

## Summary Data on Three Students

	ESL	Parent-Teacher Interview	Classroom Observations
Nanda	Needs support in all areas, Gr 1 reading level, least progress of the group	Excellent gains in maths, very good in proofreading exercise — scored higher than native English-speaking peers, shows courage in learning	Music: took lead from friend (Lucy), played guitar correctly when shown how, chatted with friend, did not sing with class Health: took lead from Lucy, got up twice to put rubbish in the bin, head in arms, she watched Lucy, wrote what Lucy wrote, responded to teacher's question with a smile
Zayar	Good oral language, poor reading/writing, Gr 1 reading level	Good in maths — but not abstract maths, struggled with proofreading test, good social skills, likes sport, likes to speak in his home language with friends	Music: sat with friend (Adam), helped Adam find the notes, said it is difficult for him to play guitar, strummed without singing Geography: persistent at finding required locations on the map, able to keep up with the other students
Ohnmar	Bright, quick at maths, Gr 3 reading level, progressing well	Difficulty with maths, abstract concepts, is willing to work once he understands what to do, sociable, willing to speak English, needs more practise with reading and writing	Music: eager to learn new notes on guitar, remembered them all correctly, did not sing with class, strummed guitar English: class had to read what they had written in their journals, watched the others, was embarrassed when his turn came but spoke clearly

appropriately and spontaneously walks around the room (twice to put rubbish in the bin) rather than being seated. While these behaviours can be associated with a learning difficulty, there are other areas to explore. For example, the NLLIA band-scales (McKay, 2008) break down aspects of students' performance into listening, speaking, reading and writing across seven levels within the three phases of learning: early years, middle years and senior year. If we look at the middle years scales, we find that Nanda appears to be operating at Middle Years ESL Listening: Level 1: 'Watch carefully what others are doing and often imitate them ... will join a mainstream activity but may not speak; will watch and listen ... will lose concentration and tire quickly if presented with an overload of unfamiliar language, routines, activities and expectations' (McKay, 2008, p. 84). Nanda displayed these behaviours in class. Such behaviours may be associated with a learning difficulty, but Nanda does well in maths and is able to focus on a reading/writing task to produce top results (the proofreading test). To organise testing for learning difficulties at this stage would be somewhat premature. Nanda is a relatively new student who has had little time to adjust to a new culture and language. It is not known if she attended school before arriving in Australia. Certainly school in a Thai refugee camp would be very different to that of a Grade 6 class in Australia.

If we consider the data for Zayar, he is described as having good oral language skills but problems with reading and writing. However, with appropriate scaffold-

ing (the teacher's prompts to find locations on the map in geography class), Zayar is able to keep up with his peers on the set task. This behaviour aligns with Cummins' (1980) findings that oral language precedes academic English, and that language learning is successful when scaffolded (Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000). Zayar's behaviour is also consistent with that described in Middle Years ESL Listening: Level 3: 'Can comprehend ... when repetition, simplification and paraphrasing is provided by the interlocutor ... will need time to process new language, and to respond to questions in English' (McKay, 2008, p. 86). The fact that Zayar's mother spoke English would no doubt have given him further support in learning English. Nanda on the other hand did not have the same kind of support. Her grandparents do not speak English.

Ohnmar's parents also spoke English, but not as well as Zayar's mother. Both boys attempted to interact with their peers (both English-speaking and Karen), primarily through sport despite their limited English-speaking skills. Ohnmar's reading of his journal entry suggests that he might be at Middle Years ESL Speaking: Level 2: 'Will use meaningful chunks of language heard from language around them' (McKay, 2008, p. 92). Both he and Zayar would sometimes stop playing during lunchbreak to sit together with other Karen-speaking students to practise their first language, resulting in a less demanding cognitive effort in speaking. This behaviour is also described in ESL Speaking: Level 2: 'May choose to use L1 [first language] with fellow L1 speakers in classroom and other interactions. Will draw on L1 and previous cultural and linguistic experiences, including L1 knowledge of the world to understand and predict meaning and take part to varying degrees ... in school and classroom events' (McKay, 2008, p. 92).

Understanding these behaviours can help teachers to better support the learning of students who are refugees. Understanding the role of background in second language acquisition and development, and knowing how to use the bandscales to track student learning, would also help teachers in supporting the learning of these three students.

## ► 158 ■ Conclusion

This paper has provided a snapshot of learning considerations for students who have ESL and who are refugees to Australia. The needs of these students are varied and complex, but they must be understood and addressed in order provide appropriate learning environments.

It was found that there was little communication between the teaching partners at the school in relation to teaching these students. Offering a coordinated learning program may help to support learning, not only of English also of their new environment and culture in Australia. Additionally, there was little mention of students' schooling before their enrolment at the school; therefore, the teaching staff do not know where students were in their understanding of concepts in literacy and numeracy. Comparing notes with each other would help teachers to identify areas of strength in learning for each student, and areas where specific teaching could be targeted.

Each teacher at the school kept individual records on each of the three students but, as stated above, did not share this information with other staff working with the students. None of the teachers used an ESL bandscale to track student learning. Resources such as the NLLIA ESL bandscales (and other similar bandscales) provide a picture of the developmental progress students travel through in learning English. Such a resource allows classroom teachers and support teachers (ESL) map students' progress utilising the many staged descriptions of second language acquisition. Teachers gain an understanding of what students have achieved in their learning and what they can be expected to do in the next stage. Rhine (1995) suggested that the challenge is to effectively prepare teachers for both tracking student learning and developing curriculum. Such challenges could be met through professional development activities such as offering workshops on using the ESL bandscales, for example.

Sidhu and Taylor (2007) suggest that the provision of quality education for students who are refugees should not be left to chance. The learning needs of these students are unique in many ways, and teachers need to take a more positive, proactive approach to meeting those needs. The three students in the study were tagged as having learning difficulties, although information on the particular kind of difficulties, the extent of the difficulties and provision to support their learning through such difficulties was not available from the teaching staff. Connor and Boskin (2001) found that students who have ESL are most likely to be identified as having a learning difficulty if their teachers lack understanding of SLA.

While this study provides some insight into the complexities of teaching students who are refugees, a limitation is that the case study included a profile of only three students. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to other students who are refugees. Indeed, it is important not to suggest that students who are refugees from Burma have the same learning needs as students from other areas. It is important that such students not be lumped together as a single group but instead be considered as individuals with their own learning needs.

Research in regards to supporting refugees in Australian schools is only at a starting point. Much more work needs to be done in this area. Over 13,000 refugees enter Australia each year (NSW Refugee Health Service, 2005); many of these are children destined for mainstream classrooms. It is important that schools are equipped with the support needed to meet the challenge so that they and their students achieve the best possible teaching and learning outcomes — and so that students are not mistakenly identified as having learning difficulties.

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