Words making a difference: What's in a name?
Robyn Henderson
Queensland University of Technology

In doing a bit of television channel surfing the other day, I caught a short segment of a religious program that was debating the 'power of words' and the use of words for good and evil purposes. Whilst I didn't necessarily agree with the arguments that I heard (in the two or three minutes before I moved on to another channel), I was certainly reminded of the need for us to consider our words and the effects they may have on the children we teach, on our colleagues, and on our work as teachers. What we say, and how we say it, can play a powerful role in our relationships with others and in the way we position ourselves and others within educational discourses.

Words play an important part in constructing the world and as Morgan, Gilbert, Lankshear, Werba and Williams (1996) pointed out, 'the upshot of critical literacy is to enable us to investigate how "word" has helped to shape "world"' (p.10). However, it's sometimes forgotten that the taken-for-granted words that we use on a daily basis play a critical role in shaping the world as we understand it.

Take 'given' names, for example. Whether a child is called Sam (and whether that's the shortened version of Samantha, Samanda, Samuel, Samet, Sami or Sama) or Jo (for Joel, Joh, Joseph, Coşkun,[i] Josuke, Joanne, Joelene or Josephine) can influence our readings of the child's world and his/her family. And, if we know that the child speaks a language other than English or a non-standard form of English, then the 'names' we apply to particular children – including the 'ESL' label – may very well influence the assumptions we make about the child's success in school literacy learning.

So, if we borrow that famous question from William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* – 'What's in a name?' – then we would probably come up with an answer that more or less says 'Quite a lot!' Yet, how often do we think about the 'names' and labels we apply to children in schools or consider their effects? To illustrate what I mean, I am going to draw on one example from my own research and a second example from the work of Kelleen Toohey (2000).

Example 1
When researching the literacy learning of itinerant farm workers' children, I became interested in the way that the naming of children and families – that is, the use of particular words and phrases – were accompanied by particular assumptions about families' practices and about school responses to children's learning needs. Initially, it was the principal of a North Queensland primary school who alerted me to the assumptions that he sometimes made about the itinerant children who enrolled in his school during the winter harvesting season. On one occasion, he said, 'When we talk of itinerants, I mean straight away I seem to think of ESL [English as a second language], a major problem.'

During the conversation that followed, the principal identified ways in which the influx of students who spoke English as an additional language to their home language was a problem for the school and its teachers. In particular, the school's resources, both human and material, were stretched to their limits and the difficulties

of trying to provide adequate support in literacy learning constituted a 'major problem'.

Another 'major problem' – identified by the principal in a subsequent interview – was the way that the terms 'itinerant' and 'ESL' were often taken to mean the same thing. He pointed out that 'I still identify the fruit pickers as ESL and that's wrong, because I've tried to go and see the other fruit pickers or seasonal workers and I realise that it's not just ESL'. Whilst 70 to 80 per cent of the itinerant children were learning English as an additional language – and were thus characterised as 'ESL' – it seemed that the other 20 to 30 per cent of itinerant children were not quite as easy to distinguish from the 'regular' students in the school.

Whilst the use of the ESL label seemed to highlight the learning needs of a sizeable group of children at the school, the application of one label to a rather diverse group of students may also have been problematic. The diversity of the 'ESL children' was evident in the range of languages spoken – including Turkish, Tongan, Samoan and Vietnamese – and in the wide range of English dialects that were used – including Tongan English, Turkish English and so on. (See Barnett, 2001, for further discussion about dialects of English in Australia.) Indeed, there was a tendency for the diversity of the children's linguistic resources to be forgotten when the all-encompassing term 'ESL' was applied.

Another problem of the 'ESL' label seemed to be the way that the term focused on children's deficiencies with the English language, whilst backgrounding the linguistic resources that the children brought to school. When I was collecting research data, one teacher explained that teachers were aware of the children's cultural and linguistic diversity, but 'don't really bring that into our school and into our classrooms.' That comment reminded me of Pat Thomson's (2002) metaphor of the virtual schoolbag:

> Imagine that each [student] brings with them to school a virtual schoolbag full of things they have already learned at home, with their friends, and in and from the world in which they live. (p.1)

Thomson argued that, in busy classrooms, children are not always able to open up their virtual schoolbags or to show what they can already do.

It seems, then, that the labelling of children as belonging to a particular category – in this case 'ESL' – may be misleading. Not only did the label mask the diversity of the children – suggesting a false homogeneity about the group – but it facilitated the 'forgetting' of the itinerant children who did not fit under that label. Words, then, can play a powerful role in including and excluding particular children from our thinking. Whilst this may sound like a 'dramatic' conclusion to draw, I think we need to consider the possibility that our use of particular words and labels can frame and influence our perceptions of particular children within schools and classrooms.

Example 2
Other research has also commented on the 'ESL' label and its consequences in school contexts. A study by Kelleen Toohey (2000), for example, focused on a culturally diverse group of students as they moved from Kindergarten through Grade 1 and Grade 2 in a Canadian school. Toohey described 'ESLness' as 'an ascribed aspect' of

the children's school identities and discussed the way that funding measures impacted on pedagogical practices for ESL students. Her research showed how one school's introduction of cost-cutting measures resulted in the school discontinuing its practice of integrating beginning ESL students into regular classrooms, placing them instead into 'reception classes' composed entirely of ESL students.

Toohey (2000) also demonstrated how the label 'ESL' was at times misleading. When the parents of children about to commence kindergarten were interviewed by the kindergarten teacher, they were asked whether they would like their children to attend an afternoon Language Development class. The children who attended that class ended up being defined as 'ESL', even though two of them had lived in homes where their parents 'had decided to raise their children speaking English, believing that knowledge of English would give their children a schooling advantage' (p.71). The end result was that one child 'who entered kindergarten speaking (in her mother's words) "only a few words" of English, graduated from ESL in kindergarten', whilst another, 'who had spoken only English before school, was considered to be "still ESL" at the end of kindergarten' (p.71). The ESL label thus helped to position children as successful or unsuccessful in the learning of English.

Conclusion
In the examples cited above, the words 'English as a second language' (and the acronym ESL) played a significant role in how students were perceived and in the pedagogical decisions that were made. So what can we learn from this? In the case of children designated as ESL, I think we need to consider the label, word and acronym options that are available. The words we use to describe children – including English as a second language (ESL), non-English speaking background (NESB), language background other than English (LBOTE), English as an additional language (EAL) or Limited English Proficiency (LEP) – may very well be important. Whilst some of these terms seem to imply a deficiency in English, the word 'bilingual' may be a better option because it focuses on a strength rather than a deficiency. In relation to Thomson's (2002) metaphor, the 'bilingual' label seems to open up the possibilities for finding out what cultural and linguistic resources children carry in their virtual schoolbags.

More generally, however, I think we need to be encouraged to engage in discussions about the words or labels we choose. Considering what we take for granted when we use particular words or terms, and investigating what other options are available, might be enlightening.

References
Barnett, J. (2001). Dialect in literacy education: What is it and how do teachers respond to it? In B. Comber, L. Badger, J. Barnett, H. Nixon & J. Pitt (Eds.), *Socio-economically disadvantaged students and the development of literacies in school: A longitudinal study* (Vol. I, pp. 319-322). Adelaide: University of South Australia.

Morgan, W., Gilbert, P., Lankshear, C., Werba, S., & Williams, L. (1996). *Critical literacy: Readings and resources*. Norwood, South Australia: Australian Association for the Teaching of English.

Toohey, K. (2000). *Learning English at school: Identity, social relations and classroom practice*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Thomson, P. (2002). *Schooling the rustbelt kids: Making the difference in changing times*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.

---

[i] For those who are puzzled by the name Coşkun – In Turkish the letter "c" is pronounced like the English "j."