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CHALLENGES FACING WOMEN WHO ARE SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS
AND HAVE ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE IN THE
WAIKATO REGION, NEW ZEALAND: AN EXPLORATIVE INQUIRY

Anthea Fester and Sujani Thrikawala

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CHALLENGES FACING WOMEN WHO ARE SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS AND HAVE ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE IN THE WAIKATO REGION, NEW ZEALAND: AN EXPLORATIVE INQUIRY

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, there has been an unprecedented increase in migration. Annually, Aotearoa New Zealand accepts a certain quota of migrants under different schemes. Naturally, some of these migrants are women who have English as an additional language (EAL). The challenges that they face are often multi-faceted.

Some substantial research has been conducted in the New Zealand context by Pio (2007) related to the experiences of ethnic entrepreneurs with a particular focus on Indian women. In addition to having to adjust to a new culture, initially, these women also often need to find employment and that becomes a challenge. For several reasons, including the fact that they are not qualified, or their previously acquired qualifications are not recognised in Aotearoa New Zealand, they struggle to find employment. Pio (2007) focuses on the process of the experiences and paths taken by a cohort of Indian women to becoming entrepreneurs/business owners. Pio and Singham (2018) reported on employment and inclusive workspaces connected to diversity and public policy of migrants. These views are echoed in our study, but we explore further aspects of the experiences of women with small businesses. The research reported in this article shifts the focus on migrant smaller business owners in several ways, from that covered by Pio (2007), and Pio and Singham (2018). These include:

- broadening the cohort base to include a wider range of ethnic women.
- offering a solution-based approach that is embedded in transdisciplinarity and is also inclusive of language and cultural challenges within the entrepreneurial space.
- taking the views of the wider stakeholder group connected to these businesswomen into account.
- being more current in terms of the period in which the data was gathered.
- focusing on challenges related to the setting up of the business not the historical process these women faced.

Migrant women frequently decide to start their own businesses, and these businesses are commonly in the service-industry sector such as in hospitality and beauty (Pio, 2007). The work conducted by Pio has also impacted on the development of the DiversityWorks (n.d.) site, which provides work-related information in New Zealand. As a result of the vital role that migrant women who are small business owners (WSBO) have in the business sector, it is important to understand the difficulties they face from their perspective. High up on the list of challenges that they face is their unfamiliarity with systems in New Zealand, along with accessing pertinent information in a timely manner, language challenges, and cultural connections.

The main aim of the overarching research project is: How might we better support EAL background women who are small business owners in Waikato region, Aotearoa New Zealand?

There are several envisioned phases for this project which include:

Phase 1: Gathering data through interviews and a questionnaire from a cohort of EAL migrant and former refugee background women who are small business owners in the Waikato region.

Phase 2: Interviewing some of the business support or supply services accessed by small women business owners who have EAL.

Phase 3: Interviewing a group of applied linguists and English language teachers on potential pragmatic and cultural competence advice to support communication.

Phase 4: Interviewing tangata whenua Tainui representatives and interviewing employees of WSBO with EAL backgrounds.

The key objective and sub-question addressed in this article are: What are the backgrounds of some of these women and what are some of the challenges they face with stakeholders as EAL background WSBO in the Waikato region, Aotearoa New Zealand?

Transdisciplinary theory

Previous research into the experiences of female migrant small business owners who are from EAL backgrounds reveals several specific challenges that they face because of their identity, background and culture. The multi-layered complexity of their situation can create combinatorial challenges that can often appear insurmountable for these businesswomen. Support services offered to these businesswomen have at times attempted to address some of these challenges. However, there does not appear to be a more comprehensive, less time-consuming, and more fruitful way to expedite business matters for these migrant women, who come from diverse backgrounds. With all the complexities associated with this specific cohort, it is reasonable to ascertain that the overarching situation is complex and requires a more inclusive, wraparound service with comprehensive input from various stakeholders.

Using a human-centred transdisciplinary (TDR) approach could provide a way forward to manage what can be identified as a “wicked problem” (Neuhauser, 2018, pp. 31–32). The notion of wicked problems or complex problems are succinctly described by Neuhauser (2018, pp. 31–32), who initially suggests that a potential solution is uncertain, and these problems are “typically heterogeneous, changeable, contextually localized, value-laden, sometimes caused by those charged with addressing them, and difficult to understand and solve.” Fundamentally, the research reported in this article addresses one such complex societal problem. As mentioned above, with the diaspora of people, the problem is likely to become bigger and more complex.

Transdisciplinary research theory and the value of the process and approach has been espoused by several researchers (Klein, 2018; Neuhauser, 2018; Nicolescu, 2014; Pohl & Hirsch Hadorn, 2007). Related literature seems to be largely underpinned by an agreed sense that a TDR approach inherently transcends disciplines and needs to take the views of all key stakeholders into account when trying to address complex societal problems. Notwithstanding the diverse frames proposed by various researchers on the processes, problem framing, structuring, and outcomes approach to TDR, the core underpinning drivers are essentially the same. The focus is on all key stakeholders, the human-centred approach, the iterative process, and the fact that all key stakeholder voices drive the potential solution framework. This study reported here does not lend itself to an exploration of individual TDR researchers’ frameworks.

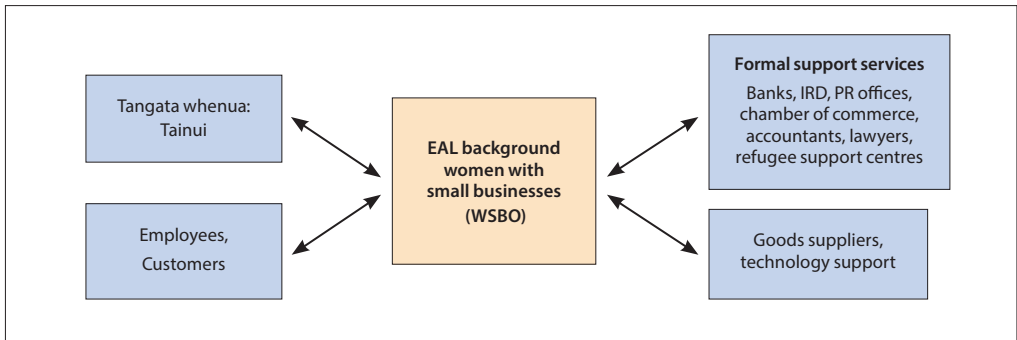


Figure 1. Mind map of EAL background WSBO's key stakeholders.

Having identified the wicked problem and the strengths underlying a TDR approach, there is a need to remain true to the notion of integration by recognising the key stakeholders. In the case of the research project reported in this paper, non-university stakeholders, NGOs, political and governmental spheres and occupational spheres are all pertinent stakeholders (see Figure 1). Their voices are imperative in designing a more suitable multifaceted potential solution for the problematic situations facing these EAL background WSBO.

English as an additional language businesswomen

Entrepreneurship and small start-up firms in a country play a major role in economic development by promoting innovation, productivity and employment (Bosma et al., 2018). Fairlie and Lofstrom (2015) state that often entrepreneurial activities are more prevalent in immigrants. According to cultural theories, the willingness of these businesswomen to take risks is demonstrated as a strong characteristic of migrants and is one of the major factors in strong entrepreneurship (Naudé et al., 2017; Neville et al., 2014; Volery, 2007). In addition, there is a huge push among immigrants to initiate new ventures (Levie, 2007) out of business acumen or as a survival strategy (Portes & Yiu, 2013). These people start new ventures to overcome obstacles that they face in the host country labour market, such as racial and ethnic prejudices, having no experience, accessing limited resources and managing language barriers (Assudani, 2009; Constant & Zimmermann, 2006). The disadvantage theory covers the above-mentioned aspects and also confirms that migrants form their own businesses as that is their only way of living in a new country and it helps to alleviate the barriers they face (Chrysostome, 2010).

Empirical evidence highlights that female-led small businesses in Western economies, such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America, are growing rapidly. Webster and Haandrikman (2017) state that migrant women make a significant contribution to the Swedish small-business community through self-employment, and they have advanced education qualifications compared with self-employed men. However, women in the business world face many barriers and discrimination when compared to their counterparts (Vaccarino et al., 2011). In addition, it has been identified that the migrant women small business owners are not a homogeneous group, and that their problems need to be identified as multifaceted (Fielden & Davidson, 2012). As a result, in most cases, they require more support to conduct their business appropriately. In a study conducted by Davidson et al. (2010) with 40 Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) female small-business owners based in northwest England, the cohort encountered difficulties when accessing various types of formal business and financial support, but they had high levels of informal support (emotional/instrumental) through their families. They normally did not use formal business support services such as local councils, banks and other business support services. As a result, the majority of BAME female small-business owners lacked suitable access to resources such as advice, information, guidance, and financial assistance.

In New Zealand, the Office of Ethnic Affairs Research in 2013 noted that migrant women entrepreneurs face the prospect of being discriminated against, mainly based of their ethnicity and religion (Department of Internal Affairs, n.d.). A study conducted by Vaccarino et al. (2011) also illustrates that many Chinese businesswomen in New Zealand tend to be self-employed, largely due to ethnic discrimination. These findings have been confirmed by Wellalage et al. (2023), who state that national culture in a country moderates the relationship between immigration and entrepreneurship. In Davidson et al.'s (2010) study, they found that there is a double negative effect of sexism and racism on these migrant communities. The consequence of this is that they have a low propensity to use mainstream business-advice agencies to improve their businesses. In contrast, Constant (2004, as cited in Harkiolakis et al., 2011) concludes that women select self-employment because of family obligations rather than job-market discrimination or rejection.

In a study conducted by Lee (2005), they observe that many migrant business owners are struggling to communicate in English even though they may have had a proper college education for many years. Also, they have a limited understanding of the services that are provided for ethnic communities. Furthermore, this report highlights the point that recent migrants in ethnic communities in Aotearoa New Zealand have limited social, community and employment networks, and face workplace and community discrimination and stereotyping. The support received by small-business owners in Aotearoa New Zealand is perceived to be minimal or non-existent. In New Zealand, research indicates that Chinese immigrant women who are entrepreneurs require a greater focus on emotional/instrumental support to conduct their businesses (Vaccarino et al., 2011). These barriers are identified as a huge opportunity cost for Aotearoa New Zealand as they erode the beneficial effects that immigrant entrepreneurship can have on the economy (Department of Internal Affairs, n.d.).

Therefore, it is important to investigate these barriers faced by migrants and especially in specific regions in Aotearoa New Zealand. As mentioned above, there has been substantial work done (Pio & Singham, 2018) on migrants as employees and the challenges that they face in Aotearoa, but not necessarily on migrant women as business owners. Addressing these barriers is one of seven population-focused long-term plans sitting under the New Zealand Government's Employment Strategy.

METHODS

The project received ethical approval from the Waikato Institute of Technology (Wintec) Ethics Committee and ensures all participants have anonymity around the data gathered and any publications that might arise out of the research. As mentioned above, the overarching project, in keeping with a TDR approach, will be inclusive of most key stakeholders (see Figure 1). This article reports on some initial findings in the first phase of the research project and includes the first data gathered from a cohort of EAL background WSBO in the Waikato region in Aotearoa New Zealand. It provides feedback on a selected group of aspects covered with the first 18 migrant participants who completed the survey, and the voices of the first eight interviewees who participated in the semi-structured interviews.

Data-collection method

We adopted a mixed research methodology, in keeping with a TDR theoretical approach. This method allows the researchers to explore wicked problems from different perspectives and to incorporate suitable solutions based on an analysis of the findings from the different stakeholders' voices by collecting multiple forms of data (Sieber, 1973).

For the part of the project reported on in this article, participants were selected in two main ways. Some were selected based on an initial sample of convenience with contacts that the researchers had, and then a snowballing effect occurred. In addition, we approached organisations whom we felt might have had contact with EAL businesswomen, such as Shama Ethnic Women's Trust, and asked them to advertise our research project.

The first data-gathering tool was an online survey, administered via a Qualtrics questionnaire. The link to the online survey was disseminated to EAL businesswomen via several options, including through contacts of the researchers in the Waikato region and a request for participants through selected non-government organisations (NGOs). This sample of convenience led to snowballing. The initial online survey was completed by 18 participants who identified as EAL background migrant WSBO in the service industry based in the Waikato region. All the participants answered the questionnaire anonymously and used a nickname to identify themselves for correlation in further analysis. The questions in the survey covered a range of topics, including relevant demographics of the cohort, questions about their business and their prior experiences, and positive and negative experiences dealing with various stakeholders in the New Zealand context. To increase the validity of our study, we developed questions in our online survey based on the prior literature and empirical evidence from other countries.

Following on from the survey, the semi-structured interviews were conducted by one of the researchers and a research assistant who was experienced in conducting interviews. All participants were asked the same questions initially and follow-on questions were posed in response to the interviewees' initial information shared. At times, interviewees inadvertently covered several questions in one response. In that case, the follow-up questions planned were not asked. Cohen et al. (2018, p. 358) suggest that individual interviews such as those conducted in this study provide an "opportunity for gathering in-depth data," are "useful for exploring complex issues," and "can build trust and rapport." As this is a complex problem that the researchers are exploring, the value of conducting individual interviews outweighed the convenience of conducting focus-group discussions; the latter might have seemed more manageable in terms of saving time, but would not have been in terms of trust and rapport building, which are both invaluable for this project. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure participant anonymity.

RESULTS

Participant details

As mentioned above, in the initial phase of the project, 18 businesswomen who identified as EAL background WSBO participated in the survey. The first set of questions related to the participants' demographic details. The data indicated that these businesswomen came from several countries or regions, including Sri Lanka, China, Malaysia, India, South Africa, Latin America, Northern Africa and the Middle East. Of the 18 participants who completed this survey, 16 of them identified as Asian or South Asian, one identified as South African and one as North African Arab. Most of them were aged between 35 and 55 (80 percent) with the rest being over 55 years old.

In the business-related questions, 60 percent of these female business owners have more than 10 years' experience in their specific fields. Participants were also asked about the legal status of their business. Almost half were registered as companies (limited liability), four were sole proprietors, three were in a partnership, and one stated "Other" (see Figure 2). Those that are registered as companies with limited liability mainly choose this status to help them build their businesses without risking their private assets.

For the types of services (see Figure 3), four participants indicated that they were in hospitality, four were in education, two were in restaurants and bars, one was in professional and consultancy services, and five of the respondents indicated that they were in "Other" businesses, which included beautician, hairdressing, massage services, retail, and selling natural gifts. More than 50 percent of the businesses had fewer than five employees in their organisation.

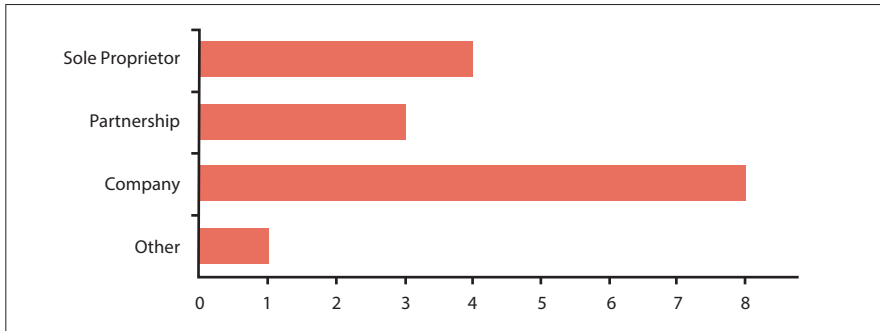


Figure 2. Legal business status of EAL background WSBO.



Figure 3. Types of services provided by EAL background WSBO.

Findings: Three important challenges

Following on from the survey, interviews were conducted with a sample of eight of the migrant EAL background WSBO. Their views are shared here as they relate to the identified specific challenges they face. In this article we wish to highlight three important challenges: English-language ability and processing; ability to understand humour, and sexism and stereotyping. In the survey, participants were asked to evaluate their own English proficiency (see Figure 4): 23 percent indicated that they were “Excellent” in both Listening and Speaking skills while 71 percent indicated that they were “Good” in both those skills. For Writing skills, 29 percent indicated that they were “Excellent” and 53 percent indicated that they were “Good,” and for their Reading skills, 29 percent indicated that they were “Excellent” and 59 percent indicated that they were “Good.” Based on this data, overall, the eight participants rated themselves relatively highly in terms of English-language proficiency.

	Excellent	Good	Average
Writing	29%	53%	18%
Reading	29%	59%	12%
Listening	24%	71%	6%
Speaking	24%	71%	6%

Figure 4. Participants' evaluation of their English-language ability (n = 8).

In the survey, in the overall responses to the question related to language barriers (*Does not having English as a first language pose some problems in your business?*), eight out of the 17 respondents felt that it was not a barrier (Figure 5). When asked whether *English language was a barrier to starting a business in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Figure 6), out of the 17 responses, six indicated *Definitely not*, five *Probably not* and three *Might or might not*. Therefore, most respondents do not consider English language as a barrier for them in setting up a business in New Zealand. These responses suggest an overall positive attitude amongst participants towards starting a business in New Zealand for EAL background businesswomen. On the other hand, the interviews revealed a range of challenges faced by these businesswomen when working with certain stakeholders, such as their suppliers, employees and customers, where communication was often the pivotal challenge. So, several of these identified initial challenges can be related to their English-language ability, processing and ability to understand humour (see Figure 4).

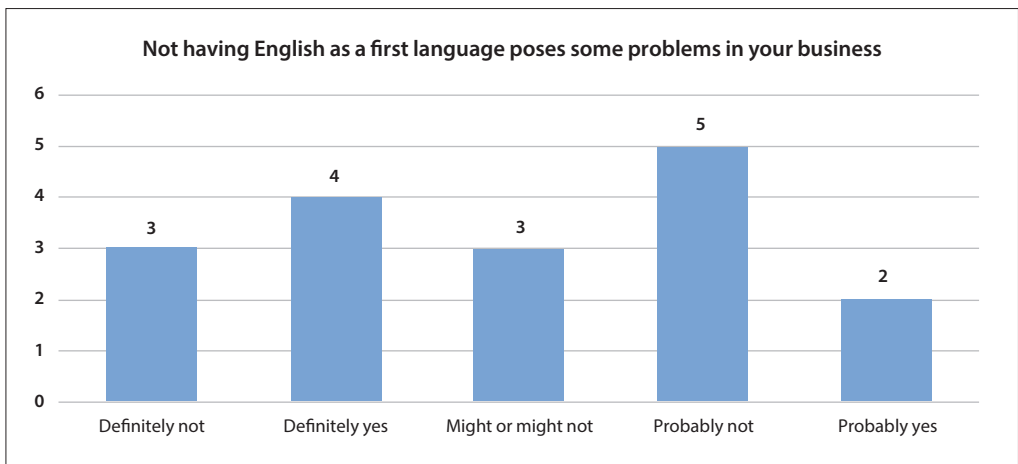


Figure 5. Having EAL poses problems in participants' businesses.

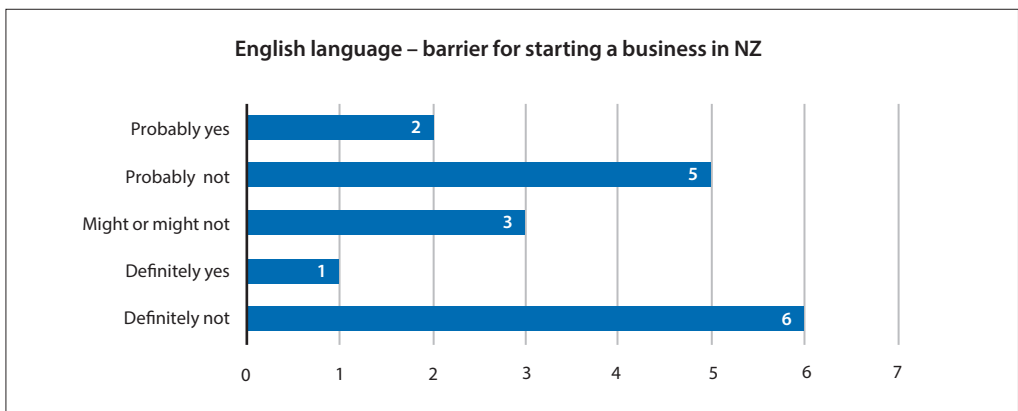


Figure 6. English language as a barrier to starting a new business in New Zealand.

In addition to the language-related challenges or miscommunications, participants were also asked to share some other challenges that they face when conducting their business. Some experiences around sexism between female employers and migrant male employees, racism, and stereotyping from suppliers were shared. Two participants shared experiences of sexism, where they felt migrant male employees were racist and sexist. One participant (P8) stated that when her husband spoke to the male employees they responded, but when she spoke to them, they pretended to not understand and made her repeat herself a few times, even though according to her she knew they understood and even though she owned the business (see Figure 7, sexism challenge).

Nature of challenge	Comments from participants
English ability and processing	<p><i>Is English language a barrier with banks – Yes, definitely, just because, er, when you ... so for banks sometimes they will ask you to prepare a proposal or business plan. We can prepare business plans. You can speak English, but you can't think in English. You can't dream in English. So, when you want to convert that to the language, you will have the difficulty putting your ideas into words. (P2)</i></p> <p><i>Definitely [need high English ability], in early childhood sector. (P1)</i></p> <p><i>[P3 completed a degree where half the qualification was delivered in her home country and half in a New Zealand university – she said that the academic English is different] Actually, I don't think my English is good. I never been to the like test. ... Nowadays even in like supplier or in the bank they also have like Asian people over there right ... it's not, they're not all Kiwi or local, right. So, you can easily find our [language] representative, you know. Like if you really have any special requirements of the language (P3)</i></p> <p><i>I think if people cannot communicate, they cannot think they are a victim, they should go and improve their English because staying here we can. I always tell people don't sit here and say they are victims, go ... and there is a lot of public speaking courses ... because certain words you can use people get offended. (P7)</i></p>
Ability to understand humour: language and cultural barriers	<p><i>[About suppliers] So sometimes, you know, they make a joke, you don't even know they're joking. So it's like that. (P8)</i></p>
Sexism and stereotyping	<p><i>[A migrant female's employers comment about her treatment from migrant male employees] They don't like what I'm saying – "Sorry I can't understand what you saying I can't get it" – and you know, they clearly can understand what you're saying. (P8)</i></p> <p><i>[About suppliers' attitudes] But I mean, there's a kind of set idea that, okay, Chinese, they want something cheap. I mean, it's not that Chinese want something cheap... Like, I mean, like the Asians they need something cheap. What? [It's] not like that. Sorry. We want quality as well. (P4)</i></p>

Figure 7. Nature of participant challenges – Focusing on three key challenges.

The findings shared in this study have important ramifications for all stakeholder groups connected to the EAL background WSBO in the Waikato region, but especially as they relate to proposed improvements to ensure that these women can face reduced challenges when conducting their businesses.

DISCUSSION

In our interviews several participants said that they started their own businesses because they had issues with finding employment in Aotearoa New Zealand. This decision aligns with other research findings which state that EAL women start their businesses to overcome the barriers that they face in their host countries (Assudani, 2009; Constant & Zimmermann, 2006; Chrysostome, 2010; Pio, 2007), such as racial and ethnic prejudices, and language barriers. The challenges identified in Figure 7 that relate to sexism and stereotyping issues also align with the barriers that have been identified in the previously mentioned studies. In the case of this study, the sexism and stereotyping challenges experienced are largely from migrant employees and local suppliers, respectively.

In contrast with Lee (2005), our study reveals that our initial cohort of migrant women business owners feel that they do not have any barriers when communicating in English. The participants in our study came from countries with high literacy rates, including India and Sri Lanka, and most of them had a university education, which ultimately supports them to tackle new ventures. Therefore, it could be presumed that the level of their English speaking, writing, listening and reading skills are appropriate to start a business in Aotearoa New Zealand. As with studies conducted by Webster and Haandrikman (2017) in Sweden, this study illustrates that EAL businesswomen in the Waikato region generally have higher education and are willing to contribute to the New Zealand economy.

Despite the survey responses suggesting that these women rated their proficiency relatively highly in English, there are potential language-related challenges faced by the cohort in this study that were revealed in the interviews. In fact, the interview responses where participants shared more details about their lived experiences, revealed that they did have more challenges with language ability, humour, and culture (see Figure 7). Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that migrant women small-business owners are not a homogeneous group and their barriers to conducting their businesses in other countries may vary from country to country (Fielden & Davidson, 2012).

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

As the researchers start to identify potential or partial solutions to the key challenges faced by EAL background WSBO, it has become evident that there needs to be a focus on implementing changes to existing local and national policies to assist with educating key stakeholders in the business sector around the backgrounds and cultures of these businesswomen. Positive and inclusive education could lead to a reduction in discrimination and miscommunication within Aotearoa New Zealand. Without education, the current situation may cause poorer outcomes for the business sector with a resulting negative knock-on effect for society.

Planning a series of workshops targeting different stakeholders, including the businesswomen, could reduce the language and cultural gaps between the women and the other stakeholders. Generally, education around business culture both in New Zealand and in their home countries could be useful. Equality of understanding is essential to recognise that it is not only the businesswomen who have to shift their thinking, but most stakeholders. Some possible movements towards solving the issues identified include developing supplier information booklets on the key ethnic groups. One of the businesswomen who was interviewed suggested that these businesswomen should do courses that are available, such as public-speaking courses. In addition, some of the issues raised were around employees of these businesswomen displaying sexism, so education needs to include stakeholders such as the employees.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In the second phase of the study, which is not reported on in this article, we explored the participants' challenges and potential management strategies suggested by a cohort of applied linguists related to pragmatic and cultural competences. Aligning with general trends in English-language proficiency around EAL background WSBOS, the participants who rated their English-language proficiency highly were mostly migrants and not from former-refugee backgrounds. Outside of the scope of this article, but pertinent to the bigger research project, further data analysis and studies are underway by the researchers to compare the responses between the two diverse groups of EAL background businesswomen (migrants and former-refugee backgrounds). The prediction is that these further findings will probably display some key dissimilar challenges, especially as these two groups would have had different pathways to establishing a business in the Aotearoa New Zealand business space.

In future research, it is important to discover how these findings can advise or drive practical implementations and policy development. This ongoing research study plans to provide better insight for policy makers, practitioners and key stakeholders, including the Inland Revenue Department, local banks and the local Chamber of Commerce, to support EAL background businesswomen in Aotearoa New Zealand. The intent would be to inform them about providing effective support mechanisms to nourish diverse groups in the business sector in the Aotearoa New Zealand context.

Anthea Fester is a Principal Academic Staff Member (PASM) and research leader in the Centre for Languages at Wintec. She obtained her PhD from the University of Waikato. Anthea teaches on the New Zealand Certificate in English Language programmes (NZCEL) and supervises several Master of Applied Innovation projects in the Design Factory New Zealand. Her current research-specific areas of interest are English language teacher training, English adult learners with emerging literacy, language and cultural support systems for EAL background small business owners, and technology for English language teaching.

📄 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0751-5598>

Sujani Thrikawala is a Principal Academic Staff Member (PASM) and co-research leader at Wintec in the Centre for Business and Enterprise. She completed her PhD at the University of Waikato, New Zealand, and teaches on the Bachelor and Master level degree programmes. Sujani also supervises on the Master of Applied Innovation based in the Design Factory New Zealand. Her main research centres on issues related to corporate governance, innovation, corruption, environmental disclosures, and financing of marginalised firms. She is interested in entrepreneurship among former refugees, migrants and ethnic communities in New Zealand.

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