

## Grammar in New Zealand schools: Two case studies

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*ABSTRACT: This paper describes two attempts to introduce grammar teaching into New Zealand schools. The first case study describes the work of the 6th and 7th form English Syllabus Committee in the 1980s which proposed the uniquely New Zealand solution of using examples from Māori as well as from English to demonstrate grammatical points. The response to this proposal shows the powerful influence of the social and political context of the time. The second case study is the Exploring Language project, a government funded initiative in the 1990s, designed to teach teachers about grammar. The objectives and processes involved in writing grammar for teachers are described and questions are raised about assessing the impact of such an initiative and its sustainability once government funding ceases.*

*KEYWORDS: Bicultural issues, grammar teaching, New Zealand, primary and secondary schools, syllabus development.*

### INTRODUCTION

Grammar teaching in New Zealand schools has been a subject of debate for many years. I have five cardboard storage boxes in my garage marked “education” containing papers, articles, syllabus drafts, correspondence, scripts for talks and much more, all on the subject of English language teaching in New Zealand schools over the past three or four decades. Going through some of this material again, I have been reminded of the huge amount of interest and effort that has gone into the subject of grammar teaching in New Zealand. The debate has taken place mainly in educational arenas, but it is also one in which members of the general public have regularly and enthusiastically participated.

In my view, it is difficult to extract grammar teaching from the much wider discussion about the nature and purpose of the school subject “English”, about methods of English language teaching and its purpose, and about English language teaching in a New Zealand context. The experience described in the first case study in this paper will also demonstrate that English language teaching in New Zealand must be seen in the social and political context of its time.

In this paper I will write about two major developments in New Zealand, which involved (among other things) the teaching of grammar. My account of these is a personal one, as I was very closely involved with both. The first was the work of the 6th and 7th form English Syllabus Committee which began work in 1986. The second was “Exploring Language”, a Ministry of Education initiative, which began in 1994 and which was intended to provide teachers with linguistic support for teaching the new English curriculum.

Because of my close association with both developments, I cannot write about this subject with any detachment. For both, I must claim a great deal of responsibility for

the shape and form of the proposed grammar teaching. Others must judge the validity of these approaches and their outcomes. What I can do is explain the reasons for the approaches taken, tell something of the story behind these developments, and also of what happened to them. Because this is a personal account, significant people and events have been omitted, not because they were not important, but because so many people were important over a long period. Also, I am writing of events that happened well in the past, sometimes nearly twenty years ago. For some of this I am relying on my memory.

### **GRAMMAR AND POLITICS: THE CASE OF THE 6TH AND 7TH FORM ENGLISH LANGUAGE SYLLABUS.**

The 6th and 7th form English Syllabus Committee was set up in 1986. In New Zealand at this time, the Department of Education was responsible for the syllabus for Forms 3-5 (13-15 years) and for the School Certificate examination taken at the end of the 5th form. The University Entrance examination in the 6th form and the University Bursary examination and University Entrance scholarship examination at the 7th form were the responsibility of the University Entrance Board and the University Grants Committee.

The university involvement is significant, because in 1969 a new prescription for English language teaching in the 6th and 7th forms was put forward, which was the brain child of Professor John Pride of Victoria University of Wellington. Professor Pride's suggestions were adopted and I think it is not an exaggeration to say that they eventually changed the whole of secondary school English language teaching in New Zealand. The influence of these changes spread well beyond the 6th and 7th forms and could be seen when a new programme of English teaching for forms 3-5 was developed a few years later.<sup>1</sup>

John Pride was a sociolinguist with an international reputation. His approach to English language teaching in secondary schools was that language must *always* be seen in a situation. The textbooks by Ronald Ridout and other traditionalists, with their set exercises, using sentences without context, were to be thrown out. Overnight, teachers were required to teach new topics in the senior secondary school English programme. In the first years, they had to choose two topics from “the language of advertising”, “the language of conversation”, “formal and informal language”, and “word meaning and the use of dictionaries”. The change to the new prescription was swift, with no gentle transition from the traditional to the new. Those who had previously relied on set exercises in text books written in England now had to learn to handle tape-recorders, search New Zealand magazines and newspapers for advertisements, understand about spoken English, learn to transcribe speech, and generally collect their own resource material.

John Pride was very firm in his view that no linguistic theory should be taught in schools and that linguistic terminology should be kept to a minimum. He argued

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<sup>1</sup> The syllabus became known as the statement of aims and was heavily influenced by the Anglo-American Dartmouth Conference of 1966. See NZ Department of Education. (1983). *English: Forms 3-5, Statement of Aims*. Wellington: Government Printer.

forcefully that there should be no direct teaching of any metalanguage and pupils were to be given terminology only when they asked for it. Grammar was to be taught as an aid to the description of a particular language variety and not as a content subject. Pride's idea was that when school pupils studied varieties of language – such as the language of advertising – they would also discover inductively about the workings of language. There was an optimistic belief that this approach to language study would be so interesting that pupils would want to learn more about language.

The new syllabus aims to show, through the study of varieties, how language works. If a pupil finishes his seventh form year with a list of points about the language of advertising, then the course has failed. If he completes the year with a more sensitive understanding of how language works, how speakers adapt their language for different purposes in different situations, then the course will have succeeded (NZ Department of Education, 1971).

After an initial shock, teachers adapted to the new syllabus and found that their pupils were actually interested in the language of advertising and the language of conversation. English language, probably for the first time, became a popular school subject. However, within a few years, many teachers were also expressing disquiet, because it was clear that the inductive approach to learning about grammar was not working. Some recognised that because of their own, inadequate linguistic knowledge, English language classes had become more sociological than linguistic. Students in first-year university classes, who had enjoyed their seventh form language work, admitted that they knew very little about language. Apart from a few terms like *phatic communion* and *anacoluthon*, most students had few if any technical terms to describe features of language. Later, more language topics were added, including “the language of love poetry” and “the language of satire”. But students were not studying the English language – they were studying love poetry and satire.

We cannot criticise the teachers for this situation, because it was not their fault that they were ill equipped to teach what was intended. At that time, not all New Zealand universities taught linguistics. In one university, language study did not extend beyond Chaucer. Even where linguistics was taught, not all students taking English took this option and it was possible to complete a B.A. in English and become a teacher of English in a New Zealand secondary school without having spent a single hour studying the English language (see Locke, 2000).

For some time, university teachers had been becoming uneasy about the lack of linguistic knowledge of first-year students who had studied English language at school. Because of this concern, an ad hoc committee of the NZ Linguistics Association was set up in 1983 to investigate the requirements of the 6th and 7th form language course, to look at examination questions and examiners' reports, and generally to make submissions about the prescriptions. I chaired this committee and was responsible for the final report. The message was clear from all those university linguists who responded. They were unhappy about the existing situation and questioned the validity of topics such as “the language of love poetry”, but the main criticism was about confusion over the need for technical linguistic knowledge. Laurie Bauer of Victoria University of Wellington wrote about the 6th and 7th form examinations:

Some questions make specific reference to linguistic categories the students are supposed not to need. This is nonsense. I think they *do* need them, but if so it should say so in the prescription, and if not they shouldn't be used by the examiners (NZ Linguistics Association, 1984).

In 1984, an explanatory note had been added to the University Entrance prescription.

Traditional formal analysis of grammar as an end in itself would not be recommended, but a knowledge of basic grammatical concepts would be helpful (NZ University Grants Committee, 1984)

University lecturers asked what was meant by “would be helpful.” Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy, of the University of Canterbury, wrote:

For “would be helpful”, I would substitute “be indispensable” – indispensable that is, for any serious study involving language: stylistic, sociolinguistic or whatever (NZ Linguistics Association, 1984).

The Linguistics Association report made a strongly worded recommendation that if “language in situation” were to be usefully studied in schools then those studying it required a knowledge of grammar, not as an optional extra, but as an integral part of their English course. This also meant that it was crucial that the teachers themselves should study grammar, so that their knowledge could be passed on to their pupils. There was some debate about which particular terminology should be used. Some teachers were complaining that the Chomskyan linguistics they had studied at University was not a useful preparation for the language work they were required to teach in schools. There was also debate among the university linguists as to whether grammar should be made compulsory in the English language prescription or whether this would disadvantage those pupils whose teachers were linguistically ignorant.

I have described this background in some detail because it explains the context for the Committee on the 6th and 7th form Language Syllabus, which was set up in 1986 to develop a new English syllabus for these forms.

The committee had 21 members, representing almost every possible interest group – secondary school English teachers, the Post Primary Teachers' Association, independent schools, the correspondence school, Teachers' Colleges, Polytechnics, the media, Universities, Trade unions, the Employers' Federation, NZ secondary school boards, the National Youth Council and Māori organisations. There was, however, no one on the committee with any background in English language and I was therefore co-opted in 1987. The committee met three times a year, for a week at a time, and because everyone stayed in the same residential accommodation, members got to know and trust each other. I will limit my discussion here to the language section, which was the part of the syllabus which most concerned me,

When I first became a member of this committee, my view was that things should probably continue much as usual, but with the addition of grammar teaching as recommended by the NZ Linguistic Association. My main objective, therefore, was to bring grammar back into the syllabus and I expected strong resistance from at least some members of the committee.

As the meetings continued, my views changed, and while I remained committed to bringing grammar into the syllabus, I also came to the view that it was not enough to tinker with the existing syllabus – we needed to produce an entirely new and distinctly New Zealand syllabus. As a university teacher, I also had to stop seeing all 6th and 7th form pupils as potential university students. Times had changed and while we needed to provide for those who wanted to continue their academic studies at university, we also needed to provide for those with different vocational needs.

The terms of reference given to the committee required us to take into account the proposals set out in a Ministerial Review of the Curriculum, and this meant acknowledging in our work the fact that New Zealand was a bicultural country. At early meetings, there was considerable unease among the committee members about what this meant for the teaching of both language and literature, with strong statements being made by the Māori committee members. One person who stood out was the Auckland teacher and poet Arapera Blank from Ngati Porou, a member of a well known family of Māori activists from Ruatoria on the East Coast. She was determined that the committee's requirement to take a bicultural approach should not be lip-service, referred to in the preamble to the syllabus, and then ignored. On one occasion she spoke passionately, and claimed that only the Māori language really belonged in New Zealand. She said that the English language belonged in England, not in New Zealand. Although I was very much in awe of Arapera and intimidated by the strength of her oratory, I felt this should not go unchallenged. So I then spoke about New Zealand English (the subject of my own academic research) and explained how this was a distinct variety of English that was found only in New Zealand. It might have had its origins in England, but it was now a variety unique to New Zealand. Arapera then stood up, crossed the room and linked arms with me, saying “Very well, from now on Elizabeth and I will work together.”

I have recounted this episode because it was a defining moment for me as a white, middle-class, fourth-generation New Zealander from the South Island. My membership of this committee forced me consider for the first time what it meant to work in a partnership between Māori and Pakeha in New Zealand.

The proposal for the teaching of English language, which was eventually put forward by the committee, reflected this change in thinking. There was also a strong desire at that time among most committee members to move away from the influences of Britain and to produce something which was distinctive to New Zealand. Both of these aims are reflected in the wording of the introduction to the syllabus.

We live in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This is a New Zealand syllabus specifically for the needs of all form 6 and 7 students in New Zealand.

In the past, the Pakeha looked to Britain for standards of English language and literature. While still embracing international standards of written English, New Zealanders have their own distinct variety of English - New Zealand English. New Zealand students are able to benefit doubly, having both the heritage of a unique New Zealand literature and the riches of literature written in English throughout the world.

This country has more than one culture and more than one language. Because the Treaty of Waitangi is the cornerstone for educational policy, the English syllabus must

take account of bi-cultural principles. We seek to work in partnership but we speak with our own voices (NZ Department of Education, 1988, p.1).

The committee proposed four main areas of language study at 6th and 7th form:

- The study of language – pronunciation, syntax and semantic;
- Language change;
- Language in situation;
- Issues relating to language –for example, topics such as male and female language, attitudes to language, and so on.

The result satisfied me at the time, because the proposed study of language was in keeping with the recommendations of the NZ Linguistics Association. The retention of topics on language in situation also pleased teachers, who were already teaching them and were glad of the continuity.

In the end, the study of language was the topic which produced the strongest reaction outside the committee, not as I had feared because people were hostile to the study of grammar for its own sake, but rather because of the method proposed for its study.

The committee decided that there were two possible approaches to the teaching of grammar. One was to take a conventional approach, using one of the existing textbooks. This had been attempted in the 1960s in New Zealand, when the book *English Grammar* (Scott, Brockett, Brown & Goddard, 1968) was used in many New Zealand schools. This book was based on M.A.K. Halliday's systemic grammar and was heralded at the time as the “new grammar.” But many teachers had become unhappy with it, saying that it was used in the classroom in exactly the same way that traditional grammar had been used in the past. The second possible approach was to teach grammar through a simple comparative method. The idea for this came about because so many people claimed that the only grammar they ever learnt at school came through learning a foreign language.

We saw that there could be considerable advantages in teaching English grammar comparatively. It would show pupils that languages are governed by rules, but also that the rules which govern English are not universal rules – they are not the only “right” or “logical” way of putting words together. Although all self-respecting linguists would object to the mindless imposition of the categories of one language upon another, nevertheless languages do not differ from one another randomly and technical terms like *noun* or *subject* turn out to be useful over and over again when talking about languages which are superficially quite different.

The question then was asked which language should be used for the comparison. European languages such as French and English were taught in New Zealand schools and in a few schools Latin was still being taught. At that time, Japanese was also widely taught in schools. But because this was to be a New Zealand syllabus, and because our terms of reference required us to recognise that New Zealand was a bicultural country, the obvious choice was to compare English with Māori. The basic principles of Māori sentence structure are not hard to grasp, but at the same time the contrast between English and Māori is quite marked – more so than between English and modern European languages such as French and German. We believed that Māori

speech sounds, writing system and vocabulary would also provide interesting and useful points of contact.

Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy and I wrote a short paper explaining the proposal which was published in the *NZ English Newsletter* (1989) and later reprinted in *English in Aotearoa*, 3 (the journal of the NZ Association of Teachers of English). In this paper we emphasised that we were not expecting English teachers to speak or write Māori. We explained that the teachers should know “just enough to be able to illustrate in a summary fashion the differences between English and Māori structure. The amount of knowledge a teacher would be expected to know could easily be set out in a short booklet” (p. 10).

Here is an example which we provided in our paper:

### Sentence structure

#### (a) order of main elements in the sentence

The basic order of the elements in English places the verb between the subject (the “doer”) and the object (the person or thing to which the action is done). In Māori, on the other hand, the verb usually comes at the beginning.

Kua horoi	a Tipene	i nga peretai.	Stephen has washed the plates.
has washed	Stephen	the plates.	

#### (b) order of elements in the noun phrase

In English the normal order is “article-adjective-noun”, whereas in Māori the order is “article noun-adjective”:

nga	pereti	paru	the dirty plates
the	plates	dirty	

#### (c) indication of object function

In English, word-order alone determines whether a noun phrase is functioning as the subject or the object of a sentence. *John saw Mary* (with *Mary* as object) means something different from *Mary saw John* (with *John* as object), but it is only the different positions of *John* and *Mary* which indicate this. In Māori, on the other hand, the object noun phrase is indicated by having the little word *i* (sometimes *ki*) placed in front of it.

I kite	a Hine	i a Mere	John saw Mary
saw	John	Mary	

(Gordon & Carstairs-McCarthy, 1989, pp.10-11).

It was always strongly stated that the purpose of this approach to language study was not to make teachers and pupils fluent speakers of Māori. Nor would the use of Māori examples in an English lesson encroach on the school subject of Māori. It was also obvious that for such a topic to be teachable it would need very good resources. Linguists, teachers and Māori speakers would be asked to assist in the production of a simple grammar and technical terms would need to be agreed upon. No teacher would be expected to teach about the English language in this way without resource materials, guidance and support.

Teachers were advised of this proposal for grammar teaching, and the results of a questionnaire sent to all English teachers were very reassuring. 50% of the respondents gave their approval without reservation; 25% approved as long as they

were given adequate resources to help them teach it; 25% expressed varying degrees of outrage.

The committee members were very excited about a truly New Zealand English syllabus which included the teaching of English grammar through a simple comparison between English and Māori. We thought we had the support of the government officials from the Education Department and we believed that those who were unhappy about the proposal would be brought around by the logic of our argument. After all, the more conservative critics of English teaching in New Zealand had been constantly calling for a return to grammar teaching in schools, and with this proposal they would have their wish.

Sadly, those opposed to this proposal were well organised and very vocal and they aroused public concern and dismay about the whole new English syllabus, which at this time was known as Draft 4. The end result was that David Lange, the Minister of Education (who was also the NZ Prime Minister at the time) refused to ratify Draft 4. It was clear from his response to a question in Parliament that he had either been badly advised by his officials or he believed that the comparison with Māori would be politically unpalatable.

I can draw a distinction between the study of English and the study of language. I am convinced that to study English one has to study English. Some of my best friends speak English, and I am sure they will keep doing so. There is a legitimate place for the study of Māori. The legitimate place for the study of Māori is not in the study of English. That means that the Government has to go back to the Committee and get it to adhere to its terms of reference and come through with a paper that is a constructive contribution to the extension of the syllabus beyond Form Five and to come back in the realisation that English is a legitimate language, that it is rich in its own culture, and that it deserves to be studied by those who study English. But for goodness sake, one does not study English by speaking Māori.<sup>2</sup>

Members felt extremely frustrated that the Minister of Education at no time met the committee (or even individual members of the committee) to hear an explanation for the method of grammar teaching proposed in Draft 4. I personally wrote to David Lange, explaining the purpose of our proposals, and offered to fly to Wellington to talk to him. The response to my letter was a polite brush-off written by his secretary. It is possible that Ministry officials involved with Draft 4 could have been distracted at that time, because they were in the anxious position of reapplying for their own jobs because of a reorganisation of the Ministry of Education.

Some opponents of Draft 4 were unashamedly dishonest, but the general public did not know this. At the head of the different sections in the text of Draft 4 were placed short Māori proverbs relating to language (with an English translation).

Ko te kumara te wai-u  
Ko te reo te wairua mauri ora.

As the kumara is mother's milk  
So language is the essence of being.

<sup>2</sup> The quotation is taken from *Hansard* for 16 November, 1988. 16/11/1988). Known as Hansard, the debates are a verbatim record what is said in the New Zealand Parliament. See [http://www.library.otago.ac.nz/subject\\_guides/nz-parliament.html](http://www.library.otago.ac.nz/subject_guides/nz-parliament.html) for useful information on this.



Opponents to Draft 4 combined these proverbs in one long continuous text and then claimed that this was what the new English syllabus would look like. In 1989, an article highly critical of the language proposal in Draft 4 was published in a popular magazine *Metro* and entitled “Te English?” (du Chateau, 1989). This had wide circulation and its author later won a media prize for her article. Although I was the only member on the committee with a linguistics background, the author, Carol du Chateau, at no time approached me or asked me for my views. She represented those writing Draft 4 as conspirators and claimed that a “small and secretive group of educationalists” was “planning changes so radical ...they are attempting to institute social engineering on a scale that has never been seen before in this country” (Du Chateau, 1989, p. 75). With comments which also revealed a lack of understanding of language relationships, it was clear that Du Chateau saw the use of Māori for comparative purposes as the problem.

There is no physical point of contact between the languages [Māori and English] as there is between English and Latin and English and French, which come from the same ancient roots....Māori has an extremely limited vocabulary... (p. 84).

In my storage cartons, I found both letters of support and letters opposed to the English/Māori comparison. In a letter to the Minister of Education, one Auckland Head of English complained:

English teachers would now be required to have a good understanding of the Māori language...Furthermore, in dividing our time between the English and the Māori languages within the English course, we must, of necessity, teach English to a lesser standard.

A different point of view was expressed to the Minister from a Christchurch Head of English:

It would be a sad matter for the teaching of English in New Zealand, if its future were to be determined by a small but vociferous group of reactionary teachers from Auckland. Down this way we consider we are also New Zealanders who live in the present concerned for their students in the modern world.

The 6th and 7th form English Syllabus Committee was then disbanded and the syllabus given to another group to rewrite. Draft 5 was also rejected and passed to yet another committee (with a member of this committee being one of the strongest critics of Draft 4). In the final draft, the comparison between English and Māori was represented by this sentence: “Māori language examples and comparisons could be used to illustrate how New Zealand English has evolved its unique linguistic identity.” In a letter that I wrote at that time to Vince Catherwood, Curriculum Functions Manager in the Ministry of Education, I expressed my concern that the whole point of teaching English grammar through a comparison between English and Māori had become completely lost.

This really shows that those revising the syllabus had no understanding of the purpose of making a comparison, and no understanding of the evolution of New Zealand English. In fact this sentence is an embarrassing nonsense (November 24, 1989).

I now look back on this whole attempt to introduce grammar teaching in New Zealand 6th and 7th forms as a disappointing failure. Perhaps we were naive not to expect a backlash because of our suggestion of using examples from Māori in an English grammar. In their response to the questionnaire mentioned above, some teachers who were strongly opposed to this approach had written of the Māori language in very disparaging terms, referring to it in terms like “a useless, stone-age language”. Sadly, this comment and others like it came from teachers in areas of New Zealand where there were high numbers of Māori in schools. At the time, we tried to ignore the adverse comments and concentrate on the many positive responses. Looking back now, I have asked myself whether fear of a backlash was a reason *not* to attempt this method of studying grammar. In hindsight, perhaps, we could have done things differently and been more accommodating. Perhaps we could have made the comparative approach optional or suggested the use of traditional methods in say the 6th form and a comparison between English and Māori at 7th form as part of wider grammar instruction, and not as the only method. In a response to a letter from Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy, the opposition spokesman on Education, Dr Lockwood Smith, wrote:

The reason I believe the proposals for the 6th and 7th form English syllabus raised so much ire, relates to the packaging and presentation of the syllabus. The Māori rhetoric through much of the syllabus caused an emotive reaction that resulted in few people considering the logic and potential value in teaching structure. That was unfortunate. ...I believe it was most unfortunate that some chose to use the draft syllabus as a vehicle for pushing a bi-cultural barrow. The comparative teaching of structure and grammar was the victim of that (December 1, 1989).

At the beginning of this paper, I suggested that the teaching of English in New Zealand had to be seen in a social and political context. When the 6th and 7th Form English Syllabus Committee first met in 1986, it was during the first term of a new Labour Government. There was a general feeling of optimism around at that time and the belief that there was the possibility of change, which included social change. The committee's terms of reference that required the consideration of biculturalism reflected the thinking of the time. At this time, public institutions were being given Māori well as English names and Māori greetings were becoming an established part of official welcoming protocol. In 1989, the Labour government was in its second term and by this time it had introduced sweeping economic changes which had produced strong opposition, even anger, from former Labour party supporters. As an election approached, the government was trying desperately not to rock any boats. These anxieties were justified, when it was heavily defeated in the polls in 1990.

For her thesis, *The politics of curriculum: a case study of the 6th and 7th form English syllabus* (1993), Sarah Cox later interviewed some members of the syllabus committee. She wrote:

There was a sense of frustration amongst the syllabus authors that crucial aspects of the draft had not been explained sufficiently and that there was a degree of misinformation about the proposed language study for example, which the media had caught on to. Hindsight provided some interviewees with the perspective that the careers of both the Minister and his officials were at a point of transition and that there was a reluctance to “push for” the adoption of the draft (p. 77).

In her interview with David Lange, Cox reports that his concerns were wider than just the contents of Draft 4.

Mr Lange believed that the commitment by his government to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, as seen in the criteria set out for the school charters under Tomorrow's Schools reforms had been the source of "an awful lot of provincial backlash...we were starting to look stupid all around." Referring to Draft 4 he said, "This results at times in the need for Ministerial intervention. It's just necessary sometimes to put a dog down. I had to do just that" (p. 80).

In recent years in New Zealand, we have seen another strong backlash brought about by conservative politicians opposed to any special recognition of Māori in New Zealand, and opposed to the recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi as a living document. This movement almost brought down the Labour government in 2005. Perhaps the angry public response to Draft 4 of the English syllabus by a few outspoken critics was a forewarning of things to come. In the end, I felt disillusioned, not just by the failure of the committee to introduce grammar teaching, but also because I had a strong feeling that if we had suggested a comparison with a European language we would not have been attacked as we were.

### **TEACHING THE TEACHERS ABOUT GRAMMAR: THE CASE OF EXPLORING LANGUAGE.**

In 1994, the NZ Ministry of Education brought out *English in the New Zealand Curriculum*, which was part of a major review of all curricular areas. The section in the English curriculum on "Exploring and Learning about language" appeared to be promoting a return to grammar teaching in New Zealand schools. It stated:

Knowledge about language is an area of intrinsic interest, worthy of attention in its own right. It is important for students' language development. Such knowledge expressed in relevant terminology enables students to talk about texts in an informed way (NZ Ministry of Education, 1994, p. 17).

In a list of language features to be studied it stated:

Students should explore and develop an understanding of grammar, or the way words and phrases are formed and combined (p. 17).

The question of linguistic terminology was further addressed:

To develop their knowledge about the organisation and functions of language, and to enable texts to be discussed with others, students will need to understand and use linguistic terminology. In the earlier years of schooling this should be explained as the need arises. As students progress, they develop concepts and knowledge which are increasingly abstract and detailed, and therefore require a more extended terminology to describe language and how it functions in communicating meaning (p. 17).

It also allowed the possibility of a comparative study:

In the senior secondary school, students can also explore language by comparing English with another language such as Māori, or any other language taught or spoken in the school or community (p.17).

A year before the new English curriculum was launched, it was decided that a handbook on language written specifically for teachers was needed, because so many had expressed the need to know more about the English language, and especially about grammar. In 1994, a contract was awarded to the National Association of English Teachers (NZATE) to produce such a handbook which was to be known as *Exploring Language*. Two years later, this was followed by another contract awarded to NZATE to run professional development courses on *Exploring Language*. I was approached to become part of the initial writing team, and although I agreed very reluctantly only to “assist,” before long I had been made the “principal developer” and ended up being involved in the professional development courses also.

The writing team consisted of four people, all with demanding full-time jobs. The three others were Ewen Holstein, Head of English at Christchurch Boys' High School, Rema Leitch, principal of a rural primary school and Sheena Hervey, Senior Lecturer and Head of English at the Dunedin College of Education. At times, we were joined by Stuart Middleton, a school principal from Auckland, who was the president of NZATE. Because I was the only person in the team with any background in linguistics, I had the responsibility for the shape, linguistic content and, ultimately, the success or failure of the handbook.

Our brief was a broad one: we were asked “to write a book containing everything we would like teachers to know about language”. At first, some requirements from the Ministry of Education seemed extraordinary. The book was to support a new English curriculum which had not itself yet been written, and it was to fill the linguistic needs of all New Zealand primary school teachers and all secondary school English teachers. University colleagues gave me their condolences and said it was an impossible task.

The most significant point about the book *Exploring Language* was that it was to be written specifically for teachers – it was *not* to be a school textbook. The reasoning behind this, which I very much agreed with, was that if we wanted more enlightened teaching of English language at all levels in New Zealand schools, then this had to come first of all through the education and re-education of teachers.

The writing of *Exploring Language* was very different from any academic writing I had ever undertaken. Everything had to be discussed by the initial writing group and then it was read and commented on by members of an advisory committee, and then by members of a ministerial review committee. These committees were made up mainly of practising primary and secondary school teachers and teachers from Colleges of Education. The “grammar toolbox”, as the grammatical component was called, was also closely checked by two linguists at the University of Canterbury – Dr Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy and Dr Kate Kearns. Later in the development, draft copies of the resource were given to teachers who came to professional development courses and who then went back to their schools and developed and tested classroom resources based on the *Exploring Language* text. At every point, parts of the text

were able to be changed, added to, deleted, or rewritten because of the comments and suggestions from many people.

*Exploring Language* covered other aspects of language as well as grammar – spoken, written, varieties of language, language in New Zealand, and visual language. In this paper, I will restrict my discussion to the grammar component which was by far the longest section in the book.

At the outset, we needed to consider some major concerns of teachers. In New Zealand, for many years, teachers and school inspectors had been questioning whether the study of grammar in schools really *did* improve speaking and writing as was often so forcefully asserted by members of the general public. In the annual reports of New Zealand school inspectors, the lack of transfer of grammatical knowledge was a fairly regular theme from the 1880s onwards. It was also taken up in the Thomas Report, which was the basis of the New Zealand School Certificate prescription in 1945:

No substantial transfer of grammatical knowledge to written and spoken English is proven. Some very successful teachers have found by experience that good English is better fostered by extending very widely the time given to reading and writing, and to discussion on the subject matter read, than by systematic training in formal grammar (NZ Dept of Education, 1944, p. 20).

In more recent times, the work of a research team led by Warwick Elley, published by the NZ Council for Educational Research, had studied three groups of students at Aorere College in South Auckland, over a period of three years (Elley, Barham, Lamb & Wyllie, 1979). They concluded that when students who had studied grammar were compared with students who had not studied grammar there were “negligible differences”. The students who had not studied grammar showed a competence in writing and other language skills that was fully equal to that of the two groups studying grammar. The researchers asked whether the teaching of grammar was not an expensive luxury in an already over-crowded curriculum.

At the time the *Exploring Language* project was beginning, there was a strong suspicion voiced by some teachers that because there was to be an emphasis on grammar in *Exploring Language*, this would herald a return to the kind of traditional grammar teaching called for groups such as the NZ Business Round Table, a conservative think-tank which had actively campaigned for a return to traditional grammar teaching in schools. I was asked whether teachers really needed to understand about the structure of language. Did it really matter if they did not recognise a proper noun or a transitive verb as long as their classes were interesting and enjoyable? Clearly, if teachers were going to study grammar, then they needed to be persuaded that there were very good reasons for doing this.

The *Exploring Language* writing group concluded that there were indeed good reasons why teachers should know about grammar. The first was because language is such an important part of our world and this in itself was sufficient reason why we should understand about it, just as people need to understand about physics or biology or history. The second was that if teachers were going to talk about language in the classroom, and if they were going to analyse texts linguistically, it was essential that they themselves had a good understanding of language, with the terminology to

describe it. The third reason was because without a knowledge of the structure of language teachers would be unable to see language development in the writing and speaking of their own pupils.

Some teachers on the Advisory Committee were very uneasy about a university lecturer being the Principal Developer and they feared that the resulting book would be a dense academic text, more suitable for a university. Again and again, they impressed upon me that *Exploring Language* must be very accessible, written in simple language with clear explanations and examples. I was told that when I was writing, I must keep in mind “a beginning teacher in a difficult South Auckland school, who has eight new curricular areas to think about, and who is tired”.

One of the functions of the *Exploring Language* project was to set out a grammatical description and terminology that would be used consistently in all schools throughout New Zealand. Therefore an early important task was to decide which approach to grammar should be adopted and which metalanguage used. There was strong pressure from some quarters to use a functional grammar based on M.A.K. Halliday's systemic grammar, which was being used in some parts of Australia. Those supporting this approach argued that if teachers really did not know much about language then why not start with a clean sheet and present a completely new approach. In the end, it was decided that it was not true that teachers were completely ignorant about language and they actually did know about nouns and verbs, subjects and objects; therefore it was better to build on this existing knowledge.

The end result was an eclectic grammar using traditional terms wherever appropriate but also introducing some terminology (such as “determiner”) which was unfamiliar to teachers. The material for the grammar was adapted from a number of sources, including the work of the British writers David Crystal, Richard Hudson, and Mary Mason's (1988) series *Illuminating English*. The comprehensive work, *A Grammar of Contemporary English* by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985), was a useful general reference, as was Katharine Perera's book *Children's Writing and Reading: analysing classroom language* (1984).

I found writing the grammar for *Exploring Language* very much more difficult and challenging than writing papers for an academic audience and it was sometimes frustrating that this work was regarded by some in the academic community as “easy work”. There was the difficulty of defining a category or a word class when essential technical terms needed for the definition had not yet been introduced in the text. But the main challenge was to make the grammar clear without being too complex, to find a balance between simplicity and completeness without compromising accuracy. How much detail was needed? When teachers began to use the grammar they reported that 6-year-olds were delighted to be able to recognise proper nouns. Do you then explain that *New Zealand* is actually a noun phrase? We took the risk of keeping the grammar simple, while at the same time inviting those who were interested and curious to go beyond the resource to the more comprehensive and detailed accounts in other grammar books and university courses.

In the many grammar books we investigated, we found that the contents were always arranged neatly, according to categories. One grammar might begin with “word” and end with “sentence” while another might begin with “sentence” and end with “word”.

The grammar in *Exploring Language* was superficially messy. The organising principle was to begin with concepts which were likely to be familiar to teachers, such as nouns and verbs, and then to build on them, and add more. So the grammar began with noun and verb, and then moved to subject, verb and object. Then adjective was added, leading to subject, verb and complement. Instead of having a whole complete section on the verb and the verb phrase, the information on verbs was broken up and spread throughout the grammar in smaller units. The reasoning for this was to create a simple narrative, so that one point followed on from what went before, but it was also designed like this because we were told that small amounts were easier to be taken in by tired teachers in difficult South Auckland schools. The end result was not neat and tidy in the manner of most grammar books; rather the information was presented in small bites, incrementally, with a crucial index. The general response to this arrangement was very positive and we were very pleased when some teachers said they were surprised to find how well the text held their attention.

The primary purpose of the writing team was to produce a grammar that would be useful for teachers.

Teachers always need to know more than they will be required to teach. In order to reduce complex language matters to the level of simplicity appropriate to different ages and stages, teachers themselves must have a knowledge of language that is thorough and cohesive (Ministry of Education 1996, final draft, p. 3).

The problem of writing a resource to cover the needs of *all* teachers from year 1 to year 13 was not as difficult as we first thought it would be. We later found that there were teachers at all levels, who admitted that they needed explanations for terms or concepts which were completely familiar and obvious to others. For this reason, we decided to assume no previous knowledge at all, and explain even the most basic and obvious terms. For many, terms like “singular/plural” or “first/second/third person” were part of their everyday vocabulary but we decided it was better to invite some readers to skip over some explanations than to miss those who needed help.

We also added extra material, arranged in boxes, which we thought might be useful for teachers at different levels.

Additional accompanying material and information has also been included in this section which we hope will be useful to teachers. We have tried wherever possible to link the grammar tool box to information about children’s language development. We have also added information about the structure of other languages, especially Māori, in order to show contrasts, to explain why second language learners might have difficulties and to show that the way the English language does things is not necessarily the only possible or logical way. Some references have been added where they are relevant about language and gender and about the historical development of English (Ministry of Education 1996, final draft, p. 25).

The section on the pronoun is a good example of this organisation. In the interests of keeping the grammar simple, it was restricted to the personal pronoun; other categories of pronoun were listed at the end of the section, with examples, but no further discussion. Teachers who wanted to know more were invited to look in other grammar books for extra detail and information. Additional material was then provided in accompanying boxes:

- Caregivers' avoidance of personal pronouns when children are learning to talk;
- Gender in the third person singular, introducing the subject of sexist language;
- Pronoun gender in other languages – using examples from Māori and Chinese;
- Information about languages which make a *tu/vous* distinction;
- Historical information about pronouns, illustrated by the Shakespearean use of *you* and *thou*;
- Information about the use of *you/you*s in other varieties of English, including non-standard New Zealand English.

The section on active and passive verbs included additional material on children's acquisition of passive verbs; the use of the passive in scientific writing; the use of agent deletion in advertisements and propaganda, and so on.

While the grammar was being written, members of the writing team would constantly question the relevance or usefulness for *teachers* of a particular category or feature of language. The section on complex sentences, for example, was received enthusiastically because teachers could immediately see its relevance for the assessment of students' writing in a systematic and productive way. (For this, we found Katherine Perera's {1984} work very helpful.) Those who had previously concentrated on surface features, such as spelling and punctuation, were now seeing that a seemingly messy piece of writing, with spelling and punctuation mistakes, could also demonstrate some advanced syntactic development, which they would have completely ignored because they did not know about syntax. Teachers agreed that what could be called the “writing virtues” of their pupils often went unseen and unacknowledged because of their own lack of knowledge about language. Teachers could also see that what they might have marked as a mistake could also be seen as an indication that the writer was taking a risk and trying (even if unsuccessfully) to use a more complex grammatical structure. As one teacher said, “It's like knowing the names of trees in the NZ bush – once you can recognise them and can name them, then it is easy to spot them. Without this knowledge, you never see them. Until I knew what a passive verb was, I never saw one.”

Later, when primary school teachers on the professional development courses went back and used the grammatical material in their classrooms, they found that small children were far less intimidated by technical linguistic vocabulary than people had previously thought; moreover, children really enjoyed learning technical words. Where teachers in the past had been talking about “naming words”, “doing words” and “describing words”, children were now comfortably referring to nouns, verbs, and adjectives (and positively delighting in onomatopoeia). One teacher reported asking a 6-year-old why he had used a capital letter for a noun, and the boy replied, “Oh, silly me! *That* isn't a proper noun!”

We have found that young children are far less intimidated by technical terms than some of their teachers. It is possible that certain technical terms could be introduced at J1 so instead of a teacher saying “give me a good word,” that teacher could say “give me a good adjective.” If the teacher understands what an adjective is and is using the term appropriately, then the child will also be learning about adjectives too, not through any formal instruction but through the most natural means of all – by hearing the word used in a context. Discussion about the form and function of adjectives can come later, if and when this is appropriate, and such discussion will be able to build on a concept and a name which is already familiar (Ministry of Education 1996, final draft, pp. 2-3).



For me, one of the most satisfying aspects of working with teachers was to see what they were able to do in the classroom with the material in the “grammar toolbox”. Information in the written text was transformed into classroom activities where small children made “noun mobiles” or added “interesting adverbs” to their stories, and older pupils considered some of the syntactic reasons why some second-language learners were having difficulties with English.

The teachers in the professional development courses were keen to learn more about grammar. When I played them a recorded interview of my youngest daughter Charlotte, aged 11, talking about the language work she had done in primary school, they recognised the truth of what she was saying.

I think teachers may not know much - and so teachers aren't really interested in language. You can tell if a teacher likes what they're teaching - teachers - they're not really interested in it - so they just give you the text book and that kind of thing...

We started language work in Standard Two. It was really confusing and nobody in the class really understood it. Our teacher just said - told us there was nouns and verbs and adverbs and blah blah blah - you know - and then she told us other things like homonyms and synonyms and synonyms and homonyms and I didn't understand - I didn't understand - I didn't understand any of them - um - and nobody could remember them next year - all I can remember is her telling us all these things - and nobody could understand them and nobody knew what they were - that's all - I knew they were just words and it was really boring.

In the professional development courses, teachers were asking where they could get more assistance with knowledge about the English language. Only selected teachers attended these courses in the first place, and a lecture and discussion might be enough to show the value and advantages of learning about grammar, but this was never enough to give the support and tuition needed. For those who had to go back to their schools or colleges and pass on what they had learned on these courses, there was always a danger of the “Chinese whisper” effect.

At the end of the writing process, a manuscript of the book *Exploring Language* was completed which was then sent to an editor appointed by the Ministry of Education. We were told that the manuscript would be “lightly edited for style”. Sadly, this editor had not attended any of the courses, lectures or discussions on the *Exploring Language* project and firmly believed her role was to convert the material into a serious academic text. Short simple sentences were combined to create long, complex sentences, material was rearranged, and at times she even changed or deleted content that had passed the scrutiny of all the committees and the teachers. An example such as “the smelly old cat” was converted into “the tortoiseshell cat” and “John is stupid” became “John is unreliable”. Lighthearted examples and anecdotes were either changed or removed completely. She would not even allow the statement that the word *grammar* was related to “glamour”. Obviously, grammar was not a subject to be treated lightly. (The editing did not only affect the grammar section. In the section on intonation, the intonation marks were left off the examples, so that they made no sense at all.) It is for this reason that in this paper I have chosen to quote from the final draft of *Exploring Language*, rather than from the published book (Ministry of Education, 1996).

It is not easy for me to report on what happened to the *Exploring Language* project after the publication of the book, as in time I ceased to have contact with many of those who had been involved with it. This was partly because of pressure of university work, but also because of my disappointment with the editing.

This year, my daughter Charlotte, whose comments about language work in primary school are quoted earlier in this paper, completed her primary teacher training. Her class of trainee teachers was told in passing that there was a book called *Exploring Language*, but that was the only reference to it in her entire course. This was as disappointing to me as the unfortunate editing. However, I have since heard that in some courses the book is certainly being used in teacher training, so it seems that its use depends on individual teacher educators. And lest I should seem too despondent, I have also heard of teachers who have found it helpful.

## CONCLUSION

These two case studies illustrate a number of points about the teaching of grammar in schools. In New Zealand, this has been a complex matter involving teachers, universities, the general public and sometimes politicians. The failure of Draft 4 of the New Zealand 6th and 7th form English Language Syllabus was caused in part by a failure to recognise that there would be strong resistance to using Māori examples among some members of the community. We now know in hindsight that we needed to be better prepared for this opposition and we should have argued for our case more strongly. Perhaps we should have been warned by the experience of the members of the Thomas Committee, who in the 1940s received death threats because of their more liberal approach to English teaching. People in New Zealand take these matters very seriously. Draft 4 generated excitement and enthusiasm among many people because here was a truly different and uniquely New Zealand approach to the teaching of grammar, which took into account this country's two official languages, English and Māori. But this was not sufficient to see it implemented.

Although Draft 4 was rejected, the ideas behind it resurfaced in *Exploring Language* in a modified form. The need for grammar teaching in schools was certainly recognised in *English in the New Zealand Curriculum*. The *Exploring Language* project, and the teacher development courses which followed it, showed a commitment to the teaching of grammar in schools and also demonstrated the strength of teacher interest in grammar, and their recognition that a knowledge of grammar would assist their teaching and their ability to assess student writing. This was stated by teachers over and over again, but they also said they wanted much more than we could give them at that time.

The final assessment of the *Exploring Language* project will depend on whether the work has continued in schools without the stimulus of Ministry of Education funded courses. In the past in New Zealand, there is good evidence that for some teachers at least, their classroom work could be somewhat untouched by Ministry of Education initiatives. Research carried out by Margaret Feist into teacher responses to a major syllabus change for Forms 3-5 in the 1970s found that teachers were modifying rather than abandoning their old programmes (Feist, 1979). Another researcher, Luran Massey, researching at the same time as Margaret Feist, found that teachers were not

as informed about curriculum changes as the Education Department thought they were. He carried out extensive teacher interviews for his PhD and found many young teachers who claimed they had not read the *Statement of Aims for Forms 3-5*, where the rationale for the new syllabus was set out, and some had not even read the syllabus that they were supposed to be teaching (Massey, 1983). It would not be surprising if a similar disjunction between some teachers and the Ministry of Education still occurred today.

Although the intention behind the “grammar tool box” in *Exploring Language* was to provide a nationally agreed terminology, to be used in *all* New Zealand schools, I have been told that this has not been strictly adhered to. I have seen one school grammar book, written and published in New Zealand in 1999, which has certainly not followed the terminology set out in *Exploring Language*, and which refers to “naming words” and “doing words”, and does not include the category of *phrase* or the word class *determiner* (Roxborough & Thomas, 1999).

I have a personal view about the way the Ministry of Education designed the contracts for this work which could also have affected the end results. This is not a criticism of the members of NZATE who carried out everything they were required to do, delivering on time the agreed outputs – the publishing of *Exploring Language* and the courses, workshops and teacher development programmes that they were contracted to provide. The real challenge, however, was to assess the *impact* of such a project – in other words, to find out what people *actually* learnt, absorbed and then used in their teaching. It seems to me that there was no provision in any contract to monitor and evaluate this impact, which I think in the end is more important than the stated outputs. For example, there was no base-line survey to find out what people already knew, or taught at the beginning of the *Exploring Language* project, and at the end there was no follow-up survey to see if there had been any change. Also, those designing the project did not consider at the outset whether it would be sustainable once the project funding finished, and consider in their planning how this sustainability might be achieved.

At the time, *Exploring Language* was an important and very well resourced initiative to bring grammar teaching into schools, through the training and re-training of teachers. However, the New Zealand experience shows that, without constant and continuing teacher development and careful monitoring, even the best prepared and resourced schemes can fail. Fashions also change in teaching and, whereas in the 1990s there was a great interest in language teaching in the English curriculum and in the role of grammar, by 2005 interests had changed. As one very experienced New Zealand educator told me, “We're all doing “genre” these days, and our interests are much more global than just seeing things in New Zealand terms.”

The two case histories show very well that grammar teaching in schools is perhaps more complex, and even more political, than Hudson and Walmsley's (2005) article suggests. Even with the support of university linguists, I do not think schools will satisfactorily teach grammar until teachers themselves are well equipped to teach it and see it as being useful, interesting and relevant. In New Zealand in the mid-1990s, I really thought we were close to achieving this; only the future will tell if *Exploring Language* has had any lasting effect.

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