

Language and the 6th and 7th Form English Syllabus

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores some of the issues raised by the use of the word 'language' in the proposed syllabus in relation to linguistic diversity, literacy and national identity, and what the implications are for the study of language as a cohesive foundation across the syllabus. The discussion includes a comparison of parts of the Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Teaching of English Language, produced by the Department of Education and Science in Britain in 1988 (The Kingman Report) as it has some interesting parallels with what is going on in our own education system. Although ours is obviously on a much smaller scale, it reflects some disturbing trends in English curriculum reform.

The Kingman Report and the New Zealand English syllabus

At the beginning of Chapter 2 of the Kingman Report¹ it is stated:

Language expresses identity, enables co-operation, and confers freedom. In language we create a symbolic model of the world, in which past and present are carried forward to the future. Language is the naming of experience, and what we name we have power over ... A democratic society needs people who have the linguistic abilities which will enable them to discuss, evaluate and make sense of what they are told, so as to take effective action on the basis of their understanding. The working of a democracy depends on the discriminating use of language on the part of all its people. Otherwise there can be no genuine participation, but only the imposition of the ideas of those who are linguistically capable. As individuals, as well as members of constituencies, people need the resources of language both to defend their rights and to fulfil their obligations.

At face value, these words seem to be stating the obvious - that in a democracy, language as political activity, and politics as education are inextricably interwoven, and they are inalienable human rights. In this respect, the right to education, and therefore the right to knowledge about language are not negotiable. They are like the law - they are political activities which protect and assert our political right to participation in society. Few of us would find that problematic. It follows, then, that education about language should not be a commodity to be bought and sold and traded for votes, nor should it be an instrument of oppression.

However, state education systems are always a product of the values and beliefs of the dominant voice in any society, and history is littered with attempts to subvert and suppress education and language because those who aspire to power as domination are well aware of the power that informed language use confers upon its users. Our own educational history is a case in point.

Specifically, we have the recent example of our own educational reforms last year. We should really ask ourselves who was it who decided that educational administration needed reforming? What was the justification for reform? Was the question of substantive benefit for what goes on in classrooms ever addressed? The answers to those questions have to lead us to the conclusion that the decisions were not intended as a liberating nor a democratizing process. The devolution of power and decision-making about the running of schools at community level was not the choice of the people directly involved. The motives behind it were nothing to do with democracy and equity: they were to do with economics and ensuring that teachers, the people who are experts on what education is about, have a very limited voice. Ultimately, it was the imposition of the ideas of those who are in power and able to pay for the linguistically able to write their documents.

How does this relate to the 6th and 7th Form English Syllabus?

The idea of a 6th and 7th Form English syllabus came into being as part of the national curriculum review and development which has been going on since the mid 1980s, culminating in the Curriculum Review 1987.² The syllabus is intended to

...provide continuity between language and English programmes in the primary and Junior secondary school, and those in the senior secondary school...The statement provides a unifying framework for planning senior English programmes for the present and future needs of New Zealand students. It reflects many of the developments in the teaching of English that have occurred over the last two decades.³

Just what is intended by the words 'continuity between language and English programmes' needs clarifying. What 'language' means in the primary school is very different from what 'English' means in the secondary school. In the primary school, the approach to language is an experiential approach developing children's linguistic resources and learning the curriculum through focused language activity. In the Junior secondary school, English is a subject to which four or five hours are devoted each week and is based on a personal growth model - by which is meant children refining their sense of self and ability to express themselves by responding to 'relevant' literature. At present, English in the seventh form largely consists of practising listening, speaking, reading, viewing, and writing about Cultural Artifacts (with a capital C and A) - novels, poems, plays, films, the media. It has very little to do with knowledge and analysis of political or social processes, English or otherwise, or experience of language use beyond the literary. The present Bursaries exam system where language is divorced from literature (and a consequent similarly small amount of class time devoted to teaching towards it), cannot help but reduce the study of language to an exercise in matching linguistic labels with cultural products. Moreover, the present seventh form system tied as it is to the exam, exemplifies the traditional and unhelpful dichotomy between language and literature because language is a separate 'section'. In addition, all that the other 80 per cent tests in terms of 'skills' is the ability to answer a few comprehension questions, and the ability to write expository essays from a very small selection of literature in a narrow tradition of literary criticism. It cannot even claim to test extensive reading to any great extent - there is no hard evidence to claim that the essays written are based on informed reading of the literary texts being written about. The only reading it tests is the rubric of the examination paper itself.

On the face of it, then, it may be argued that the idea of continuity from Forms 3-5 as proposed for the new syllabus is a good one. What we have to face however, is that the present system is failing too many children before they get to the 6th and 7th form. And generally speaking, those children are from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds - notably, as statistics keep reminding us, Maori and Pacific Island children. Simply put, whatever goes on in forms 3-5 is working against the interests of those who are most in need of help. Yet, the Foreword to the Syllabus states confidently - '[The syllabus] reflects many of the developments in the teaching of English that have occurred over the last two decades'.

Even if these children have not dropped out of school by the 5th form, by continuing approaches to language education which favour only those who are already skilled in our Pakeha

centric educational practices, all we are doing by treating the 6th and 7th forms as a holding pen for them is increasing their chances of repeated failure. What is not widely known, or acknowledged, is that the learning gap widens for children who are not proficient in academic language use when they enter secondary school. The gap does not get smaller the longer they stay at school. There is nothing in any of the syllabus statements which clearly addresses the role of linguistic development in the academic learning process, nor precisely what the relationship is between the child's language, academic language, and how this is to be fostered to meet the linguistic demands of the adult world, if indeed it can. It is simply not adequate to state that: 'Language makes a unique contribution to the wider aims of education which are concerned with promoting the development of students' intellectual, personal, social, and aesthetic qualities,⁴ without being able to specify and demonstrate what language in education is and what it does bring about these transformations. Interestingly, the words 'intellectual, social, personal and aesthetic development are also found on p.8 section 9 of the Kingman Report. This can hardly be coincidence, and thus raises questions about the professional integrity, attitudes, and assumptions of the author of the Draft 5 syllabus.

Standard English as cultural imperialism

To get another perspective on the word language, we must consider the context in which the Kingman Report was written. It was made in the context of national core curriculum reform, and it is about standardising English language teaching, learning and assessment. The English national curriculum is about English, and despite the generic use of the word 'language' in the introductory quotation in this paper, and therefore the political, pedagogical and linguistic interpretations that could imply, the whole document is calculatedly designed at government level to assert the supremacy of the English language and the canon of English literature in England as the norm, and these are inextricably associated with national identity. A little further on in 'Language in Relation to Social Development' we read 'The public world of children is largely bounded by the school, where Standard English will be the norm.'⁵ (note the use of will - does it mean obligation or inevitability?) and then in the section entitled 'Language in Relation to Aesthetic Development' we find the words:

It is possible that a generation of children may grow up deprived of their entitlement - an introduction to the powerful and splendid history of the best that has been thought and said in our language. Too rigid a concern with what is 'relevant' to the lives of young people seems to us to pose the danger of impoverishing not only the young people, but the culture itself, which has to be revitalized by each generation.⁶ (My italics)

Political and cultural literacy in their terms equates with English. In other words, in their view, it is the only political language, and it is exclusive; encoding this in a government document is a way of diffusing diversity, defusing potential political discontent, and consolidating national identity using the English language as the instrument of maintaining the status quo. It is about using English as an instrument for reproducing the dominant culture, it is emphatically not about educating for challenge and change, as the introductory quotation appears to suggest. In the introduction to the Ministry draft (Draft 5) of our syllabus, we have:

English is an international language. New Zealand students in the senior secondary school need skills and competence in English to provide a means of communicating with other people around the world. In studying literature, students need to read and respond to literature of the past, as well as to contemporary writing. The plays of Shakespeare, for instance, speak powerfully to the students of today because their message [*singular*] is universal and timeless.⁷

So here we are to interpret 'language' as English, and English as one neutral? international language. Furthermore, in the same paragraph there is the juxtaposition of the appeal to Shakespeare (presumably intended as a kind of literary artefact representing 'the best that has been said and thought in our language') because the message of his plays is 'universal and timeless'. The danger here is in treating Shakespeare's plays as some kind of stable linguistic (and by implication,

moral) beacon of cultural rectitude, as static written text only, rather than as a drama as a dynamic process of reinterpretation and transformation of meaning. Treating Shakespeare's plays as written text suggests a decontextualised approach to literature, ignoring the social and historical forces which shaped them, therefore treating the words as having one unchanging meaning, and thus ignoring the fact that the whole of the vast critical literature on Shakespeare is concerned with precisely that difficulty: how are we, coming from a different social and historical context, bringing an enormous diversity of experience to the 'reading' of text, supposed to interpret Shakespeare's messages? Surely any approach to studying Shakespeare must be built on the premise that the very instability and irregularity of his language points to his concern with uncertainty and disorder. If Shakespeare is to be studied, it is precisely because his messages and language are problematic and not 'universal'.

However, further on in the introduction to the Draft 5 syllabus, we are given to understand that the syllabus is also meant to reflect the bi-cultural nature of our society by placing more emphasis on New Zealand literature written by both Maori and Pakeha men and women, New Zealand English, and literature from other parts of the globe. In this respect, the syllabus is more inclusive than the Kingman model for which there is only one important English literary tradition. However, there is still the problem of language and national identity in our syllabus. Embedded in the apparently liberal statements about literary and cultural diversity and equity there is the inept statement that 'our language and culture (singular) is being strengthened by interaction with other cultural groups' which may be interpreted as 'English Rules, OK?', or to put it another way - institutionalized linguistic imperialism. While our syllabus may not be advocating a return to the unrealistic expectation of schools to perpetuate one standard English,⁸ as the Kingman document appears to be doing, nevertheless there is the undertone of English being the only language of value. The idea of linguistic and cultural diversity being viewed in the classroom or anywhere else as a tool for strengthening Pakeha language and culture is bizarre, repugnant and intellectually ridiculous. In the first place, the idea of a distinctive New Zealand English dialect conflicts with English as an International Language with uniform and stable grammar and vocabulary that that implies. The most that language contact can do is further diversify English. Secondly, we no longer talk about one English, but many Englishes, so the idea of one standard, let alone one standard international English is entirely at odds with the known facts about the diversity of English. And, however well-intentioned the motives for promoting New Zealand English in the new syllabus, what we can teach is really only tentative, given that, as yet, we do not have a detailed linguistic survey of New Zealand, and there has been no comprehensive survey or research of any substance ever been done to establish the existence and domains of use of, for example, Samoan New Zealand English or Maori English.

In practice, all we know is that New Zealand is not by any means a homogeneous monolingual society, any more than England is. There are some local education authorities in England in which there are schools where monolingual English speakers are very much in the minority. We have similar situations in Auckland, but unlike England, we have no comprehensive survey. Moreover, England has never been linguistically homogeneous, from the point of view of regional dialect, nor, historically, is the English language an indigenous language exclusive to the English, any more than it is indigenous to New Zealand, and yet the main thrust of the National Curriculum for English is to attempt to impose one Standard English: '...one of the school's duties is to enable children to acquire Standard English, which is their right.'⁹

Of course, children have a right to learn English, but whether it is within the powers or resources of a school to impose Standard English is entirely another matter. Indeed, in the context of the political motives behind the Kingman Report, and our own syllabus, it is essential that children learn English in order to see through the linguistic deceptions being perpetrated in the name of Government of a supposedly open, pluralist, democratic society. The statement with which this paper began is therefore deeply ironic and grossly misleading when we consider what is being proposed and implemented in every state school in England, and furthermore, what every child will

be assessed on at the ages of 7, 11 and 16. There is every indication, that with the change in government, we will be heading in a similar direction, with a devaluing of sixth form certificate and a commitment to extending national assessment and strengthening the nationally standardised school certificate and bursaries exams. I have already mentioned linguistic diversity. The Kingman Report does make a few coy gestures in that direction, but the message is that once children enter the school gate, Standard English is the norm. The home language or dialect must only be used at home, or at the most, to be used only as a comparison to show how inappropriate it is in public life, in England, and in the world:

The dialect usages of family and immediate circle are sufficient to their purposes; but membership of the smaller group entails membership of the larger, and for the wider community - that of the nation and the world - the standard language will be indispensable.¹⁰

The problem with this document, and with ours, is that it reveals either profound ignorance or a deliberate unwillingness to admit to knowing about what schools are really like, the role of language in education, bilingualism, and, indeed, about English as a language. There are irreconcilable differences, both practically and politically, between what is expected of teachers in terms of teaching English according to the view of the document and the needs and aspirations of the cultural and linguistic communities their students come from. There is no discussion in the Kingman document about the positive aspects of bilingualism or bidialectism as being potentially intellectually enriching. Indeed, it seems rather to subscribe to a deficit theory - the child's home language, if it is not standard English, is intellectually inferior.

The social purposes of the English syllabus

One of the more serious charges we can lay against our draft syllabus is that it barely acknowledges the responsibility we have as teachers in upholding the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. So far I have been discussing the linguistic ineptitude and mystification of the latest draft. This draft (draft 5) was preceded by a syllabus statement (draft 4) which was the result of extensive work and consultation throughout schools and the community for more than two years. It gave very clear and unambiguous directions about the role of English in our bicultural community. It states -

Because the treaty of Waitangi is a cornerstone of educational policy, the English syllabus must take account of bi-cultural principles ... English programmes should therefore give a central place to the language and literary resources unique to New Zealand.

There was a storm of protest from the more conservative members of the public and the teaching profession. Indeed, the public debate was a very good example of the kinds of issues that the syllabus set out to address, and the kinds of attitudes that it has the potential to redress. All the familiar linguistic myths and prejudices about biculturalism, standard versus non-standard English, and the role of grammar in literacy standards were trotted out. The opinions themselves were not surprising, but they did reveal the widespread public ignorance and naivety about general principles of how language works, and specifically the relationship between linguistic pedagogy and linguistic and cultural diversity in New Zealand. It is again ironic that the Metro article¹¹ condemning the politics of the syllabus was the very agent which prompted public debate on precisely the issues which the dissenters held should not be in our English syllabus: knowledge about language and linguistic diversity. Draft 5 emerged from the Ministry later in the year as a substantially different document. All mention of the Treaty of Waitangi, and the state and status of the Maori language as proposed as a topic for discussing language issues in Draft 4 have been removed. We can only conclude from their removal that far from there being a policy to actively promote debate on these topics, there is an official conspiracy to silence. Moreover, as the process is led to a final draft under the helm of yet another committee, there is to be no formal consultation with schools, and no consultation with the Maori people about the principles and practice of the syllabus. The reason for this, we are told, is a question of money.

Unless there is concerted action to place the roles of Maori and English in their proper perspective in this syllabus in the context of our cultures, the people who will be most immediately affected by the change are the people who will ultimately be in positions of power in years to come - the 6th and 7th form students. Is it too cynical to suggest that it is for these reasons that there is official suppression of sensitive issues? Or was it linguistic and cultural sanitizing in deference to the fundamentalist vigilantes? Or was it, yet again, an attempt to strengthen, unify and standardize the English language? It may be the case that it was all three of these motives. To declare it was none of them would be to admit the equally untenable position of an unprincipled and atheoretical stance.

From what has emerged so far it is clear that neither our Draft 5 syllabus nor the Kingman document have any serious theoretical underpinning concerning the critical question of the pedagogical relationship between language use in the community and the role of language in the English syllabus, and therefore what that entails in relation to knowledge about language. The Kingman model of knowledge about language is designed to impose a 'politically' acceptable standard of English language use, formulated as 'attainment targets', which individuals are to achieve by national assessment. Our Draft 5 syllabus, as has been shown, was designed to perpetuate traditional pedagogical approaches to English teaching, within the framework of an existing compartmentalised (atheoretical) model of teaching about English language. Ironically, each claims a progressive shift towards a pedagogical linguistic approach, but the promises cannot be fulfilled precisely because of the questionable pedagogical and theoretical principles underpinning them. If, as each claims, knowledge about language and our communities' linguistic resources is central to learning in the wider sense, and, ultimately, informed participation in 'the working of democracy', then a model of English language clipped on to existing practices and approaches is, at the least, inadequate. The main purpose for studying language and its uses is to see through language as it is used, to challenge the principles and practices of language use. As Harold Rosen said in his paper *Responding to Kingman*.¹²

Language is not a triumphant collective human achievement lubricated by innocuous rules and conventions. It operates at the heart of social conflict. The world is not a peaceful debating society. Language makes possible cheating, lying, every kind of deception, domination of one group by another, mystification of all sorts.

Of course it is essential that children learn English, but not for the reasons stated in the Kingman document, nor those implied in our syllabus. We cannot reconcile practices and approaches with the uncomfortable truths about language use as Rosen describes if present practices treat English language and literature as static, decontextualised objects. It is logically inconsistent to state that: 'The programmes should encourage an enjoyment and love of language and literature for their own sake in order to enhance the lives of young people, and to enhance their leisure activities,' and '... be flexible and enable students to cope with change.'¹³

Nor can we reconcile the demands of standardised attainment and assessment requirements when it is well-known that children's language does not develop in a linear fashion, that there can be a wide range between individual children in terms of language development when they speak the same language, let alone between children who speak different languages and who may have been in the country for different lengths of time, not to mention different schools in different parts of the country.

The primary responsibility of the syllabus is to teach knowledge about language and the uses to which it is put in the discourses we engage in to participate in community life in an informed way.

Language as social discourse

The aims of our English syllabus, then, should not only promote critical awareness of the language actually used, but also of the meanings behind the words and the silences between. The prerequisite for this sort of critical awareness, the close analysis and systematic study of language as the

discourses really used by all the various communities and groups in our society, has not up to now been given any priority in any political decision or school syllabus. Political activity in this area has largely been concerned with its avoidance and suppression. Our schools and our curriculum are the products of our political history, and the dominant attitudes to linguistic issues are reflected in the neglect of such things as the study of foreign languages, more recently the implications for maintaining minority languages, the provision of English support for immigrants, the merits or otherwise of bilingual education, or any other of our linguistic responsibilities. In this respect there is a direct connection between official attitudes towards language and what goes on in the classroom, and therefore what the new syllabus has the opportunity to redress, and what Draft 4, at least in some measure, attempted to do. M.A.K. Halliday (1982)¹⁴ argues that

linguistics [the study of language] is uncomfortable because it destroys fondly held myths about language, and subversive because it forces us to come face to face with unpalatable truths about social inequalities in contemporary multicultural societies. Such issues are not hypothetical, as in literature, but are precisely the topics debated by government select committees. They have to do with the role of English as a world language, and with historical and social forces on minority languages and dialects. Teaching language or teaching about language is therefore a social and political act, and this should be explicit in the teaching. It has to do with changing people's attitudes, not merely with imparting another body of knowledge. The merits of such a syllabus for teachers is that it can combine a discussion of social and ethical problems with a clear intellectual content; and not only a body of factual knowledge, but also a training in critical thinking and analysis.¹⁵

What Halliday is arguing is what should be the fundamental role of knowledge about language - the systematic study and analysis of language as social discourses. What distinguishes these discourses or genres is their systematic linguistic differences - how language operates to subvert, convert or divert attention away from or to real social issues. Social and cultural conflict is not only at the heart of literatures, films and drama taught in the classroom, they are the realities of many of our students' lives. Their interpretation of these works of literature will be coloured by their particular experience. The pedagogical aim of a syllabus is surely to help these children give voice to their experience, to name their world as Freire says 'the student's voice should never be sacrificed, since it is the only means through which they make sense of their own experience of the world'.¹⁶

Naming and making sense of their world entails the analysis of the workings of language, including their language, and its functions and appropriateness. It entails the comparison of the structures and semantics of the languages in the classroom. These are the skills and knowledge fundamental to critical reading, critical debate, persuasive and creative writing.

This is where the study of language and its uses becomes the issue of literacy. Those who claim that literacy standards are declining have only a narrow view of what literacy really is about, or what 'standards' really are. If people spell badly or are unable to punctuate effectively, there is cause for concern, not because this knowledge is the be-all and end-all of writing, but because the gatekeepers in our communities make social and economic judgements about it. People who can't spell look bad, because the assumption is often made that if they can't spell there are probably other things they can't do. Conversely, what being unable to spell in English does not reveal is all the other things that person can do, such as being able to speak or write two or more other languages, as is the case with many of the people in our classrooms. Singling out spelling and punctuation as being the symptom of declining literacy standards is trivialising what should be of far greater concern in the literacy debate - what general principles of the English linguistic system should be understood of which spelling and punctuation are only a small part. This requires analysis and selection from the body of knowledge which we call the linguistic system, which includes written and spoken language. It is a complex organisation with interconnections between its sounds, grammar and meanings in its contexts of use in increasingly diverse and divergent range of discourses which shape and are shaped by different language communities, with disparate, often conflicting interests

and preoccupations. That there ever was one standard against which all linguistic use can be measured is a myth.

Of course there are accepted conventions for writing (including spelling) which must be observed for the very practical reason that written language is decontextualised in the sense that it doesn't have the extralinguistic props that we rely upon in spoken language. But they are agreed upon conventions for writing about different topics so that the reader separated by time, distance, or cultural difference can understand. Written language, especially written English, is a lingua franca. The fact that it is lingua franca is a historical accident. It does not imply that English is a superior language or that there is one single standard. Students need to understand what makes the difference between spoken and written English, why the differences between the different spoken or written discourses are significant, why some aspects of the systems change more rapidly than others. We have at our disposal a number of linguistic choices to make in order to convey our meanings, but the choices are not random: they are conditioned by the social purposes evolved by various communities over time. We have only to think of the enormous variation in registers between, for example, the writing of James Joyce, Dylan Thomas, Clive James, Keri Hulme, V.S. Naipaul, Stevie Smith, Sylvia Plath, Hone Tuwhare, or the difference between an entry in a school text book about snails and what a gardeners' manual has to say about them to realize that there is no one single standard. They all draw on the same linguistic resources - nouns, verbs, clauses, phrases, phonemes and morphemes, but these texts all have different purposes. It is the socially motivated selection of these items and how they are arranged in relation to one another that makes the difference. It is the linguistic system which is the bridge that spans the gulf between intention and interpretation, between people and their socio-cultural beliefs.

Understanding the linguistic system must include grammar, or syntax as it is technically known, to understand how we focus information. For example, it is useful to know the functions of the passive to explain the different messages being conveyed by the pair:

- a. A young woman was killed when a gun was discharged in a suburban street.
- b. A sniper shot and killed a young woman in a suburban street.

In the first (passive) version the message conveyed is that the young woman was shot at random - she was unlucky to be in the way. Notice that the Actor in the passive version is deleted. In the second version, the active version, there is someone responsible for the killing. The first is (possibly) death by misadventure, the second is murder. A similar device is used to impersonalise a controversial statement, or to distance oneself from it, and to give it an air of authority, for example:

It is considered that lowering the age limit for receipt of the unemployment benefit will reduce the number of unemployed.

Official statements such as this use this grammatical device frequently to conceal logical inconsistency and to keep the real author anonymous. The passive in other languages, however, may have different functions.

It is essential to understand how the system of modality (models being the set of auxiliaries which are first in the five term English verb system) operates in English to know how attitudes, obligations, permission and possibility are marked.

Consider the difference between the following passages, each taken from a different draft of the English Form 6 & 7 syllabus, under the heading 'The Descriptive Study of Language'

- a) This will include a study of the forms of language - sounds, letters, words, sentences and how these relate to meaning - and will include a simple comparison of English and Maori and opportunities for comparing the forms of English and other languages. A key goal in a comparative study of the forms of English and another language is to develop students' understanding of the particular features that characterise the English language. A most useful comparison would be when the forms of the languages are significantly different, as is the case with English and Maori. This approach also provides students with access to at least two pictures of the world. Learning

about these differences will help students see that the way English language organises experience is not the only 'logical' or 'natural' way.¹⁷

b) This topic should include a study of the forms of language - sounds, letters, words, sentences, and how these relate to meaning. A key goal in a comparative study of the forms of English is to develop students' understanding of the particular features that characterise the English language. There are several approaches by which this goal can be achieved. One approach is to compare the forms of English with the forms of another language. A useful comparison would be when the forms of the languages are significantly different as is the case with English and Maori.¹⁸

If, as is stated in both drafts, knowledge of language and its uses is the basis for the study of English, then a descriptive study of language has to be the major component of the syllabus. That there may be some choice in the matter as the should in example b) suggests, negates the philosophy of the syllabus and renders the exercise of syllabus reform meaningless. A descriptive study of language is the study of linguistic forms and how they relate to meaning. To suggest otherwise is to return to the view of language as a formal abstraction operating in isolation from, and incidental to, meaning - a view of linguistic study which has had unfortunate consequences in the history of English teaching for the last twenty years.

An approach to the descriptive study of language must take into account the fact that language is essentially a purposeful social activity. When we use language we engage in discourses, such as when we negotiate to buy a house or a car or a loaf of bread, write or tell a story or anecdote, explain a natural phenomenon, or describe a process. We have to take into account the cultural context, and the context of situation - that is, who the people are, what their relationship is, what is their purpose for entering into a discourse, what are the relevant 'goings on' in the discourse. In this respect, the contexts of a linguistic event or discourse are an integral part of the grammar. Another crucial aspect of this type of approach to the study of language is understanding what linguistic features serve to glue a text (used in the sense of either spoken or written language above the level of the clause) together as a global whole. This is known as cohesion, and it operates on the syntactic and lexical level. For example, the use of the word 'language' throughout the documents in question gives an impression of coherence, uniformity and consistency, but scrutinised from within the linguistic network which makes up the discourse reveals how important it is to take into account the context and context to piece together the intentions behind the words.

Literacy and the English curriculum

This is what literacy is about - having the analytical skills and the knowledge to critically interpret and make meaning. Students cannot become linguistically aware of something if they don't know what to look for what makes the difference in the first place. It is futile and simplistic to uphold one single standard of English in the classroom - simplistic because the chances of there being one socially and linguistically homogeneous group of students in the classroom are extremely remote, especially in today's multilingual classrooms where, here in Auckland at least, it is becoming the norm for English to be the minority language, even if there were one single standard to uphold, and futile because as a century of monitoring and attempts at teaching one standard English in the classroom has shown, children talk the way their family and community talk, not the way the teacher says they should. Nor should they be expected to talk the way they write, nor to write the way they talk. This is not because spoken language is simpler than written language, as is so often believed. Spoken language is complex in ways that written language is not. It draws on the same linguistic resources, but puts them together in quite different ways. In the context of multilingual classrooms, we also need to seriously consider the role of spoken language. It is not adequate to say that a quarter or a half of the syllabus is devoted to oral language - we should specify what spoken discourses our learners need to gain mastery in. Explaining instructions, making oral submissions, running or participating in a debate on important issues are discourses which are all valued in the dominant society. How are these processes carried out in other cultures? What topics are taboo in

other cultures? Who may participate? How do our English speaking students learn them? Not by the processes of osmosis. So there is a need to distinguish between the organisation and structure of informal and formal spoken language, private and public language. It is now fairly well established that learners of English as a Second Language learn the discourses of informal English relatively quickly - outside the classroom. From Canadian research¹⁹, it is estimated that it takes NESS learners about two years to gain mastery of informal spoken English, but 5-9 years to gain mastery of academic English - school discourses. Our own experience in New Zealand is that our non English speaking background students very quickly gain mastery of informal social English, but not of academic discourse. It is because it is not being explicitly taught. Language development is about extending students' control of different discourses, and for them to understand why that is important for them as critical and sensitive members of their communities.

So what are the implications?

First and foremost, the brief account given here of a sociolinguistic approach to language study make clear the importance of context - the students' own social and linguistic contexts and the wider contexts of the bodies of knowledge they have to master. It is a global approach, and this entails an understanding of the linguistic systems - it is not adequate to approach the syllabus piecemeal. The study of language involves development and extending all the skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing, and knowing why and how. This does necessitate having a language to talk about languages. Understanding how English functions involves understanding how other languages function, whether as dialect or other language, or as other discourses, or registers. Comparing the sounds, structures and discourses of other languages with English is essential for all students to meet the academic and therefore socio-political demands of English. It is an approach to teaching curriculum through language.

But how can all this be done in two years? The principle of the senior English syllabus being geared to the Form 3-5 syllabus is surely wrong: what happens in Forms 3-5 should be geared to what is possible later. This implies that the approach to teaching English through language must begin much earlier, to address the appalling inequities in our education system, particularly in respect of the tangata whenua. It should be remembered too that academic success in the mainstream system, however we define it, does not depend solely on success in the subject English. All other subjects are taught through English - (English happens to be the dominant institutional language in New Zealand, and for practical reasons it is likely to remain so). The whole curriculum is content centred - discrete bodies of knowledge about science, history, and geography etc. but all these bodies of knowledge are processes and systems. The one process they have in common is the medium through which they are taught - the English language. English as a subject has been treated in a different way from the other subjects - rather than being treated as processes and systems, it has been treated as cultural artifacts and activities. The reason this has come about is that the language we use is inextricably bound with the content it expresses - it is invisible. Hence the dichotomy: language versus literature; form versus content. Even the language section of the seventh form Bursaries exam has presented different texts as discrete objects, and are thus taught piecemeal, with a similarly fragmented approach to the linguistic system which is common to all, and yet which differentiates them. The latest language topic, 'Attitudes to New Zealand English' is a breakthrough in this respect, as it requires the study of social and historical processes of language change, and that requires some understanding of the interconnectedness of the linguistic system as described above.

The school community and the curriculum is made up of different discourses and learners need to control and master the language varieties which constitute these discourses. The usual complaint from teachers of other subjects is that it is not their job to teach English: it is the English teacher's job. Language and how it functions is every teachers' responsibility. English teachers are, however, uniquely placed in that they have the opportunity that the proposed syllabus offers to take the lead and demonstrate the need for a reinterpretation of the role of language study as a basis of

curriculum and all that that implies for humane and equitable provision of education. All teachers will inevitably apply sound pedagogical theory in all their teaching if they are convinced of its need and worth. Just as inevitably, however, a conservative approach to the syllabus as a model philosophically, pedagogically and theoretically isolated from the rest of the curriculum, will entail that the principles will not be applied.

We are fortunate in this country that we already have a model of how linguistic revolution can be instigated, planned and executed with the model of the Maori Language Commission. This was not a government initiative - it began at the 'grass roots' level as part and parcel of cultural definition and assertion. For the tangata whenua Te Reo Maori is not an optional 'extra', it is inextricably bound up with spiritual and economic survival. If education is an agent for change and empowerment as it is held to be, then it is a matter of urgency that the principle of the centrality of language must become the cornerstone of curriculum reform which is the business of schools, not the State.

Notes and References

1. P.7 S2. Ch.2 The Kingman Report. March 1988 H.M.S.O.
2. The Curriculum Review. 1987. Department of Education. New Zealand
3. Foreword. Syllabus for Schools English Forms 6 and 7. Draft Ministry of Education. November 1989.
4. P.1 Introduction *ibid*
5. P.9 S13 Ch.2 The Kingman Report. March 1988 H.M.S.O.
6. P.11 S.22 *ibid*
7. P.1 Syllabus for Schools English Forms 6 and 7. Draft. Ministry of Education November 1989.
8. In fact the Kingman Report does not make it at all clear what it means by 'Standard English'. On the one hand, in s 15 '...some regional English usages dictate he do rather than he does. So parts of words may vary in a regular fashion, as may syntactic choices, as well as accent or idiomatic expressions.' 'Received Pronunciation' [as an accent] is not used as the model of English pronunciation in British schools, since speakers may be rightly proud of their regional pronunciation, which identifies where they come from.'(s.33), but on the other hand: 'Dialects of English are typically spoken rather than written down. They are spoken with local, regional accents. (Accent refers only to features of pronunciation, whereas 'dialect' implies regular grammatical patterns and distinctive vocabulary which characterise the language of a particular area and distinguish it from its neighbours and from Standard English). There are no conventions for writing dialects. It is largely for this reason ... that dialect speakers also learn the standard language.' s.34.
9. P.14 S.33 *ibid*
10. P.7.S.5 *ibid*.
11. Carol du Chateau 'Te English' Metro June 1989
12. Responding to Kingman. Proceedings of a National Conference on the Kingman Report. Nottingham University. Tuesday 21 June 1988. Eric Ashworth and Len Masterman (eds) Nottingham University, School of Education.
13. P.3. Introduction. Draft 5. English Forms 6 and 7.
14. The full text of Halliday's argument can be found in 'Linguistics in Teacher Education' in Michael Stubbs (1982) *Linguistics and the Teacher*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, U.K.
15. Michael Stubbs (1986) *Educational Linguistics*. Blackwell. Oxford. UK.

16. Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo. (1987) Literacy. Bergin and Garvey. Massachusetts.
17. Draft 4. Forms 6 & 7 English Syllabus. March 1989.
18. Draft 5. Forms 6 & 7 English Syllabus. November 1989.
19. Jim Cummins, quoting Virginia Collier, on the implications of ESL mainstreaming in US and Canadian schools. August 1990.