Grammar in the New Zealand English curriculum: Implications for primary school teachers and teacher educators

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Abstract

In this review of the English area of the New Zealand curriculum, the spotlight is focused on the grammar teachers in primary schools are expected to know and understand in order to effectively teach and assess literacy. It is suggested that, despite some professional development in the 1990s during the Exploring Language project, teachers currently fronting New Zealand primary school classrooms lack sufficient declarative knowledge of grammar to teach and assess the grammatical components of literacy in the English curriculum. This may be cause for concern, particularly in light of the introduction this year of *Reading and Writing Standards for Years 1 to 8*, which places teachers' judgements about learners' literacy proficiency under increased scrutiny. Overseas studies of teachers' knowledge about grammar are reviewed and implications drawn for the local context.

Introduction

Knowledge of grammar is one component of literacy, which is "the ability to understand, respond to, and use those forms of written language that are required by society and valued by individuals and communities" (Ministry of Education, 2003a, p. 13). In order to acquire literacy, a person needs to be able to use grammar effectively, appropriately and accurately. Moreover, knowledge of grammar enables students to reflect on how the English language works, understand how grammatical structures affect meaning and critically analyse texts (Derewianka, 1998). It follows then, that as part of their professional capability, teachers need knowledge about grammar (hereafter KAG) to identify the extent to which students are able to do this as they strive to become literate.

Literacy teaching in New Zealand has been generally well regarded by international standards (Mc Naughton, 2002). In 2006, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results showed the mean reading literacy score for New Zealand 15-year-olds was above the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) mean, and this has not changed significantly since 2003 and 2000 (Marshall, Caygill, & May, 2008). However, there are also groups of learners, mainly Māori students and children from Pacific Islands immigrant families who make relatively poor gains in literacy, and in 2006 the PISA findings showed that these learners had lower mean literacy scores than their Pākehā/ European and Asian counterparts (Marshall et al., 2008).

In order to address this inequity in literacy achievement, *Reading and Writing Standards for Years 1 to 8*, commonly referred to by teachers and educators as "National Standards", have been introduced to "provide a nationally consistent means for considering, explaining, and responding to students' progress and achievement" (Ministry of Education, 2009a, p.4). Despite widespread criticism by many teachers, principals and other education professionals, who argue that National Standards are not the way to address inequities in literacy achievement (see, for example, Middleton, 2009; "Standards and the professor", 2010), 2010 saw their introduction in all mainstream primary schools. A discussion of the debates surrounding the standards here would add neither clarity nor justification to the current argument; however, the fact that the National Standards are in schools and being implemented now gives import and some urgency to considering teacher capability in understanding the reading and writing assessment standards which, it will be illustrated, include a significant grammatical dimension.

This article, then, questions whether or not primary school teachers do have adequate KAG to teach and assess learners' ability to use grammar. As a component of literacy, grammar is both implicitly and explicitly referred to in the English area of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). This document, along with other recently released ministry publications intended to support literacy teaching—*English Language Learning Progressions* (ELLP) (Ministry of Education, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d) and *Literacy Learning Progressions* (LLP)

(Ministry of Education, 2010)—will be examined to illustrate the nature and extent of KAG teachers are expected to have. Finally, in the absence of any local empirical research, some overseas studies of teachers' KAG will be discussed, as these have possible implications for the New Zealand context.

Background

In my position as a lecturer, I work with practising primary and secondary teachers doing postgraduate study in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). It is important to note that, although this is a TESOL course, most teachers work in mainstream classes that include native speakers of English *and* English language learners (ELLs). All course members, both mainstream and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers, are required to identify the specific language demands of curriculum tasks undertaken by their students. Such specificity necessitates an understanding of English grammar, and therefore both learning about grammar and integrating grammar in teaching have become integral parts of the course. Functional grammar, described by Halliday as "a 'natural' grammar, in the sense that everything in it can be explained, ultimately, by reference to how language is used" (Halliday, 1994, p. xiii), underpins the approach. In such an approach, the emphasis is "not so much on the correction of grammatical errors or on syntax for the sake of syntax, but on extending the learners' ability to use language effectively and appropriately in a variety of contexts" (Derewianka, 2001, p. 261). Or, as Halliday simply states, the forms of language are "a means to an end, rather than (as) an end in themselves" (1994, p. xiv). All teachers use the texts *A Grammar Companion for Primary Teachers* (Derewianka, 1998) and *Grammar and Meaning* (Droga & Humphrey, 2003) as core resources which support such an approach. *Exploring Language* (Ministry of Education, 1996) is also drawn upon as this was developed specifically for the New Zealand context.

In teaching the grammar aspect of the course, it has become apparent that teachers vary considerably in their explicit or declarative KAG. Some admit that they struggle to define parts of speech (for example, *noun*, *verb*, *adjective*), whilst others are able to readily explain some of the most

complex rules of English grammar (this latter group tend to be overseas-born teachers who have learnt English as a second or foreign language). To date these observations are purely anecdotal, but I am currently conducting research to assess this KAG more formally.

Another aspect of the course is familiarising teachers with Ministry of Education guidelines and support documents in the areas of literacy and English language learning. This has become increasingly important in the last two years, with the release of several documents in quick succession: *English Language Learning Progressions* (ELLP) (Ministry of Education, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d), the *Literacy Learning Progressions* (LLP) (Ministry of Education, 2010), *Supporting English Language Learning in Primary Schools* (Ministry of Education, 2009b) and *Learning Through Talk* (Ministry of Education, 2009c). A close examination of these documents, in particular ELLP and LLP, has served to further highlight the need for teachers to have an understanding of grammatical terminology. As will be shown in the next section, grammatical terms feature frequently throughout the documents and become increasingly complex as the curriculum levels progress.

Concern about teachers' KAG is not new. Attempts to support primary school teachers in their understanding of grammar were carried out in the 1990s, resulting in the publication of *Exploring Language* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and associated professional development. However, as stated above, it may be that many teachers currently working in schools lack the KAG to understand the documents and feel even less prepared to incorporate grammar in their teaching and assessment practices. Before looking precisely at the grammatical components of the current English curriculum, it is useful to reflect briefly on the Exploring Language project.

The Exploring Language project and beyond

More than 10 years ago, as a result of concerns about teachers' KAG, the Ministry of Education published *Exploring Language: A Handbook for Teachers* (1996). This publication aimed to support teachers to deliver the 1994 English curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1994), which

required them to have explicit knowledge about grammar for teaching and assessment purposes. The introduction stated that "knowledge of the working of language is (also) essential for teachers to be able to examine and assess their students' language use in a systematic and productive way" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 3). One of the underlying principles of the resource is that "students and teachers need to be able to use a nationally agreed metalanguage of concepts and terminology to describe and discuss language" (p. 7). The handbook provides teachers with concepts and terminology as well as theoretical underpinnings and principles of language learning. Professional development courses accompanied the resource, but these were only available to selected primary school teachers. Those who attended reported that they were able to use the grammatical knowledge gained in their classrooms, but were keen to get more assistance with knowledge about the English language (Gordon, 2005). Since *Exploring Language* there have been a number of publications and resources to support language and literacy teaching. In addition to those already mentioned, there are *The New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars: English* (Ministry of Education, 2003b), *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1 to 4* (Ministry of Education, 2003a), *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5 to 8* (Ministry of Education, 2006) and *asTTle Assessment tools for teaching and learning, version 4* (Ministry of Education, 2005). To effectively implement the guidelines in all of these documents, an explicit understanding of grammar is needed. *Exploring Language* therefore remains a useful and relevant document, although the extent to which it is used and understood by teachers is not known. As Gordon (2005) laments, the professional development initiatives that accompanied the release of *Exploring Language* were not monitored or followed up, so the impact of these on teachers' grammar knowledge and teaching approaches was not evaluated.

Reviewing the grammar in current documents

As stated in the introduction, the purpose of this article is to identify the nature and extent of KAG primary school teachers need. A review of the English learning area of the curriculum and two of the recently released Ministry of Education publications (the LLP and ELLP) will illustrate that this focus is indeed warranted, as references to grammar are frequently

implied and also explicitly stated. Both of these documents are referred to in the *Reading and Writing Standards for Years 1 to 8* (Ministry of Education, 2009a) as resources for teachers to consult when making an Overall Teacher Judgement about whether or not learners are meeting the standard for their year level or stage of progression.

The English learning area of *The New Zealand Curriculum*

Just as the 1994 curriculum required teachers to have explicit knowledge of English language, so too does the 2007 document, *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). In some places KAG is implied. For example, students "need to know how language works so that they are equipped to make appropriate language choices and apply them in a range of contexts" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 18). Teachers need to realise that implicit in this statement is the need to understand and use grammar effectively. Moreover, the curriculum requires learners at all levels to engage in critical literacy: "students learn to deconstruct and critically interrogate texts in order to understand the power of language …" (p. 18). This statement, too, implies an understanding of how grammar works and is used by authors to convey meaning in texts.

As well as implied references to grammar, explicit references consistently feature in the speaking, writing and presenting section of the English learning area of *The New Zealand Curriculum*, where control of grammatical conventions is expected at every level. For example, at level 1 students are expected to gain control of "some grammatical conventions" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 44) and by the time they reach level 8 they should be able to use "a wide range of text conventions, including grammatical and spelling conventions, appropriately, effectively, and with accuracy" (p. 44). Learners are also required to be reflective about their own text production. At level 1, for example, they need to seek feedback and make changes to texts, become reflective about their own texts and monitor, self-evaluate and describe progress. By the time students reach level 8 they are expected to achieve all these things with clarity, effectiveness and confidence. An understanding of grammar is an essential tool that will assist learners in achieving these goals.

The Literacy Learning Progressions: Meeting the reading and writing demands of the curriculum

LLP describe and illustrate the "literacy-related knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students need to draw on in order to meet the reading and writing demands of the New Zealand curriculum" (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 3). They are also being used as reference points for the *Reading and Writing Standards for Years 1 to 8* (Ministry of Education, 2009a). A sound understanding of this document is therefore of utmost importance for teachers. The progressions are ordered according to length of time at school, and progress indicators are given for reading and writing beginning with the first year at school, until the end of Year 10.

As with the curriculum, references to KAG are frequent but often not specifically spelt out. For example, a "knowledge of how language is structured … strategies to get and/or convey meaning" (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 4) implies that students and teachers will apply an understanding of ways in which grammatical features can be used for particular effects. Knowledge of this nature is also required for "analysing and responding to texts and bringing a critical awareness to reading and writing" (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 4).

In addition to the implicit references to grammar, explicit references requiring grammatical knowledge are made at each level, most notably in writing. In the early years, references relate in the main to parts of speech. For example, in the first year of school, learners should have "a wide oral vocabulary of nouns and verbs and also many adjectives and prepositions" (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 8). By the end of the second year at school, learners should be "using simple conjunctions correctly, with subject–verb agreement and noun–pronoun agreement" (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 13). Teachers of learners in Year 6 need to be able to identify whether or not students are "using simple and compound sentences that are correct grammatically and have a variety of structures, beginnings, and lengths and using some complex sentences that are mostly correct grammatically" (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 16). Unless teachers have had specific instruction about the grammatical terminology in the document, either in their own schooling or teacher education, they are unlikely to be able to identify the features mentioned, let alone teach or assess them.

The English Language Learning Progressions

ELLP (Ministry of Education, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d) differs from the previous resources reviewed in that it has been specifically designed for teachers of ELLs. However, the resource is intended for both *mainstream* and ESOL teachers, as many ELLs are placed in mainstream classes, often with little or no additional specialist support. ELLP aims to help teachers identify stages and patterns of progress in language development; analyse the complexity of oral and written texts; and plan for, monitor and report on student progress (Ministry of Education, 2008a). Teachers must use their professional judgement to decide whether ELLs should be assessed against these progressions, or the National Standards. Learners in Years 1 to 4 may be assessed using ELLP for up to two years, and those in Years 5 to 8 for up to three years (Ministry of Education, n.d.). Once again, the high-stakes nature of such assessment makes it extremely important for teachers to understand the progressions.

The indicators of student progress given at each stage are very specific and frequently include grammatical features. For example, writing indicators at stage two explain that students may use subordinate clauses and modal verbs, but display inaccuracies in their use of complex verb phrases (Ministry of Education, 2008a). In reading at stage two, students may be reading texts containing simple, compound and some complex sentences. The sentences may "sometimes be expanded with prepositional phrases or other structures" (Ministry of Education, 2008c, p. 19). Teachers need to understand this terminology if they are to accurately assess students' stages of development.

ELLP provides annotated examples of student writing at each stage and gives suggestions for further direction or "where to next" for students at each level. Specific suggestions for teaching aspects of grammar are included in these suggestions. For example, "where to next" suggestions for writers at stage three include "minimising the use of simple connectives in compound sentences and using more embedded clauses and phrases" and constructing "grammatically correct and expanded phrases, especially verb, noun, adverbial, and prepositional phrases" (Ministry of Education, 2008c, p. 72).

Of the documents reviewed for this article, ELLP arguably provides the most comprehensive language teaching guidelines for teachers. The specific and detailed progress indicators, along with suggestions of "where to next", are a welcome addition to teacher support material. However, the extent to which teachers can implement the guidelines will depend to a large degree on their understanding of the grammar and the ways in which it may be best taught to their particular students. It is interesting to note that the glossary in the introductory booklet contains 67 terms, 38 of which are grammatical. Is this an indicator that the authors themselves assume that teachers do not understand these terms? My experiences as a teacher educator would suggest that some teachers, at least, do not.

This brief examination of the English learning area of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) and the two supporting documents teachers need to use as reference points for National Standards, provides an insight into the explicit KAG teachers require. Not only do they need to be able to identify simple parts of speech, such as nouns, verbs and adjectives, they also need to be able to teach learners to identify and use a range of grammatical devices (for example, nominalisation, modality, the passive voice) and to critically analyse and write texts. While this is important for teaching and learning purposes, the introduction of *Reading and Writing Standards for Years 1 to 8* (Ministry of Education, 2009a) makes it important for assessment and accountability purposes as well. In 1996, writers on the Exploring Language project concluded that there were three good reasons why teachers should know about grammar: they needed to understand language because it is an important part of our world; if teachers were going to talk about language and analyse texts linguistically, it was essential they themselves had a good understanding of language and terminology; and without a knowledge of the structure of language, teachers would be unable to see language development in their students' writing and speaking (Gordon, 2005). The documents examined for this review show that these reasons are as important now as they were when Gordon and her colleagues carried out the Exploring Language project. More than a decade on, do we know whether or not teachers have the necessary KAG to implement the new curriculum and assess against the national reading and writing standards? Attention will now turn to recent research that provides some possible insights into this question.

What do we know about teachers' knowledge about grammar?

There is a paucity of research currently available in New Zealand to give an accurate picture of primary school teachers' KAG. However, Gordon asserted that "many teachers in New Zealand have little background knowledge about the working of language" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 2). She explained that this was not a criticism of teachers but rather an acknowledgement that teaching about language had not been consistently available to everyone.

Despite an extensive search, I have only been able to find one New Zealand study that included the assessment of a small amount of grammatical knowledge of preservice teachers. Nicholson (2007) surveyed the linguistic knowledge of 83 first-year teacher trainees, focusing predominantly on knowledge of phonology, morphology and spelling rather than grammar—only four grammatical items were included in the questionnaire. Nevertheless, Nicholson concluded that "many trainees had difficulty in identifying grammatical terms" (2007, p. 30). Although conclusive claims about the grammatical knowledge of teacher trainees or practising teachers cannot be made based on such a small number of items surveyed, they nonetheless signal a need for more research in this area.

KAG has been investigated with pre- and post-service teachers overseas, and these studies (which in many cases also included teachers' beliefs and practices) have been comprehensively reviewed by Borg (2003a, 2003b, 2006). It is not necessary and not possible to replicate such a review here. However, the finding most relevant to the current discussion was the generally low levels of teachers' declarative KAG. The research studies reviewed covered preservice primary trainees, postgraduate primary trainees, foreign-language teachers, English teachers and native as well as non-native speakers of English (all outlined in Borg, 2003b). Whilst the participants in these studies were predominantly teacher trainees as opposed to practising teachers, they did include some more experienced teachers, and we can therefore still view them as having possible implications for primary school teachers in New Zealand. Borg concluded

that the teachers in the studies he reviewed generally held "inadequate levels of grammatical knowledge" (Borg, 2003b, p. 98). One study, for example (Williamson & Hardman, 1995, cited in Borg, 2003b), assessed the grammatical knowledge of 99 trainee primary school teachers at the start of their postgraduate course and concluded that the trainees had significant gaps in KAG, misconceptions about language and lacked metalanguage for analysing language use. These findings mirror the other studies reviewed by Borg (2003b), as well as those of the small study carried out by Nicholson (2007) in New Zealand.

Another study investigating KAG, this time with preservice Malaysian English teachers (Elder, Erlam, & Philp, 2007), arrived at similar conclusions to those in Borg's (2003a) review. Sixty-one trainee language teachers, all advanced learners of English, were given a metalinguistic knowledge test and a grammaticality judgement test near the end of a foundation programme, prior to commencing a four-year Bachelor of Education degree. They found that the trainees varied widely in their knowledge, and as a group performed "rather poorly" (Elder et al., 2007, p. 233) on a metalinguistic knowledge test. The authors of this study contend that these preservice teachers' lack of KAG is particularly disturbing, given the explicit attention to grammatical form in their English language courses over a four-year degree. One implication drawn from this study was that when teachers have gaps in metalinguistic knowledge, they should avoid teaching strategies that call on using technical terminology. In other words, teachers should avoid teaching situations that require verbalisation of specific grammatical rules, because they may give incorrect instruction and advice. Elder and her colleagues lament that teachers do not have the necessary knowledge to draw on in their teaching "including the provision of explicit grammatical information when learners signal the need for it" (Elder et al., 2007, p. 237).

In contrast to these studies, a large study in the United Kingdom (Cajkler & Hislam, 2002) paints a less gloomy picture of teachers' KAG. It was conducted between 1997 and 2001, with 503 primary teacher trainees participating. These trainees were given tests of their grammatical knowledge when entering and exiting the programme. Interviews were also carried out with 10 participants at the exit stage to explore in more

detail both their ability to identify parts of speech and the effectiveness of the grammar dimension of their preservice programme. The researchers found that recognition of word classes upon entry ranged from complete accuracy to 60 percent inaccuracy, "but relatively few participants had consistently low ratings" (Cajkler & Hislam, 2002, p. 166). All trainees improved in their knowledge during the course. In contrast to Borg (2006) who laments that teachers may be "confidently ignorant" (p. 3) about grammar, Cajkler and Hislam (2002) assert that "in terms of basic knowledge and awareness, sensational and alarmist claims are not justified" (p. 175). They do admit that concern about the teaching of grammar is not unjustified, stating that "problems are more challenging than a mere lack of knowledge of terms" (p. 175). One implication drawn from the study is that trainees need to engage in explicit analysis of the ways in which grammar works in context to create effective texts.

Another recent study, this time conducted in the context most like that of New Zealand teachers, was carried out with second-language teachers undertaking postgraduate TESOL training in Australia. Jensen and Harrington (2008) investigated 12 experienced teachers' perceptions of the importance of metalinguistic knowledge, along with their actual KAG. The study arose from the authors' belief that teachers must have explicit KAG to be able make informed pedagogical decisions about ways in which grammar can be dealt with in the classroom. Using a version of the test used by Elder et al. (2007), they found that teachers were to a large extent adept at correcting grammatically incorrect sentences, but less adept at explaining grammatical rules underpinning these corrections. This lack of declarative knowledge contrasted with the teachers' expressed beliefs about the importance of using knowledge of grammatical rules in their teaching. They concluded that teachers need explicit support to raise their language awareness and claim that "there is some evidence of need for professional development in language awareness for practising language teachers" (Jensen & Harrington, 2008, p. 8).

Investigating teachers' KAG has, and continues to be, a topic of interest for international researchers, particularly those involved with second- and foreign-language acquisition. Research of this nature has not been carried out with teachers working in the mainstream in New Zealand. If we accept

that explicit KAG is an important component of capability for mainstream teachers, and I think we must, the lack of local research is a matter that needs to be rectified. In particular, it is important to investigate the KAG of those teachers already teaching and charged with the responsibility of implementing the curriculum and ensuring all students meet *Reading and Writing Standards in Years 1 to 8*.

Conclusion

This article began by asking whether or not primary school teachers possessed the knowledge and skills to implement the grammar components of the English learning area of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), and to assess against the *Reading and Writing Standards in Years 1 to 8* (Ministry of Education, 2009a). An examination of the curriculum and some of the recently released supporting documents has aimed to bring to the attention of primary school teachers and teacher educators the importance of declarative KAG as a necessary component of teacher capability. In order to implement the English learning area of *The New Zealand Curriculum*, and to assess national literacy standards, teachers require an understanding of grammar that goes well beyond being able to identify and define simple parts of speech. Teachers and students need a shared metalanguage that enables them to construct and deconstruct texts. Just as Gordon and her colleagues asserted in 1996 (Ministry of Education, 1996), knowledge about grammar is a fundamental part of this metalanguage, yet it is possible that many teachers lack this knowledge.

In light of the fact that research in this area has (a) mainly been conducted overseas and (b) signals generally low levels of declarative KAG amongst teachers and trainees, it is important that similar up-to-date information is gathered regarding New Zealand teachers' KAG. The purpose of this would not be to highlight teachers' possible inadequacies or failings, but rather to ascertain the nature of support they need to implement the curriculum confidently and effectively. Whilst it may be necessary to gather this initial information with simple tests of the "define and identify" type (such as those used by Elder et al., 2007), we must be cautious that this does not imply that this is the only type of knowledge needed to understand, assess and teach grammar effectively. Being able

to define grammatical terms is necessary, but on its own will not equip teachers (or their learners) with the ability to use them effectively. Ellis and Batstone (2009) argue strongly for grammar teaching to be based on a set of principles, rather than rigid adherence to a particular methodology. Similarly, Gordon (Ministry of Education, 1996) argued that teachers should not slavishly follow one method or philosophy when teaching language and literacy. Gordon advocates for a more eclectic approach. This may be good advice, but eclecticism must be *well informed*. Finding out what teachers know about grammar is a starting point for structuring pre- and post-service courses to ensure that they are.

Alongside gathering information about declarative KAG, it is important to investigate teachers' beliefs and attitudes about teaching grammar, as well as their pedagogical practices, both reported and observed. Teacher cognition—what teachers think, know and believe—and its relationship to instructional decision making, is now acknowledged by language teacher researchers as a central concern (Borg, 2003a). It is the opinion of this author that investigating teachers' knowledge and beliefs about grammar should be attended to with some urgency in New Zealand.

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