

## EDITORIAL: SETTING THE SCENE

### AOTEAREO - A WAY FORWARD?

The publication of Jeffrey Waite's document, *Aotearo: speaking for ourselves* (Ministry of Education 1992) is welcome: it represents a basis for the creation of an enlightened languages policy for Aotearo/New Zealand. Whether the initiative taken by the Ministry of Education in commissioning this work will be followed through remains to be seen. At present, this seems unlikely in view of the expense involved and the need for genuine commitment to change on the part of a whole range of agencies. What is refreshing about *Aotearo* is its recognition of the central place that the revitalization of Maori language and culture must have in all national policymaking. It is equally heartening to observe that 'language' and 'English' are not treated as being synonymous, that the importance of maintaining community languages, of strengthening international languages and of developing interpreting services is recognized as is the urgent need to attend to adult literacy problems which "derive not from falling educational standards, but rather from a rise in literacy requirements". From our point of view, one of the most interesting aspects of *Aotearo* is its recognition that "the provision of ESL assistance is required in both the schools sector and the post-school sector" and its references to under-funding in this area.

### THE LITERACY DEBATE: A TRIVIALIZATION OF THE ISSUES?

Notwithstanding its international reputation in the area of reading recovery, New Zealand, like all developed countries, has problems relating to child and adult literacy. It is tempting to blame teachers and schools for falling standards, but the fact is that there is no evidence that standards have fallen. As Jeffrey Waite observes in *Aotearo* "adult literacy problems derive not from falling educational standards, but rather from a rise in literacy requirements". This problem affects all institutions. The increasing democratization of education has meant more opportunities for more people. A higher percentage of the population has access to tertiary education now than in the past. This must mean that the same sort of effort will now be required of university academics as has been required of school teachers. Inevitably, it puts pressure on academics to develop their teaching skills.

U.K. universities have now introduced 'literacy tests' and New Zealand Universities could follow them. A large number of university staff are in favour of this. It would not, however be appropriate to do so. The so-called literacy tests that are already in existence test only superficial, mechanistic skills, have no proven predictive validity and huge resources of time are often wasted in preparing students to sit the tests. In any case, universities could not afford to deny access to more than a few students on the basis of literacy tests and those few who were rejected would be likely to be from socio-economically disadvantaged groups or from cultures whose perception of literacy may be rather different from that most favoured in Western-style universities. A good university education involves literacy development. It does not confuse the starting point and the end product. It involves appropriate educational processes. Just as 'language across the curriculum' ought to continue to have relevance in our schools, so language and literacy development across the curriculum should be seen as the duty of all responsible tertiary educators. We hope that New Zealand universities will resist the temptation to seek simplistic answers to complex problems.

## THE NEW ZEALAND CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK AND THE ENGLISH STATEMENT: HOW CONSISTENT ARE THEY?

In the Foreword to The New Zealand Curriculum Framework (Te Anga Marautanga o Aotearoa), it is noted that "it [the Curriculum Framework] acknowledges the value of the Treaty of Waitangi, and of New Zealand's bicultural identity and multicultural society ... [allowing] the schools freedom to develop programmes which are appropriate to the needs of their students". The assertion is that "we need a learning environment which enables all our students to attain high standards and develop appropriate personal qualities" (underlining mine), and that "we need a work-force ... which has an international and multicultural perspective".

The Curriculum Framework recognizes language and languages as an essential learning area and communication skills among the essential skills. The claim is made that "at all levels of schooling, programmes will build on students' previous learning experiences, and will prepare them for future learning" and that "inequalities will be recognized and addressed" (P7).

In view of this, it is particularly unfortunate that New Zealand is currently preparing a Statement on English language rather than language since all of the generalizations that can be made in such a statement could be made with reference to language development in a general sense, the details being provided in individual syllabuses. The fact that there will also be a Statement for te reo Maori is a welcome addition to the original plans. It does not, however, remove the problem. There is no reason to suppose that all students will be equally well served by a single English Statement. Clearly, the needs of pupils in bilingual and immersion settings may be very different from the needs of pupils in the mainstream and the stage of development for these children of different aspects of the English curriculum may not match those of mainstream pupils. There is a very real danger that these pupils will be judged, unfairly and inappropriately, on the basis of performance in curriculum-related tasks and seen, on the basis of that judgement, to be disadvantaged by the type of schooling their parents have chosen for them. It is not only, however, these children for whom a single National Curriculum Statement for English may be inappropriate. It is likely to be even less appropriate for pupils from non-English speaking backgrounds. If we are serious about equity, we should provide for these pupils a separate Statement and a range of relevant syllabuses. They could then be assessed in terms of their performance according to both sets of criteria and would have an opportunity of having their real progress recorded and acknowledged. In this connection, it is worth remembering that in the 1992 Report of the U.K. Inspectorate, it is noted that: "the performance of bilingual children in Standard Assessment Tasks was often dependent both on their ability in English and on the teacher's skill in describing the tasks and encouraging responses. Over half of the bilingual children seen undertaking the Tasks did not understand all the instructions. Many did not readily recognise the context in which some tasks were set because of the cultural dependence of the subject matter. However sensitive the teacher's explanations were, almost all children had not enough time, after understanding what was required, to attempt tasks at the higher levels despite classroom evidence that they would have been able to do so", (Assessment, Recording and Reporting: A Report by H.M. Inspectorate on the Second Year, 1990- 1991).

### **ACHIEVEMENT BASED ASSESSMENT: THE ANSWER TO OUR PRAYERS?**

It is not surprising that achievement based assessment has not been greeted in this country with the same level of suspicion as it has elsewhere. After all, we have put up for too long with a system calculated to represent half of our children as failures. As teachers of English as a second or foreign language, we are probably more aware of the pitfalls in this area than others. Although criterion referencing clearly has its positive side, the assessment of people in relation to clear statements of objectives for performance and knowledge is far from a simple task in relation to language competence. This is particularly true if that assessment relates - as it is likely to do in the National Curriculum - to summative rather than formative assessment. It remains to be seen what the effect of the attempt to introduce criterion based assessment will be.

### **ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A WELCOME DEVELOPMENT?**

In Aotearoa, Jeffrey Waite observes that "New Zealand is well placed to export high quality EFL educational services" and that "this offering is already happening, with both public and private educational institutions offering EFL courses ... to full fee-paying students who come from overseas on study visas". Although it is true that some very high quality provision in this area has been made available and that New Zealand is well placed geographically to offer this sort of service, it is not immediately obvious that it is well-placed to do so in other respects.

Certainly, professionalism is increasing, in both the public and private sectors, as more high quality training is made available. However, much more needs to be done. It is essential, for example, that provision in this area should be both theoretically sound and practically orientated. New programmes which do not include a practicum (ie. supervised teaching practice component) should be discouraged and all courses which do include a practicum should be costed in such a way as to ensure the adequacy of that practicum. In addition, stricter controls should operate in relation to the financial viability of institutions providing EFL tuition and the assessment of the adequacy of their teaching resources should be based on more stringent criteria. In particular, courses of less than twelve weeks should be assessed at least as carefully as are longer courses. Overseas students are a valuable resource for New Zealand. Their value, however, rests not in any short-term financial gain, but in the establishment over time of relationships of various kinds between New Zealand and other nations. The tightening of controls can only benefit the many excellent providers.

### **ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: ARE THE SCHOOLS EQUIPPED?**

It is not possible to paint a uniform picture of the organisational arrangements made for ESOL students in primary and secondary schools around the country. What happens to the second language development of these students has, for some time, depended on any or all of a number of factors: the proportion of 'ESOL' students on the school roll, the availability of special funding from the Ministry (previously Department) of Education, the perceived status of a particular teacher, and of course school policy - whether de facto or explicitly stated. Recently another factor has come into play - parental pressure.

Since the 1970s, when the arrival of large numbers of Pacific Island students presented a visible image of the second language learner, a number of arrangements have been made in schools including:

- \* The placement of a small proportion of new arrivals for several weeks or months in a special language 'unit'.
- \* The setting up within a school of a 'special English' stream, which takes place either at the same time as other English classes or as a choice during optional subject periods.
- \* The integration of students into regular classes (with withdrawal for extra support) from a teacher provided through a peer or community tutoring scheme.
- \* The integration of students into regular classes with some support from a teacher who comes in to work with the student during other lessons.
- \* The integration of students into regular classes with whatever assistance the teacher is able to provide in the context of catering for the range of differences within any class.

One new element in all of this is parental involvement in funding. Under the headline "Parents Pay Up for Extra English Classes", a recent news item (North Shore Times Advertiser, May 11, 1993) reported that one primary school was paying the salary of an extra teacher from money given by the parents for separate English lessons. A number of concerns arise here, most of which could be grouped under the heading of fairness. If, as reported in this case, one fifth of a school roll is made up of new migrant children, then a significant percentage of the teaching staff could end up owing their positions to the presence of these students and to the contributions made by their parents. What of those unable to pay?

The situation in the ESL area is a critical one and one that could, in view of the largely unplanned promotion of New Zealand education overseas, lead within a very short time to major political embarrassment. There is an urgent need for all regions to be required to produce action plans indicating exactly how this issue will be dealt with in the various sectors within their region. In particular, schools should be required to produce evidence that they can cater adequately for the needs of children for whom English is not the home language and should not be allowed to advertise for pupils overseas unless they can meet the language needs of these students adequately. Of course, the other side of this is that schools must be provided with adequate funds to meet the needs of students from non-English speaking backgrounds. At present, they are seriously underfunded. This issue must be addressed urgently. New Zealand cannot afford in its Achievement Initiative to ignore the priorities set in Aotearoa.

Winifred Crombie  
(The University of Waikato Language Institute)