Editorial: "Grammar Wars" – Beyond a truce

TERRY LOCKE
School of Education, University of Waikato, NZ

Any special issue of a journal is an acknowledgement of a conversation that needs to be had. The conversation in this double issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* has had a multiplicity of prompts, some of which I will refer to in this introduction, others of which will be referred to by the contributors to this issue (Part 1). In respect of this journal as a forum, the conversation will spill over into Volume 5, Number 1 (May, 2006). This editorial should be thought of as a work in progress; contributions to Part 2 have yet to arrive in my email basket and cannot be referred to here.

Some of my own prompts in initiating this conversation have their origins close to home − in my experiences as a teacher, teacher educator and researcher in the New Zealand context. It is a context that has had its own share of social upheaval and educational "reform" in the last twenty years (Locke, 2000, 2001 and 2004). In the larger context of struggles over administrative, curriculum and assessment policy and practice, questions of "grammar" and "language" have not been prominent on the radar screen.

I was, however, one of the teachers Elizabeth Gordon refers to in her timely article in this issue, who was asked to implement a socio-linguistic approach to language study in the senior secondary English class in the 1980s. My university English degree had not prepared me for this role, though the core degree still required majors to do "language" papers and had yet to suffer the slings and arrows of critical theory. The socio-linguistic resources teachers worked with came with plenty of terminological baggage − you couldn't analyse the language of conversation without talking about *anacoluthons,* could you? This metalanguage was certainly a different breed from the traditional grammar I was subjected to as a student in the 1950s and 1960s as I worked my way through endless, decontextualised parsing exercises. But while it aroused in some students and teachers an interest in the way language worked *in situ,* it didn't appear to be designed to help students write better.

As a secondary teacher in the late 80s and early 90s, I had little linguistic training, some knowledge of traditional grammar (augmented by my learning of additional languages) and no clue whatsoever in respect of the place of knowledge about language in the English/literacy classroom. I identify with a recollection of Richard Andrews (in this issue), who writes:

> As a practising English teacher…I created my own mix of top-down (research-informed) and bottom-up (pragmatic, inventive, intuitive) approaches to the teaching of writing, and employed whichever method seemed right for the learners I was teaching (p. 69).

Nevertheless, in 1992, as a recently appointed HOD English of a large, somewhat multi-lingual secondary school, I was struck by the dawning realisation that ignorance about language was widespread. Undeterred by my own shortcomings, I wrote and published a small book entitled *Every Student's English Language Manual.* The first

part of the book covered "Elements of Language" (morphology, diction, spelling, punctuation, word classes and syntax) and the second part dealt with "Applications", by relating language use to particular genres (for example, formal letters, reports, essays, display ads and lyric poems). If you had asked me to indicate how "research-informed" the book was, I would have mentioned Halliday and Hasan (1985), Andrews' work on rhetoric and argumentation (1992, 1993) and the work of Australian genre theorists such as Jim Martin that had snuck across the Tasman Sea in the dead of night (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). But I couldn't have told you whether English teachers should teach "grammar" in their classrooms.

As Elizabeth Gordon recounts, the "Exploring Language" project was initiated by the New Zealand Association for the Teaching of English (NZATE)[1] at the same time as a draft national English curriculum was being developed. In some respects, the project might be thought of as a pre-emptive strike, aimed at forestalling criticism that the English teaching profession had gone soft on grammar. I am aware that I have just used a military metaphor. Writings about education in general, and the "grammar question" in particular, are replete with such wordings. New Zealand was one of the case studies examined by Urszula Clark (a contributor to this issue) in her book, *War words: Language, history and the disciplining of English* (2001). The language-related changes Gordon attempted to initiate in the senior secondary school English curriculum in New Zealand were undermined by a kind of covert operation. One might say that the battle was lost, but in fact the war continues. There are social forces in New Zealand that are ensuring that the presence of a resurgent, indigenous, official language (Maori) will not be wished away. Neither will the option of using Maori as an option for the comparative study of language structures in New Zealand schools.

As for the "Exploring Language" project itself. Well, the book itself is still out there (Ministry of Education, 1996). However, as Gordon suggests, there has never been an adequate professional development programme, underpinned by coherent theory and sound research, to help teachers know how to use it. Meanwhile, pedagogical practice in respect of language in New Zealand schools is being increasingly shaped by the availability of cheap, write-on, "basic English" texts and testing regimes such as AsTTle[2]. As David Slomp (this issue) reminds us – writing out of the context of Alberta, Canada – constructions of worthwhile (language/grammar) knowledge in tests have an impact on classroom practice that cannot be overestimated.

So much for prompts from my own backyard. In respect of the bigger stage, I was fortunate enough to be involved in the English Review team, based at the University of York and chaired by Richard Andrews, which undertook two systematic reviews in association with the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) on (1) whether the formal teaching of sentence grammar or (2) whether instruction in sentence-combining was effective in helping 5 to 16-year-olds write better (see Andrews et al., 2004a, 2004b). Richard's take on this project and where it might lead are the subject of his contribution to this issue.

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[1] NZATE is the professional association of New Zealand secondary English teachers and is equivalent to such organisations as AATE, NATE and NCTE.
[2] For a critical discussion of AsTTle, see
http://www.soe.waikato.ac.nz/english/EnglishNZ/PrimAssess.html#asttle

For my own part, involvement in the project raised many questions in own mind about the virtues of systematic reviews and how they construct "best evidence".[3] In respect of grammar and knowledge about language, I was left with the uneasy sense that our published reviews begged a lot of questions. For instance, the framing of our research questions encouraged a separation of sentence-level grammar considerations from a wider view of what "grammar knowledge" might mean. A definition such as the following from Cope and Kalantzis (1993) would have fallen outside this frame:

> "Grammar" is a term that describes the relation of language to metalanguage; of text to generalisations about text; of experience to theory; of the concrete world of human discursive activity to abstractions which generalise about the regularities and irregularities in that world (p. 20).

In addition, because the focus of the review was on effectiveness, there was a tendency to favour studies reporting trials that were controlled in various ways, but whose measures of writing effectiveness were somewhat narrow, to say the least. This tendency also led to a selection of studies which focused on the intervention proper, as if such interventions were neutral and separable from the classroom teacher and his/her professional knowledge and value system.

However, the systematic review project was also a spur for conversations within and beyond the confines of the English educational setting. Dick Hudson, of University College, London, was an early conversant whose views on the place of grammar in schools were in many ways out of step with the findings of the systematic reviews. A draft account by Hudson and John Walmsley on the relationship between English Grammar and teaching in the Twentieth Century (see Hudson & Walmsley, 2005) was circulated among members of the review team and prompted a meeting between Dick and me in London in June, 2004, where we consolidated plans for this special issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique.* With John Walmsley's agreement, Dick made the draft available to prospective contributors to this journal through the *ETPC* website, and the article has constituted a point of reference for a number of articles in this issue (Part 1).[4] Indeed, though the edited article was eventually published in the *Journal of Linguistics* (arguable its proper home), it has operated as a kind of print-based, "keynote address" for this double issue.

My own list of questions requiring answers after the English Review Group had done its work was included in the rationale for this double issue. I believed that the issue had to go beyond perennial concerns about the teaching of grammar and its effectiveness/ineffectiveness in relation to literacy development. I saw a broader debate as potentially characterised by the following questions:

1. What is meant by "knowledge about language"?
2. Whose knowledges are we talking about when we refer to "knowledge about language"?
3. In what ways is "knowledge about grammar" subsumed under the term "knowledge about language"?

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[3] I am broadly sympathetic to Maggie MacLure's assault on systemic reviews in MacLure, M. (2005). "Clarity bordering on stupidity": Where's the quality in systematic review? *Journal of Education Policy, 20* (4), 393-416.

[4] The article is still accessible from http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/dick/engpat.htm

4. What relationships exist (as productive or non-productive) between the development of linguistics as an academic domain, and educational policy and practice in respect of the presence of "knowledge about language" in the English/literacy classroom?
5. What (if any) justifications exist for the inclusion of "knowledge about language" in an "intended" curriculum as knowledge worth knowing for itself?
6. How is knowledge about language affected by the technologised nature of its object?
7. Put another way, how does metalanguage need to change under pressure from the increased digitising and graphicisation of texts and text-based practice?
8. Are there any sustainable arguments for a positive relationship between knowledge about language (however understood) and increased effectiveness in some aspect of textual practice (reading/viewing or production)?
9. What is the relationship between metalanguage and metacognition?
10. What pedagogical frameworks or approaches appear to render "knowledge about language" effective or ineffective as a component of literacy teaching and learning?

Potential contributors were not, of course, expected to address all of these questions. However, I offered these questions as providing parameters for a conversation or debate that might unfold in this double issue. All of the contributors in Part 1 were invited, and no restriction was put on the type of academic inquiry their contributions might represent.

Taking their cue from the work of Hudson and Walmsley (2005), Martha Kolln and Craig Hancock provide an account of the position and positioning of grammar within American classrooms in the last century and into this one. Over a distinguished career, Kolln has argued for a rhetorical grammar, to be gainfully used in classrooms for a different purpose "…from the remedial, error-avoidance or error-correction purpose of so many grammar lessons. I use rhetorical as a modifier to identify grammar in the service or rhetoric: grammar knowledge as a tool that enables the writer to make effective choices" (1996, p. 29). The article describes a brief renaissance in the 50's and early 60's, inspired largely by the structural grammar of C. C. Fries, and examines the combination of forces that undermined this beginning:

- the ascendancy of generative grammar;
- NCTE policy, including the 1963 Braddock report and the 1986 Hillocks update;
- whole language approaches to language acquisition;
- the ascendancy of process approaches within composition;
- the primacy of literature within English curriculums at all levels;
- minimalist grammar and its anti-knowledge stance;
- political pressures against the imposition of an elitist language;
- a general lack of preparation for those in the teaching profession;
- and a general public failure to recognize grammar as anything but a loose collection of prescriptive mandates.

In referring to forces arranged against grammar-teaching and contradictory factions currently allied against it, they too can be seen as drawing on military metaphors to

evoke the current milieu, this time in the US. Both Kolln and Hancock are members of ATEG (Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar), a sub-group of NCTE, and NPG (New Public Grammar), a group formed to promote and develop a new public grammar through the cooperative effort of linguists and English teachers. One theme (taken up by David Slomp in this issue) is that the failure to develop a coherent, usable, workable grammar for schools has in fact weakened opposition to current, highly reductive testing practices. They outline how the successful reintegration of grammar might be achieved taking on board the concerns of those currently opposed.

Urszula Clark, focusing on the situation in England, also sets out to make connections between "grammar in schools" and whatever forces might be identified as impacting on the practice of such (however defined). In contrast with Hudson and Walmsley (2005), but covering a similar terrain, she suggests that these researchers have insufficiently taken account of ways in which educational policy has shaped the teaching of grammar and language. Nor, she argues, have they taken account of the role played by the subject "English" (and grammar within it), in maintaining and reproducing notions of national identity, including those of social class. Clark applies Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse to her case study of the introduction of the national curriculum in English in England in the late 1980s and the National Literacy Strategy in the 1990s as a way of exploring links between academic theory and educational policy. Like Kolln and Hancock, she shows how politically motivated factionalism undermines proper debate about the place of grammar and knowledge about language. Clark concludes her account by arguing for the contemporary recontextualisation of a pedagogic grammar of English which would be integrated with other aspects of the English curriculum and take account of modern theories of language (for example, Hallidayan grammar and various genre approaches). However, she cautions, such recontextualisations cannot derive totally from a particular grammar, but should also "add, extend and reconfigure existing gradations and practices which take account of and build upon teachers' knowledge base. Such a grammar," she argues, "would go some way towards allowing pupils to understand the ways in which English and language actually structure, convey and position their experiences" (p. 45).

As Elizabeth Gordon explains in her account of two case studies related to grammar in New Zealand schools, her decision to take an "eclectic" approach to the development of a "Grammar Toolbox" for primary and secondary teachers was an attempt to do what Clark recommends in her article – to extend current practices and build upon teachers' existing knowledge base. As one of the teachers involved in the professional development work associated with the "Exploring Language" project, I can confirm the excitement and enthusiasm of both primary and secondary teachers as they sought to find ways of integrating various kinds of language/grammar awareness into their classroom programmes. Gordon, herself, is a striking illustration of the way in which linguists can work constructively and productively with teachers and teacher educators to address some of the issues raised by the ten questions above. Her contribution to the development of Draft 4 of the New Zealand 6th and 7th form English Language Syllabus was also a brave and exemplary attempt to address an issue that faces English/literacy curriculum and programme designers in a range of educational settings. How do you foster language knowledge, either for its own sake or as an adjunct to developing reading and writing skills, in a bicultural and/or

multilingual context, in ways that support biculturalism and multilingualism and resist (English/standard English) linguistic hegemonies?

Richard Andrews' reflection almost two years on from the publication of the EPPI reviews mentioned previously is a reminder of the polemical flurry that followed their publication. The EPPI Centre's press release (dated January 18, 2005) was a carefully worded document with the headline: "New answers to old debates about teaching grammar". Andrews, himself, is reported as saying:

> This does not mean to say that the teaching of formal aspects of grammar is not interesting or useful in its own right; however, in a pressured curriculum, where the development of literacy is a high priority, there will be better ways of teaching writing and our findings suggest that the teaching of sentence combining may be one of the more effective approaches (Newman, 2005, p. 1).

On the same day, the University of York issued a press release with the headline: "University of York researchers closer to answering 100-year-old question". Within hours, the British press had responded with a variety of headlines: "Formal grammar is 'ineffective'" (BBC News, 18 January); "Grammar lessons do not help children write proper" (*The Guardian*, 18 January); "Teaching grammar 'is a waste of time'" (*The Daily Telegraph*, 19 January); "Traditional grammar teaching is a waste of time, say academics" (*The Times,* 19 January). On January 22, 2005, young people's writer Philip Pullman chimed in with a opinion piece in *The Guardian,* noting among other things how the York findings went against common sense, which he described as follows:

> That particular quality of mind, the exclusive property of those on the political right, enables its possessors to know without trouble of thinking that of course teaching children about syntax and the parts of speech will result in better writing, as well as making them politer, more patriotic and less likely to become pregnant (¶2).

There is something predictable about the amount of darkness shed by this particular frenzy, where "grammar" slides easily into "traditional grammar" into "formal grammar" as if there were general agreement on what exactly is being referred to. Pullman himself was stretching things when he claimed that the York study claimed that it was "writing in a meaningful context" that worked (2005, ¶10), but he had his own axe to grind. In fact, as mentioned previously, the York findings were circumscribed by a number of limitations and the claims were quite modest.

Indeed, this is the starting point of Andrews' article in this issue, which focuses deliberately on grammar at the level of the sentence, while recognizing that "grammar" can potentially refer to word- and text-level grammars. For Andrews, policy advice in recent years in England has suffered from two flaws: 1. an assumption that pupils need to know about sentence grammar through a terminology and 2. an assumption that what matters is *how* this knowledge is conveyed pedagogically rather than whether it *should* be. Like other contributors, Andrews uses Hudson and Walmsley (2005) as a prompt, and begins his response to them by denying their premise that English schools stopped teaching grammar in the 1960s. Then, in an interesting irony, he takes issue with a statement by Hudson and Walmsley that Kolln and Hancock (above) enthusiastically endorse:

> As with any other tool, language is more effective if it is better understood, *so* we take it for granted that school leavers *should* understand how language works; this understanding will help them not only to use their existing resources better but also to acquire new resources…our view is that the understanding *must* include some of the technicalities of grammar.[5]

The italics here are Andrews' and are used to pinpoint what he sees as a sliding between premises and conclusions. For Andrews, even the opening premise is an assumption to be contested. His main concern, rather than to take issue with Hudson and Walmsley, however, is to make suggestions about the shape of a future research agenda, including further systematic reviews of aspects of teaching grammar, "like grammatical awareness, the non-teaching of grammar, working with emergent grammars, the use of systemic-functional grammars and the links between sentence grammars and other levels of language description, like word- and text-level grammars" (pp. 72-73). He is also at pains to emphasise a need to recognize increased multimodality in text production practices. In his conclusion, he draws a set of provisional conclusions in respect of what teachers and pupils *do* need to know about language. Like other contributors, he supports the collaboration of linguists and educationalists in exploring ways of ensuring that teachers are provided with a metalanguage, while cautioning that there is no research to indicate that the provision of such a metalanguage will lead automatically to improved quality in student writing. However, he does suggest that "a teacher with a rich knowledge of grammatical constructions and a more general awareness of the forms and varieties of the language will be in a better position to help young writers", even though we still don't know what forms of "grammar teaching" are likely to be most effective (pp. 73-74).

Debra Myhill, in her article in this issue, takes the York research as one of her prompts, describing it as disappointing for not engaging sufficiently with "key pedagogical and empirical questions" (p. 79). In gently taking to task the York research for its findings, she contends that there is research available which highlights pedagogical issues which warrant further enquiry and continuing debate. She supports Hudson's (2004) claim that there has been a significant policy shift in England from grammar approaches obsessed with error (a "deficit model") to an emphasis on effectiveness, the ability to make choices, and an awareness of differences between standard and non-standard forms and dialects. In the main, her article is an attempted theorization of how "knowledge about grammar might inform both learners' and teachers' understanding of writing, rather than looking more broadly and generally at knowledge about language" (p. 77). In doing so, she positions herself as wanting to move beyond the polarizing debates which have characterized the situation in England over the last forty years. Like Andrews, she calls for a widening of the research agenda: "What is needed is more research which is genuinely open-minded and critical, and policy initiatives which encourage professional engagement with the pedagogic issues…" (p. 80). Rather than adopting the "mantra" of "teaching grammar in context", she proposes an approach to developing "metalinguistic awareness about linguistic choices" in an overall view of "writing as a social practice" (p. 84). In exploring the relationship between "tacit" and "explicit" knowledge she also engages

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[5] This particular quotation comes from an earlier draft of the Hudson and Walmsley (2005) article, which was made available to contributors to this issue and was also for a time available as a download on Dick Hudson's own website.

with an issue Andrews alludes to in his article. In her conclusion, she articulates three principles at the heart of the theoretical conceptualization she is proposing:

1. "*Writing as a communicative act* should be the principal pedagogic focus;
2. "Writers should be encouraged to see the various linguistic choices available to them as *meaning-making resources*, ways of creating relationships with their reader, and shaping and flexing language for particular effects;
3. "*Connectivity:* Children should be supported in making connections between their various language experiences as readers, writers and speakers, and in making connections between what they write and how they write it" (pp. 91-92).

Myhill's emphasis on writing as a social practice and a larger context for increasing student (and teacher) awareness of linguistic choices is in tune with Hilary Janks' article on "Language and the design of texts". What Janks offers and demonstrates, in fact, is a rubric, drawing on Hallidayan grammar and the work of Norman Fairclough (1995), for the critical analysis of texts. "When people use language," she writes, "they have to select from options available in the system – they have to make lexical, grammatical and sequencing choices in order to say what they want to say" (p. 96). Whilst Janks models the part played by grammatical knowledge in the act of critical reading, there are implications here for writing viewed as a social (and discursively constructed) practice. Indeed, as Janks shows, critical reading which contests (deconstructs) a text's assumptions is effectively a readerly re-writing of it. She concludes her article, syllogistically: "If discourse analysis is not possible without grammar, and critical reading is not possible without discourse analysis, then we do our students an educational disservice if we do not teach them grammar" (p. 109).

The penultimate article in this issue, from Lesley Rex and colleagues associated in some way with the University of Michigan – David Brown, Linda Denstaedt, Laura Haniford and Laura Schiller – is a useful reminder of the way in which Hallidayan grammar, seeded in England, nurtured in Australia and taken up as the preferred grammar of most critical discourse analysts, is now a widespread lens through which to consider questions of knowledge about language/grammar and its place in the classroom. Rex and her colleagues, while endorsing one of the positions adopted by Hudson and Walmsley (2005), are adopting a similar position to that occupied by Janks, as a comparison of their respective bibliographies will show. They have used the opportunity offered by this double issue to engage in a conversation among themselves, "explaining to each other our particular applications of linguistic theories" and seeking commonalities (p. 111). The result, for readers of this issue, is a series of small case studies, located in a range of settings: initial English teacher education (Laura Haniford); continuing English teacher education (Lesley Rex and Laura Schiller); the production of writing textbooks (Linda Denstaedt); and the teaching of Standard English (David West Brown). Underpinning each of these studies is an argument that "language study is more usefully thought of as a process inseparable from human social practices through which people create their own 'grammars' to operate successfully in the world. These grammars are successful because they are fluid, responsive and adaptive to the social and discursive conditions in which they are created" (p. 113). The notion of a personalised "grammar" is a long way from traditional, prescriptive, sentence-level grammars with their emphasis on rules, appropriateness and error.

Finally, I welcome the contribution from David Slomp, a young academic based at the University of Alberta. I have referred to Slomp earlier in this editorial where I have suggested that his discussion of construct validity and its pertinence, in particular, to the setting of writing tests, is a timely reminder of something alluded to by a number of contributors to this issue. That is, that the collaboration between linguists and educators in addressing the sorts of questions listed earlier in this editorial, at times celebrated and at other times called for by various authors, are unlike to bear fruit in actual classrooms unless the pedagogical decks are cleared by addressing ways in which tests are being set in ways which subvert desirable practice. Although not using the term, Slomp is calling for the kind of advocacy for change that can result from what Judyth Sachs (1999) has called "activist professionalism". In terms of this view, activist professional is fundamentally political in nature "…in that it brings together alliances and networks of various education interest groups for collective action to improve, at the macro level, all aspects of the education enterprise and at the micro level, student learning outcomes and teachers' status in the eyes of the community" (p. 1).

The current term for what Sachs is referring to, in part, is networking. Part 1 of this double issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* – the tenth issue since the journal's inception in 2002 – contains eight articles from contributors based in five countries. As editor, it has been a privilege to be entrusted with these contributions and a pleasure to read them. Is some kind of consensus emerging on any of the ten questions listed previously? Readers of this issue will form their own opinion according to their own lights. Part 2 is due for publication in May, 2006, and I look forward to sharing my own conclusions on this question in my editorial for this issue (Volume V, Number 1).

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