

english in the mainstream: *heritage language* or *lingua franca?*

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abstract

This article examines fundamental assumptions that relate to the nature and role of the English language in Aotearoa New Zealand, including its use in society generally and in the school curriculum specifically. As a framework for this discussion, the article begins by considering the contrasting classifiers of languages as *heritage language* and *lingua franca*. The historical and cultural backgrounds of users of English in Aotearoa New Zealand are then briefly examined and the position is argued that the cultural (and in many cases linguistic) roles and use of English in New Zealand may lie somewhat closer to that of a *lingua franca* than a *heritage language*. This is followed by an examination of existing *heritage language* assumptions underpinning the approaches taken towards English in education and their consequences. Finally the article discusses how the mainstream approach to teaching and learning English, currently predicated on a *heritage language* view, may change if a *lingua franca* view of English were to be adopted.

introduction

In 1989 *Te Reo Maori* was made an official language in Aotearoa New Zealand and over the years 2005 and 2006 legislation was tabled and passed through its various stages in Parliament to make *New Zealand Sign Language* the second official language. While both events were important and represent long overdue recognition for the status of the two languages involved, what these two disparate acts of government tell us is that New Zealand, unlike Australia, does not have 'languages policy' within which these acts took place. This is not to say that there have never been moves to create a languages policy in this country; indeed in the early 1990s, Geoffrey Waite's research and report, *Aotearoa: Speaking for ourselves*, showed all of the signs that we were moving towards developing a coherent and consistent languages policy. However, Waite's report, like several other earlier reports on languages in this country, suffered the usual fate - that of being consigned to library shelves and forgotten. The official status accorded to *Te Reo Maori* and New

Zealand Sign Language, therefore, represent ad hoc steps taken by governments, laudable in themselves, but also disappointing in that they were not taken as part of any systematic languages policy.

However, given the accordance of official status to each of these two languages, a number of interesting questions arise from this ad hoc policy. These include: What about English? What is the actual role and status of English in New Zealand? Why do we largely ignore the role of English but use it as the de facto language of everyday communication? What societal assumptions have led to this state of affairs?

The answers to these questions have considerable importance in relation to education since they directly relate to the ideas that underpin the role and nature of English as it is taught in the mainstream school curriculum. In order to provide a framework for the discussion that follows, two key concepts are briefly reviewed, the concepts of *heritage language* and *lingua franca*.

heritage language

Heritage language is a term that appears to be mainly used in North American contexts and different definitions have been proposed. The definition used here is that taken from Grenoble and Whaley (2006, p.14) who claim that 'the term often refers to any languages spoken by one's parents or other ancestors regardless of how many generations have passed'. For people who identify as Maori, therefore, their heritage language is Te Reo Maori even they may no longer use it as the main language of communication in their daily lives.

lingua franca

Wardhaugh (1998, p. 55) cites the UNESCO (1953) definition of a lingua franca as 'a language which is used habitually by people whose mother tongues are different in order to facilitate communication between them'. A lingua franca is any language widely used beyond the population of its native speakers. A language often becomes a lingua franca because of its use in commerce or diplomacy.

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Rather than classifying all languages strictly within these two categories, it is probably useful to think of heritage language and lingua franca as extreme points at each end of a continuum along which a language may be placed in terms of its functions and role within the society where it is used. In deciding where to place New Zealand English on such a continuum, it is useful to consider its historical evolution along with its current roles and use in society

English is not the heritage language of Maori as the indigenous population of the country and neither is it that of the descendants of considerable number of groups within the settler population, people whose earlier generations arrived speaking Pasifika languages, Cantonese, Serbo-Croatian, Dutch, Polish and German. Even much of the original Anglophone settler population came from parts of the British Isles that had (and still have) distinct cultures originally deriving from non-English or dialect linguistic backgrounds, such as the sizable Scottish and Irish settler groups. Furthermore, recent settlement in New Zealand has also involved numbers of Afrikaans speakers as well as sizeable numbers of Chinese and Korean as well as a number of other smaller groups.

English, therefore, has become the language of wider communication in New Zealand society, developing its own functions and usages specific to the New Zealand context. It has given rise to its own literature, with strong contributions from Maori and the descendants of settler groups. It has become the language of education for most of the population, regardless of cultural or linguistic background, although this hegemony has been resisted by *Kohanga Reo*, *Kura Kaupapa Maori* and community (heritage) language schools, such as evening and weekend schools run by the Greek community.

Overall, therefore, considering the definitions of the two terms offered here and considering the role of English, it seems to be the case that English in

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Aotearoa New Zealand may be placed on the continuum somewhat closer to the category of lingua franca than that of heritage language for many people, and especially for many recent arrivals or alternatively schooled Maori. However, it is a lingua franca introduced by the largest settler group, which has taken to itself a rather hegemonic role involving heritage language assumptions. Because of this, newly arrived settlers from other language groups feel the need to quickly adopt English to the extent that heritage languages tend to be largely lost during the second generation.

English as a heritage language (EHL) assumptions in education

The heritage language role that English plays in Aotearoa New Zealand gives rise to a range of assumptions that underpin the educational curriculum and educational practices. It is rare that these assumptions are interrogated despite the strong influences that they exert.

The first underlying assumption that shapes education can be expressed in the following way: because it is a given that English is 'the' heritage language, there is no particular need to examine or articulate its role either in society or in education (hence no languages policy.) This view is evidenced by the past tendency of the educational community to refer to the subject of English as 'language' in the primary school timetable and in the titles of various educational publications. The corollary of this view is that other languages do not need to be considered as central to learning, since their roles and influences on societal communication and cultural life tend to be of only peripheral importance. In recent years some ground has been yielded to Te Reo Maori in terms of allowing ceremonial and formulaic usages (such as greetings and institutional signage), however, it is fair to say that these responses arise from a perceived need to give recognition to the Maori Renaissance rather than out of any deeper ongoing discourse about the respective roles of the two languages in society, such as a discourse that would surround a languages policy.

Another (highly challengeable) assumption that seems to persist in education is that because we live in an EHL country, all learners will arrive at school with a fundamental competence in English and, on this basis, teaching and learning can proceed. Most teacher training still appears to be predicated on this assumption and most newly trained teachers enter the classroom only equipped to deal with relatively homogeneous groups of EHL learners. New teachers, therefore, have received little or no training in how to deal with any English as a lingua franca (hereafter ELF) learners that they will encounter. The worst manifestation of this assumption within schools is to view ELF learners as a group that is somehow developmentally deficient, and for whom language support is best delivered as part of the programmes for students with learning needs. (Regrettably, this deficit view of ELF learners is still a feature of the course organisation of some secondary schools.) However, contrary to the (EHL country) assumption in education, the reality is that there are a considerable number of schools where the overwhelming majority of children who attend are ELF users confronted with an EHL education system underpinned by EHL ideas and practices. This is a distinctly imperfect fit that can have serious implications for levels of educational achievement. Stephen May (2002) points out that ELF learners may include children whose first language is not English, such as immigrant children, but it also children who are first language speakers of English who:

have been socialised into different linguistic norms and practices and so may not possibly be as familiar with the English academic language and literacy requirements of school based discourse. This group includes, for example, second or even third generation Pasifika students [and] . . . it has long included Maori (p. 9).

A more specific EHL curricular assumption is that, given the fundamental English competence of the whole school population, a focus on the structure and organisation of the language (systemic knowledge) is assigned a subsidiary role within the curriculum. It is felt that linguistic information,

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including the forms of the language such as grammar, syntax and discourse structure, is better covertly rather than overtly taught, and this often occurs as an adjunct to literature studies. This approach again derives from the view that children arrive at school with a fundamental native-speaker competence. Already familiar with the spoken code, learners, by exposure to literature (written, spoken and visual) and its ideas, will seamlessly acquire the written code while engaged in creative expression in 'language rich' classrooms. A focus on systemic language knowledge tends to be only introduced as and when specific issues arise.

Therefore, because of its perceived centrality to cultural expression, literature still is seen as the central vehicle for the teaching of English. However, the problem with this view is that understanding EHL literature requires a worldview that embodies certain types of cultural knowledge, experiences and values that may not be part of the repertoire that an ELF learner brings to his or her school-based learning. It also appears to make the rather questionable assumption that a steady diet of literature study provides the best pathway to the more advanced academic literacies that many learners will encounter in tertiary education.

Another EHL derived assumption is that the need to mandate the learning of other languages in schools merits low priority in the already 'overcrowded' curriculum. Languages other than English tend to be seen as ancillary and enriching, but not central to learning or learner expression. Stephen May (2002) points out that there has also been a double standard in respect to the maintenance of or learning of other languages.

Many who argue, for example, that maintaining Maori or Samoan is at best unnecessary, and at worst detrimental to the acquisition of English are also just as often quick to insist that learning another (so-called prestige) language like French and German is academically and socially advantageous. (p. 9)

The disturbing subtext of such a view, as Cummins (2001) points out, is that second language learning may be good for the rich, but not necessarily so for the poor. Despite recent efforts, second language

learning does not enjoy a central role in the curriculum. It is introduced at a relatively late age, in discontinuous 'taster' offerings in the early years and with small total numbers of hours of instruction accumulated by Year 13 - all of which means that learners can never attain very high levels of proficiency. The generally low priority accorded to second language learning strongly reinforces ELH society assumptions and their entailments.

It seems that EHL assumptions underpin the curriculum as embedded fundamentals about which there are no ongoing discourses. The lack of a languages policy discourse largely contributes to the persistence of this situation in the collective unconsciousness.

English as a lingua franca and education

This section is a speculation based on the hypothetical existence of a languages policy in Aotearoa New Zealand. As part of this policy, English has an articulated role in society and a set of complex, developed relationships with other languages. The speculation also presumes ongoing discourses in society and education about languages and it also assumes the existence of a national centre for language research, planning and innovation. In this scenario, it is accepted that New Zealanders are the cultural inheritors of a number of languages, all of which are recognised and some of which have official status because of their particular societal roles. Within this situation, English is used as the lingua franca for a range of pragmatic reasons and it is also an important vehicle for cultural expression. However, it is also accepted that the other official languages will replace the use of English in many contexts.

The curriculum considers that a learner's consummate language development involves English and the knowledge of one other language. English is taught overtly as a lingua franca, cognisant of the specific needs of particular local communities and school contexts. For example, the realisation of the English curriculum is not the same for learners in schools in South Auckland as it is for learners in schools in South Canterbury. In tandem with English, the learning or maintenance

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of an additional language is seen as a necessary aspect of the development and understanding of the complex systems of language knowledge that support a full development of oracy and literacy skills. In particular, the additional language is seen as essential to the acquisition of a range of cognitive skills and for intercultural development, aspects of learning that do not occur in a monolingual environment.

Teaching English as a lingua franca avoids prior assumptions about learners in terms of their language experiences, cognitive training and knowledge of prior texts. Rather it assumes that learners may arrive in the classroom with a diversity of cultural, language and textual experiences and it will aim to both affirm that diversity and develop the learners' knowledge of English using a systematic and balanced approach. This will involve a developing a strong understanding of its systemic language knowledge in tandem with the contextualised use of such knowledge in spoken and written genres. Essential to first aspect of this process is a conscious, ongoing and graduated focus on the development of metalinguistic knowledge including: morphology, vocabulary, grammar, syntax and discourse structure. The overt focus on systemic knowledge is always related to the contextualised use of such features. At the upper levels of the curriculum, study of the language involves developing a critical understanding a range of occupational, professional and academic as well as literary genres.

Learning an additional language is seen as an indispensable part of the curriculum. This provides opportunities for cognitive development and the requirement to negotiate meaning through cross-cultural understanding and communication. It will also assist the development a greater comprehension of metalinguistic knowledge relating to all of the languages in the learner's repertoire.

conclusion

It seems certain that underlining assumptions about the respective roles of languages in any society have far reaching influences on education including curriculum and pedagogical practice. For such underlying assumptions to change, if indeed it is

decided that they need to change, there needs to be an ongoing and developing discourse centred on a range of issues. In many ways it seems that this particular discourse should precede (and indeed provide a basis for) any specific reviews and attempts to reshape the curriculum. Such a discourse could also contribute to the articulation of a national languages policy. Ideally the pressure and impetus for this would be bottom up rather than top-down (government initiated) as it has been in the past.

The foregoing discussion has suggested that there is a range of implications from any shift from EHL to ELF language assumptions in relation to curriculum and pedagogy. These include expectations in relation to the prior knowledge of learners and different views of teacher practice and teacher training. It may also result in a more articulated curriculum in relation to the systemic language knowledge. This would also have implications for teacher knowledge and practice. The discussion has also suggested that there may need to be a re-evaluation of the current role of literature in the curriculum with perhaps a focus on a wider range of texts. Finally, it may also mean that schools introduce a more specific focus on academic literacies for those preparing to enter higher education.

The role of English is clearly very important in New Zealand society, however, it appears to be a role about which many are ambivalent and that ambivalence has long suppressed the development of a discourse about its role in society and how it is taught in schools. It may also be the case that while society fails to adequately articulate the role of English, Te Reo Maori and other languages will continue to struggle to find their own places on the languages landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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