



Te Reo
the Journal of the Linguistic
Society of New Zealand

Volume 61

Issue 2 (*Special Issue*) *Linguistics in New Zealand: Personal Histories*

Contribution Type: Essay

2018

Pages 85-94

November 2018

Bridging research and practice

Paul Nation

Victoria University of Wellington

This paper is a peer-reviewed contribution from <https://www.nzlingsoc.org/journal>

©Te Reo – The Journal of the Linguistic Society of New Zealand

Editor: Laurie Bauer

Bridging research and practice

Paul Nation

I was born and brought up in a small town in New Zealand. Ever since I can remember, I wanted to be a schoolteacher. This ambition was strongly limited by the small number of roles that I could see around me. A very notable feature of life in a small New Zealand town was its egalitarianism. When I think back of my close friends during my youth, I realise that many of them were among the poorest people in town. This is not something that I was aware of at the time, because I just regarded them as my friends and we never really thought about those things. Also, when I think back about it, there was nothing in the way we dressed or the things that we did that distinguished us. We all went largely barefoot out of preference, and the games that we enjoyed playing didn't require equipment or uniforms.

I did reasonably well at school, usually coming in the top two or three in the class and only topping the class when it really mattered in standard six and form seven. This was purely by accident and certainly not by design. I was lucky enough to get a teaching studentship to support me at university. It turned out that the academic support that the studentship provided was at least as valuable as the financial support.

University study

It was not until I went to university that I realised how poorly my secondary school education had prepared me for tertiary study. I had little idea about how to study and what was expected of me at university. I remember sitting in one of my first English tutorials and looking at the text that we were supposed to work on that day and realising that I could barely understand it.

Fortunately or perhaps unfortunately, I boarded in a men's university hostel, Weir House. It was enormous fun. I immediately had 90 people I knew at university (I was the only one from my home town at university that year), and I did all of the things that it seemed university students were supposed to do, except study. I almost failed my first year, scoring 28% in French reading knowledge, 50% in History, and in the mid-60s in Psychology and English. It wasn't until the middle of my second year that I figured out what I was really supposed to be doing, and from then on I did reasonably well.

One of the things that struck me was the gap between teaching staff (especially the professors) and the students. This gap seemed especially pronounced with some of the professors who were not from New Zealand. Although I never saw myself becoming a university teacher, I was determined not to be like that in my relationships with my students.

When it was clear that I was going to major in English, I went out of my way to go to all sorts of extracurricular activities such as poetry weekends, discussion groups, protests (the Vietnam war and rugby trips to South Africa), and endless arguments with others in Weir House. I went to highly entertaining poetry readings by James K Baxter, Peter Bland, Louis Johnston, Alistair Campbell and the rarely sober Denis Glover.

I was lucky enough to be in the first undergraduate and then postgraduate linguistics courses ever taught at Victoria University. Professor Frank Brosnahan had been newly appointed and he taught a second year course in English structure. It involved basic phonetics, morphology, and immediate constituent analysis. It was very clearly and systematically taught and provided an excellent grounding in basic linguistics. Several of us in the course were very enthusiastic, challenging each other to analyse sentences and work out linguistic ambiguities. Kon Kuiper, later to be Professor Kon Kuiper at the University of Canterbury, was one of these students.

When I did Masters study, a couple of linguistics papers were offered and I did both of them. There were two of us in one class, the other student being George Quinn, later to become Professor George Quinn at the University of Canberra. George and I met up again in Jogjakarta in Indonesia where I was working at a teachers training college as part of the Colombo plan, and George was studying in Indonesian at Gajah Mada University.

The English Language Institute

During my Masters year a job became available at the English Language Institute and we were encouraged to apply for it. I think I was the only person to apply and was interviewed by H.V. George. I didn't know what to make of him during the interview, but I was offered the job and took it. Fortunately, teaching at the university was regarded as filling the bond requirements of my teachers' studentship. On completing my Masters degree, I was thrown into the deep end of teacher training, having never been a teacher myself and having never had any training in being a teacher. My students were all older than me and were vastly more experienced in what I was supposed to teach them. They were however young enough to realise what it was like to be a novice teacher and they were very kind and generous in putting up with my attempts to teach them.

At this time teaching English as a foreign language was in the very early stages of being a profession. H.V. George pointed out that people of my generation were really the first professional trainers of teachers of English as a foreign language. Previous to this, people had drifted into the profession through postings through the British Council or some other arm of the colonial service. They were often graduates in literature. People of my generation had studied linguistics, and in my case psychology (which proved to be very useful in my professional development), and were thus coming into the profession with some relevant preparatory background.

When I look at the professional development resources available now, it makes me realise how little there was to draw on at that time. There were a few journals such as *ELT Journal*, *Language Learning*, *TESOL Quarterly*, and *English Teaching Forum*, and very few directly relevant books. This lack of relevant books had a positive effect on me, because it made me realise that I really needed to do my

own research and study to gain the knowledge that I needed to be an effective teacher trainer.

H.V. George was initially the source of all our knowledge. Pat McEldowney and I attended all of H.V. George's lectures and then provided tutorial support for them. This was our personal teacher training. Fortunately, HVG was very experienced, having taught in Malaya, Iraq, and India. While in India, he undertook a very large scale verb form frequency count, relying on his students to help gather the data. He was thus a very early corpus linguist and the work that he did in the late 50s and early 60s was in many ways years ahead of its time. The research carried out by Douglas Biber and others for the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* was to a large degree an unwitting replication of HVG's work. HVG's interest in corpus studies was very influential in my own vocabulary research. Very early on I learnt about Zipf's Law, frequency counts, types and tokens, and text coverage. HVG was also a very egalitarian person leading by example rather than authority. While he was always prepared to spend time helping us, he was not very directive in pushing us to pursue lines of research and interest. As when I began university study, I spent the first year or so floundering around before I figured out what I needed to do.

Graeme Kennedy was also a staff member of the English Language Institute. He had been invited to join the staff when the ELI was being set up under the directorship of George Pittman and under the guidance of Professor Ian Gordon. When I joined the staff Graeme was getting ready to head off to the United States for doctoral study. Although he was less accepting of HVG's teaching than I was, he was strongly influenced by HVG's corpus focus and on returning to New Zealand several years later, he began to pursue corpus studies.

The English Language Institute operated on the normal trimester year. During the "academic" year (March to October), the ELI ran diploma and certificate teacher training courses providing specialist training for teachers from Southeast Asia and the Pacific. During the summer trimester November to February, it ran an English proficiency course to prepare non-native speakers of English for university study. Some of these non-native speakers of English would go on to do the Diploma in Teaching English as a Second Language (Dip TESL, later to become the Dip TESOL). ELI staff taught two trimesters each year. For most staff this involved teaching on the English proficiency program in the summer and teaching one of the academic semesters on the Dip TESL. This proved to be excellent on-the-job training, because not only did we have to train teachers, but we also gained experience in English teaching. In addition, because several of our course members did both courses, we had to put our money where our mouth was.

When HVG arrived at the ELI, he quickly realised that the English proficiency program needed to be much better organised and needed to meet the needs of its learners in a more systematic way. While in India, HVG had met Helen Barnard who was developing materials to prepare non-native speakers of English for university study. As soon as he could, he had Helen appointed to the ELI staff with her main goal being to develop a systematic English proficiency program.

Both HVG and Helen were remarkable people. It took no stretch of the imagination to see HVG dressed in a loincloth as a Gandhi-like guru. This physical impression was reinforced by his offbeat wisdom. He did most things with a strong

sense of fun and did them in a way that was peculiarly his. I remember him coming back from a meeting with Volunteer Service Abroad, dismayed at the criteria they were applying to select volunteers for overseas service. He likened the criteria they used to the criteria used for selection for the Waffen SS in Hitler's Germany (fitting in, being a good chap etc.), and he spoke with some authority on this having been interned in a German prisoner of war camp during the Second World War. I also have a note he wrote to the professorial board criticising a document on planning that had been put forward by one of the science professors. The note began, "Writing a report is a small exercise in planning. On this basis, Professor X's report has disqualified him from participation in any planning committee." He then went on to critique the report showing how poorly planned and poorly organised it was. I remember him saying, that if you are going to get into a fight, you had better make sure you enjoy it. He clearly enjoyed writing the critique.

One of his goals as Director of the ELI was to keep the ELI from being too closely integrated into the rest of the university. He considered that too close an integration would result in a loss of flexibility, and he preferred for the ELI to be regarded as something different so that he could take it in whatever direction he thought fit. When HVG retired, the new director, Graeme Kennedy, had exactly the opposite goal. Graeme saw integration with the rest of the university as a way of securing its continuance.

Helen Barnard was a tall and somewhat imposing figure. Her appearance was completely unlike her personality. She was kind, generous, full of fun and a pleasure to work with. She was also somewhat abstracted and occasionally not very aware what was happening around her. You could trace where she had just been by the trail of objects (glasses, keys, books) left behind. I remember visiting her once when she had one of our Indonesian students staying with her. The student was from a very poor family in Indonesia and had little experience of Western ways (he later went on to become the head of one of the best known private teacher training institutions in Indonesia). He was sitting there eating his breakfast which included a fried egg which he was trying to balance on his knife to get into his mouth. Helen was sitting at the other end of the table eating her breakfast, completely unaware of the small drama being played out at the other end of the table. I realised that he could board with her for 10 years and still not get a quick lesson on how to use a knife and fork.

Helen quickly developed a set of course books for the pre-university course, *Advanced English Vocabulary*, and this was soon published by the newly formed Newbury House and became one of their bestsellers. It was exciting teaching on the course while it was being developed, because we were trialling the material as it was developed, getting feedback from the students and passing that feedback and our impressions on to Helen. The course was based on frequency counts and specially prepared word lists, and was an excellent example of corpus linguistics being applied to teaching. The model of this work was a strong influence on me for the writing of my first book *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*, also published by Newbury House.

Overseas experience

At the end of my second year at the ELI, I went to Indonesia for a year as a part-time teacher at the teachers training college in Jogjakarta (IKIP Negeri Jogjakarta) and to gather data for an inadequately planned and prepared-for PhD. I had previously visited Indonesia for a couple of months the year before as a tourist and had begun learning Indonesian.

While there I also taught two English classes a week in a junior high school using the oral-aural coursebook recently introduced into Indonesian schools. As well as teaching in the government teachers college, I also taught one day a week in a Catholic teachers' college, Sanata Dharma. At the end of that year I went to Thailand to get married (the best decision I ever made in my life) and we returned to New Zealand where I spent a year working on my deservedly ill-fated PhD. On the good advice of the new professor of English Language, John Pride, I abandoned my PhD and was lucky enough to be re-employed by the ELI.

Around this time I took on the job of secretary to the Wellington branch of the Linguistics Society of New Zealand. The Linguistics Society had reasonably regular meetings which were well attended by staff from the ELI, English and Philosophy, as well as some staff from the New Zealand Council for Educational Research and local teachers. The minutes of meetings were recorded in a hard-covered battered ledger book which even at that time was something of an antique. The talks were usually held in the council chamber at the top of the Easterfield building and were lively enjoyable affairs with plenty of discussion and debate.

My experience in Indonesia had better prepared me for work at the ELI and after two years of teaching, I returned to Jogjakarta on secondment from the ELI under a bilateral aid agreement. Ron Fountain had followed me at the teachers' college and before going to Indonesia he had wisely negotiated a deal with the university and the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs to keep his job at the ELI.

In many ways my return to Indonesia was truly the beginning of my career as an applied linguist. I now had some basic knowledge of the field and could see ways in which to develop my knowledge and to publish from this knowledge. Ever practical, one of the tasks I set myself was to make a comprehensive list of all of the teaching techniques used in teaching English as a foreign language. This involved a very thorough search of all the journals and books and resulted in a booklet called *Language Teaching Techniques* which I made available to my students in a duplicated form. This became the basis for many subsequent articles and books. My colleague, Gerry Meister, and I set up an extensive reading program at the teachers college. We found that the teachers college library actually contained a reasonable number of graded readers which were scattered through the shelves. We gathered them altogether, made a list of them, managed to obtain some more and got our students doing large amounts of extensive reading. It was clear that many of the students needed a dictionary to do the reading, but could not afford to buy one. So, with the help of Father Bolsius from Sanata Dharma we created a 1000 word English to Indonesian dictionary, and later 2000 and 3000 word versions. Initially the 1000 word version was available to the students in duplicated form. We made copies of the dictionary and gave it to the librarians to sell very cheaply. We let the librarians

keep the money from the sale but they had to make the graded readers available for the learners to read. Previously most books were stored in glass cabinets and borrowing was discouraged. The librarians had never worked so hard in their lives, because each time there was a break between classes there was a rush to the library to borrow graded readers. The effects of the extensive reading program were astonishing, largely because most of the students at the teachers college were clever and capable but were not rich enough to be able to afford university fees. When they were given access to resources such as graded readers, they made very fast improvement in their English proficiency. A substantial group of the students were reading unsimplified texts within a year or two of beginning the extensive reading program.

At the same time I worked with Emmy Quinn (married to George Quinn), an ELI graduate, on a speed reading course, written at the 1000 word level. There was already a commercially available speed reading course for learners of English as a foreign language written at the 2000 word level, but this proved to be too difficult for our students, and also contained passages containing the names of lots of diseases such as kwashiorkor, bilharzia, yaws and scurvy which proved to be quite an obstacle for our students when trying to improve their reading speed. Our speed reading course was based on Southeast Asian topics which were at least partly familiar to the readers. It worked really well and Oxford University Press in Kuala Lumpur decided to publish it.

By the time we returned to New Zealand after three years in Indonesia, I had already published several articles, several course books, and had plenty of ideas for new areas of research. One of the main reasons for this productivity was that I had got into the Asian habit of having an afternoon sleep. A typical day involved getting up sometime around 6 o'clock in the morning, having breakfast and then going off to teach at the teachers college at around 8 o'clock. Teaching was over by 1pm (it was too hot to teach after that) and I returned home for lunch and an afternoon sleep. At 4 o'clock I got up and was ready to meet students coming for consultations on their research papers, and then still feeling fresh, I could get on with my own research and writing until fairly late in the evening. In effect, the day had two beginnings - the morning, and the late afternoon.

Our son Prahm was born in Indonesia and was beginning to speak three languages by the age of three. Fortunately he managed to maintain two of them.

After three years back in New Zealand I had the opportunity to work overseas again under the auspices of the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This time the post was in Thailand in a Thai government Department - the Department of Technical and Economic Cooperation - in their language institute which prepared Thai government officials to take up scholarships to study in foreign universities. Unlike the work in Indonesia which involved teacher training, this was direct language teaching in preparation for sitting tests such as the TOEFL test and the IELTS test. The courses were relatively short but based on scores on the entrance test we could predict with reasonable accuracy how many courses a student would need in order to be able to pass one of the English tests. The Institute had teachers from Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States who worked alongside local Thai teachers. My calculation was that the existence of the Institute effectively doubled the number of Thai government officials who could pass the English test in order to take up the scholarships that they had been offered to study

overseas. It was a very effective use of aid money. After two years in Thailand I wanted to extend for another year, but the university gently pointed out that I had been employed by them for 10 years but had only worked in the university in New Zealand for five of those years. They reasonably considered it was time to come back.

When I returned to New Zealand, I did some further postgraduate study at Victoria in the field of education. The university had recently set up a professorial position aimed at staff development and the first Professor was John Clift who was very ably assisted by Brad Imrie. As a project for one of the papers, I decided to do a survey of research on foreign language vocabulary learning. I expected to find about 20 or 30 articles but to my amazement I found many hundreds. I wrote a very substantial review paper for my assignment and set up a database of vocabulary articles. The paper and the database (which I still maintain) became the basis for my first book, *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*. Like almost all of my books it was written before it was offered to a publisher. Most books in our field begin as proposals to a publisher, and then if the proposal is accepted, the writing begins. I find it very difficult to work this way because for me writing is a process of discovery. I write in order to know what I think. I find it very hard to stick to preconceived plans and prefer keep the freedom and flexibility of not really having a plan. An influence from H.V. George? As Spike Milligan said, "We haven't got a plan so we can't go wrong."

Graeme Kennedy

When H.V. George retired in 1982, Graeme Kennedy became Director of the English Language Institute and New Zealand's first Professor of Applied Linguistics. He then set about making the ELI a well-integrated part of the university both administratively and academically. This in itself was a lifetime's work which Graeme with typical dedication and effort achieved in less than ten years. H. V. George had trained and inspired a very capable staff, and Graeme Kennedy enabled that staff to offer a wide range of graduate and eventually undergraduate programs in applied linguistics.

Graeme's close links with Linguistics meant that the amalgamation of the ELI, Applied Linguistics and Linguistics into the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies in 1997 went very smoothly, and it now is difficult to remember how they ever once existed separately.

At his retirement in 2004, Janet Holmes noted Graeme's outstanding qualities of courage, integrity and honesty. He showed courage in taking on administrative causes that he saw as being important even though they might be difficult or unpopular. In his times as Dean he continued to remain true to his principles and was universally trusted – a rare achievement. Similarly, his PhD supervision in the unfamiliar areas of deaf studies and dictionary making were brave ventures in fields where initially he knew little. Like the best scholars, he learned along with his students.

After many years of building up the school and then passing over the Directorship to the very capable hands of David Crabbe in 1993, Graeme established

the Deaf Studies Research Unit, and then the New Zealand Dictionary Centre. Although there are many very substantial administrative and academic achievements that could be singled out, I consider the *Dictionary of New Zealand Sign Language* to be his most important. It has had an enormous effect on the Deaf community and on the use and learning of New Zealand Sign and is a model of how such a dictionary should be made.

Graeme made it to retirement but unfortunately Parkinson's disease meant that his retirement was not the long and pleasant time that he deserved.

Supervising doctoral research

As the ELI became more integrated with the rest of the university, it moved from being in a couple of houses on Wai-te-ata Road to being in a multi-story building on Kelburn Parade, its name eventually changed to become the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies incorporating the ELI as the language teaching part of the school, and it became more research-focused. The number of Masters and PhD thesis students steadily grew, and the staff's expertise at supervision also grew.

I am sure my first thesis students suffered from my lack of experience in thesis supervision and research design. One of the disadvantages of the British system of PhD study is the strong reliance of the candidate on their own skills and on the skills of a single supervisor. The American system of initial coursework typically provides the basis for at least a reasonable research thesis. With very capable students and a capable supervisor, the British system of no coursework and a substantial thesis can be a great advantage, because the thesis can be an opportunity for large amounts of learning, the development of true independence in research, and for a substantial number of subsequent or concurrent publications. My rough estimate is that about one third of my doctoral students truly benefited from the British system, while the other two-thirds would have found the American system of greater benefit to them.

Thesis supervision is a learning experience for both the supervisors and the students, and it is exciting for both supervisors and students to see the work progress and to learn unexpected things. At one point I had nine doctoral students and I found that I had reached the limit of what I could get my head around at any one time. When each student arrived for a supervisory session, they had to remind me of their topic and where they were.

Supervision can be quite hard on the ego as inevitably students prove that their supervisor was wrong, at times substantially wrong. However, one of the great satisfactions of supervision and teaching is seeing your students go on to succeed in their chosen profession, and even more importantly, to enjoy it and to be grabbed forever by the subject area.

Retirement

It may be that it is only when you retire that you realise how much of your time during your working career was taken up by things that were not truly central to your interests. Now, almost 10 years after retiring, I still find that I am not terribly

successful in managing my retirement. When I first retired, I suddenly had all this free time to do the research and writing that I previously had to put aside because of other more immediate pressing requirements. For the first year or so of my retirement, I found I was spending less time working outside in my garden than I was before retirement. I realised that this was because I was now doing much more research and writing than I was able to do before retiring, and I was giving most of my time to this rather than living a more balanced life. I was not unhappy about that, but I eventually realised that it would be wise to ease off a little. Since retiring I have averaged writing around one book a year. Interestingly, several of these books have not required me to do new research, but have required me to reflect on knowledge gained over a long period of time. My first such book, *What should every EFL Teacher Know?*, was partly inspired by similar books that others had written. I looked at them and thought I can do better than that. I figured that if after almost 50 years in the profession I could not readily tell a teacher of English as a foreign language the most important things that they needed to know, then I had been wasting my time. That book is my favourite of all that I have written, and I wrote it over a period of less than a month, while we were on our annual visit to family in Thailand.

Having written that book I realised that it was somewhat unfair to stop there, because my salary had been paid by New Zealand taxpayers and in New Zealand most English teaching was ESL rather than EFL. So I wrote another book, *What should every ESL Teacher Know?*. I thought before I began writing that book that I would be able to take some chapters from the EFL book and use them in the ESL book. The two books turned out to be strikingly different. I wanted these books to be readily available for teachers, and so when K.C. Kang of Compass Publishing offered to publish the EFL book, I told him that I did not want it to be an expensive book and he happily agreed. He also kindly offered to get his designers to work on the ESL book which is available free from the Compass Learning website. Here are the titles of subsequent books.

What do you Need to Know to Learn a Foreign Language? (A book written for language learners which is available free from my website).

What every Primary School Teacher should Know about Vocabulary. (A book written with Jannie van Hees for teachers of young native speakers of English and published by the NZCER).

Another such book remains to be written, *What should every Heritage Language Maintainer Know?*, but I do not have the knowledge to write it.

Another notable achievement in my retirement has been the Picture Vocabulary Size Test (available free from Laurence Anthony's web site <http://www.laurenceanthony.net/>). I have had a long interest in the vocabulary size of native speakers of English. This is one of the worst researched areas in applied linguistics with much of the research being methodologically faulty. I have designed multiple-choice tests that can be used with native speakers based on the substantial word family lists that I spent many years working on. These multiple-choice tests are not suitable for very young learners, and so I was interested in seeing whether a picture-based test was feasible. To my surprise it was not at all difficult to create a test using pictures where the words were randomly selected from word lists, and not chosen just because of their picturability. These tests have been trialled in

New Zealand primary schools and work well. The programming of the test was largely done when Laurence Anthony visited New Zealand and we did a tour around the North Island of New Zealand sampling the pies of the winners of the annual pie competition.

Since retiring, I have become involved in family history. This has provided interesting insights into the present as well as the past. My great-grandmother's brother born in 1830 and writing in 1908 marvelled at the beginning of railway transport (travelling 3rd class involved sitting in the open air with cinders raining down and with an umbrella in case of rain), and then went on to say:

“What a wonderful century we began our lives in. Later on telegraphs were brought into use, starting of steam machinery for agriculture manufactures, mining & shipping. Now the telephone and flying machines which is to be the wonder of the future some say. Motorcars are beginning to become a nuisance on every road filling the air with dust & horrible smell from the petrol they consume, besides running over people.”

I feel much the same way about living through the beginning of the computer age. I was lucky enough to get into corpus work very early, making use of a large reel tape of the Brown corpus. The university's mainframe computer took all night to do a concordance search on a single word! Our school had one of the early departmental computers, costing \$10,000 with a similarly expensive expansion unit increasing its memory to 20 megabytes. Since then we have the internet, digital libraries, powerful PCs, voice recognition software, smartphones that are effectively minicomputers, enormous corpora and a wide variety of software to support research and language learning. Because of these innovations, doing research and writing up research has never been easier. It is still hard to design good research, but the computer age has transformed the way we do it. Like my ancestor, I am so glad to have lived through a time of great change and to have experienced it first-hand.

References

- Barnard, H. (1972). *Advanced English Vocabulary*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.
- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. & Finegan, E. (1999). *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. London: Longman.
- Hees, J. van, & Nation, I. S. P. (2017). *What every Primary School Teacher should Know about Vocabulary?* Wellington: NZCER Press.
- Kennedy, G. (Ed.) (1997). *Dictionary of New Zealand Sign Language*. Auckland: Auckland University Press.
- Nation, P. (2013). *What should every EFL Teacher Know?* Seoul: Compass Learning.
- Nation, I. S. P. (1990). *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.
- Quinn, E., & Nation, I. S. P. (1974). *Speed Reading*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.