

Knowledge about language in the English classroom in Scotland

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ABSTRACT: This article is concerned with knowledge about language in the English classroom in Scotland, with a particular emphasis on national educational policy. The article provides a discussion of the main national guidelines on English Language teaching in the primary and early secondary years, as well as some observations on the place of knowledge about language in the Standard Grade qualification. While inspectors' reports suggests that there is much good practice in relation to knowledge about language in individual classrooms, there is evidence to suggest that, as far as national educational policy is concerned, knowledge about language is marginalised, and aspects of the guidelines are patchy in coverage and somewhat confusing. The national curricular review of educational provision from ages 3 to 18, ongoing in Scotland, is also discussed. The article concludes with a suggestion that knowledge about language be explicitly assessed as part of the national qualifications in Scotland, so that children can get credit for displaying their understanding of what is already expected of them.

KEYWORDS: 5-14 National Guidelines on English Language, knowledge about language, literacy, Scotland, Standard Grade.

INTRODUCTION

This article presents a review of aspects of educational policy concerning the teaching of knowledge about language (KAL) as part of the English curriculum in the Scottish educational system. It further discusses the extent to which KAL is formally assessed in Scottish public examinations. As well as discussing some of the traditions of the past, which continue to feature in that educational system, the article also addresses some of the on-going policy debates about the teaching of KAL generally, in light of the Scottish Executive's [A curriculum for excellence](#) proposals. It outlines some of the ways in which the relationship between Scottish universities and schools is developing to promote KAL in Scottish education.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Philp (2001) provides a broad survey of grammar teaching in British schools, outlining what he describes as three approaches to furthering a child's knowledge about language in the United Kingdom. These three approaches are: the "Traditional Grammar Approach" (prescriptive, explicit, decontextualised teaching of lexical categories, parsing and "correct" grammatical structures); the "Creative Writing Approach" (essentially an abandonment of any kind of explicit teaching of grammatical knowledge for its own sake); and the "Language-Study-Based Approach", divided into two subcategories, "implicit" (aiming to avoid the introduction of linguistic metalanguage) and "explicit" (where terminology from linguistics is deliberately made use of) (Philp, 2001, pp. 723-6).

These three models are useful ways of categorising trends in teaching KAL in Britain up to the 1990s. It is the last which characterises (in terms of policy at least) the model adopted in the present Scottish system. However, since the 1990s, more noticeable differences between the teaching of KAL in England, Wales and Northern Ireland on the one hand, and in Scotland on the other, have become apparent, not simply in terms of the establishment of a very specific National Curriculum in the former countries. While there have always been some differences – Philp notes that “structural” methods of grammar teaching were more popular in the 1960s in Scotland and the United States than they were in England, for instance (2001, p. 725) – those differences became more pronounced in the last decade of the Twentieth Century.

LITERACY, KAL AND THE CURRENT 5-14 CURRICULUM

There is no doubt that KAL in its broadest sense is seen as critical in the current curriculum in English for 5 to 14-year-olds in Scotland. Recent initiatives by the Scottish Executive have included the *National Statement for Improving Literacy in Schools* (Scottish Executive, 2002a), as well as investment in foreign language teaching in Scottish primary schools. However, KAL in and of itself is not explicitly assessed in Standard Grade (see “Standard Grade” below); candidates may be asked to identify how a particular mood or tone is created by a writer, but will never be asked directly about grammatical structure or multilingualism in contemporary Scotland, for instance.

There is currently some debate regarding a more radical change to the system, one in which candidates are given credit for displaying a knowledge about language for its own sake (and not merely as a means of servicing the greater literary good.) There are clear parallels with the teaching of mathematics and physics here – while no one would doubt that maths is critical for an understanding of physics, few would disagree that maths is also important for its own sake. It is puzzling that such a view is rarely expressed with reference to language and literature in the English classroom, though McGonigal (2003, p. 518), in a discussion of English Language education in the Scottish secondary system, does raise the related and important issue of the role of English as “school service provider of literacy skills for other curricular areas”.

National statement for improving attainment in literacy in schools

The *National statement for improving attainment in literacy in schools* (Scottish Executive, 2002a) is concerned, among other things, with providing “initiatives to improve attainment in reading and writing” (Scottish Executive, 2002a, Part 2, p. 2). There are frequent references to the importance of knowledge about language, including a note of a particular initiative led by the Scottish Executive Education Department to “raise pupils’ knowledge and awareness of the nature, function and variety of language structures” (Scottish Executive, 2002a, Part 2, p. 11). The National Statement also records the proportion of pupils achieving attainment levels in reading and writing for the period between 1998 and 2001. Overall, levels achieved during primary education were higher than they were when students were assessed in the second year of secondary education (S2) – over the period, between

72.8% and 79.8% of students in the primary age-group achieved the required attainment levels for reading, and between 60.0% and 70.3% did so for writing; the equivalent percentages for S2 were 44.5% to 56.4% for reading and 38.0% to 45.9% for writing (Scottish Executive, 2002a, Part 2, p. 2).

Since the 1998/1999 academic year, there has been a year-on-year increase in the proportion of students at both primary and S2 levels achieving the expected attainment levels, though there are clearly many Scottish children failing to achieve the desired level of literacy at the appropriate stage in their school career. This is echoed in the *Commentary on improving attainment in literacy and numeracy in schools* (Scottish Executive, 2002b). The commentary reports that 93.9% of candidates in S4 (the fourth year of secondary school) achieved a pass at Foundation Level in Standard Grade English Language (for more on this see “Standard Grade” below), but suggests that “success in Standard Grade English Language and Mathematics courses – particularly at Foundation/General level – does not guarantee specific competencies in literacy and numeracy skills” (Scottish Executive, 2002b, p. 14).

The 5-14 National Guidelines for English Language

The 5-14 National Guidelines (SOED, 1991) for the teaching of English language were issued in 1991 by the Scottish Office Education Department. The 5-14 Guidelines are not uniquely concerned with English Language; each subject has its own set of guidelines to cover the primary and early secondary stages of a child’s educational career. As Clark observes, the Guidelines as a whole were produced following extensive consultation between government and “working parties of professionals closely involved in work in the schools” (Clark, 1997a, p. 9). The 5-14 National Guidelines on English Language provide (among other things) the basic framework for the teaching of KAL in Scottish schools. However, the guidelines do not constitute a national curriculum as such, so that there are not national tests of the same kind as those suffered by English schoolchildren at the end of the various Key Stages¹. Nonetheless, as Ellis and Friel (2003, p. 380) observe, the Guidelines are very widely adopted throughout the Scottish primary and early secondary education system as a focal point for the teaching and learning of English Language. In what follows, I concentrate primarily on the main aspects of the KAL strands as outlined in the Attainment Targets and Programmes of Study.

In the Guidelines, there is a clear and unambiguous emphasis on the place of grammatical knowledge in the English classroom:

Knowledge about the structure of language, its grammar, vocabulary and sounds, is seen as contributing to all four outcomes of language [i.e. Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening] (SOED, 1991, p. 4).

Although the speech children bring to school already makes use of complex structures, acquired naturally without explicit knowledge of rules and terminology, learning how to read and write and how to extend their skills in talking and listening requires the teaching of a gradually enlarging descriptive vocabulary. This will

¹ For a detailed discussion of the differences between the English and Scottish systems with regard to English Language teaching in primary education, see Clark, 1997b.

include a selection of terms referring to the words, grammar and sounds of the language....With this knowledge, pupils can discuss and appreciate the many varieties of language and their structures, purposes and effects (SOED, 1991, p. 7).

Equally, the Guidelines highlight the benefits of acquiring KAL in a multidialectal and multilingual setting², including an excellent section on linguistic diversity in Scotland (SOED, 1991, p. 59):

In order to realize these aims [of English language learning and teaching], all teachers will...take full advantage of dialects, ethnic diversity and bilingualism, in teaching cultural tolerance and knowledge about language (SOED, 1991, p. 5).

Giving attention to Scottish culture will permit the exploration of issues appropriate to the needs of children growing up in communities with their own histories and concerns. The classroom use of dialects and languages other than standard English can reveal much about the nature of language generally, and set English in perspective as a world language operating across cultural, geographic and ethnic boundaries (SOED, 1991, p. 7).

Much of this material, however, appears in the general sections of the Guidelines, not in the Attainment Targets or Programmes of Study. A closer inspection of these latter parts of the Guidelines uncovers a rather murkier account of the place of KAL in the Scottish primary and early secondary system. One of the most puzzling things is what is considered as knowledge about language – what the scope of KAL within the English classroom actually is. For instance, in the Attainment Targets for the *Knowledge about language* strand at Level D³ in Listening, pupils should be able to show that they know the following terms: “vowel, consonant; Standard English and dialects; play, scene; mass media; points of view” (SOED, 1991, p. 13). Given that there is another strand entitled “Awareness of genre (type of text)”, why “play”, “scene” and “mass media” are included in the KAL strand is baffling (to me at least, and I suspect also to teachers and pupils). This is not restricted to the Listening outcome. In Reading, for instance, at Level B, the KAL that pupils are expected to know comprises at least the following terms: “author, title, chapter, index, contents; character, setting the scene; poem, dictionary; question mark” (SOED, 1991, p. 16). Such a random hotchpotch of issues to do with literary conventions and punctuation (Why just the question mark? Speech marks and the exclamation mark are addressed at Level C, but there is no mention of the full stop or comma anywhere) hardly promotes a coherent, systematic study of critical issues in language for the purposes of reading. Such non-KAL issues continue until Level E, when suddenly pupils are expected to know, understand and be able to use terms like “root”, “stem”, “suffix”, “metaphor” and “simile”. Given that an understanding of the difference between “root” and “stem” might perplex some beginning, undergraduate linguistics students, it seems rather demanding to expect such knowledge out of the blue from a thirteen-year-old.

² The linguistic diversity which surrounds Scottish children both in and out of the classroom is a topic addressed by McGonigal (2003) and Donovan & Niven (2003).

³ There are five levels (A-E) in the 5-14 Guidelines. Level A should be attained by most pupils roughly between ages 6 and 8; Level B by age 9; Level C between ages 9 and 11; Level D by age 12; and Level E by age 14.

The situation with the Writing Attainment Targets is slightly better, though the inclusion of non-KAL topics in the KAL strands continues. At Level B, in addition to being able to understand “letter” and “word”, pupils are also supposed to be able to understand the terms “drafting” and “re-drafting”. The KAL topics which are explicitly mentioned at Level D include many of the word classes, as well as morphological terms associated with the categories of gender, number and tense.

Such Attainment Targets are explicitly linked with Programmes of Study in the 5-14 Guidelines, which are again subdivided by level. Such programmes were provided with the aim of assisting those charged with the formulation of school policy regarding language, and the document explicitly states that the Programmes “offer only general guidance...and suggest only a few of the available options” (SOED, 1991, p. 20), and that schools should not feel restricted to the language topics outlined in the document (SOED, 1991, p. 22).

But the Programmes of Study, while they expand on the Attainment Targets, sometimes fail to disambiguate issues in instruction in KAL, and issues in text structure generally. Thus, in the discussion of Reading at Level B, the Knowledge about Language strand begins: “Author, title, chapter, index and contents will be used in developing pupils’ familiarity with the ways texts are organised” (SOED, 1991, p. 42). While such terms are critical for the development of a child’s knowledge of how written texts of a particular kind (usually books) are organised, it remains a mystery as to why such terminology should be considered as part of knowledge about language. Indeed, all of the terms highlighted in the knowledge about language strand for reading are essentially terms of literary analysis/practical criticism (for example, “plot”, “main character”, “conflict”, “relationships”, “motives”), except for a series of morphological terms introduced at Level E, noted above.

Most worrying, however, is the discussion of grammar in terms of writing. The main problems are as follows:

1. There is a paucity of information. Grammatical terminology is barely discussed, and when it is, it is often introduced alongside non-grammatical terms (for example, planning and drafting of writing).
2. There is an understandable, but unfortunate, restriction of the discussion of grammatical issues to Writing. In Talking, for instance, the only “linguistic” term which is highlighted is “slang” (contentious in itself, but made more so by the absence of any other linguistic terminology). While use of the terms “vowel” and “consonant” are encouraged, they “will be used in talking about the *spelling* of words” (SOED, 1991, p. 49, my emphasis); these terms do not appear in the KAL strand for Talking at any level.
3. The rationale for discussing particular grammatical terms is not clear. At Level D, pupils are expected to understand and use terms such as “masculine”, “singular” and “tense” “when examining the relationship between words and meanings within sentences” (SOED, 1991, p. 49). It is not apparent why such a discussion of such terms should be concerned solely with intra-sentential analysis, nor why something like gender morphology is concerned with the relationship between a word and its meaning. I presume that the real aim is to get pupils to understand relationships between words (for example, between a pronoun and its antecedent, or between a subject and a verb), and how such

inflectional forms relate to the structure of Standard English. All of this is critical for the development of a child's knowledge about language. But the guidelines are less explicit and less helpful than one might hope.

In some respects, however, there is clear evidence that the 5-14 Guidelines have been of great benefit to teachers and pupils. Ellis and Friel (2003, p. 383) note that results from the Assessment of Achievement Programme and from inspection reports provided by schools' inspectors suggest an improvement in talking and listening skills achieved by children in primary and early secondary schools in Scotland. An inspection report concerning English teaching in Scottish secondary schools published in the early 1990s (SOED, 1992) is explicit with regard to the importance of KAL in the English classroom, and notes that "[o]ver the years teachers have sometimes felt uncertain about the role that factual knowledge should play within the English syllabus" (SOED, 1992, p. 9). The advice in the report is that explicit knowledge of linguistic terminology and an understanding of the nature and function of linguistic variation are critical aspects of what constitutes the subject "English", but that decontextualised teaching of such material is not advised. What is particularly encouraging about this report is that it highlights the following facts: that children "find linguistic phenomena interesting in their own right" (SOED, 1992, p. 9); and that "[b]eing able to talk with accuracy and economy about their own writing increases pupils' confidence and competence to develop it" (SOED, 1992, p. 53). But it is nonetheless the case that there are some serious problems in the guidance that the 5-14 National Guidelines provide to teachers with regard to knowledge about language generally.

STANDARD GRADE

The situation with regard to KAL for the Standard Grade⁴ qualification in English in Scotland is essentially a continuation from that outlined above for the 5-14 curriculum – while KAL is recognised, it is sidelined. In the *Standard grade arrangements* (SQA, 2000), there is copious discussion of the importance of language as a cultural, intellectual, moral and imaginative force. But as ever, the focus is on the written language (though there is at least some recognition of diversity in written language given the encouragement to incorporate Scottish writers into the curriculum), while the linguistic characteristics of spoken English are barely addressed. This is not to say that "speaking" is not an issue at Standard Grade; rather, what is missing is the analysis of spoken language in terms of its structure and variety⁵. Yet structural issues lurk in the background of much of what is considered important in, for instance, Reading and Listening in Standard Grade, where a discussion of the techniques of a writer or speaker are often foregrounded (SQA, 2000, pp. 10-11).

The *Arrangements for standard grade* do include a specific section on the place of knowledge about language at this level (SQA, 2000, pp. 12). Much of the discussion

⁴ Recall (cf. §2.2 above) that the Arrangements for Standard Grade do not constitute a "national curriculum" or syllabus for English in Scottish schools (cf. the situation in England as described by Hudson and Walmsley 2005). These Arrangements function as guidelines, giving considerable freedom and flexibility to individual departments in schools.

⁵ This marginalisation of the analysis of spoken English is not true just of the Scottish Standard Grade. It is equally true, for instance, of the GCSE in English (Language) in England and Wales.

is hugely encouraging for those concerned with KAL in Scottish education. There is recognition that Scottish schoolchildren should, as part of their English classes, be introduced to linguistic diversity in terms of regional and social variation in Scotland and beyond, and register variation in texts of various kinds. As far as grammar teaching in particular is concerned, there is further recognition that students will be required to understand word and clause structure. But this is as far as any real discussion of grammar gets – simply that students should know how a sentence is constructed (and punctuated – note the primacy of the written language again). The arrangements note that explicit teaching of these concepts may still be required (SQA, 2000, p. 12). This presupposes that there has been extensive teaching of these issues in the 5-14 curriculum. While this may be the case, thanks to the gallant efforts of a number of teachers in Scotland, it is certainly not suggested by the 5-14 Guidelines as discussed above.

Most damaging, however, is the fact that the place of KAL in the Standard Grade curriculum is undercut by the final sentence in this section of the *Arrangements*, where it is made clear that grammatical knowledge (and indeed KAL) generally is not part of the formal assessment for English at that level (SQA, 2000, p. 12). This suggests that students are expected to have enough serviceable knowledge of grammar in order for them to be able to write a formal letter or understand a Shakespearean sonnet, but for them to have explicit knowledge of nouns or subordinate clauses and to be able to write about some of the complexities involved in the analysis of grammatical structure for its own sake is not worthy of credit. Thus, the notion that KAL generally and grammar in particular is in and of itself interesting, and intellectually stimulating and demanding for schoolchildren, is ignored in favour of the old-fashioned view that language is of value only for the interpretation of literary texts. Given the already crowded English curriculum, and our target-driven education system, why would a teacher waste time addressing issues which, fascinating though they may be, will not be of direct relevance to the assessment of the student in the formal examination at the end of the course?

It is nonetheless the case that language ideologies pervade some parts of the *Arrangements* documentation. The subsection of Grade Related Criteria relevant to the internal assessment of Individual Talk (SQA, 2000, pp. 45-50) makes explicit comments on the use of vocabulary and grammatical structures to be borne in mind when teachers are making their assessments. Students achieving a Grade 5, for instance, are likely to have used “intelligible language, weakened by inaccuracy”, while those achieving a Grade 3 will have shown an “adequate accuracy of language”. It is not clear what is meant by accuracy here; it seems to imply the use of Standard English. Presumably, however, if the topic of the individual talk were about the use of Scots in a particular field, the candidate would be expected to use Scots syntactic variants, and would therefore receive a lower mark for using Standard English, since using a Standard English form would be “inaccurate”. But how would a student know this unless significant time could be dedicated to a thorough understanding of grammar and grammatical variation in contemporary Scotland? It is clearly the case that the use of Scots is promoted in aspects of the later secondary curriculum:

“Candidates are encouraged to ‘write in Scots where appropriate’ as part of their creative writing paper in English at Higher level. (While there is no specific advice in the guidelines, it has always been possible to do this at Standard Grade.)” (Donovan

& Niven 2003, p. 265). More embedding of Scots in the earlier curriculum would be a step forward, a view which is in line with the comments made by schools' inspectors on the desirability of increasing the "Scottishness" of the English curriculum (SOED, 1992, pp. 37-8).

ENGLISH, LANGUAGE AND A CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE

In the new millennium, plans for an overhaul of the entire Scottish school curriculum from 3 to 18, known as *A curriculum for excellence (ACfE)*, have been put in motion. Templeton (2005) outlines three main stages for the *ACfE* program, the first stage of which concentrates on the de-cluttering of the current curriculum for 3-15 (including a framework to replace the existing 5-14 Guidelines as discussed above). While *ACfE* will consider the entire Scottish school curriculum (not just English), what is noticeable about the way in which *ACfE* has been planned is that it has brought together the teaching of English with the teaching of modern and classical languages. This Language group consists of teachers, academic educationalists and representatives from Learning and Teaching Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority. According to Templeton, the rationale for having one group which embraces English, Modern Foreign Languages, and Classics is:

1. that such an approach is inclusive, and will provide consistency for learning about language across a range of disciplines;
2. that the centrality of language in all of these subject areas is a key criterion for bringing them together under one umbrella for the purposes of *ACfE*;
3. that the interconnected nature of language learning will be highlighted by treating the curricula for the different subject areas in a similar manner
4. that a consistent framework – the use of metalinguistic terminology, and the development of specific language learning skills, whether that be for a student's first or second language (including cases where the second language is English, presumably) – will benefit student and teacher alike.

The rationale for the Language group of *ACfE* is therefore encouraging for those who are keen to promote more KAL in the English classroom in Scotland. The promotion of the link between English, Modern Foreign Languages and Classics relies on the centrality of KAL for all of those disciplines. Given the centrality of grammatical knowledge in KAL, there will be a clear impetus for raising the profile of the teaching and explicit assessment of grammar in the Scottish classroom (no matter whether the subject be Latin, French, Gaelic or English). This is also of relevance to those who are keen to promote Scots in the classroom. A greater focus on formal and functional characteristics of Scots (including, but by no means restricted to, its use in historical and contemporary literature) in education would raise the profile of Scots in the community at large (see, for example, Donovan & Niven, 2003, p. 270). As McMahon and Trousdale (2005) have noted, it is encouraging that the Language group in *ACfE* exists. However, what we need currently is "to increase dialogue between interested groups, to build networks and communities, so colleagues from universities and schools can develop courses and resources, and provide support and ongoing training" (p. 48). Specific attempts to establish new networks and connect existing ones are outlined in the conclusions which follow.

CONCLUSION

Hudson and Walmsley (2005) propose that “linguists should be more aware of the links between their research and the school curriculum” (p. 593). In Scotland, there has long been a tradition of forging links between academics working on “language” and schools. These links have been fostered in part by the Language Committee of the Association of Scottish Literary Studies and the Committee for Language Awareness in Scottish Schools. Such committees regularly host conferences for teachers of English in Scotland, the themes of which conferences are intended to link directly to some of the teaching about language at various levels of the Scottish curriculum (including the Language Study module at Advanced Higher). In addition, certain departments offer Continuing Professional Development courses in language for both trainee and established teachers. The Linguistics and English Language Department of the University of Edinburgh, for instance, offers a 36-hour course entitled *Language in textual analysis* to English teachers in southern and central Scotland. Given the established tradition in Scotland of teaching grammatical knowledge through textual analysis, this gives teachers not only the opportunity to consolidate their own understanding of grammatical terminology, but also a set of resources which they can adapt for use with their students, as they see fit.

One of the many beauties of the Scottish educational system is the freedom it gives to local authorities and individual schools and teachers in terms of curricular content. Yet that freedom comes at a cost. While some school children may have regular, systematic and widespread exposure to work on knowledge about language, others may not. In their discussion of the teaching of Scots in the classroom, Donovan and Niven (2005) suggest “the experience of any individual child will depend very much on the teachers she/he happens to get and their attitude to the Scots language” (p. 265). KAL is sidelined by the public assessment process in Scotland, so Donovan and Niven’s comments could be extended beyond the realm of the Scots language to language generally. Until KAL receives recognition as an assessable, accessible subject in its own right, it will continue to be marginalised in the Scottish classroom.

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