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The New English Curriculum
A Study of Text Complexity
in
Reading and Written English

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Abstract

This research examines the teaching methods in a Year 7 distance education English programme in relation to text complexity in reading and written English. It considers student performance, processes, resources and teaching strategies.

The research focuses on the assessment and teaching of text complexity in reading and written English in relation to student aptitude. It explores how the students' needs were met in the years 1996-1997 and considers the implications for teachers of the new English curriculum in relation to the assessment and teaching of text complexity. Consideration is also given to criticism of the new English curriculum especially where it is relevant to the teaching of text complexity in reading and written English.

The thesis therefore has two aspects to it. Firstly the criticisms of the new curriculum and the English curriculum, in particular, are examined and the implications these criticisms may have for the teaching of text complexity are considered. Secondly a Year 7 English programme developed in distance mode at The Correspondence School is researched in light of the requirements of the new English curriculum as it relates to text complexity in reading and written English.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This study sets out to examine the assessment and teaching of text complexity in reading and written English in a Year 7 class at The Correspondence School, and the impact of the new English curriculum on these educational processes.

For the purposes of this study text complexity is defined as the ability to read and understand increasingly more difficult levels of words, terms and concepts in literature. In written English it is the ability to express ideas in writing using more difficult words, terms and concepts. Both within reading and written English the new curriculum assumes that the understanding and use of more difficult levels of grammar, punctuation and spelling is a part of text complexity.

The new English curriculum gives prominence to the teaching of reading and written English and requires that progression should occur in text complexity. Although there are positive aspects to the new English curriculum, criticisms have been made of its structure and direction and, in particular, its inability to meet the requirements in text complexity. What appears to be unclear is how text complexity is to be taught within the framework of the new English curriculum and how progression in text complexity fits the levels placement of students in relation to the new achievement objectives.

Additional concerns are the ability of teachers in schools, including The Correspondence School, to know whether their students have achieved an acceptable standard in text complexity and whether the type and level of text chosen will help to realise these standards.

The reason for undertaking this research was to identify what programme changes might be needed in order to meet the requirements of the new English curriculum for the teaching of text complexity. Therefore methods of assessment and the teaching of text

complexity used in the school in 1996–1997 are looked at, as are the requirements and criticisms of the new English curriculum.

Research Objective

The main objective of this study is to investigate the current assessment and teaching practices in a Year 7 English programme at The Correspondence School, to study how they affect student progression in text complexity in reading and written English, and to consider the implications of the new English curriculum.

Research Aims

1. To discover the implications that the new English curriculum has for The Correspondence School as it relates to text complexity in reading and written English.
2. To explore the effectiveness of the assessment practices for text complexity in reading and written English within The Correspondence School.
3. To ascertain the accuracy of student programme placement at The Correspondence School in relation to text complexity in reading and written English.
4. To establish the standard of achievement for Year 7 students at The Correspondence School in text complexity in reading and written English.
5. To establish the learning needs for students and the teacher requirements at The Correspondence School in relation to the teaching of text complexity in reading and written English.
- 6 To make recommendations from conclusions reached in this study.

Approach to Study

Specific research activities were established to carry out the objective and aims of this study. An explanation of what information was gathered and for what purpose follows.

Initial research activities determined how The Correspondence School class teachers (these are distance educators who normally do not have face to face contact with their students) currently assess their students' reading ages and written English grades, and obtaining from the teachers current assessment grades of their students' reading ages and written English. In order to confirm the reliability of the teachers' assessments grades an independent assessment of the students' reading ages and written English was undertaken. These activities were completed to evaluate how accurately the teachers were able to undertake the assessments of reading ages and written English grades in relation to text complexity. Research activities also identified the incidence of remedial and gifted students in reading and written English. In addition, the research assessed whether all students were placed on suitable programmes according to their needs in text complexity.

Further insight about the appropriateness of programme placement of the students was gained by consulting supervisors (the persons who supervise the student in their place of learning, usually care-givers) and their students, about the suitability of the reading extracts and written English activities in the current programme. Students and supervisors were asked additional questions that were designed to identify any factors that may support or hinder student progress.

The Correspondence School teachers were interviewed in order to

- analyse teaching needs according to text complexity in reading and written English
- establish the effectiveness of the current programmes
- identify restrictions for teachers in achieving their teaching objectives
- ascertain whether programme changes were made to individual student programmes when independent data from this study indicated this might be needed.

In order to determine current Correspondence School student standards of work in reading and written English a comparison of standards with students at a non-distance school was made. Students in a Year 7 non-distance class were assessed for reading ages and written English grades in relation to text complexity using the same methods employed in The Correspondence School assessments. This comparison was also made

so that The Correspondence School could develop a moderation process with another school, to begin determining standards in text complexity in English.

A literature review focussed on the implementation of the new curriculum as it relates to the teaching of text complexity in reading and written English. This review made it possible to identify factors that may be of help or hindrance to the teaching of text complexity in reading and written English.

Format of Thesis

This thesis is presented in the following format.

Chapter 1.

Introduction

Chapter 2.

This chapter begins with an analysis of the political and policy background relevant to the New Zealand Curriculum Framework. A general description of the Curriculum Framework follows together with the criticisms that have been made of it.

Chapter 3.

The assessment process in the new curriculum is examined and issues are raised.

Chapter 4.

The English curriculum is described and current criticisms noted. The assessment process is highlighted with emphasis placed on text complexity in reading and written English.

Chapter 5.

The implications for The Correspondence School of the new curriculum and the teaching of text complexity in reading and written English are discussed in the context of distance education.

Chapter 6.

The methodology used for this thesis, including the data gathering process, is described.

Chapter 7.

Explanations of the assessment instruments used for reading and written English are outlined.

Chapter 8.

The results of the collected data are recorded.

Chapter 9.

In this final chapter the implications of the study including those of the literature review and the data results are discussed, and recommendations are made.

Specific Issues Related to the Study

Specific issues, arise out of the literature review and the investigation of the current assessment and teaching practices in text complexity in a Year 7 English programme at The Correspondence School.

A major concern is that the learning needs of individual students are not overlooked as a result of the implementation of the new English curriculum. Reasons for this concern include the contradiction which has been identified between learning theory and the demands of the new curriculum, and the apparent conflict between progression in text complexity and the achievement objectives. How this will affect levels placement and standards of work is of particular interest.

The Correspondence School must fulfil the directions of the new curriculum.

These include

- assessment for student levels placement and text complexity in reading and written English

- the meeting of other requirements such as the assessment and teaching of the essential skills
- the provision of adequate resources to meet new curriculum and moderation requirements
- the training of class teachers, supervisors and regional representatives (regionally based teachers who visit students at their place of learning) in the new curriculum.

In implementing these requirements The Correspondence School needs to consider how the new directions will affect the assessment and teaching of text complexity in reading and written English especially as they impact on the learning needs of the individual student.

Chapter 2

The New Zealand Curriculum Framework

Background

Information obtained from the literature search for this study suggests that political and policy decisions have influenced the direction and structure of the new curriculum. Both the political and policy backgrounds appear to have given authority to a curriculum framework which has been designed to bring about improved learning outcomes. There is doubt however, as to whether the new curriculum will bring about appropriate learning outcomes. An examination of its political and policy backgrounds helps to reveal the factors that have influenced the direction and structure that the new curriculum has taken. This chapter examines these backgrounds and then goes on to describe the new curriculum and the criticisms that have been levelled at it.

In 1988 Britain began developing a new national curriculum. Each subject was divided into approximately six strands and within these strands ten levels of attainment were established. Students were to be assessed at each level in order to progress through the levels (Elley, 1994). In 1993 the New Zealand Curriculum Framework was launched by the Minister of Education. It also was composed of strands and levels of attainment. Although there are differences between the British and New Zealand models it is recognised that they have much in common (Elley, 1993). The new curriculum heralded some significant changes in education and especially in the area of assessment. What then had brought about these changes?

An important influence on the direction of the new curriculum was the international policy agency, the Organisation For Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD is made up of a number of countries whose representatives meet together to decide how best to bring about economic growth, employment and a rising standard of living. It also fosters trade between these countries (OECD, 1987). In the early 1980s

this organisation argued that the way to greater international competitiveness and economic survival lay in part with the capture and restructuring of education, science and technology (Peters, 1993). Thatcher's Conservative government in Britain took on board the messages of the OECD and, believing that it was threatened by world economic competition, chose to restructure social institutions, such as schools, along commercially competitive lines (Keat & Abercrombie, 1991).

However, in Britain, economic theory did not entirely drive educational changes. The 1977 Munn Report (Hargreaves, 1990) raised issues of accountability and assessment of student performance in schools. Campbell (1993) maintains that prior to 1988 there was much to be critical of in the education system including its inability to fully bring about progression through the curriculum. The British government, driven by the nation's desire for improved educational standards in schools and the hope that this improvement would lead to economic success, passed the Education Reform Act of 1988. This act sought to improve educational standards by developing a national curriculum which included new approaches in assessment and reporting (Hargreaves, 1990). It appeared that in Britain the issue of accountability and school performance was not solely driven by economic concerns but these concerns obviously had considerable influence and would help to determine the direction of the new national curriculum.

In New Zealand the reason for change echoed the arguments of the British government but solely on economic terms. The New Zealand government did not argue for change on curriculum grounds and gave little credence to the curriculum reviews published prior to 1986 even when aspects of these reviews supported the new curriculum direction (Elley, 1996a). Economic argument therefore was the main factor in the government's position on education in New Zealand and Peters (1993) maintains that the OECD's influence was highly visible. Evidence that this is so is revealed in a Ministry statement, which argued strongly that the way to a better economy was through "national directions for schooling ... [which are] essential if New Zealand is to achieve the standards which, as a small trading nation, it needs in order to prosper alongside other nations in the international marketplace" (Ministry of Education, 1991b, Foreword). Therefore, economic influences in the form of market values, often referred to as the 'New Right', were to dominate the new curriculum's direction.

Snook (1994) suggests that it was with the delivery of the Picot Report that the influence of the ‘New Right’ agenda for education really began to impact on New Zealand. Prior to the 1988 release of the Picot report several administrative proposals had been submitted. These proposals had supported changes such as the abolition of Education Boards, devolution of control to schools and the beginnings of bulk funding (Barrington, 1991). However, Snook maintains that it was the Picot report that first emphasised the ‘New Right’ philosophy as the way to bring about effective schools. It was from this background that the curriculum framework was created.

Description of the Curriculum Framework

The New Zealand Curriculum Framework was developed in response to the establishment of the Education Amendment Act 1991. This framework is the “official policy for teaching, learning and assessment in New Zealand Schools” (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 3) and is set out in *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* document and the national curriculum statements.

There are several components to the New Zealand Curriculum Framework. These include the Curriculum Principles; Essential Learning Areas; Essential Generic Skills; and Attitudes and Values (Ministry of Education, 1993). Within the ‘Essential Learning Areas’ seven areas have been identified (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 5). One of these areas is entitled ‘Language and Languages’ and this is where the statement *English in the New Zealand Curriculum* is derived from. In addition, the New Zealand Curriculum Framework has identified eight ‘Essential Skills’ which go across all areas of the curriculum. These are:

communication skills

numeracy skills

information skills

problem-solving skills

self-management and competitive skills

social and co-operative skills

physical skills

work and study skills (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 5).

Within the national statements ‘learning outcomes’ are specified for the purpose of assessing student achievement. In addition, the framework highlights attitudes and values as being “an integral part of the New Zealand Curriculum” (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 21).

Each national curriculum statement, of which *English in the New Zealand Curriculum* is one, gives a more detailed account of the required learning and identifies the specific learning outcomes for all students. Within each statement there are several ‘learning strands’ (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 22) and these strands contain one or more achievement aims. Each strand has achievement objectives which are incorporated into levels. There are usually eight levels within a curriculum statement. The purpose of these levels is to show “progression and continuity of learning throughout schooling from year 1 to year 13” (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 22) and they are designed to give greater emphasis to what happens in schools (Ministry of Education, 1991a).

Criticism of the New Curriculum

Since the implementation of the new curriculum both in Britain and New Zealand there has been considerable debate about its merit. Much of the comment has been critical. This criticism includes

- the lack of a philosophical and theoretical basis
- the impact it will have on freedom and choice
- the emphasis on skills rather than knowledge
- the pace of change with which the new curriculum is being implemented.

Concern has been expressed about the weak theoretical base of the curriculum framework and that because of this the curriculum is likely to fall short over time (Irwin,

1994). Criticism is mainly directed towards the curriculum levels and Dines (1991) believes that the progressive nature of the levels is not based on either research or the experience of the teacher. Elley (1994) maintains that there is no sensible reason for breaking up subjects into levels, and that these breaks are arbitrary in nature. He questions “whether the sequencing of knowledge and skills constitutes a clear progression at all” (Elley, 1996a, p. 12) as it is not based on research about how students’ learn (Elley, 1994).

Elley (1994) argues that because the curriculum areas of mathematics and physical education lend themselves to a levels structure it was assumed that all curriculum areas could be broken down into sequential levels of learning. However, as Elley notes “in many parts of the curriculum, student’s knowledge and growth is individual and idiosyncratic” (1996a, p. 12) and he maintains that the new structures are not able to cater for this. Elliot (1994) gives further support to this view when he maintains that with an objectives model “children are assumed to make progress in learning as isolated individuals who relate only to a sequence of pre-structured tasks mediated by a teacher” (p. 56). Elley (1996a) suggests that with the more academic subjects, for example history, science and English the levels progression will limit the development of student areas of interest because of the need to meet learning objectives. Whether these learning objectives will be met is also dependent upon the teachers’ understanding of them. In a Scottish evaluation of the primary curriculum and assessment begun in 1991, it was recorded that teachers displayed a lack of sophistication in understanding the relationship between strands, levels and targets (Harlen & Malcolm, 1994).

As well as criticism of a lack of any theoretical base in the new curriculum there is concern about a lack of any extensive philosophy underlying it (Lee & Hill, 1996). Gordon (1993) is critical of the philosophical direction in the new curriculum and suggests that the philosophy on which the New Zealand’s educational system has been based for the last 100 years is being destroyed. Historically, the New Zealand system was founded on the welfare of individuals and their rights and freedoms no matter where they sat in society. Gordon maintains, that with a market led system which puts ‘public choice’, and the rights of the individual first, the system will only serve to diminish the democratic rights of all individuals.

Peters and Marshall (1996) have also expressed concern about the stress on 'freedom' and 'choice' in the new educational system. They believe that in considering the freedom and choice of individual students there may be conflict between what the genuine needs are as opposed to what the perceived needs may be. Peters and Marshall suggest that teachers may still make appropriate choices for students with the new curriculum but it cannot be guaranteed.

With the introduction of a levels system in the new curriculum there is concern that greater emphasis has been placed on skills as opposed to knowledge. In an open letter to Lockwood Smith (the then Minister of Education), Coddington (1995) laments the reduction in knowledge-based learning in favour of skills-based learning, and expresses her belief that knowledge should have a more exalted position in the new curriculum. Irwin (1994) notes that the basic reasons for education, that is, the underlying theoretical knowledge, and a balance of skills and knowledge, have not received sufficient attention in the curriculum framework document. Elliot (1994) maintains that the objectives model distorts what constitutes knowledge. Peters and Marshall (1996) suggest that the lack of emphasis on knowledge while emphasising skills-based learning is in keeping with the 'New Right' approach to education. It is also Marshall's (1994) view that where there is such an emphasis on skills to the detriment of knowledge, students will be stultified by an education system that mostly prepares them to take their place in the society of the 'New Right'. In other words because of the limitations of these structures there is concern that conformity will reign and the originality and creative skills urgently needed in future workforces, will not be there. It is apparent that industry has similar views for as Arnold (1997), maintains "contrary to the popular perception of how industry feels, it doesn't just want employees with specific skills" and he goes on to say that "our future depends upon having adaptable people with a good sound knowledge base, as well as specific skills" (p. 10). Of interest here, is the fact that recently some schools in Britain have moved away from the emphasis on skills and back to a more traditional knowledge-based approach. In these schools improvements in the national results of tests for 11-year-olds have occurred (The Economist, 1998).

Given all the criticism levelled at the new curriculum it is of concern that the implementation has tended to be rushed through. Elley (1996a) raises issues in relation to the speed at which the New Zealand curriculum has been implemented and focuses on the development stages which he maintains were done hurriedly and without sufficient trial or consultation amongst teachers. He accents the fact that the curriculum framework and the curriculum statements have been forced through while the protests and turn arounds that have been part of the British implementation process have been ignored. It is also revealed by Lee and Hill (1996) that although the then Minister, Lockwood Smith, maintained that wide consultation took place when the curriculum framework was being developed the evidence does not support this. They note that Barbara Mabbett then of Learning Media, reported that a only a limited number of the initial draft document had been printed, thus reducing teacher access to the proposed plan.

The speed of change has also been of concern to the classroom teacher. In a Scottish evaluation of a curriculum implementation, teachers were worried about the pace of change and calls were made for a slow down on the timeframe for the implementation of the documents (Harlen & Malcolm, 1994). However, it wasn't until December 1995 that the Ministry of Education in New Zealand conceded that there was a need to slow down and issued a statement accordingly (Ministry of Education, 1995c). At this stage, it was recognised by the Ministry, that primary teachers who have to implement all the curriculum statements could not be expected to cope with the constant and frequent modifications that were required. There was also an acknowledgement that the secondary teachers were under pressure to introduce Unit Standards as part of the new curriculum framework. In his speech at the launch of the Coalition Framework in 1996, Wyatt Creech, the new Minister of Education, reinforced the need for better pacing of the new curriculum's implementation. He also recognised that many people were critical of the curriculum framework and that polarity existed in the current debate. He emphasised the need to consider both sides of the argument. However, this slow down does nothing to address any problems that may have been created by the curriculum framework and the curriculum statements already issued.

Summary

It is evident that a new curriculum framework has been seen as a panacea for the economic concerns of both the British and New Zealand governments. This has resulted in the principles of market forces with their emphasis on outcomes, impacting on the structure of the new curriculum. Within the new curriculum, assessment is highlighted as the way to bring about better learning outcomes. In order for progression in learning to occur, a system of levels has been created with students assessed against achievement objectives at each level. Critics maintain that this approach is ill-conceived (especially in regard to English, history and science), does not have a sound philosophical or theoretical basis in teaching and learning, and that it will not bring about the desired results. They maintain that the new curriculum does not provide any intelligible form of progression at all, and they are concerned that this system will not produce appropriate educational outcomes or actually address the way students learn. They also maintain that schools will have difficulty in defining what constitutes a standard of work let alone how to achieve it. In addition, they believe that schools will be stretched in order to meet all the new requirements such as the teaching of essential skills and the carrying out of moderation processes. Finally, they have concerns that the learning rights of the individual students may be lost sight of because of the constraints of the new curriculum structure.

Assessment And The New Curriculum

While the literature review reveals that there has been criticism of the new curriculum in general, the direction and structure of the assessment process, has drawn strong criticism. The New Zealand Curriculum Framework states that “The primary purpose of school-based assessment is to improve students’ learning and the quality of programmes” (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 24). Progression and continuity of learning are seen as coming about through the assessment of the achievement objectives within the various levels. Assessment therefore has been identified as one of the main vehicles for bringing about improved student learning. Critics of the new curriculum believe that too much weight has been placed on assessment as a method of achieving improved learning outcomes and that not enough emphasis has been given to the teaching process. There follows an analysis of the assessment requirements in the new curriculum and the criticisms that have been made of them.

The Assessment Requirements in the New Curriculum

School-based assessment is described in the Curriculum Framework as follows

Assessment of individual student’s progress is essentially diagnostic. Such assessment is integral to the learning and teaching programme. Its purpose is to improve teaching and learning by diagnosing learning strengths and weaknesses, measuring student’s progress against defined achievement objectives, and reviewing the effectiveness of teaching programmes. The information which teachers record from these assessments enables clear profiles of individual student’s achievement to be built. These profiles are used to inform teachers about each student’s learning and development.... Existing

school-based assessment methods which are known to be effective cover a range of formal and informal procedures. These include diagnostic surveys, running records used in reading programmes (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 24).

Assessment requirements are outlined in the document *Assessment Policy to Practice*, (Ministry of Education, 1994b). National Education Guidelines set out the “accountability requirements for schools” (Ministry of Education, 1994b, p. 11). These requirements are compulsory and Boards of Trustees must address them. Included in the National Requirements are the National Education Goals and the National Administration Guidelines. The National Education Goals describe the educational outcomes that the government aspires to. Laid out in the National Administration Guidelines are the school boards’ obligations in meeting the requirements of the New Zealand Curriculum. These include the board’s responsibility to “monitor student progress against the national achievement objectives”, [to] “assess student achievement, maintain individual records, and report on student progress”, [to] “analyse barriers to learning and achievement” [and to] “develop and implement strategies which address identified learning needs in order to overcome barriers to students’ learning” (Ministry of Education, 1994b, p. 11).

The document *Assessment: Policy to Practice* emphasises that students do not all learn at the same pace and that students of the same age will be working on different levels and possibly different levels across strands. Also emphasised is the teacher’s role to provide opportunities to bring about learning outcomes, derived directly from the achievement objectives, for the purpose of assessing the student’s progress.

Three forms of assessment for carrying out school-based assessment have been identified in the document *Assessment Policy to Practice*. These forms are diagnostic assessment, formative assessment and summative assessment. The main purpose of diagnostic assessment is to find out what a student has already learned and to identify their learning difficulties. Diagnostic assessment can be undertaken in a variety of ways including prepared tests and individual questioning of a student. Formative assessment amongst other things illustrates student progress and sets directions for further teaching.

Summative assessment is by nature more structured and its main purpose is to provide a view of progress over time. At times all three types of assessment may overlap depending on the purpose.

Listed in the document *Assessment Policy to Practice* are methods of assessment.

These are

- standards-based assessment
- achievement-based assessment
- competency-based assessment
- norm-referenced assessment
- evaluation.

The document makes the following explanations about these methods of assessment. For standards-based assessment the student's achievement is compared with a standard.

Descriptors that are progressively more challenging (that is, grade related), are used in achievement-based assessment. These descriptors give a picture of the student's level of achievement. Achievement-based assessment, competency-based assessment, criterion-referenced assessment, mastery assessment and domain-referenced assessment are all forms of standards-based assessment. With competency-based assessment the level of achievement is decreed beforehand and students are said to be proficient if they are able to reach the level. Norm-referenced assessment is used to compare a student with a specific group of students. At the national level, Progressive Achievement Tests and Tests of Scholastic Abilities are examples of such testing. Evaluation is used to reach conclusions and make decisions about the educational programme, or the student's progress. Assessment procedures will include the use of informal assessment, observation, self assessment, peer assessment, conferencing, portfolios, exemplars and tests. The place of moderation between students, classes and schools is also stressed.

Criticism of the New Assessment Requirements

In defining assessment Willis (1993) suggests that its main purpose is to investigate learning and it is usually undertaken to inform the assessor about what learning has

occurred. Willis also indicates that it can be used to predict future learning needs. Rowntree (1977) highlights the dual role of assessment, for both diagnostic and accountability purposes. The curriculum framework is seen by Croft (1995) as meeting the main purpose of assessment and as having appropriate assessment procedures. However, it would appear that there are many critics of the new system.

Criticisms of the new assessment requirements cover a range of aspects: whether the new system fully meets the purpose and process of assessment; the conflict between assessment for diagnosis and assessment for accountability; how the setting of standards will be achieved and perceived; difficulties, including the limitations of the terminology used, in carrying out the new assessment process.

The Purpose and Process of Assessment

One of the criticisms of the new assessment process is whether it meets all the purposes and processes involved with assessment. McDonald (1990) is concerned that the new system concentrates too heavily on the process rather than educational outcomes, while Codd, McAlpine and Poskitt (1991) maintain that the new curriculum is driven by assessment.

Elley (1994) suggests the new assessment process is unreliable and he is critical of an assessment system which is based on levels. He maintains that subjects “cannot be summarised in levels” (p. 8) and poses the question “how can teachers reliably assess important academic skills which are not easy to specify in steps?” (1996a, p. 16). He is so concerned about this issue that he questions whether student achievement levels should be recorded at all and instead recommends that the ideas of levels be dropped. He suggests that instead the focus should be “on aims to be sought and topics to be addressed, rather than standards to be obtained” (p. 17). In spite of criticism that can only be described as fundamental, Elley still believes that there are advantages to be gained from the new curriculum.

Croft (1995) suggests that the New Zealand Curriculum Framework is not a plan for assessment and that this is not its function but he recognises that the framework sets priorities for assessment. In his view the new assessment is formative, school-based,

founded on the curriculum levels, emphasises criterion-referenced measurement as opposed to normative, and can provide 'profiles' of students, classes and schools. He believes that performance-based assessment already exists in New Zealand classrooms, particularly in the primary schools, and he notes that the curriculum framework makes it clear that the present 'best practice' should be retained. While recognising the worth of the new assessment process Croft does not suggest that it is perfect and he maintains that in attempting to improve validity under the new system, reliability may be undermined.

Nevertheless, there is concern that in developing the levels system of assessment the new curriculum has lost sight of educational outcomes. Assessment is seen as an important component in the learning process (Crooks, 1988). However, Willis (1993) maintains that the inability of the new curriculum to identify the connection between learning and assessment has led to a confusion with the educational aims of the policy documents and she is concerned about the level of learning that may result. She is also concerned that because the emphasis is on objectives-based assessment rather than the learning outcomes, the needs of individual students will not be met. Codd, McAlpine and Poskitt (1991) reinforce this view when they maintain that improved learning outcomes will not come about as a result of this emphasis.

Several factors have been highlighted in relation to the effect that the new assessment system will have on educational outcomes. Torrance (1993) believes that the new structure will determine what will be taught and learnt and this could result in students' needs not being met. Another possibility is that the system is likely to undermine the teaching skill of teachers (Dale, 1990). It has been shown that the method used by students in the learning process is an essential element to success but this may be lost sight of in the new system (Biggs, 1988). And there is concern that the assessment process will make learning less accessible because it may complicate the teaching process (Hargreaves, 1989). Torrance (1993) suggests that a reduction in actual teaching may be one consequence of the new assessment process. In monitoring the implementation of an assessment package for 7 year old students in Britain, he notes that students did not appear to have sufficient work during the period of assessment (of several weeks duration). He also found that the teachers involved in the implementation process were severely overloaded and he illustrated how they were unable to carry out normal

responsibilities such as playground duty. O'Neill (1997) notes that there is concern that New Zealand primary teachers are experiencing work overload in the new curriculum and especially in regard to assessment.

In considering the impact of the new assessment process on educational outcomes the effects on higher level learning should not be ignored. There is considerable evidence that improved learning results are more likely to be obtained when higher levels of learning such as problem-solving, are emphasised (Willis, 1992). It has been shown by Bates (1979) and Nicholls, Patashnick and Nolen (1985) that the development of problem-solving skills and the ability to recall over time are increased through intrinsic motivation. However, the new curriculum is seen as a hindrance to the development of such learning. Indeed some would go as far as to say that the new curriculum "trivialises the nature of knowledge, narrows the curriculum and causes teachers to teach to tests" (Codd, McAlpine & Poskitt, 1991, p. 23). In supporting this view Perkins (1995) suggests that the traditional multiple choice, knowledge-based testing causes teachers and students to concentrate on rote styles of learning. He maintains that this style of learning may help bring about the retention of knowledge but does not help bring about understanding or the application of knowledge. What may be open to debate here is whether the new curriculum is about students getting tests right rather than emphasising learning of a social and reflective nature. In fact assessment in the new English curriculum does not appear to be concentrating on rote styles of learning or multiple choice tests but rather on the teachers' assessment and evaluation of students' work.

Finding alternative methods of assessment to appraise higher levels of learning is not an easy task and Torrance (1993) questions whether it is possible to develop testing of higher order skills within a structure which demands accountability. He notes that with more widely based assessment examples it does not follow that effective teaching will occur. White (1992) points out that whatever the process might be it is important that a balance is kept between assessment of higher order learning and the measurement of specific skills.

Perhaps the most important criticism of assessment requirements in the new curriculum concerns the question of what will now be assessed. Both Willis (1992) and

Elliot (1991) suggest that, by removing knowledge and skills from a contextual setting, the value of what is learned is not considered. Willis (1992) is concerned that students and parents may no longer value specific knowledge, and that what is being assessed is not measured in terms of its social value. She also believes that no consideration is being given to what the important goals are or why they have been chosen.

Assessment for Diagnosis or Accountability

Criticism about the conflict between assessment for diagnosis and assessment for accountability and its effect on the assessment process has been voiced by Torrance (1991) and Codd (1988). A standardised approach to assessment has problems for diagnostic purposes and it has been pointed out that “good diagnostic assessment is best done informally, according to need, and in unstandardised fashion... by contrast, accountability assessment must be uniform and tightly controlled” (Elley, 1996a, p. 15-16).

Codd (1990) suggests that the emphasis on performance will have a negative impact. He believes that it may encourage teachers to aim for “minimum levels of performance” [and at the same time reduce] “educational excellence” [which comes from] “personal initiative and professional autonomy” (p. 23). In 1990, Elley (1996a) notes that when comparisons were made between schools, in the United Kingdom, by newspapers and educational experts school and teacher behaviour changed. They began to coach for tests and reduced the learning objectives taught. In other words the focus was drawn away from diagnosis for teaching purposes to assessment for results. In 1992-3 teachers resisted the new assessment system in Wales and England which led to an official investigation headed by Dearing (Elley, 1996a). Eventually Dearing decided that the curriculum levels objectives should be cut from 1000 to 200. According to the New Zealand Ministry of Education the assessment process is more adaptable with the emphasis on diagnosis (Perris, 1993). However, Elley (1996a) doubts whether this emphasis will be maintained as he believes that the same pressures that impacted on Britain will eventually occur in New Zealand and assessment will emphasise results to the detriment of diagnosis.

Standards

McDonald (1990) maintains that “standards, accountability and monitoring have always been part of our education system and that we have had many flurries of concern about our standards over the years” (p. 28). However, in the new curriculum there is an apparent confusion about standards and Locke (1996) goes as far as to say that the various statements issued by the Ministry contradict one another. Barber (1995) indicates that students are no longer compared with each other using norm-referencing but are now measured against a standard. The Education Review Office, (1995) notes that although the New Zealand curriculum framework and the national curriculum statements use the term ‘levels’ this does not in fact mean that there is a uniform national standard. It is pointed out by the Education Review Office that while the term ‘standards’ has been used widely in relation to the national curriculum statements, these statements do not determine standards but in fact define achievement objectives for the levels.

The Education Review Office suggests that the large number and differing forms of achievement objectives will make it hard for teachers to agree when a level of achievement has been reached and “it will, therefore, be difficult for judgements to be made nationally about levels of student achievement through the New Zealand Curriculum” (Education Review Office, 1995, p. 32). Both the Education Review Office (1995) and Baker (1996) suggest that without national standards schools must develop their own. However, the ability to provide uniform standards in academic achievement is open to question as it has been demonstrated that there can be significant variation in records of achievement both between teachers and between schools (St. George, Chapman & Lambourne, 1991).

In discussing the setting of school standards, Hall (1994) points out that thought needs to be given to issues of validity, reliability and aggregation when undertaking assessment. Hall notes that in order for assessment to be valid it must be derived from appropriate content. He also stresses that without reliability it will be difficult to compare student and school performance and he maintains that to ensure consistency it may be necessary to make comparisons with other schools. Hall believes that aggregation has a place in helping to identify strengths and weaknesses but he warns that schools must take care that aggregation is not used for ‘high-stakes’ accountability.

Of particular importance is the effectiveness of the new system in bringing about improved standards. In 1993, Richards indicated that, under the new curriculum, standards of achievement assessed in five British schools had gone up but this was shown to be untrue. Initially, in these schools, when the progress of students in reading was assessed by teachers against the curriculum levels an improvement was shown. However, when these students were measured on a standardised reading test it was shown that they in fact achieved at least a year below the assessment rating on the curriculum levels (Davies & Brember, 1994).

Difficulties

Several difficulties have been identified with the new assessment system. It is maintained that the assessment process is too comprehensive and will increase teacher workloads, that it requires considerable amount of professional development, and that the terminology for the achievement objectives is open to interpretation.

In March 1995 The Ministry of Education officially recognised that the assessment requirements were too comprehensive and that teachers needed to be selective about choosing achievement objectives for assessing against and reporting on (Ministry of Education, 1995a). The Education Review Office has continued to reinforce the position that “teachers are expected to assess the achievement of individual students at each *level* against the *achievement objectives*” (1995, p. 4). However, it recognises the complexity of assessing student progress and achievement under the new system and that academics and practitioners, disagree about the principles and practices of assessment. A solution proposed by Torrance (1993) is to create “a range of common tasks for teachers to incorporate in their normal teaching” (p. 88) but he acknowledges that this would take time to develop. Hall (1994) suggests that selected objectives should be concentrated on so that the assessment process can be achieved.

Even if the number of achievement objectives is reduced the workload on teachers may still be a problem. Broadfoot, Abbot, Croll, Osborn, Pollard and Towler (1991) signal that the new assessment approach will add to the work demands of teachers in primary schools. Torrance (1993) records that, in Britain, the implementation of an assessment pack produced for 7 year old students created particularly heavy workloads.

Teachers were documented as spending up to three hours of extra work each day, in spite of the day already being long and demanding. Aschbacher (1994), notes that, for this type of assessment, teachers lack preparation time, training, ability to adapt to change and a long term implementation plan. To encourage the development of the new assessment process he calls for technical and administrative support, team development, and committed teachers.

In recognising that teachers are challenged with the enormous task of carrying out new forms of assessment, recording and reporting The Ministry of Education has made provision for professional development programmes (Ministry of Education, 1996a). In addition to teacher training, whole school professional development is emphasised (Ministry of Education, 1996b & 1996c). Assessment resource bank development was begun in 1994. It was noted by the Ministry that teachers gave firm support to these resource banks. However if as suggested by Elley (1994) the curriculum is basically flawed, this support will make little difference and will only reduce to some degree what is already a daunting task.

Given that all the above problems are taken care of, a major difficulty still to be overcome is the imprecise terminology used in the new assessment system. Harlen and Malcolm (1994) reported that in the evaluation of the Scottish curriculum's implementation, the curriculum and assessment guidelines were described by teachers as 'vague' and 'woolly'. This made it difficult for teachers to work their way through the documents. In Britain teachers have found some of the terminology unclear and open to interpretation (Torrance, 1993). Elley (1994) is also critical of the terminology in the New Zealand curriculum and asks of terms such as "can draw and interpret simple maps ... when is a map simple?" (p. 8). It is evident that problems of interpretation are seen as an area of concern for teachers and may not be easily overcome.

The stated purpose of the recent publication *Planning and Assessment in English* (Ministry of Education, 1997) is to assist teachers in planning and evaluating their programmes and assessing, recording and reporting on student progress. It notes that

when assessing, teachers need to bear in mind that the achievement objectives are designed in terms that are not rigid or exclusive but are part of a whole continuum designed to help focus on progression in students' learning as whole (Introduction, p. 7).

This suggests that factors in addition to the achievement objectives should be taken into account, including text complexity in reading and written English, when determining levels placement. However, there will still be the problem of the interpretation of the achievement objectives, and conflicts could arise over appropriate levels in relation to text complexity and the achievement objectives.

Summary

It would appear that at the core of the new curriculum is the assessment process. However, the focus on assessment has produced a system that may not be effective in helping to bring about better learning outcomes in spite of that being its stated intention. Critics maintain that to promote improved learning, emphasis in the new curriculum has been placed on assessment to the detriment of teaching. They also note that both assessment for diagnosis and assessment for accountability are required and they are concerned that this may create a conflict for teachers. There is fear that the focus will be drawn away from diagnosis for teaching purposes to assessment for results. A further conflict is evident in the place of standards in the new curriculum. While the emphasis is on comparing students against a standard the levels system has not in itself been designed to create a uniform standard and will hinder this process. Schools will be required to determine their own standards through the moderation process but this in itself is fraught with difficulties. Compounding this problem is the large number of achievement objectives which, because of the vagueness of the terminology, are open to interpretation. The need for teachers to be trained in the new system and the impact on teachers' workloads in carrying out the assessment process are seen as further problems. With the emphasis on assessment, and with skills and knowledge removed from the contextual setting, there is some concern about what will be taught and about the devaluing of important knowledge. In addition, the possible undermining of teachers'

professionalism with the new assessment structure has been highlighted as an impediment to the learning process. Underlying all of this is the impact the system will have on meeting the teaching needs of individual students and therefore on their right to learn. Thus the assessment process as outlined in the new curriculum appears to have implications for all schools, including The Correspondence School, in relation to the criticisms raised. How these will impact on the assessment of text complexity in reading and written English needs to be considered.

Chapter 4

Reading And Written English In The New Curriculum

Along with criticism of the assessment process in the new curriculum there has been specific criticism of the new English curriculum, especially as it relates to assessment in text complexity in reading and written English. The English curriculum follows the levels structure as outlined in the curriculum framework. There are three strands: oral, written and visual. Along with a range of other skills, emphasis is placed on the teaching of text complexity in reading and written English in the written strand. Differences between assessment in text complexity and assessment using the achievement objectives have been highlighted by some critics. There follows a description of the English curriculum, with particular reference to the teaching of text complexity, and the criticisms which have been made.

A Description of the English Curriculum in Relation to the Teaching of Reading and Written English

English in the New Zealand Curriculum (The Ministry of Education, 1994c) takes the place of the English primary school syllabus, *Language in the Primary School* (Department of Education, 1961), its supplement which is the *Statement of Aims* (Department of Education, 1986), and the *English: Forms 3-5 Statement of Aims* (Department of Education, 1983).

The general aims of the new English curriculum are as follows.

“Students should be able to:

- engage with and enjoy language in all its varieties
- understand, respond to, and use oral, written, and visual language effectively in a range of contexts” (Ministry of Education, 1994c, p. 9).

To achieve these aims the English curriculum indicates that students need to, among other things, become competent in the processes of reading and written English, develop skills in grammar and the conventions of English, respond intelligently to a range of text, and find and communicate information. In establishing these aims the English curriculum recognises that all students should be provided for and that the curriculum will be gender-inclusive, and will cater for the needs of Maori students, students from language backgrounds other than English, students with learning difficulties, and students who are gifted and talented.

The new English curriculum emphasises the importance of responding to the individual needs of the student. It recognises that as a student's "understanding of language becomes increasingly complex and sophisticated ... [it] involves understanding and using the formal conventions of English" (Ministry of Education, 1994c, p. 6). The new curriculum also states that in responding to text, students

will extend their ability to discriminate and to understand text through close reading and through exploring and analysing the effects of words, conventions, structures, techniques, and images ... [and that they] should learn to think critically about language and meaning as they ... read (Ministry of Education, 1994c, p. 16).

Literature is recognised by the English curriculum as having a key role in the development of literacy. The need to provide students with a wide range of literary texts is stressed.

Opportunities for students to explore and learn about language are emphasised in the English curriculum, and this includes "grammar, or the way words and phrases are formed and combined ---- [and] conventions of written forms, including spelling and punctuation" (Ministry of Education, 1994c, p. 17). It also emphasises the need for students to develop a "knowledge of the steps in writing including forming intentions, composing, drafting, correcting and publishing ... and to write confidently, clearly, and appropriately, in a range of styles and for a variety of purposes" (Ministry of Education, 1994c, p. 33). This emphasis is reinforced in a Ministry of Education (1995b) pamphlet

published for parents and trustees. Highlighted in this pamphlet is the centrality of reading and writing in the English curriculum and the importance of accuracy in writing, grammar and spelling.

The oral, written and visual language strands are interwoven across the eight achievement levels. Within each strand the achievement objectives allow for structured progression. The English curriculum stresses that these “achievement objectives are based on the recognition that language is a developmental process and that students within a single class will be operating at different levels of learning” (Ministry of Education, 1994c, p. 19). Skills identified within this developmental process include the writing of more complex sentences and the ability to comprehend more complex text.

When determining which level within a particular strand will best suit a student, the English curriculum indicates that it will be necessary for teachers to consider a variety of records.

From a teaching perspective, the English curriculum notes that in practice more than one strand will be involved in most programme plans but that reading and writing will be of the greatest importance in all levels of the English programme.

Criticism of the New Zealand English Curriculum

According to the Professor of English at Victoria University, Robinson (1994) there are two opposing and ongoing views that have caused significant debate, both in New Zealand and Britain, about how to best teach the subject of English. Traditionalists have always stressed the systematic teaching of grammar, literature, reading and writing skills. The opposing position takes a more holistic outlook. Advocates of the second view believe that the teaching of English should relate to the development of the individual child and it should be incidental rather than focus on the forced teaching of rules. Confusing these two perspectives is the growth of telecommunications which does not rely solely on printed literature to put across ideas. Each side of the debate accuses the other of social engineering.

In Britain the education system has also oscillated between the two positions. Robinson (1994) maintains that this has led to disastrous consequences regardless of which position was emphasised in the curriculum. New Zealand has attempted to find a middle ground with the new English curriculum and according to Robinson has merged the 'best' of both positions. He maintains that there is now a good equilibrium between the teaching of skills and the growth of the individual student.

Brooke (1995, 1994a, 1994b) takes issue with Robinson's belief that there is a good balance in the new curriculum between the traditional and individualistic views of teaching English. In her view the new curriculum has no substance and she sees the content as taking second place to the needs of the student. This lack of substance includes vaguely stated objectives that have been poorly conceived, a lack of literary direction and not enough emphasis on specifics in areas such as grammar or systematic teaching of skills. Brooke (1994b), in particular, has expressed concern about the lack of direction for the thorough and rigorous teaching of skills in the English curriculum. She notes that "exhortations abound that students 'should be able' to do this and to do that without any emphasis on systematically teaching them what they need to learn to achieve a high level of competence" (p. 8).

While recognising that the new English curriculum makes reference to students' understanding the 'conventions' of the written language Brooke suggests that it falls short in ensuring that grammar and syntax are taught methodically. In her view it is not possible to comprehend anything without well developed skills. She also maintains that without proper instruction in the pronunciation of the spoken language some students will be disadvantaged especially when they have to compete for jobs in the workplace.

Nicholls (1996), project director of one of the development contracts for the Exploring Language components of the New English Curriculum suggests that ideological debates should not restrict teachers from keeping an open mind about how to develop "informed and consistent principles for EL [English language] and how to translate these into effective classroom practice" (p. 40). It is her view that the exploration of language should not be limited to isolated grammatical rules. Instead aspects of language should be integrated into the overall plan as is implied by the new English statement. This perspective is confirmed by Elley, Barham, Lamb and Wylie

(1979) who indicate that research has shown that the teaching of formal grammar does no better than less formal approaches in bringing about improved writing skills. The handbook *Exploring Language: A Handbook for Teachers* (Ministry of Education, 1996d) appears to have the same perspective when it states that objectives are set out by the national curriculum for students at every level and it highlights the importance of students knowing about all aspects of language and within authoritative contexts.

Along with the publication of the handbook *Exploring Language*, the handbook *The Learner as a Reader: Developing Reading Programmes* (Ministry of Education, 1996e) has been made available to teachers. Both handbooks set out to help teachers plan for those areas of teaching that have not been expanded upon in *English in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1994c). *Exploring Language* has been produced “to assist [teachers] with the exploring [of] language objectives” and as the result of teachers’ needs “to become more knowledgeable about language, including the grammar of English” (Ministry of Education, 1996d, Foreword). *The Learner as a Reader* has also been produced to assist in the development of learning objectives and to aid teachers in developing reading programmes.

The place of these new handbooks could be significant in supporting the new English curriculum. Locke (1996) makes the point that New Zealand currently has a curriculum but no syllabus and because of this, teachers of English are confused and are either ignoring the new directions or are attempting to find a way through the morass of information. According to Locke the curriculum should be seen as a guide with which to organise English programmes that will provide for language opportunities developed sequentially in levels of difficulty. Franken and Watson (1996) also believe that it is not the function of a curriculum statement to give specific direction in the teaching of a subject. Rather the statement should “specify clear and developmentally sound achievement objectives [and that] essentially a curriculum statement describes goals to be monitored and assessed and goals to be incorporated into programme planning” (p. 54). In line with this perspective Franken and Watson propose that a structured approach is required, one that examines ‘tasks’ in a sequential order and allows for ongoing practice in English language skills.

With the development of a curriculum that specifies progressive learning outcomes in each subject area, it is intended that there will be a provision of standards of learning with which to assess student progress. However, Elley (1996a) asserts that although this system may work in curriculum areas such as mathematics and technology it will not do so in English. He points out that there was much criticism of the 1993 draft because of its inability to identify specific stages of gradation in the development of language and the limitations of restricting it to the eight levels. However, he notes that these eight levels have been retained in the final draft. Elley does concede that the level statements will give teachers objectives to aim for but he maintains that these objectives are shared by all the levels.

Evidence that the new English curriculum will result in better standards is still to be proven (Elley, 1996a). Research so far has not been encouraging as revealed in the Scottish evaluation noted earlier (Torrance, 1993). Elley highlights the fact that New Zealand is already well known for the level of achievement of its students in English and that there may be cause for concern in following a model that is already being criticised as ‘unworkable’ in Britain.

Tickell (1996) does not believe that English can be ‘regulated’ and he suggests that the idea of regulation is driven by a political agenda that does not consider the needs of the learner nor comprehend the central role of education. He indicates that one assessment tool cannot satisfy all of the assessment aims, that good teaching does not result from a structured curriculum, and that many years of research have shown that the crucial determinant to student learning is the individual teacher. Tickell therefore considers that the new English curriculum will undermine teacher professionalism.

In regard to standards-based assessment in the English language, Elley (1996b) maintains that this will only work where the standards are clear and where a visible picture of the progression of standards is apparent. Elley believes that there are some main objectives that do not vary from one year to the next in the teaching of English. These objectives are not found in the various skills but in the increased level of more complex writing and in the understanding of more difficult text. Elley (1996a) indicates that “difficulty in reading ... is more a function of the characteristics of the text – its structure, its complexity, its vocabulary level and the match between the interests of the

student and the context of the text, than it is a function of the particular skills defined in the levels” (p. 14). He concludes that it is not possible to define these main objectives in the type of statements developed for the new curriculum, and that the carrying out of assessment is more complex and varied than the English curriculum suggests. However, the publication *Planning and Assessment in English* (Ministry of Education, 1997) has indicated that “the achievement objectives are designed ... [as] a whole continuum designed to help focus on progression in students’ learning as a whole” (Introduction, p. 7.) suggesting that further factors should be taken into account when determining levels placement.

* The Educational Review Office is critical of the new curriculum in its ability to deliver literacy in New Zealand schools and maintains that the policy and curriculum statements for literacy are “too general, [do] not provide sufficient guidance for teachers, and [are] difficult to understand” (Gerritsen, 1997, p. 4). In considering the poorly defined terminology used for standards there are claims that it is not clear what is to be accomplished in the new English curriculum. Brooke (1994a) suggests that terms such as ‘communication’ and ‘effective’ are used freely but are not defined clearly and that “any sort of desultory deliberation can be called communication” (p. 11). Supporting this view * Elley (1996b) claims that statements such as can ‘explore language features’ and can read a ‘range of written texts’, are not standards. To illustrate the limitations of these statements further, he asks in what way do ‘meanings’ and ‘ideas’ differ and how will teachers determine at which level to place a student by the way they ‘respond’ to or ‘discuss’ text (Elley, 1996a). Another limitation is the assumption that the standard is only possible at one level. For example, the idea that students can only cope with implicit messages at the Form 7 level (as in unit standard E1.17) is challenged because, as Elley (1996b) points out, primary children can do this and it is the complexity of the text that really matters. He queries whether parents will accept that their children can ‘select and read oral texts widely’ or ‘read visual texts closely’ as evidence that their child is making progress in reading. Such statements he maintains, will not reveal whether a student can read and understand complex texts, or write good clear prose with few punctuation and spelling errors.

A submission on the English draft (Education Forum, 1994) maintains that the importance of reading and writing has been reduced by the new curriculum and that they

now assume no more significance than 'oral' and 'visual' language. The Forum also points out there is little emphasis on teaching and assessing in reading and writing.

* Gawith, Chatfield and Trebilcock (1995) assert that the teaching of reading has almost become lost in the English curriculum. They stress that it should be the predominant feature in any English programme and that before all else students need to learn to read so that they can survive in the world. Because they are anxious about the lack of emphasis on reading in the new curriculum they have developed a course which outlines ways of re-emphasising the place of reading in the classroom. Hood (1995) suggests that daily writing demonstrations, modelling and learning to construct text with experienced writers are some of the keys to learning to write but this may not be possible if all of the achievement objectives are to be met.

* Within the new curriculum there appears to be a lack of emphasis on the quality of reading (Elley, 1996b). Elley indicates that students will be assessed on what they appear to do rather than on their actual progress. They will get credit for having read a book, not on how well they have read it. Elley maintains that in close reading it is text difficulty and the student's ability to comprehend text that should decide whether progress is being made by the student and not whether they can complete the requirements of the poorly defined statements in the English curriculum. He also notes that with no direction for text difficulty at each level the choice of text will result in further confusion in gauging achievement and he suggests that with the pressures of accountability this could lead to teachers deliberately choosing easier texts.

It is also Locke's (1996) view that it is the difficulty of the text rather than the eight curriculum levels which determines the attainment level of the reader. He argues that there are three main aspects to the development of reading ability: competence in reading, reading 'sophistication', and textual range. He defines competence in reading as being able to comprehend factual information, give interpretation to text, and respond critically to text. Reading sophistication is described as the ability of the reader to understand more complex text and content. Textual range is seen as the variety of text to which a reader can respond. Reading sophistication and variety of text should be an integral part of an English syllabus but competence in reading should be the major focus at all levels. Locke indicates that reading sophistication is disregarded in the new curriculum.

Research on catering for reading sophistication has shown that appropriate placement can be problematic. Durrell (1956) notes that a common weakness in primary reading instruction is the failure to allow superior readers to progress at their own pace. He suggests that these readers will benefit most from independent reading in the various subject areas and through the pursuit of topics of interest. At the same time research has shown that up to 50% of students can be placed on programmes that are too advanced for them (Johns, cited Pikulski & Shanahan, 1982).

However, the more recent publications *The Learner as a Reader* (Ministry of Education, 1996e), *Exploring Language* (Ministry of Education, 1996d) and *Planning and Assessment in English* (Ministry of Education, 1997) do give direction to the teaching and assessment of text complexity in reading and in written English. What may still be of concern is the problem of the interpretation of the achievement objectives, and conflicts that could arise over appropriate levels placement in relation to text complexity and the achievement objectives.

Given the complexity in implementing the assessment process in levels placement it is of concern that the new English curriculum is likely to increase teachers' workloads significantly and that this will be accentuated if students are working on different levels and topics (Elley, 1996b). The moderation process will also add to the workload as it will require time and organisation for teachers to meet with other teachers. Elley points out that the moderation process is fraught with difficulties because of differences in interpretation of the standards based system.

Although there is reference to 'literary texts', especially those that set high standards in written English, Brooke (1995) bemoans the lack of prescribed texts at each level for teachers to select. It is her view that without some direction for the teachers, students will be deprived of outstanding literature that will enhance and extend their knowledge and understanding of the English language. Brooke also believes that with the emphasis on gender, racial and cultural issues, and the Treaty of Waitangi, the quality of written material chosen for teaching purposes will be limited and she insists that the standard of English is more important than the racial or national origins of the text. Lynch (1994) supports Brooke's view and, while acknowledging the worth of New Zealand literature he is concerned that without more emphasis on world-wide literature, that the

“international community acknowledges as great and enduring” (p.10) students will be exposed to a narrow and restricted resource.

Granted the concerns expressed about the new English curriculum it is of interest that Gordon (1996) identifies some positive aspects. It is suggested that the inclusion of the three strands, within the English curriculum has set a precedence by acknowledging the importance of all the elements of the English language. Lynch (1994) also acknowledges the importance of the oral and visual strands but maintains that reading and writing should be given greater emphasis because it is from this area that the skills and knowledge of English are best obtained.

Summary

It is clear that the new English curriculum places considerable emphasis on the development of text complexity in reading and written English. How progression in text complexity is to be made does not appear to be clearly defined in the curriculum statement but the implication is that it should take place. However, more recent Ministry publications give some direction in this regard. In addition the curriculum requires that structured progression in each strand occurs via the assessment of the achievement objectives. More recent Ministry publications suggest that the achievement objectives are just one part of a whole continuum of student progression in learning. How these differing forms, that is, student progression in text complexity and the achievement objectives are to work together does not appear to be fully explained. It is also clear that the critics of the new English curriculum do not believe that progression in text complexity will occur and they note that standards of educational outcomes (in Britain) have been less than satisfactory so far. It is their belief that the current levels and achievement objectives do not identify the specific stages of learning in the English language. Instead, the critics maintain that progression in the English language is to be found in the increased levels of more complex writing and the understanding of more difficult text. And they note that it is still to be proven that appropriate standards in English outcomes can be achieved under the new system. There is a need then, to resolve

the apparent conflict that surrounds the teaching of progression in the English language if teachers are to place students on programmes at their level of ability as is required by the new curriculum. The more recent Ministry publications on the teaching of English may assist teachers to overcome these problems. Finally it is evident that the literary text has an important role to play in the development of text complexity and that careful consideration should be given to the type and level of the text used.

Chapter 5

Implementation Issues For The New English Curriculum And Distance Education

The teaching of text complexity in reading and written English, as laid down in the new curriculum, has implications for all schools. Of concern is the apparent conflict that exists between learning theory and the demands of the new curriculum. In fulfilling the new curriculum, schools should implement those elements involved in bridging the gap between policy and practice. In distance education and at The Correspondence School, in particular, the effect on teaching processes that are unique to this form of teaching need to be considered. There follows an analysis of the above issues as they impact on schools and, especially, on distance education schools.

A Description of Distance Education

To fully appreciate the implications of the new English curriculum for distance education it is necessary to have some understanding of what is involved in this educational process. A brief and selective description of distance education in the areas where it may impact on curriculum delivery follows.

Traditionally distance education has been seen as removing the face to face provision of education because the student is separated from the teacher. This condition is created through the distribution of the group of learners across a nation (Keegan, 1986). Holmberg (1983) notes that students are supported by an educational institution at a distance, and he describes the learning process created by the geographical separation of the student and the institution as a 'guided didactic conversation' (p. 115).

The traditional model of distance education has been characterised as an industrialised model (Gamlin, 1995) and is described by Peters (1973) as similar to an

assembly line where there is a division of labour between those who write the course and those who tutor and support the student. This traditional model is usually print-based and has been defined by Rumble and Harry (1982) as “correspondence education or correspondence study” (p. 11). More recent descriptions include open learning, non-traditional studies and off-campus programmes.

Hodgson (1993) draws a distinction between open and distance learning. Open learning is defined as an “educational philosophy” and distance learning as “an educational delivery system to meet particular needs” and Hodgson suggests that “most systems have elements of both openness and distance” (Introduction, p. 13). Hodgson indicates that an open learning institution is one that provides flexibility of learning and access for learners who under different conditions may not be able to study.

Although the main teaching material in traditional distance education institutions is print based, audio and video cassettes, radio broadcasts, and computer programmes are also utilised (Dewal, 1988). Keegan (1990) notes that distance education is not always an effective medium as educational materials can be left untouched or discarded by the student. However, Perraton (1983) maintains that “you can use any medium to teach anything” (p. 37). This perspective is based on the studies undertaken by Chu and Schramm (1968) who found that whether print, radio, television or the classroom teacher taught, it made no difference to learning outcomes. What may not be accounted for in Perraton’s position is the impact that distance learning has on student motivation.

A new model of distance education (although still in its infancy) is now beginning to emerge. This model delivers teaching through a range of the newer technologies such as video-conferencing, audio-graphics, audio-conferencing (Gamlin, 1995) and the Internet (Anderson, 1994). A difference in the effects of delivery between the industrial model and the new technology has been highlighted by Lockwood (1995). Because the new technologies can provide direct interaction between student and teacher, and student and student, there is now a capacity to bring about reflective learning through the use of two-way communication. The old systems of print, radio and television do not support this type of learning to the same degree. In addition new technologies through the Internet provide students with a huge database of information. It is possible that student motivation will be enhanced with this type of innovation.

Some advantages of teaching in the primary school area in distance teaching are one-to-one teaching (when a home supervisor is involved), self-paced learning, the development of independent learning on the part of the student and a non-competitive learning environment. Some disadvantages are a lack of interaction with peers, no team sports, plus the problems of the supervisor, who is usually the mother, having to continually interact with the child (Waugh, 1990).

In addition to the supervisor The Correspondence School, in New Zealand, offers some face to face teaching support in the form of school days and school camps and teacher and regional representative visits to the student's place of learning.

The Implementation of Levels Placement and Text Complexity in Relation to Learning Theory in Distance Education

In identifying a conflict between learning theory and the requirements of the new curriculum Dines (1991) has suggested that the progressive nature of the levels in the new curriculum is not based on research or the experience of the teachers. Learning theory stresses the importance of appropriate, organised and structured stages in the learning process. Dewey (1971, 1942) maintains that learning leads on from known to unknown experience while Piaget (1970) has identified stages in mental development. Bruner (1966) points out that theories of development need to be linked to a theory of knowledge and a theory of instruction. It is his view that how stages of knowledge are sequenced will affect the student's ability to learn and he points out that there is no one method of sequencing for all learners. Problems in specifying formal levels of thinking have been identified by Driver (1978). Skinner (1968, 1986) suggests that instruction should be individualised and in small steps, and that the computer is the best way to provide programmed instruction. Pocztar (1972) maintains that it is important that the essential learning objectives are clearly defined and the aims precise. Abstract terms such as 'understand' are therefore seen as unscientific and too vague.

It is evident from the above statements on learning theory that learning progresses in stages and that these stages should be of an appropriate size and lead on from the known to the unknown. Highlighted is the fact that sequenced learning depends on the learning needs of the individual student. However, the stages in learning, the size of each step in learning, and the learning needs of the individual student do not seem to be clearly thought through in the new curriculum. Elley (1996a) is critical of a curriculum that fails to identify specific stages in the development of language. It is his view that there are some main objectives that do not vary from year to year, or level to level, which are found in the increased levels of more complex written English and reading. Elley reinforces Skinner (1968) and Bruner's (1966) analysis that instruction should be individualised, when he points out that students' knowledge and growth in subjects such as English is "individual and idiosyncratic" (p. 12). He maintains that the curriculum structure does not allow for this. There does appear then, to be some conflict between learning theory identification of learning stages in knowledge and the levels of progression as itemised in the achievement objectives in the English curriculum.

In addition to the conflict that appears to exist between learning theory and the new curriculum levels, is the issue of progression in text complexity. Elley (1996a) and Locke (1996) maintain that it is not sufficient to assess students on what appear to be poorly defined achievement objectives to ascertain progress in text difficulty. They consider, for example, that progress should also be evident in such things as the increasing understanding of the structure and complexity of text. The new curriculum indicates that the assessment and teaching of text complexity should remain and it advises that good assessment practices such as running records should continue to be used (Ministry of Education, 1994c). This suggests that progression in text complexity should include an analysis of the student's increasing knowledge of known vocabulary both in reading and written English. Added to this is a need to assess comprehension levels in reading and to assess the student's ability to write using more difficult concepts as well as using more complex forms of writing. But the levels system of assessment in the new curriculum is apparently not based on learning theory and may not fit the individual needs of students in regard to progression in text complexity.

Challenges for Distance Education

Difficulties have been identified in both the teaching and assessment of the new English curriculum. The assessment of the achievement objectives creates difficulties in regard to interpretation of the terminology, levels placement and in meeting standards. The conflict between progression in the curriculum levels and text complexity has also been highlighted. Distance education schools will need to decide how the assessment of achievement objectives and text complexity will be undertaken to determine student placement on levels. Teachers will need skill in combining the two assessment requirements to determine at which level each student should be placed. Hopefully the handbooks, published recently by the Ministry of Education to support the English curriculum, will be helpful in this regard.

In assessing and teaching the new curriculum teachers will need to be careful about interpreting the achievement objectives correctly. The use of precise terminology is seen as essential when setting learning objectives in distance education (Poczta, 1972). However, Brooke (1994a) and Elley (1996a) are critical of the terminology in the new English curriculum. They see it as poorly defined and that terms such as 'respond' to and 'discuss' text make accurate assessment difficult. Teachers will therefore need to be clear about what is actually meant by the various achievement objectives.

Teacher, supervisor and regional representative training is necessary if the requirements of the new curriculum in levels placement and assessment in text complexity is to be undertaken effectively. While pre-written assessment packages may ensure, to some degree, that there is uniformity in the achievement objectives it is another issue to ensure that teachers will be able to assess student response correctly, especially if the achievement objectives are open to interpretation. Also, decisions should be made about what 'best practice' will be in regard to the assessment of text complexity and to make sure that both remedial and more able students are identified. In addition, schools teaching at a distance will need to provide assessment materials written for understanding and use by teachers, regional representatives and supervisors. And in undertaking this new assessment schools should ensure that the many and complex requirements of this process do not dominate the teaching programme.

Added to the task of assessing progression in levels and text complexity in reading and written English will be the complication of developing teaching programmes to deal concurrently with the number and range of levels that are likely to occur within a student group. The requirement to place students at different levels in different strands according to their learning needs suggests that programmes should be individualised.

According to Gall (1983) and Harley (1985) the individualisation of student learning in a distance education institution may be an easier task than for non-distance schools. Harley believes that distance education is ideally placed to be more flexible than non-distance schools and should be able to adapt programmes to meet the individual needs of students at least as much as non-distance schools if not more. However, distance education schools differ from non-distance schools in that education does not generally include face to face teaching (Keegan, 1990). Instead students are supported at a distance by the teacher and the teaching institution (Sewart, Keegan & Holmberg, 1983). Because of the lack of direct supervision by the teacher, constraints are placed on the accuracy of any assessment and teaching undertaken at a distance. Distance education schools may need to find ways to overcome this problem.

Another challenge that schools have is the teaching and assessment of higher order learning. The new curriculum places emphasis on higher order learning skills such as problem solving. However, it does not appear to explain what place the assessment and teaching of text complexity has in all of this. Torrance (1993) indicates that assessment which takes account of higher order learning should be made available but questions whether it is possible to develop this form of assessment when accountability is required. McInerney and McInerney (1994) suggest that norm-referencing and self-evaluation may be appropriate for higher order learning. They place emphasis on assessment techniques such as observation, student portfolios and journals, interviews and work samples. In the new curriculum all of these strategies of assessment are suggested in the document *Assessment Policy to Practice* (Ministry of Education, 1994b). The difficulty for teachers will be in administering a scheme in which criterion-based assessment is required by a performance-based system which provides achievement objectives that appear to be norm-referenced because of their vagueness self-evaluative in nature.

There is a need for schools to think through what place higher order learning and its assessment have in the teaching programme especially as it relates to text complexity. However, although the new curriculum is encouraging self-evaluative assessment some aspects such as interviews may be difficult in a distance setting. Added to this is a need to keep a balance between assessment of higher order learning and the measurement of specific skills.

In preparing assessment and teaching packages for the new English curriculum student motivation will also be an important issue. Distance education schools should attempt to provide print based materials that will motivate the student. Dewal (1988) highlights the importance of the style of presentation which should be warm, personal and friendly. Dewal also emphasises the importance of graphics with the use of visuals and cartoons to help the student understand the content. The primary supervisor, as well, has a key role in motivating student learning (Tomlinson, Coulter & Peacock, 1985). Harley (1985) sees the supervisor as the main facilitator and she emphasises the importance of supervisor training and guidance. Distance education schools therefore not only have to give consideration to the design of print-based materials provided, but should also consider the supervisor training requirements in relation to the new curriculum.

In setting new directions for assessment and teaching, the new curriculum gives emphasis to standards of work. The Education Review Office (1995) notes that the term standards has been used extensively in relation to the National Curriculum Statements, but they maintain that these statements define achievement objectives for levels but do not determine standards. The Education Review Office suggests that without national standards schools must develop their own. It has also been indicated that schools will need to find ways of achieving moderation between teachers, and with teachers in other schools, to ensure that standards are achieved. However, because there are a large number and differing forms of achievement objectives and because they are open to interpretation, this could be a daunting task.

Hall (1994) suggests that, in order to overcome the problem of assessing all the achievement objectives, teachers should be selective. Torrance's (1993) solution is to create some collective tasks which would be a part of the routine teaching programme.

If either of these suggestions is taken up, schools will need to make sure that teaching is not restricted to the particular tasks or objectives chosen. This will be less of a concern for distance education schools as programmes are mostly pre-written but these schools should ensure that the objectives or tasks used are the same as those chosen by the school with which they wish to undertake a moderation process. This may mean that negotiations will be needed when selecting achievement objectives or tasks for pre-written packages. In carrying this out the teachers will need assurance that validity and reliability can be maintained.

Standards in text complexity in reading and written English will need to be assessed along with the achievement objectives. Schools will have to find common criteria for judging text complexity in order to undertake this assessment. Again distance schools should make sure that the criteria used are the same as those of schools they undertake moderation with.

In considering the place of assessment, teaching and standards in reading and written English schools should be aware that the English curriculum identifies the library as being the main focus in the development of the English language. Emphasised, is the key role that literature plays in the development of literacy and the importance of providing a wide range of literary texts. In addition, Brooke (1995) is concerned about the lack of prescribed written texts for each level, from which teachers can select. It has also been suggested that, without some direction for teachers in the choice of texts, students may not have exposure to the type of literature that will best help extend their knowledge and understanding of the English language (Brooke, 1995 & Lynch, 1994). If these issues are seen as a concern by schools, it will be necessary to make sure that prescribed texts and appropriate literature are identified for each of the levels.

In attempting to meet the requirements of the English curriculum it is important not to forget all the other curriculum obligations which need to be met and that some of these will impinge directly on the teaching of text complexity in reading and written English. These requirements include the coverage of the eight essential skills and the nine principles, and the importance of meeting the needs of minority groups. In addition attitudes and values are to be taught. Certain aspects of the essential skills will naturally

form part of the English programme. In communication skills, for example, the student will be required, amongst other things, to read and write competently, and to confidently convey and receive information. Apart from this, it is not made clear how the essential skills will form a part of the English programme. In regard to the teaching of attitudes and values and the implementation of the nine principles only general directions have been given. The incorporation of the essential skills, attitudes and values, and the nine principles into the English curriculum is to be explained in future Ministry of Education publications but until these are available teachers will need to devise ways and means themselves.

When preparing English programmes for the classroom teachers are expected to give consideration to minority groups. These minority groups include Maori students, students from language backgrounds other than English, students with learning difficulties, girls, and talented and gifted students. Given that The Correspondence School (in particular) has an ever increasing roll of Maori students (Appendix 1) an increasing roll in remedial (Appendix 2), gifted and talented students (Appendix 3), and students who are speakers of other languages (data was not available for this group but the recent immigration patterns with Asian students is known to have some impact, especially in the Year 7 and 8 class levels) the school has a significant responsibility in this area. While some direction for dealing with students from minority groups is given in the new curriculum, there is little that is specific. However, support is given in the two handbooks *The Learner as a Reader: Developing Reading Programmes* (Ministry of Education, 1996e) and *Exploring Language: A Handbook for Teachers* (Ministry of Education, 1996d).

Despite the range of difficulties identified with the new English curriculum one of the advantages is the worthwhile aims that have been established. These aims will give a more comprehensive teaching of the English language for teachers to work to and ensure that a wider coverage of skills is maintained in areas such as writing styles and in the teaching of oral and visual English. Schools will need to take care that coverage is maintained and not limited to objectives developed for assessment purposes. The Correspondence School should be advantaged in this regard as courses are pre-written and coverage is assured provided the programme is completed by the student each year.

Bridging the Gap Between Policy and Practice

Historically, the putting of policy into practice in education has not been straight forward. Research has shown that policy developed by education authorities does not automatically translate into practice in the classroom. To transfer policy into practice in the classroom it is important that the teacher is willing and able to carry this out. However, the transition of policy to practice does not always run smoothly. McKenzie (1983) notes that educational research has shown that where the curriculum is created by innovators and then forced onto teachers without their acceptance it will not work. An early historical example of this, in New Zealand, is the ineffective implementation of the 1877 secular clause (McGeorge, 1987). Ramsay (1983) considers that it is naive of the curriculum developers to believe that their policies will be willingly adopted by teachers. Cuban (1993) points out that “teachers working alone in their classrooms, choose what to teach and how to present it” (p. 184) and that the power of pedagogy, the art and science of teaching, is more important than any curriculum reforms. And it is the relationship of the classroom teacher with their students that has the greatest influence on how students learn.

Massey (1983) suggests that the written curriculum is removed from what happens in the classroom and that the real curriculum is “often a matter of oral folk lore passed from one teacher to another” (p. 35). Because of the uniqueness of both student and teacher the reality is that their interactions are unable to be equated with the demands of the curriculum. It is Massey’s view that in developing and effectively implementing a new curriculum it is important to achieve consistency between the curriculum planner and the classroom teacher. However, when the teaching is pre-developed (as with distance education), and when levels placement through achievement objectives is a requirement (as stated in the new curriculum), the ability of a distance teacher to follow their professional inclinations may be severely curtailed. The new curriculum may therefore have a negative impact on meeting the learning needs of individual students.

Teachers need to be clear about what it is they are expected to do in putting policy into practice. In an evaluation of the implementation of the English Forms 3-5 Statement it was noted that teachers appeared to be confused about the requirements of the new

curriculum (Massey, 1983). The school's administration, organisation and physical plan, and the role of the principal were seen as crucial in implementing curriculum change. Insufficient resources can also help to undermine effective implementation of new policy. Walshaw (1996) has noted that in a study of the new mathematics curriculum implementation in New Zealand schools both teachers and students found it hard to make the necessary changes to learning. She notes that the National Qualification Framework policy requirements have led to uncertainty and confusion for teachers of mathematics. Both a lack of training and an inability to interpret the vague statements of the background literature were identified as some reasons for this confusion.

It has been suggested that professional development is a way of helping teachers to put policy into practice. McGee (1980), Massey (1983), Ramsey (1983) and Erickson (1995) believe that school based professional development is one of the keys to bringing about curriculum change. However, more recent research indicates that teachers perceive sufficient resources and sufficient time for implementation, as a more useful support than professional development (Knight & Meyer, 1996).

In closing the gap between policy and practice the distance education teacher and supervisor are advantaged in that most of the curriculum, whether it be the assessment process or the teaching programme, is developed by the institution. If the new English curriculum can be interpreted correctly by those responsible for developing the English resources, then it should be assessed and taught effectively through the written package. This should help to narrow the gap between what is policy and what is classroom practice. However the new curriculum objectives are open to interpretation – something which is beyond the control of schools. This problem of interpretation becomes more critical when the teacher begins to assess the student's work. Not only must the teachers struggle with a curriculum that is open to interpretation but they will also need a full understanding of the purpose and direction of the new curriculum. As there is much that is new in the English curriculum it appears that professional development will be important in order to ensure that the student's work is correctly assessed and evaluated and that appropriate teaching follows. The provision of sufficient resources (Knight & Meyer, 1996) and time to carry out implementation (Harlen & Malcolm, 1994) have been identified as important in this process. In addition, the new curriculum by its very

nature, for example, the large number of achievement objectives to be assessed, will require more time.

Summary

Implementing the new English curriculum as it relates to the teaching of text complexity in reading and written English has significant implications for all schools including distance schools.

The apparent conflict between learning theory's identification of learning steps in knowledge and the levels of progression as set out in the English curriculum, may be a problem in itself. Added to this, is the issue of how to fit progression in text complexity with the new curriculum's levels of progression; especially in view of the conflict that appears to exist in regard to learning theory. It would seem that it will be up to the teachers to decide how to combine the two assessment requirements when determining levels. A policy direction from school leadership may help to overcome this confusion.

Not only will teachers have to assess students for levels' placement within each strand of the English curriculum but they will have to decide how to implement this assessment at a distance. Accuracy of assessment will also be an issue. The provision of pre-prepared assessment packs along with the teaching material is one possibility but it is timely to consider the use of technology and the role of schools, near to where some of the students live, to carry out assessment. In addition, attention needs to be given to a range of assessment approaches including interviews, especially with assessment for higher order learning.

In implementing moderation to set standards for student achievement in English, distance schools must ensure that they use the same assessment process as the other schools involved. Selecting parallel achievement objectives or tasks and deciding upon common criteria for text complexity, may be necessary. As The Correspondence School mostly pre-prepares teaching and assessment material, contact with other schools may be important at the planning stage. And with all of this the difficulty of administering a scheme in which criterion-based assessment is required by a performance-based system

which provides achievement objectives that appear to be norm-referenced and because of their vagueness self-evaluative in nature, must not be lost sight of.

Student motivation is of particular importance in distance teaching. Both the method of programme delivery and the training of teachers, regional representatives and supervisors are essential in bringing about the successful motivation of students.

The English curriculum requires that provision is given to the teaching of the eight essential skills, attitudes and values, and the needs of minority groups as well as the recognition of the nine underlying principles of the New Zealand Curriculum Framework. In undertaking these requirements it will be important to consider the place of text complexity as it relates to each of them.

Specific factors have been identified as fundamental when translating policy into practice. At The Correspondence School, professional development of teachers, supervisors and regional representatives will be required if students' work is to be assessed, and programmes evaluated and taught correctly. Time to understand the new English curriculum, and to learn how to respond effectively to it are important elements in successful implementation, as are sufficient and appropriate resources, such as books, and good leadership from the principal.

It does appear that the new English curriculum brings a more complex and varied approach to the teaching process than did past curricula. This is particularly evident with the introduction of a system of levels and the assessment associated with it. With the greater demands that this will bring to the teaching process, teachers in distance education schools as well as other schools, will need to ensure that they do not lose sight of the learning needs of individual students.

Chapter 6

Methodology

In order to carry out this study it was necessary to choose a research design and methods of gathering information, to meet the study's main objective and aims. The research design set out to achieve the specified aims of the study using an illuminative evaluation paradigm. Qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection were employed. The methods chosen for data gathering were based on the methodology as outlined, and the adaptations and limitations of these methods are identified. Both the research design and the data gathering process are described in this chapter.

Research Design

Illuminative Evaluation

This study sought to make a formative evaluation of the teaching and assessment approach with a Year 7 English programme as it relates to text complexity in reading and written English. An 'illuminative evaluation' (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972) approach was adopted to undertake this evaluation.

The illuminative evaluation has its origins in programme evaluation (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972). The basis for programme evaluation is the traditional scientific approach to research where a pre-test is given, experimentation then takes place, and finally after a period of time a re-test is undertaken to observe changes that may have occurred. Illuminative evaluation considers the educational programme from a wider perspective and it is mainly concerned with description and interpretation. The purpose of illuminative evaluation is to examine the way in which a programme works, the influences in the school that affect it, the advantages and disadvantages that it may have, and how student learning is affected. It also sets out to discover and to record what it is like to be part of the programme, and to consider and bring illumination to

a wide range of difficult questions. It does this by involving the range of people participating in the programme, and applying a variety of data sources within the research process.

It is suggested by Parlett and Hamilton that there are three stages in illuminative evaluation, that is, observation, inquiry and explanation. All these stages overlap and interrelate. The observation stage involves making a record of discussions with and between participants, as the language conventions, jargon and metaphors used can reveal assumptions, and status differentials. Finding out the views of the participants is a vital part of evaluating a programme. For this stage, the interviewees may be selected randomly, because of special insight, or because their position in the organisation may make their opinions important.

Illuminative evaluation focuses on information gathering. It aims to heighten debate by simplifying the complexities of the situation and concentrating on the significant issues. Because of the demands placed on teachers in the current educational climate the evaluation method must be flexible enough to adapt its methodology to constant change. For this reason Parlett and Hamilton's illuminative evaluation provides a useful theoretical base from which to develop methods of evaluation suited to the complexity of today's schools.

The approach used was responsive to both the variety of issues and groups of people, transactional to the extent that it identified features in the process of change, and illuminative as it concentrated on the information-gathering rather than the decision-making aspect of evaluation.

Programme evaluation is not without its problems. Factors such as the neutrality of the evaluator, the function of formative evaluation, and the value of the study long term have been identified. The position of the researcher may be open to question, because this may have an influence on the conduct and progress of the programme. Of some concern are the research techniques used, as they may result in a lack of impartiality on the part of the researcher. It is important therefore that the viability and integrity of the research is maintained, as is the confidence of the people participating in the research

process. The establishment of good working relationships with colleagues and administrators is of prime importance. Researchers need to make clear what their role is, and to keep participants informed about the purpose of the study.

Finally, consideration must be given in illuminative evaluation as to whether it is possible or not to relate results and analysis to a universal situation.

Triangulation

Illuminative evaluation can be supported by triangulation. Mathison (1988) defines triangulation as the use of “multiple methods, data sources, and researchers to enhance the validity of research findings” (p. 13). It is a means of ensuring the validity of research findings by demonstrating that independent measurement is able to support the research (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Triangulation helps to reduce bias, and explanations that may otherwise have some merit (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). In this study triangulation involved multiple methods such as questionnaires, interviews, and data collection from people, for example, teachers.

For the purposes of this study both an ethnographic and a statistical approach were utilised in the research process. Ethnography attempts to create a picture in relation to a ‘way of life’ of a particular group of people and it refers both to the process and outcomes of that research (Wolcott, 1988). Ethnography and qualitative methods are much the same, in that they include research strategies such as interviewing with open-ended questions, and observational research, for example, talking to people in their own environment. Statistical research is quantitative in nature and can be supported and enhanced by ethnographical research (Delamont, 1992).

Observation

Observations can be both structured and unstructured. In structured observation checklists are used while in unstructured interviews observations are made about what is happening in a given setting, and this is recorded. Delamont (1992) suggests that the best observation occurs when it is carried out over several weeks or months. Hopkins (1985) indicates that peer observation is often less threatening than when it is done by an

outsider. For this study unstructured observation using a peer as an observer was utilised to a limited degree.

Interviewing

Powney and Watts (1987) characterise interviews as ‘respondent interviews’ or ‘informant interviews’. With respondent interviews the interviewer retains control throughout the interview which is structured to a lesser or greater extent. The structure is imposed by questions that cover the issues that are important to the interviewer. With informant interviews it is the interviewee who determines the structure. In this study the interviews were mostly respondent in nature but had elements of informative interviews in that each question and response could be discussed at the time of the interview.

Interviews are also characterised as normative or elite (Anderson, 1990). With normative interviews information collected from a substantial group of people, was classified and analysed. Unlike a normative interview an elite interview is concerned with small groups of people. The interviewer conducting a normative interview is not necessarily familiar with the subject under research but with an elite interview this is of prime importance as the interviewer wishes to increase his/her understanding and it is therefore ideal for analysing a teaching situation. For this study the interview was basically elite in nature but employed some normative characteristics in that information was developed from the results and analysed.

Questionnaires

The difference between an interview and a questionnaire is that interviews collect oral data while questionnaires collect written data. Generally questionnaires are structured but they may have only open questions. In this study the questionnaires were structured.

Data Gathering

The methods chosen for the gathering of data were based on the methodology as described in this chapter. In this section, adaptations and limitations of these methods in the data gathering process are identified. The data gathering processes were as follows:

- The first stage of this study took the form of a short interview with the class teachers. From information to hand they gave or estimated the reading age and grade of written English of each of their students.
- The regional representatives were asked to assess the reading age of each student in the student's place of learning, using an informal prose inventory.
- Three teachers of English were also asked to independently assess a sample of written English from each of the same students.
- A phoned interview was conducted with each supervisor to ascertain the suitability of the reading extracts and the written exercises provided by the programme. Students were asked similar questions as part of their questionnaire.
- Questionnaires sent to supervisors and students included further questions that were beyond the scope of the main objective but could provide insight into aspects connected to teaching at a distance.
- Results from the independently assessed reading ages and the written English were then collated.
- The level at which each student was placed on the English programme was identified. Programme changes that occurred as the result of the independent assessment were also identified.
- The teachers were presented with the findings and then interviewed about the effectiveness of the programme and their teaching needs in relation to this.
- For reliability purposes students from a Year 7 English class at a non-distance school had their reading ages and written English samples assessed.
- Comparisons were made between the reading ages, of each student in the non-distance class from the informal prose inventory assessment results and from the Reading Comprehension Progressive Achievement Test results. This was done to assess the reliability of the informal prose inventory. Testing was also undertaken with the non-distance school to trial a moderation process, and to begin setting standards in English.

The Correspondence School class teacher assessment of reading ages and written English grades

A survey was undertaken at the beginning of the research process to establish the teachers' assessment of each of their students' reading ages and written English levels. The interview for this survey was conducted after the teacher had received 2-3 postings of work back from their student. The teachers were approached individually and a respondent interview approach was used. The following questions were asked about their Year 7 students.

1. What is the current reading age of your student ?
2. On a 1 to 5 scale, with one being the highest, how would you grade your student in written English?

Until recently, teachers were required to grade their students in all the main subject areas on a 1 to 5 scale in the Progressive Achievement Register in New Zealand schools. Because of the familiarity of this system, it was chosen for grading the written English levels.

In conducting this interview it was apparent that most teachers did not have a record that they could instantly access for reading age levels. Some teachers had records from previous years and a few looked at the progress card (currently The Correspondence School's official record of achievement) but this did not often indicate the reading age. One teacher had been on a home visit and had taken two students' reading ages. Mostly, however, they looked at their student logs (a written record of student work results) and a few teachers obtained a reading age from these but most of them made an estimation. It appeared easier for the teachers to make an assessment of the students' written English levels. This was probably because they had received samples of written work from the students and had recorded notes in their students' logs. Certainly they looked closely at their logs in making these assessments.

Independent assessment of reading ages

Practical considerations had to take precedence as to what form of reading test was used to establish the level of the students' reading ages. Because of this an informal prose inventory was chosen. This had the advantage of ensuring that some form of comprehension testing was undertaken. Apart from helping to determine levels, comprehension testing would also help to ascertain students who may be gifted and particularly able in reading.

In order to undertake an independent assessment of each student's current reading age a visit to their place of learning (usually their home) was required. The regional representatives, who visit students in their place of learning, were asked to conduct this assessment and were trained to this end. The purpose of the assessment was to find out how much the reading ages were in agreement with that of the classroom teachers' assessment and to see what changes were made to the programme when the difference, if any, was known by the teacher. Therefore when a reading age assessment was completed by the regional representative it was immediately conveyed to the class teacher.

The number of independent reading ages collected was dependent on the ability of the regional representatives to undertake this assessment. The factors that affected the regional representatives in carrying out this assessment were as follows:

- It was not practicable to approach every student because they may either have had medical reasons, been away from home for a period of time, were itinerant or they were too inaccessible to reach.
- Some regional representatives have more extensive and difficult terrain to cover which limits the time available for such a project.
- Regional representatives' roll numbers are such that it makes it hard to visit every student and this problem is compounded by ongoing withdrawals and enrolments taking place during the course of the year.
- The needs of individual students on the regional representatives' roll would have to take priority.

- In a few instances the regional representatives appeared to have other priorities as their returns were small and in one case no assessment was attempted.

Independent assessment of written English

In this study it was decided to limit the independent assessment of written English to an analytical one. The decision was made for three reasons. Firstly, the class teacher had already made an impressionistic assessment when grading the written English of their students. Secondly, the analytical approach could give a more detailed analysis of students' writing strengths and weaknesses. And thirdly because there were constraints on time. As teachers' time is at a premium it was considered that it was better to attempt to do one approach well rather than two approaches poorly.

It was decided for this study that three teachers who were not the Year 7 class teachers would assess the written samples independently. One of these teachers was a primary teacher and the other two were secondary teachers of English. The results of their assessment would be compared with the class teachers' impressionistic assessment of each of their students. If it had been possible, more teachers would have been involved in the assessment process but again time was a factor as the teachers required release time for this purpose and only so much was available.

After discussion with the secondary teachers of English it was decided to use the following criteria for this particular study using a 1-5 scale with 5 being the highest.

1. Fluency
2. Clarity
3. Depth
4. Imagination
5. Spelling
6. Sentence Structure
7. Paragraphs
8. Punctuation

These eight criteria are an attempt to include the range of demands on the student writer when composing text. They were designed to help overcome the range of styles that were to be assessed by looking at the general features of written English that apply to most forms of writing.

In applying the 1-5 scale, the interpretation of each criterion and scoring process was discussed with the assessors as follows:

- Fluency was defined as the progression of ideas (the ideas flow in logical sequence).
- Clarity indicates that the reader understands what is written.
- Depth is about the exploration of ideas, and the observation of detail.
- Imagination is apparent in the choice of words and/or an imaginative plot.
- Spelling includes the level of difficulty of the words used and the number of errors.
- Paragraphs were considered as to whether they were used in the text or not. If they were not used then the assessor would score NA (not applicable). They were also looked at from the point of view of complexity. The use of simple paragraphs would be rated as a 3. Evidence of more complex paragraphs could result in a rating of a 4 or 5.
- Sentence structure that was simple but correct would rate as a 3. Evidence of more complex sentences, for example compound sentences, and a greater variety of sentence structures could result in a rating of 4 or 5.
- Punctuation that was simple and correct (for example, full stops and capital letters) rated a 3, while more complex uses such as speech marks rated a 4 or 5.

The results of the criteria gradings were collated and the totals transferred into percentages to create individual student grades. Grades were reversed from 1 - 5, with 1 being the highest and were established as follows:

Grade 1 = 90-100%

Grade 2 = 66-89%

Grade 3 = 40-65

Grade 4 = 21-39%

Grade 5 = 0-20%

Teachers then did a trial run and further discussion took place before all samples were assessed.

It was not possible to incorporate a variety of writing styles in this study. The practicality of obtaining written English samples from students working at a distance made this task impossible. Instead samples came from the written work that was sent in as part of the student's set writing exercises. In the end it became necessary to consider just one sample of work from each student because so few samples were received. This meant that the style of writing samples varied from student to student. However, as has been noted, the criteria were constructed to help overcome this anomaly by looking at the general features of written English that apply to most forms of writing.

There were several reasons why the number of samples was limited. Firstly, some students did not return written work. Students came on the roll at different times of the year, and as the year passed there was less chance of getting a return in time. It was not always possible for teachers to put aside samples.

As has already been shown, there were several limitations in this area of the study. These included the variation in the style of writing from student to student, because of the difficulty in obtaining sufficient samples. The most limiting feature was the fact that the assessment of written English cannot be made a precise task as the criteria are always open to interpretation.

One written English sample per student was also obtained from a Year 7 class attending a non-distance school. The procedures used for assessing the written English samples from distance students were also used for the samples from a non-distance school. The same assessors were used. These students all wrote an essay in the same genre. There were some limitations in the topic given, as it took the form of an argument and students tended to list points for both sides of the argument. However, not all of their writing was in this form and sufficient material was available to cover all the criteria for assessment.

Survey of supervisor and student opinions on the appropriateness of the level of work in reading and written English

The selection of areas to be surveyed was mostly determined by the main objective of this study, to investigate current assessment and teaching practices as they affect progression in text complexity in reading and written English. This was carried out by a phoned interview for the supervisors and by a questionnaire for the students (Appendices 4 & 5). The main purpose of the survey was to help establish that the level of the reading extracts and written English exercises was suitable for each student. By including appropriate questions about suitability triangulation would also be achieved. In addition to these main questions further questions that were beyond the scope of the main objective but that could provide insight into aspects connected to teaching at a distance were included (Appendices 5 & 6). These remaining questions came from questions that have often been asked over time in regard to teaching at a distance in The Correspondence School, and by canvassing teachers for aspects that they considered should be included.

As the respondents to the questionnaire were scattered around New Zealand the questionnaires were posted to them. The wording of the questionnaires and interview were established in two ways. Firstly, several teachers experienced in editing were asked to check the questions for clarity. Secondly pilot testing was undertaken. Respondents selected for this purpose came from the students where the class teacher had chosen not to be a part of the research process, thus leaving all remaining students available for participation in the final survey by questionnaire. In writing the questions issues such as ambiguity (De Vaus, 1991) were considered.

Interviews and questionnaires used a closed or forced-choice question type (De Vaus, 1991). The forced-choice question format was mainly chosen because the questionnaire had to be self-administered and De Vaus recommends this format when there is not a skilled interviewer to establish rapport with the responder. Closed formats are also less difficult to code, do not allow the articulate responder opinions to dominate responses, and will help prompt the responder. One limitation of this approach is that they can create false opinions because the participant is prompted into a response. Also they do not take into account any qualifications the responder may wish to make.

The Likert-style format rating scale (De Vaus, 1991) was chosen. This format involves the provision of statements, with the respondents indicating how much they agree or disagree with them. The format was presented in verbal form.

The layout was set up so that participants could circle a number next to the response of their choice. A matrix presentation was used for setting out the questions and responses. Contingency questions were not required as all questions needed a response. General and section introductions were included. The general instructions included the main purpose of the questionnaire and instructions on how to answer the questions. Each section introduction detailed its purpose. Questions were grouped by content areas and were spaced well apart to avoid clutter.

The collection of the data from the questionnaires was dependent on the supervisor or student ensuring that they were completed and returned. Although good numbers were returned they did not necessarily match those students who had been graded for reading ages and written English levels. With the phoned interview the supervisor required access to a phone, or to easily be contacted by phone. This was not always possible.

Survey of English programme levels placement in relation to reading ages and written English grades

An analysis was made of the programme level at which each student was placed in English. This was done in order to compare the levels placement of students in relation to the reading ages and written English grades determined by the research undertaken in this study. It was also done to identify any changes that occurred as a result of the independent assessment. Information about the level of programme placement was obtained from the student logs and computer records.

Students at The Correspondence School are currently placed on courses written for specific class levels. For example, the course FLA100 has been written for Year 7 (Form 1) students. In the future, courses will be written in relation to the levels outlined in the new curriculum. This is beginning to happen. There is a specific course for Year 7 (Form 1) students and most but not all students are placed on FLA100. Those students not placed on FLA100 are usually placed on an individual programme which is designed

to cater for the student's individual needs. These students come under the heading of Special Needs Students and are required to be assessed by the Specialist Education Services before they can be accepted on to the Special Needs roll. In addition there are usually a few students who have been identified as not being able to cope with the FLA100 programme but who do not fit the category of Special Needs Students. These students are placed on an adjusted programme, which means they will be placed on a lower level course and may have some individualisation of their programme. Where students have shown to be exceptionally talented in English, they are placed on a course above Year 7 (Form 1), usually on the Year 8 (Form 2) course (FLA200) and on rare occasions they have been placed on secondary English courses.

Analysis of reading ages of the reading extracts in the FLA100 course

The FLA100 course is composed of a series of booklets known as sets. The reading extracts in these sets have mostly been obtained from School Journals and therefore have been assessed for reading age levels using the noun frequency method. In addition a reading age levels assessment using the informal prose inventory is included in sets 3 and 10. Again, the reading extracts used were drawn from the School Journals. A survey was undertaken to identify the range of reading ages used in the selection of extracts for reading exercises and assessment purposes.

The Correspondence School class teacher interview

The teachers were presented with the findings of the research as it related to their individual students. Both the reading age results assessed by the regional representatives, and written English grades assessed by three independent teachers were shown to them. On some occasions the reading ages and the written English grades were given to the class teacher at least one month before the interview and in most cases several months before. They were then shown again at the beginning of the class teacher interview. These results were compared with those of the teachers' assessments, undertaken at the beginning of the study and before the interview was conducted.

The interview had several purposes. One of these was to find out whether the teachers had made changes to a student's programme once any difference in reading age assessment had become apparent. A survey of the student logs and computer data just

prior to the interview, was also carried out for this purpose. By undertaking an interview with the class teachers an opportunity was provided to find out how the teachers currently go about assessing reading ages and written English grades. It also showed what the teacher normally does in relation to programme adjustment, when confronted with a variance in reading age or written English grade and what could be done to help teachers better meet the needs of their students. It was an elite interview, was mostly respondent in nature but had elements of the informant interview (Appendix 7).

Justification for Population

As this was a study about the teaching and assessment of text complexity at a distance, students from The Correspondence School were the only appropriate choice. Because these students have a class teacher who prepares and teaches the programme at a distance, as well as a supervisor who is involved in the teaching process it was important to involve both teaching parties in the research. Also, each of the three groups was needed in order to ensure that triangulation occurred. The student group from the non-distance class was included to increase reliability.

Research Sample

The research sample was planned to include the whole of the current population of Year 7 students, their supervisors and class teachers except for overseas students. The numbers involved a floating roll of approximately 130 students, about 130 supervisors and 15 class teachers.

Justification for the Sample

The Year 7 English classes consisted of 130 students, 130 supervisors, and 15 class teachers. There was no further population to draw on because The Correspondence School is the only distance state primary school in New Zealand. It was therefore necessary to include all students in order to obtain as true a picture as possible.

Ethical Considerations

The following procedures were carried out to make sure that ethical standards were addressed:

- The thesis was proposed and developed in 1995 as part of an Educational Research paper at Massey University.
- The Correspondence School was also approached in 1995, and approved the school's involvement in the research study (Appendix 8).
- The class teachers of Year 7 students at The Correspondence School were given an oral and written explanation of the research study and their involvement in it. Confidentiality was assured (Appendix 9). Any changes from the original plan were conveyed to them orally, for example, the inability to send out reading tests in addition to the regional representatives undertaking assessment. They were also given an explanation of the purpose of the research. Most teachers agreed to participate in the study although some chose not to include all of their students. Those teachers who did not agree to become involved were not included in the study but their students and supervisors were used to undertake trial questionnaires.
- The regional representatives were given an oral and written explanation of their role in the research study and the purpose of the research. All of them agreed to support it and again confidentiality was assured (Appendix 10).
- The supervisors and students were given a written explanation of the purpose of the research study and their role in it and confidentiality was assured (Appendix 11).
- A non-distance school was approached for the assessment of a Year 7 class in reading ages, and for obtaining a sample of Progressive Achievement Tests and written English results. Parents were contacted in written form and confidentiality was assured. Explanations about the research were given to the students by their class teacher and students chose whether they would participate or not (Appendix 12).

Summary

This illuminative programme evaluation drew on both ethnographic and statistical approaches. It included the methodological strategies of questionnaires, interviews and

the gathering of hard data obtained in the form of reading ages and written English grades. It involved gathering data at a distance. In undertaking the data gathering processes it was apparent that there were several restrictions placed on the methods of collection. These included the type of assessment chosen and the limitations imposed by the environment of the study. Limitations of distance determined the type of assessment used for obtaining independent reading ages as well as the number collected. Distance was again a factor in determining the number and type of written samples that were collected. The type of assessment used for written English was predetermined by the time available for the assessment process. The phoned interview was dependent on being able to contact the supervisor in this way. Returns of questionnaires were dependent on the number of supervisors and students who completed and returned them. The survey of the reading extracts, programme placement and the class teacher interviews were relatively easy to conduct because they were reliant on the administrator of the study for completion. Distance then had a considerable impact on the gathering of data as did the ability of participants such as regional representatives, teachers and supervisors to fully carry out the process.

Chapter 7

The Assessment Instruments

In undertaking the independent reading and written English assessments it was important that the most appropriate forms of assessment instruments were developed for a distance education setting. There follows an explanation of why the particular assessment instruments were chosen and how they were constructed.

Independent Reading Assessment

An informal prose inventory was specially developed for assessing the reading ages. There were several reasons why an informal prose inventory was used as there is more than one method for assessing reading achievement (Farr, 1969). Methods range from standardised tests to informal tests. Assessment includes the following types: informal observation; running records; informal reading inventories; tests of word recognition; tests of vocabulary; amount of reading; and tests of silent reading comprehension (Smith & Elley, 1994).

Progressive Achievement Tests, are frequently used in New Zealand to assess student reading levels (Smith & Elley, 1994). These tests must be administered by a trained teacher, and early in the school year to be valid (Reid & Elley, 1991). The logistics of administering Progressive Achievement Tests at a distance made the choice of this form of assessment impossible.

On some occasions the Burt Word Reading Test has been used by teachers and regional representatives of The Correspondence School. Smith and Elley (1994) point out that this is a word recognition test and therefore measures a limited aspect of the reading process although they believe that it has merit in clarifying a student's word recognition skills, and for providing an age level in relation to this. Harrison (1991) is

concerned about some uses this test has been put to, for example, its use as an evaluation procedure for reading recovery and for baseline testing in some current New Zealand research. Harrison's concern about the Burt test is the fact that it cannot give a picture of a student's level of ability in comprehension, that is, a student's comprehension ability may deviate at least two years from that of the Burt test result.

It was imperative for this research study that the reading assessment revealed the comprehension levels of the students and so the informal prose inventory was seen as the most suitable assessment instrument.

Informal reading inventories consist of a

standardised series of graded passages of text, which individual children read aloud to the teachers, and then respond to open-ended comprehension questions. The teacher will normally count oral reading errors (accuracy), self-correction, and the number of comprehension questions answered correctly. (Smith & Elley, 1994, p. 105).

A debate exists about the value of informal prose inventories in regard to levels placement. Some research on their reliability for this use suggests that informal prose inventories may not be suitable but it has not been seen as sufficient to abandon their use (McKenna, 1983). However, Farr (1969) points out that the use of informal reading inventories for ascertaining a student's reading level is quite well established practice and that they are highly regarded for their usefulness for this purpose. Johnson and Kress (1976) highlight the importance of obtaining the present level of achievement in reading of a student and support the use of informal prose inventories for this purpose. They point out that standardised tests have proved to be inadequate for determining accurate reading levels. The informal prose inventory is seen by Holdaway (1990) as a valuable tool in monitoring student progress in reading. The most important use of the informal prose inventory as far as Johns (cited, Pikulski & Shanahan, 1982) is concerned, is its capacity to match the student's reading ability with the appropriate instructional level.

Johns notes that some educators believe that more than 50 percent of students are placed on levels that are too difficult.

Construction of the Informal Prose Inventory

Several informal prose inventories are available for use in New Zealand and Pikulski and Shanahan (1982) point out that research has shown that results from published inventories and teacher-made ones vary little. However, it is recommended that schools develop their own inventories based on the type of reading material most commonly in use at the school concerned (Betts, 1946, Farr, 1969). The context of the story must also be familiar (Nicholson, 1982). The New Zealand School Journal has traditionally been used as a source of reading material for informal prose inventories (Ministry of Education, 1994a). School Journal stories are used widely in the English course written for the Year 7 students at The Correspondence School. Also, the topics in these stories have a New Zealand flavour and are likely to reflect the background of most of the students. Many of the stories are based on home or school situations that can be familiar to the students (most Correspondence School students have attended a school at one time or another). For the above reasons, School Journal extracts were chosen as the reading extracts for the informal prose inventory.

School Journal extracts were also chosen because the reading age designated to each extract is determined by the Noun Frequency Method. This method of assessing reading ages was specially developed for New Zealand conditions and although it is not seen as perfect it has proved its worth over the years (Elley & Croft, 1989). It is used both by teachers and librarians to help establish reading levels in texts for student use.

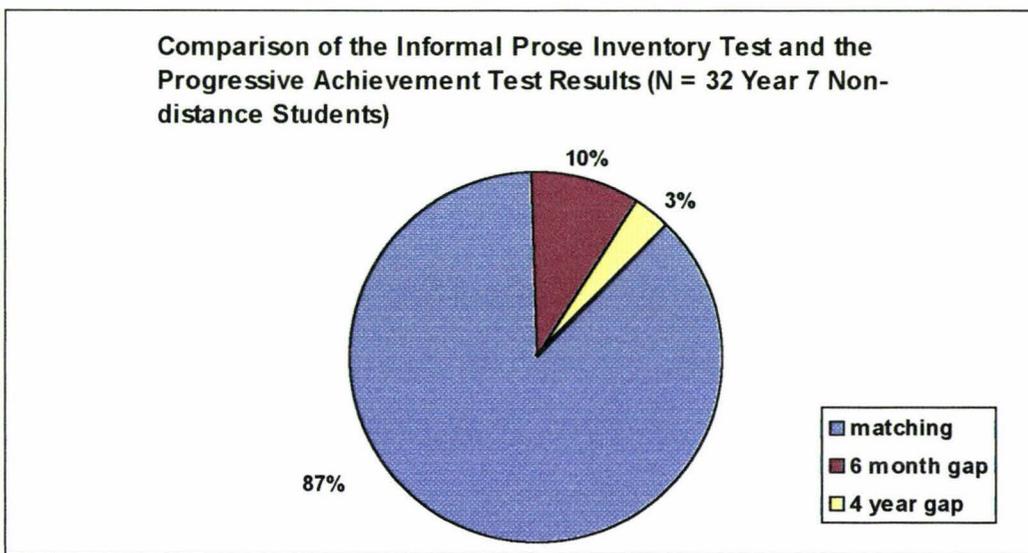
In constructing an informal prose inventory there are established principles that should be followed. The three most important features of any reading test are that they be valid, reliable and practical (Pumfrey, 1985). Pumfrey indicates that the validity of a test is determined by how well it measures what is intended to be measured while reliability is demonstrated by the consistency of the results. The practicality of a test is best confirmed by its usefulness to the teacher.

The validity of the informal prose inventory developed for this study is proven to the extent that it was designed for the purpose intended, that is, to establish student reading levels by analysing accuracy in word recognition, self-correction and comprehension.

Reliability was established by using the same informal prose inventory with a non-distance Year 7 class and then comparing their Progressive Achievement Test results. In order to achieve reliability further the informal prose inventory was administered, at the non-distance school, by the one teacher. Instructions given to the regional representatives in the use of informal prose inventories, were also observed by this teacher. The results were as follows.

In the class of 32 Year 7 students the results of 27 students' informal prose inventory assessments matched the results of their Progressive Achievement Test (Figure 1). There were three students with results half a year out and one that was four years out. One student achieved a reading age of under eight years but there was no Progressive Achievement Test result available for this student. However, a reading age taken at a previous school was in agreement with the informal prose inventory assessment results. It is evident from this survey that the informal prose inventory assessment results were significantly the same as the results of the Progressive Achievement Test of the non-distance school students. These results therefore help to confirm the reliability of the informal prose inventory instrument used in this research study.

Figure 1



Pikulski and Shanahan (1982) highlight the importance of providing teachers with consistent, structured and ongoing training. They note that when this occurs accuracy in assessment of reading levels using informal prose inventories is greatly improved. Reliability therefore was further enhanced by ensuring that each of the regional representatives had the same instructions to follow when undertaking testing (Appendix 13). Also, during their regular visits to the school the regional representatives were involved in discussions about the assessment process so that any anomalies could be overcome.

To further establish reliability a survey was undertaken to establish the previous experience that each regional representative had in using this type of assessment (Appendix 14). This survey was in the form of a structured questionnaire and was responded to either in written form or by phone depending on what best suited the regional representative. Results from this survey were as follows:

- Of the twelve regional representatives conducting informal prose inventory assessment with the students, nine of them had extensive experience in primary teaching, that is, 10-20+ years. For all of these representatives their experience in conducting informal prose inventory assessment, closely matched their individual teaching experience. Three had very little or no experience in primary teaching or in conducting this form of assessment. Four of the regional representatives had also been trained in specialised reading courses such as reading recovery. One regional representative had seven years primary service and specialised training in undertaking informal prose inventory assessment but was limited in actual experience.
- The survey of the regional representatives reveals that the majority demonstrated competency in conducting informal prose inventory assessment and would therefore have assessed the students reading ages effectively. Many of the reading ages assessed were two or more years above or below the students' chronological age and only three assessments within the wider range of results were taken by inexperienced but trained teachers (they were trained in using informal prose inventories for this study). It can therefore be said that the assessment results have considerable reliability in relation to regional representatives skill in using informal prose inventories.

- After the limitations of using an informal prose inventory are taken into account there are still some further considerations that should be noted. As mentioned already, of those students with reading ages two or more years above or below their chronological age only three assessments in total had been administered by regional representatives inexperienced in taking an informal prose inventory. It must also be remembered that it was a one off test. Given the comparison with the informal prose inventory results and the Progressive Achievement Test results of the students at a non-distance school it is likely that most of the ages are correct.

Questions which assess the comprehension level of the student need to range in complexity from explicit through to implicit (Nicholson, 1982). An explicit question can be answered directly from what is stated in the story. To answer an implicit question the student needs to draw inferences from what is read and not just state what is in the text. Betts (1946) also indicates that in order to appraise the student's comprehension skills fully, both recall of facts and inferential questions should be used. The informal prose inventory used in this study included both factual (explicit) and inferential (implicit) questions with each extract, to ensure that the students' comprehension was assessed as completely as possible.

As has already been noted, the purpose of using the informal prose inventory was also an attempt to ascertain those students who may have exceptional abilities in reading. In addition it could help to identify students that may generally be of high intelligence. The final reading extract in the informal prose inventory was selected because of its conceptual difficulty. Clark (1992) states that amongst other cognitive characteristics, able students have an unusual capacity for processing information and quickly grasp underlying concepts. They are also able to handle complex ideas, draw inferences and isolate cause and effect relationships (Cathcart, 1994). In Renzulli's (1996) Enrichment Triad Model gifted students are initially identified by their greater interest and commitment to a topic. The final reading extract in the informal prose inventory was about atomic energy and highlighted the above characteristics. Some students were able to read the extract aloud, but not all were able to provide intelligent answers to the questions asked or to undertake discussion about the article with the regional

representative (Appendix 15). Students at the non-distance school were also questioned about their previous knowledge of the content from the atomic extract before reading it. Little was known about the detail of the extract by any of the students, illustrating that those students who understood it were the ones able to process information and quickly grasp underlying concepts.

It may be that the identification of exceptional readers could help to distinguish those students who may be gifted. In considering the relationship between intelligence test performance and reading test performance Farr (1969) notes that the results of these tests tend to become closer as the chronological age increases. Jensen (1980) and Matarazzo (1972) indicate that verbal comprehension, that is, the ability to understand the written word, is the greatest single indicator of an individual's general intelligence. More recent research suggests that it is not possible to relate any form of intelligence testing results to actual intelligence. Rosenthal, Baker and Ginsburg (1983) revealed that there were significant reasons for underachievement in levels of learning. They found that socioeconomic status and ethnicity were factors in underachievement and were in fact more important than language development. Flynn (1987) notes that IQ tests do not measure intelligence but instead correlate with a weak causal link to intelligence and he suggests that IQ differences cannot therefore be equated with differences in intelligence. Roy Nash (1988) indicates that scholastic ability tests are really tests of verbal IQ and that all that can be derived from them is that a student requires specific information processing aptitude to achieve a high score whether it be on an IQ test or a reading test. All of the above suggests that whatever innate intelligence might be it is probably not possible to assess it through achievement in reading. However, it is possible that high achievement in reading could be seen as an indicator of high intelligence and therefore could serve as a starting point for identifying the more able students.

Obviously there were limitations in using an informal prose inventory to establish reading levels and many of these have already been identified above. Botel (cited Pikulski & Shanahan, 1982) suggests that it is not possible to estimate the sub skills of comprehension and recommends the use of a vocabulary-in-context measure. Pikulski and Shanahan (1982) indicate that the quality of the questions is an important factor in determining levels of comprehension and that they must be conceived carefully in order

to accurately discriminate understanding. Pikulski and Shanahan also point out that the practice of using more difficult levels of text in informal prose inventory assessment appears debatable as the type of error and 'miscue' changes as the text becomes more difficult for the student. Spache (1976) notes that the scoring standards are subjective and probably invalid, their basal reader source can be questionable and the testing procedures are different from what they are supposed to be based on. In considering some of the limitations of informal prose inventory assessment Pikulski and Shanahan remind critics that other forms of tests also have similar limitations.

Independent Assessment of Written English

In organising the independent assessment for levels of achievement in written English several factors were taken into account. These included the written samples, the criteria, the assessment process and the limitations both of the methods used and of the particular study. In addition, reliability and validity must be apparent in the assessment process. As noted before, validity occurs when what is intended to be measured, is measured. Reliability occurs when two independent measures bring about similar results.

Most attempts to assess the standard of written English have included two approaches. The first approach is to grade the written sample according to the immediate overall impression of the assessor while the second approach requires the assessor to isolate specific features of the text such as spelling and give each feature a score (Woods, 1992, Lamb, 1987, White, 1986, & Gorman, White, Orchard & Tate, 1981). Of these two approaches the former is known as Impressionistic and the latter as Analytic marking. Gorman et al have shown that both methods can produce reliable results depending on the variables involved. In one study the impressionistic approach achieved the most satisfactory results. However, another study showed the analytical approach to be superior. White indicates that the analytical approach allows evaluators to begin to find answers to the strengths and weaknesses of a specific group of students.

Using the analytical approach in this study gave an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the students and by combining the individual scores for each feature of the

written English, for example, punctuation and imagination, an overall rating could be applied to each student. This rating could then be compared with the class teacher's assessment. As this was the purposes of the assessment, validity would be achieved.

The criteria for an analytical scoring scheme vary and are grouped differently in assessment studies undertaken in the past. Gorman et al (1981) highlight one marking scheme where the following criteria were used:

1. Content and organisation
2. Appropriateness and style
3. Grammatical conventions
4. Orthographic conventions

Lamb (1987) notes the criteria used in an IEA study. It included:

1. The quality and scope of content
2. Organisation and presentation of content
3. Style and tone
4. Grammar and punctuation
5. Spelling and orthography

White (1986) records that a language team assessing written language used the following criteria:

1. Content
2. Organisation
3. Appropriateness and style
4. Knowledge of grammatical conventions
5. Knowledge of orthographic conventions

Most of these studies used a 1-5 scale with 1 being the highest score.

Codd (1989) notes that where teachers themselves decide about what the criteria will be then it is more likely that valid assessment judgement will occur. Gorman et al (1981) have shown that the assessors should agree on the interpretation of the criteria.

Training of the assessors is considered an important element in the assessment of written English (Lamb, 1987). In an IEA study Lamb records that each assessor having marked an essay using the criteria provided, then went through the process of discussing their reason for their particular rating to help reach a consensus for the final score. Most trials involve several markers in the assessing process (Lamb, 1987 & White, 1986). This is necessary because inevitably the opinion of markers will vary and by having several markers a consensus can be reached about scores. White used a panel of four to six teachers in the assessment of writing for students of 11 and 15 years. In a moderation process for practical art Codd (1989) involved four to six teachers.

In most assessment studies of written English a variety of writing genre is considered for example, a letter, a summary of text and a personal narrative (Lamb, 1987). In the study undertaken by Gorman et al (1981) students produced written English texts for a range of purposes e.g. reporting, narration and to argue a point of view.

The main limitation of any assessment of written English is that it cannot be made a precise task as the criteria are always open to interpretation. However, the use of several markers per student work has been shown to be an effective method of reducing the impact of this limitation and in bringing about reliability (Gorman et al, 1981). Gorman et al also point out that problems of interpretation exist in most subject areas and it is therefore a factor in many assessment processes.

Summary

While accepting that no one form of assessment can be fully valid and reliable it is evident that an attempt has been made to develop assessment instruments that would help to ensure both validity and reliability for this research study. In addition, the assessment instruments have been designed to overcome problems of assessing at a distance as well as addressing particular requirements such as the comprehension levels of the students.

Results

The results, from the data gathered, have been presented under the following headings

- Reading Age Assessment
- Programme Placement in Relation to Reading Ages
- Supervisor and Student Opinions of the Suitability of the Reading Extracts in their English Programme
- Written English Results
- Supervisor and Student Opinions of the Written English Exercises in their English Programme
- A Comparison of Reading, Written English and Programme Grades in Relation to Programme Placement
- Triangulation of Reading Ages, Programme Placement and Supervisor Opinion
- Triangulation of Written English, Programme Placement and Supervisor Opinion
- Results of the Interview with the Class Teachers
- Further Results from the Questionnaires

The total numbers of participants varies across the range of results. There are several reasons for this. In the case of the reading ages the regional representatives sometimes sent in student reading ages that either had not been estimated by the class teacher or for which written English samples were not available. Some written English samples did not have matching reading age results. Likewise supervisor and student opinions results did not always match the student results from the reading ages and written English samples. Factors that contributed to this variation included regional representative ability to obtain reading ages, teacher ability to obtain written English samples, and supervisor and student willingness to respond to the questionnaire. Ongoing withdrawals and enrolments

also reduced the total participants. The end product was that it was not possible to obtain a common total for the various results nor to provide sufficient results to bring about full triangulation. The supervisors' interview conducted by phone resulted in smaller response numbers because some supervisors did not have a phone while some of the numbers listed in the school database were not current. On several occasions supervisors appeared to be away and it was therefore not always easy to make contact.

Section 1

Reading Age Results

In this section an analysis of the student reading ages, as assessed by the regional representatives, is compared with their chronological age. The class teachers' estimations of the student reading ages is compared with the regional representatives' assessments. A comparison is also made of the reading ages of The Correspondence School students and students from a non-distance school.

Spread of Reading Ages in Relation to Chronological Age of the Year 7

Students at The Correspondence School

Of the 63 reading ages assessed, less than half of the students were reading within two years of their chronological age (Figure 2). Eight were reading three or more years below their chronological age and seven were reading two years or more below. Students reading 2-3 or more years above their chronological age numbered 20. Twenty-eight students were reading at about their chronological age. Of particular interest here is the percentage of students who were reading 2-3+ years above their chronological age that is, 32% were reading well above their chronological age. It is quite possible that a number of these students could be categorised as able or gifted readers.

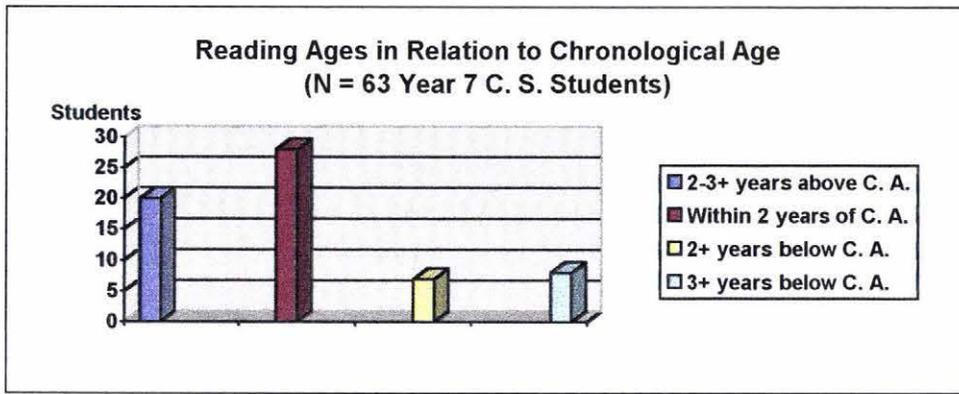


Figure 2

A Comparison of Class Teachers' Estimations of Student Reading Ages with the Regional Representatives' Assessment

Out of the 63 reading ages received from the regional representatives 48 were compared with the class teachers' estimations established at the beginning of the study (Figure 3). Of the 48 reading ages, nine were already known to the teacher while 39 had been estimated. There was a difference in estimation of two years or more for 24 of the students. Of these 24 students, 18 had a difference of two or more years and six had a difference of three or more years. Twenty-four students had the same reading ages but of these nine were already known to the teacher through previous records or because a reading age had been taken recently. The known reading ages were the result of an assessment process from reading tests undertaken by the regional representative or class teacher, or were from recent records. This survey illustrates that of the students' reading ages not known to the teachers less than half were estimated correctly. As each reading age level in this study has a range of two years it is possible that even more students could have been estimated wrongly if the range had been just one year. It also shows that teachers knew half of their student's reading ages accurately.

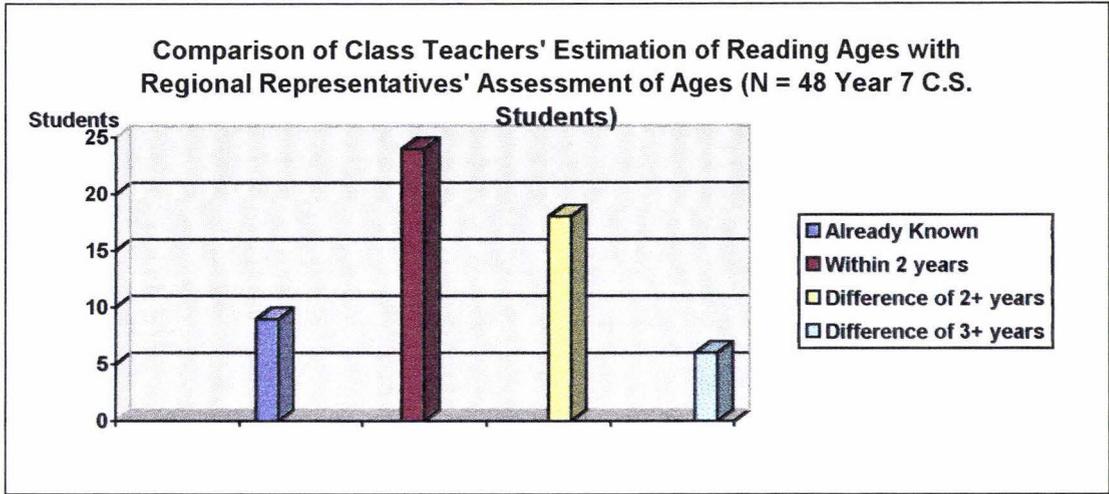


Figure 3

Comparison of Reading Ages Between The Correspondence School and a Non-distance School

A comparison was made between the prose inventory test results of the Year 7 students at The Correspondence School and the Year 7 students at a non-distance school (Figure 4). It is evident that more of the students at the non-distance school are in the 2-3+ years above category than those at The Correspondence School. In the 2-3+ years below category there is a greater percentage of children at The Correspondence School than at the non-distance school.

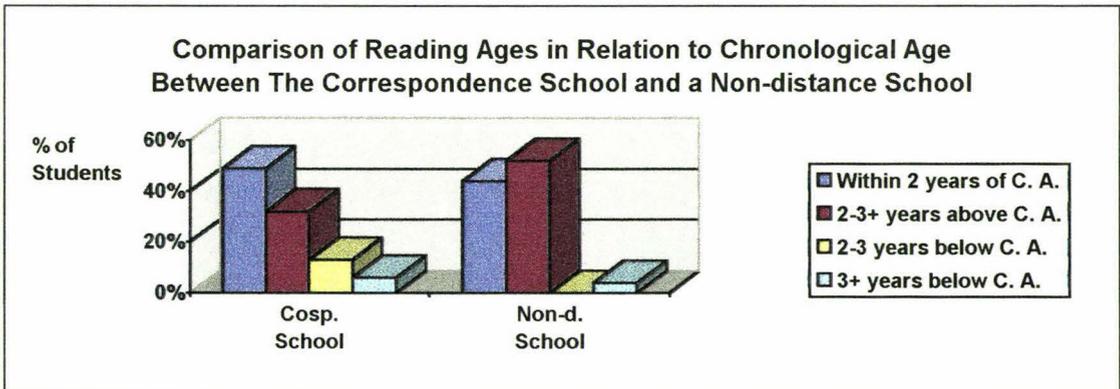


Figure 4

Section 2

Programme Placement in Relation to Students' Reading Ages

Section 2 compares the programme placement of students in relation to their reading age. A survey of the reading ages of the reading extracts in the Year 7 course (FLA100) is shown. This was undertaken to help determine the appropriateness of this course in terms of reading age. The programme placement of students was then compared with their reading ages.

Survey of the Reading Ages of the Reading Extracts in the Year 7 English Course FLA100

A survey was carried out of the reading ages of the reading extracts in the Year 7 FLA100 English Course. Reading ages ranged from under eight years to 11-13 years but were heavily loaded towards the average to lower reading levels (Table 1 below and Figure 5).

Table 1

Reading Ages of the Reading Extracts in the FLA100 Course

Under 8	8-9years	9-10 years	10- 12 years	11-13 years
3	8	8	5	1

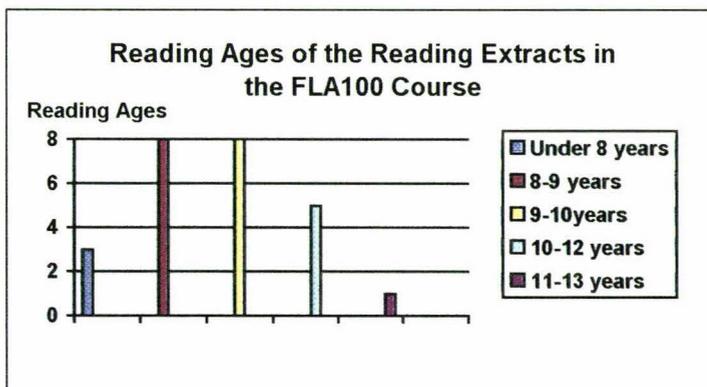


Figure 5

Two sets (units of work) in the course, that is, set 3 (FLA103) and set 10 (FLA110) contained informal prose inventories. There was only one informal prose inventory in the FLA103. It had a reading age of 8-9 years. FLA110 contained three informal prose inventories with reading ages of under eight, 9-10, and 10-12 years respectively. This course is normally sent out in sequence beginning with FLA101. Not all students reach set FLA110 before the end of the year.

Programme Placement of Year 7 Students in Relation to Reading Age Levels

There are five options open to teachers when placing students on a programme. The FLA100 course was written for students in Year 7 but it is clear that the reading extracts are not appropriate for all Year 7 students. Students can be accelerated to the FLA200 course or onto secondary courses with the possibility of more challenging reading extracts being available but a survey is still to be done on these courses in regard to reading age levels. Students having difficulty with the Year 7 FLA100 course can be adjusted to Year 6 or Year 5 courses or if a Specialist Education Services' assessment is undertaken, they may be placed on an individual programme. In the latter case students are not placed on a course but are sent item bank material (discrete sets of work) at the appropriate level.

Out of 41 students one was placed on the Year 8 course (FLA200) and 32 students were placed on the Year 7 course (FLA100). A further three students were placed on adjusted courses and five were placed on the individual programme (Figure 6).

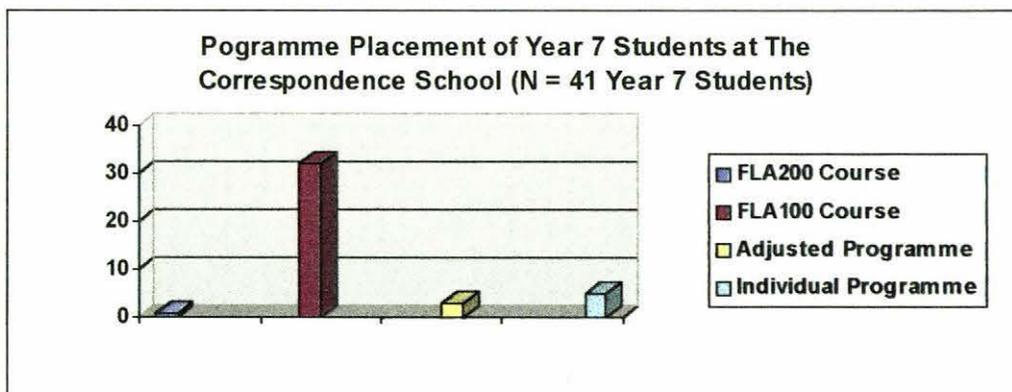


Figure 6

Table 2
Programme Placement of the Year 7 Students at The Correspondence School in Relation to Reading Ages

The one student placed on FLA200 had a reading age of 13-16

Of the 32 students placed on the FLA100 course

11 had reading ages of 13-16

14 had reading ages of 11-13

2 had reading ages of 9-10

3 had reading ages of 8-9

2 had reading ages of 7-8

Of the 3 students placed on an adjusted course

1 had a reading age of 10-12

1 had a reading age of 9-10

1 had a reading age of 7-8

Of the 5 students placed on the individual programme

3 had reading ages of 9-13

2 had reading ages of 7-8

If it is accepted that the majority of reading extracts in the Year 7 (FLA100) course were at 10 years and below in reading age then 30 of the students appeared to be working at a level below what they were capable of. There were also three students reading at 7-8 years that were not on the individual programme which meant that the majority of extracts were probably too difficult. It could therefore be said that 33 out of the 41 students may have been wrongly placed according to reading age.

Section 3

Supervisors' and Students' Opinions of the Suitability of the Reading Extracts in Their English Programme

In this section the results of the survey of supervisors' and students' opinions on the suitability of the reading extracts in the students' programmes are examined. Most students, but not all, were placed on the Year 7 course FLA100. The survey therefore looked at the response regardless of the level of programme placement.

Supervisors' Opinions on the Suitability of the Reading Extracts in the English Programme

Out of 77 supervisor responses received, 37 thought the reading extracts were "Just Right", one thought they were "Much Too Difficult", 11 thought they were "Too Difficult", 19 thought they were "Too Easy" and nine thought they were "Much Too Easy"(Figure 7). This indicates just under 50% of supervisors were satisfied with the reading extracts for their students.

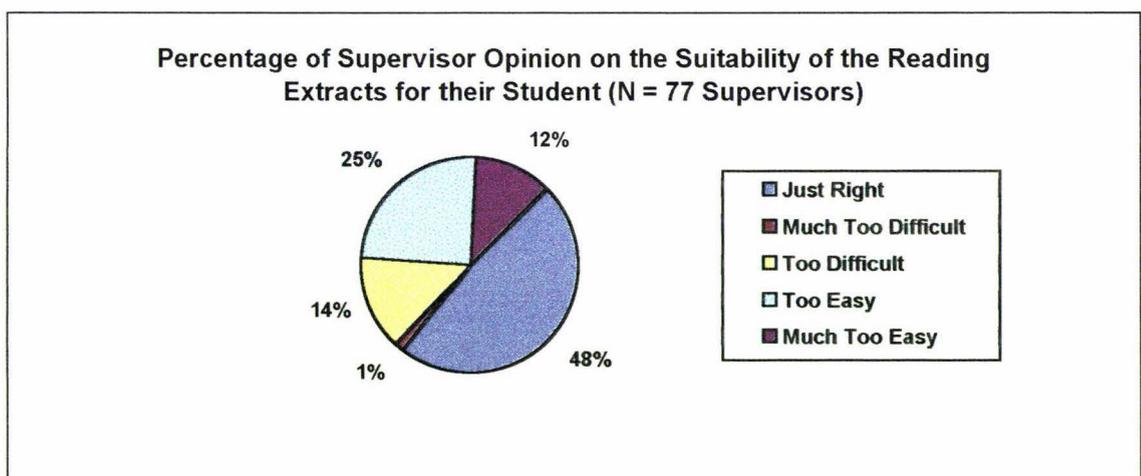


Figure 7

Students' Response to Reading Extract Suitability

In response to the question "The reading exercises in the sets are too hard" 74 students answered No, eight students answered Yes, and nine students were "Unsure" (Figure 8).

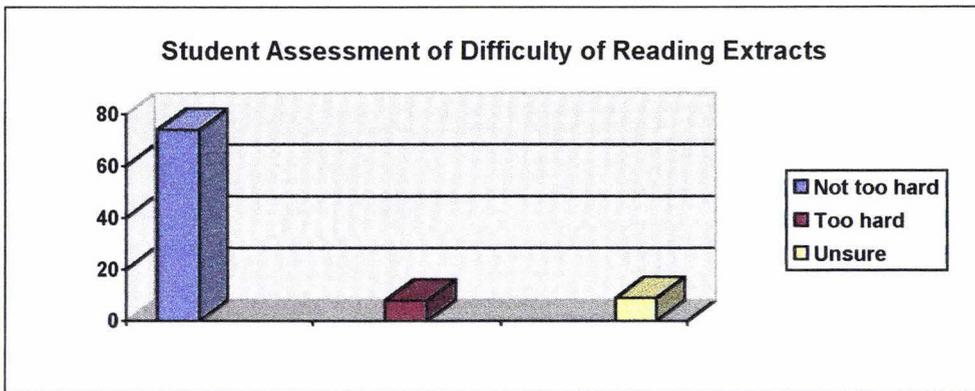


Figure 8

Section 4

Written English Results

Section 4 graphs the class teachers' estimations of their students' written English grades in relation to the independent grades. It then analyses the independent grades of all the written samples collected. This is followed with a comparison of the written English grades from The Correspondence School with those of a non-distance school. Finally, the written English skills in the sample are examined in relation to text complexity.

Comparison of Class Teachers' Estimations of Written English Grades with the Independent English Grades

Of the class teacher grading of 54 students' ability in written English over two thirds were the same as those graded independently by three other teachers of English. Class teacher grades matching the teachers of English grades equalled 37 while class teacher grades not matching equalled 17 (Figure 9).

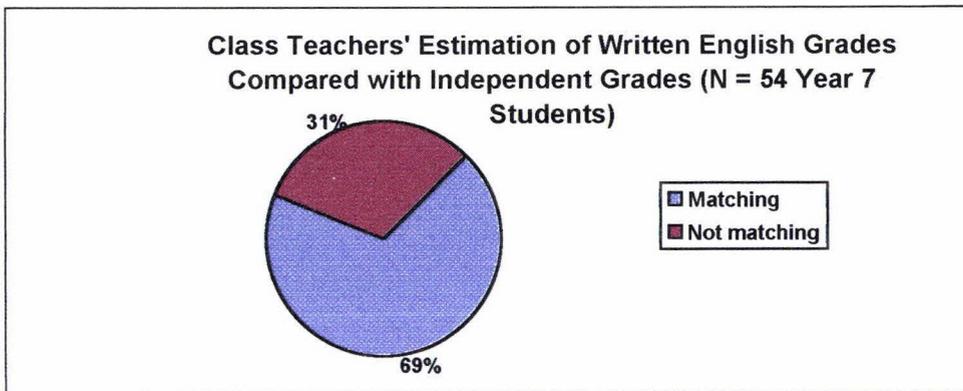


Figure 9

Independent Written English Grades of The Correspondence School Year 7 Students

Out of 60 written samples graded the majority of students were graded above average or better (Figure 10). Grades were from 1-5 with one being the highest. It should be noted here that what constitutes average in relation to standard of ability at Year 7 is open to debate. Average in this case is based on the criteria set for this study and is at the simplest level. For example, in sentence writing the student is capable of writing a simple sentence (see Chapter 6 Methodology). This may well be below the standard that should be expected from the average Year 7 student.

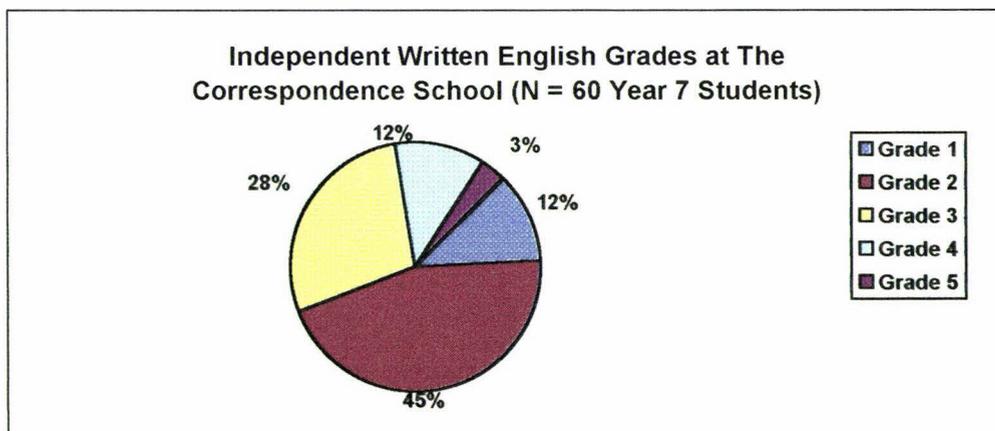


Figure 10

Comparison of Written English Grades Between The Correspondence School and a Non-distance School.

The number of samples from The Correspondence School was 60 while the non-distance-school had 27. In both schools the majority of students achieved a grade of 1 or 2. The Correspondence School had 51% of students who achieved a grade 1 or 2, while grade 1 and 2 was achieved with 59% of students at a non-distance school (Figure 11). It is also evident that the students at The Correspondence School had slightly more students weighted towards grades 4 and 5 but not significantly so.

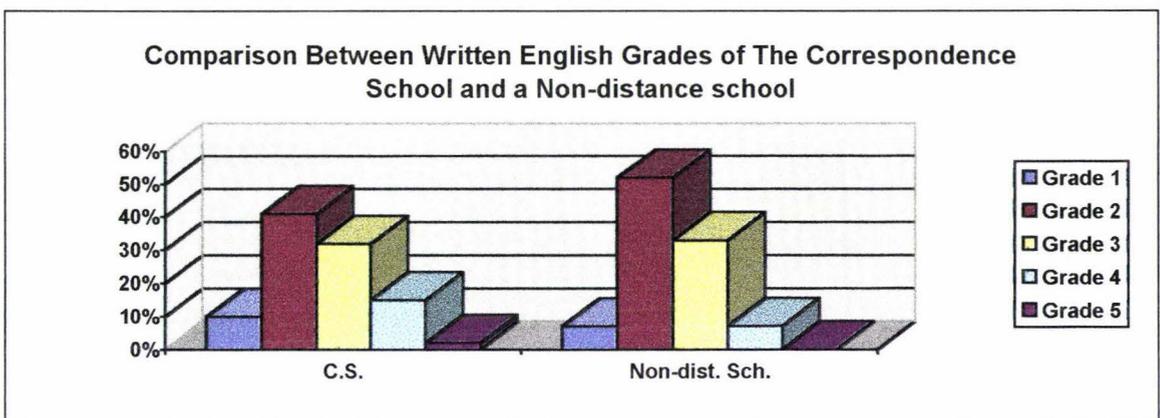


Figure 11

Grading of Written English Skills in Text Complexity

Sixty written English samples from The Correspondence School students were analysed for the criteria listed below. Grades were from 1-5 with 5 being the highest. For the purposes of this study results were reduced to three standards that is, 1-2 for a poor standard, 3 for average and 4-5 for developed (Figure 12).

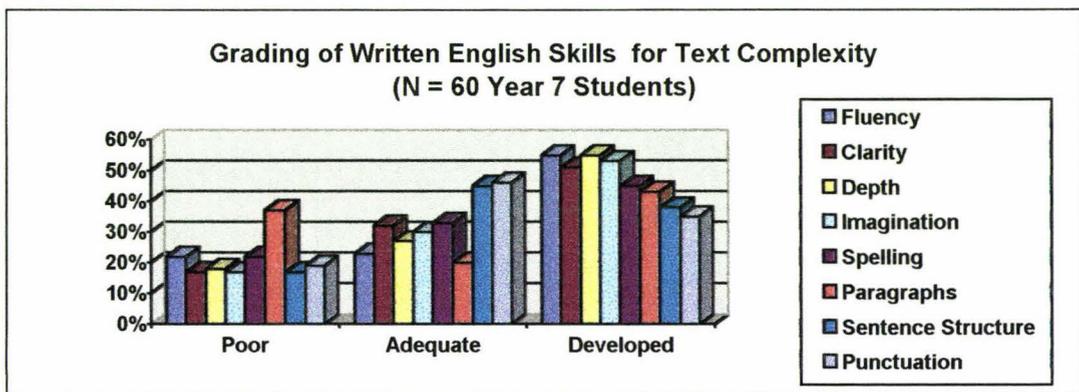


Figure 12

Table 3**Grading of Written English Skills for Text Complexity for 60 Students at The Correspondence School**

Grading:	Poor (1-2)	Adequate (3)	Developed (4-5)
Fluency	22%	23%	55%
Clarity	17%	32%	51%
Depth	18%	27%	55%
Imagination	17%	30%	53%
Spelling	22%	33%	45%
Paragraphs	37%	20%	43%
Sentence – Structure	17%	45%	38%
Punctuation	19%	46%	35%

(For a description of criteria, see Chapter 6 Methodology)

Section 5**Supervisors’ and Students’ Opinions of the Written English Exercises in the English Programmes**

In this section supervisor and student opinions of the suitability of the written English extracts in their English programmes are shown.

Supervisors’ Opinions of the Suitability of Written English Exercises in the English Programme.

The 77 supervisors responded to the suitability of the written English exercises as follows:

“Much Too Difficult” one, “Too Difficult” 11, “About Right” 46, “Too Easy” 16, and “Much Too Easy” three. It is evident that just over 50% of the supervisors thought that the written exercises in the English programme were suitable.

Students' Opinions of the Written English Exercises in the English Programmes

The students responded to the statement "The written language exercises in the sets are too easy" as follows:

"No" 63, "Yes" 10, "Unsure" 17.

Section 6

A Comparison of Reading, Written English and Programme Grades in Relation to Programme Placement

Section 6 makes a comparison between reading, written English and programme grades in relation to programme placement. A grading system of 1-5 was used for each area.

Both the reading ages and written English grades were graded on a 1 - 5 scale, for comparison purposes, with 1 being the highest. Reading age grades were designated as follows:

3+ years below chronological age, Grade 5

2-3 years below chronological age, Grade 4

9-12 years, Grade 3

2-3+ years above chronological age, Grades 1 and 2

For the purposes of this study the FLA100 course was deemed suitable for students with a chronological age of about 11 as it was written for this age group, that is, it was assumed to be suitable for a grade 3 reading age and written English. It therefore does not take into account the fact that the majority of the reading extracts in this course were written at reading ages below 10 years of age. An adjusted programme was deemed suitable for a student with a reading grade and written English grade of 4, while an individual programme was deemed suitable for a reading grade and written English grade of 5. Students with a reading grade and written English grade of 1 or 2 were considered to be suited to an accelerated course.

Out of 63 students the number of reading age grades that matched the programme grades was 25 while the number that did not match was 38 (Figure 13).

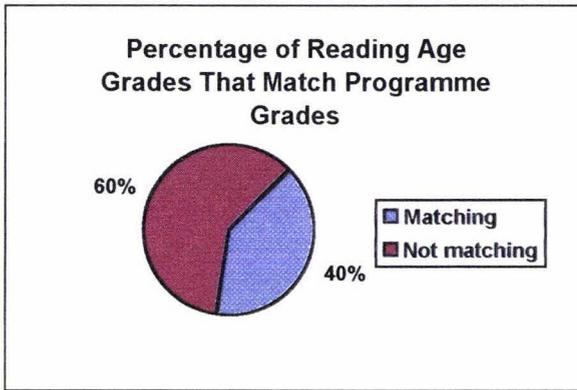


Figure 13

Eleven of these students were placed on programmes that appeared too difficult for their reading age while 20 were placed on programmes, that in relation to reading age, appeared too low for them.

Out of 57 students the number of written English grades that matched the programme grade was 17 while the number that did not match was 40 (Figure 14). Five of these 40 students appeared to be placed on programmes that were too difficult for them while 35 appeared to be placed on programmes that were too easy for them.

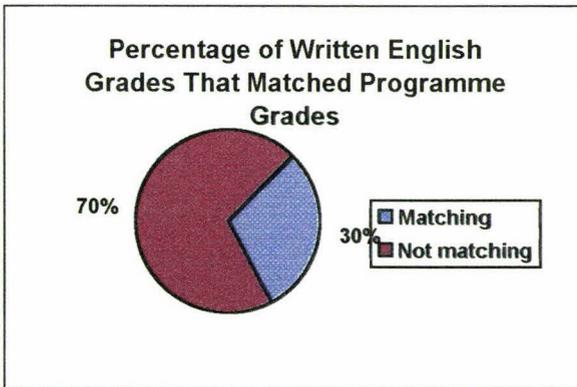


Figure 14

Out of 39 students, the number of students with reading ages and written English grades that fitted with programme placement was six (Figure 15). The number of students where either the reading grades and written English grades or both did not fit the programme was 33.

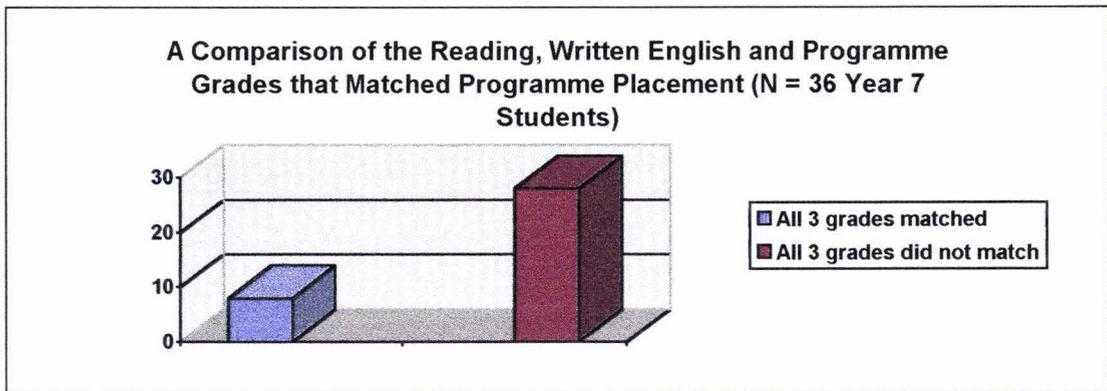


Figure 15

Section 7

Attempt at Triangulation of Reading Age and Written English, Programme Placement, and Supervisors' Opinions

In order to further confirm whether students had been appropriately placed on a suitable programme supervisors were asked their opinion on this. Supervisor opinion was then compared with the actual programme placement and then the independent grades obtained either in reading or written English.

Triangulation of Reading Ages, Programme Placement and Supervisors' Opinions

Of the 48 student supervisors, 26 confirmed what the other results were saying (Figure 16). For example, if the supervisor said the programme was “Too Easy” and the reading age was also indicating this in relation to programme placement then it could be said that the supervisor’s opinion was confirming. Of interest here is that on nine occasions when the supervisors said the programme was too easy, the reading age and programme placement were in the average category, that is, three.

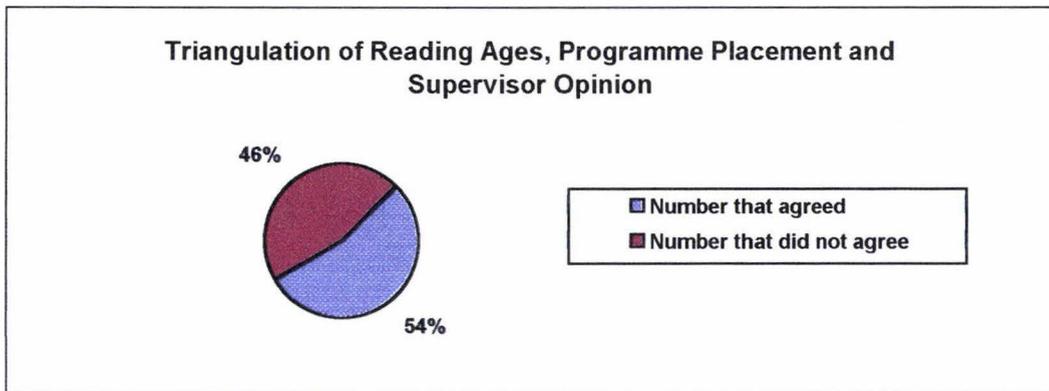


Figure 16

Triangulation of Written English, Programme Placement and Supervisors' Opinions

Out of 52 students, 20 supervisors confirmed what the other results were saying (Figure 17).

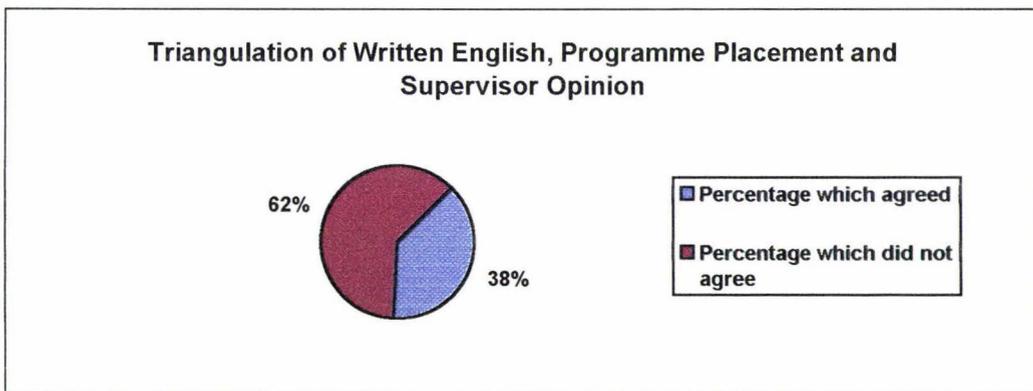


Figure 17

Section 8

Results of the Interview with Class Teachers

The answers that individual teachers gave to each question were varied. By examining these answers it was possible to find elements that they had in common and it is these that have been summarised below.

1. How do you assess the ability level of your student in reading and written English?

Reading The teachers rarely have available to them the results of direct assessment of reading ages and they therefore use a wide range of methods to arrive at what level they think the student may be. Methods include assessing written English in students' letters, and listening to tapes of the students' reading. However, in this latter case it was evident, during their assessment of the student reading ages, that the teachers were not always aware of the reading age of the taped extract. When reading ages are assessed by the regional representatives or by the teachers themselves on a home visit, then these are used as the student reading age by the teacher.

Written English Many of the strategies used for assessing reading ages are also used here but in addition, written work across the curriculum areas is looked at, as is complexity of writing, for example, sentence structure.

2. What would help you to assess reading and Written English levels?

Reading Assessment using direct methods was the main request, that is, informal prose tests taken by regional representatives or by the class teacher when home visiting.

Written English Again direct assessment by the regional representatives and class teachers was requested.

3. When the reading and/or written ability of your students is either above or below that of the Year 7 course, that is, when the reading age is two years or more above or below the student's chronological age, what changes do you make to the programme?

More able students Teachers tended to develop some form of extension programme. This included sending more challenging literature in texts such as books and journals. They also encourage the students to do such things as write and justify more in their responses. Although some teachers said they accelerated students the evidence in the year of this study did not support this. Only two students had been accelerated. One reason for this may be the inadequacy of the Year 8 course which at least one teacher said was out of date. However, this should not preclude acceleration onto secondary courses where appropriate.

Remedial students Resources from the Individual Programme Section are used and on some occasions students are adjusted down a course.

4. In what way have you been restricted from making changes to your programme?

Teachers indicated that there are not enough remedial and extension resources and what is available is not easily accessed. Lack of time was also a significant factor, as was teaching the student at a distance.

5. If you did not use the current English course FLA100 and you had sufficient time, how would you develop an English programme in reading and written English to meet the ability level of each student?

Most teachers would like to widen the programme and provide more literature based material. They would also like to cater more for individual needs of the students than is possible now. Some teachers see a place for a basic programme but with opportunities to extend and develop it. Aids such as videos for the modelling of the various writing styles were seen as important.

6. When a student has problems in a particular area of written English (for example, varying sentence beginnings, using capitals and full stops, or using paragraphs) what action do you take?

Most teachers make use of the teaching materials available from the Individual Programme Section or they give model examples.

7. In what way are you restricted from dealing with problems/teaching points that arise with the student?

Teachers say that lack of time limits what can be done. Also, there are not enough suitable resources that are easily accessible. The problem of teaching at a distance is also a restriction.

8. Do you feel that there are enough opportunities for regular written English practice in the current FLA100 course?

Overall teachers felt that the course did not provide sufficient time for written expression.

Section 9

Results from the Questionnaires

There were 86 returns from the written questionnaire. Mostly the results from the questionnaires confirmed that the supervisors and students were happy with the level of service provided. It is not the intention of this study to analyse results in depth here. However, some answers were of interest to the extent that they could help with future directions. One, in particular, was the response to the statement “You feel pressured to get through the year’s programme”. In this case 50 supervisors indicated that they agreed with this statement while 11 did not feel strongly either way. Twenty-three supervisors disagreed with the statement. However, supervisors tended to be happy with the amount of work set per day and per fortnight. To the statement “The amount of work in each day is right for your student” 11 supervisors strongly disagreed, or disagreed, 17 did not feel strongly either way, while 57 either agreed or strongly agreed. To the statement “The amount of the fortnight’s work sent is right for your student” 12 strongly disagreed, or disagreed, 18 did not feel strongly either way, while 56 agreed or strongly agreed. These results therefore indicate that the amount of work both for each day and for each fortnight is mostly about right but that the programme to be completed in a year is too much. Some supervisors felt strongly enough about the work being too much, for a daily, fortnightly or a yearly basis, that they wrote further on this subject.

Section 10

Programme Placement Stemming from Data Results

Part of this study was to establish whether students were placed on new programmes as the result of teachers being given the independent reading ages and written English grades from the research undertaken. A survey revealed that only two students' programmes were changed at this stage of the study.

Summary

There was insufficient information gathered to bring about triangulation. However, results gained in reading age assessment, written English grades and programme placement were sufficient to give an indication of how well the school meets the needs of the individual student. For example, with a return of 48 reading age assessments out of approximately 130 it is possible to establish, to some degree, whether teachers are able to gain access to the correct reading ages of their students. Similarly, there were sufficient samples collected and graded to achieve a reasonably clear picture about the teachers' ability to assess their students' written English levels. Results from the phoned interview were at a high level with a 77 response from approximately 130 supervisors. The returns for the written questionnaire were at a high level with 86 supervisors and 90 students responding. Additional information was also seen as being of value. Of particular interest was the information collected and collated for text complexity in written English. Over all, the results were of a satisfactory enough level to indicate some possible interpretations and conclusions. Discussion of these results is to be found in Chapter 9.

Chapter 9

Discussion and Conclusions

The previous chapter recorded the results of the surveys and questionnaires. In this concluding chapter the implications of the literature search findings and data results as they affect text complexity in reading and written English are discussed. Problems are identified and recommendations given. The outcomes of this study are then summarised.

Discussion of Reading Age Results

Assessment of Reading Ages

Results in this study revealed that when 48 student reading ages, estimated by class teachers, were compared with the independent informal prose inventory assessments only 24 matched. Of these 24 reading ages, nine were already known to the teacher. This indicates that the teachers' informal assessment of their students' reading ages was less than 50 % correct.

It appears that the current assessment process for obtaining the majority of reading ages for Year 7 students at The Correspondence School, is neither valid nor reliable. The class teacher is mostly required to rely on assessment using a range of subjective indicators. The occasions when a valid and reliable assessment process is used are when the regional representative or class teacher visits the student and undertake an informal prose inventory. Records from a previous school are also a source but are not necessarily up to date or reliable. The Correspondence School aims to visit its students at least once a year. Thus some of the students who were new on the roll may not have been visited at the time of the initial assessment in this study. It would also appear however, that when visits do occur an informal prose inventory is not undertaken as a matter of course nor is any other form of reading assessment. Evidence that this is so can be supported from two sources. Firstly, when the teachers of 48 students were asked to estimate their students'

current reading age they were able to identify only nine of them from a written record. The rest of the reading ages had to be estimated because the teachers did not have access to a formal assessment for most of their students. Secondly, in the teacher interview, the teachers stressed the need for regional representatives or themselves to undertake informal prose inventory assessment on a more frequent basis at the student's place of learning. They saw this as being the best form of assessment.

It was evident from the study undertaken that not all regional representatives made a practice of undertaking reading age assessment when visiting a student in their place of learning. This is confirmed by teachers' requests to see greater coverage of the assessment in reading ages by the regional representatives, and the lack of reading ages available. However, the lack of reading ages can partly be explained by the increase in regional representative rolls in recent years (Appendix 16). This reduces regional representatives opportunities to visit all their students. At the same time it was apparent that not all teachers were focussed on ensuring they got the correct reading age of the student. The lack of any reading age in many of the students' records, or of a systematic method of recording reading ages was made evident when the teachers were asked to establish their students' reading ages: they looked at a range of sources for example enrolment notes, student logs and sometimes progress cards. However, in the interviews the teachers said that they wanted to have an accurate reading age and to be supported in obtaining it by:

- the regional representatives being more consistent in assessing for reading ages
- the provision of more opportunities for teachers to visit and undertake assessment
- the provision of reading age assessment packs that could be readily sent out by teachers and easily administered by supervisors.

Programme Placement of Students

The placement of students in regard to reading age and programme was looked at from two perspectives in this study. Firstly student placement was considered in light of the reading ages of the reading extracts in the Year 7 course FLA100, the course on which most students were working. Placement was then looked at in relation to students' reading grades and programme grades. In the first instance it was shown that the reading ages of the extracts were heavily loaded towards 10 years and below. However, 28 out

of 63 students were reading at about their chronological age of 10-12 and 20 were reading 2-3 years above their chronological age. Of note here is the fact that the inclusion of a few informal prose inventory assessments in sets FLA103 and FLA110 has not helped teachers to better assess their students. This would be partly because of insufficient higher age extracts and also because teachers were not always aware of the age level of the extracts. In the second instance, programmes that The Correspondence School has available for placement were put into grades from 1-5. Students' placement according to reading grades was then compared and 60% were found to be not matching.

Given that progression in text complexity in reading is dependent on appropriate placement of students, that students should progress from the known to the unknown in learning and the need for knowledge to be appropriately sequenced, it is important that students are placed on material at their level of achievement if effective learning and progression is to take place. It does appear from the results obtained in relation to reading ages and programme placement in this study that students may not be placed on appropriate programmes. It is possible that in some cases the students' written English skills might be well below their reading age level but even so many of the reading extracts in the FLA100 course are unlikely to be challenging to most of them. It is also possible that the class teachers were sending out more challenging library books and journals for the students to read. However, given that many of the correct reading ages were unknown to the teacher the ability to provide the appropriate level of literature to cater for progression in text complexity is open to question. It was also evident from interviews that teachers felt that insufficient suitable library books were available.

The high number of apparently wrongly placed students is however open to debate. Indeed the teacher interview revealed that some of the more able students produced excellent written work from the FLA100 course indicating that it was open-ended enough to cater for quite a wide range of ability in written English. The written English results also confirmed that a very good standard was achieved by about 50% of the students. At the same time about 50% of student's needs were either not being met in text complexity in written English or were being met only at an adequate level (see Chapter 8, p. 88). The teacher interview also indicated that teachers extended some

students by sending more challenging written English but that they also felt restricted in what they could do because of insufficient resources and time. Not knowing the reading ages of their students would affect what was sent. It could therefore be said that for some students the FLA100 course may cater for their written English needs but not so well for their reading needs.

Catering for Gifted and Remedial Students

Of the 63 students assessed by the regional representatives using an informal prose inventory, the most significant outcome was the number who appeared to be reading well above their chronological age. Twenty of the students were reading 2-3 or more years above their chronological age.

The new curriculum, in implying that progression in text complexity is required, notes that the individual needs of students including those of the gifted and talented should be catered for. Gifted students have the ability to handle complex ideas, draw inferences and isolate cause and effect relationships, and to show greater interest in and commitment to a topic. The final extract on atomic energy in the informal prose inventory used in this study helped to identify these characteristics.

It has been demonstrated that students who achieve well in tests should progress at their own pace and with their own interests. However, a common weakness in primary reading instruction is the failure to allow superior readers to progress quickly enough and to adjust to their reading needs. The literature research revealed that superior readers will benefit most from independent reading in the various subject areas and through pursuing topics of personal interest. The ability of the teachers at The Correspondence School to provide for this is dependent on two things being available: first a method of identifying the more able readers (the informal prose inventory, and in particular the extract about atomic energy could be one tool used for this purpose): second the availability of suitable library books and other forms of literature as well as literary-based extension and enrichment programmes. The need for more of these resources to be available was made evident in the teachers' interviews.

In the case of remedial students it was found in this study that 15 students out of 48 were reading 2-3 or more years below their chronological age. Of these 15 students, eight were placed on programmes that appeared too advanced for their needs. The literature search has shown that more than 50 percent of classroom students can be placed on books that are too difficult for them. Obviously, this proportion does not appear to be the case here but at the same time the results of the study do highlight the need to ensure that remedial students at The Correspondence School are placed on an appropriate programme level. The literature search revealed that learning theory indicates that correct placement is crucial if remedial students are to make effective progress.

Where there is a correlation with written English results and reading age results at the higher levels in this study it may be that the student should be working on a more advanced programme than the FLA100 course. The new curriculum however, does not appear to explain how reading and written English achievement levels in text complexity are to be incorporated into the achievement objectives levels. More recent publications give some direction in this regard.

Supervisor and Student Opinions of the Suitability of the Reading Extracts

This study showed that just under 50% of the supervisors believed that the reading extracts were suitable for their student. An attempt at triangulation tended to confirm this. Only 54 % of supervisor opinions matched reading age and programme placement. It is debatable how much can be inferred from this part of the study since approximately half of the supervisors were incorrect about the suitability of the reading extract, and the information on only 48 students was able to be triangulated.

It is apparent that for most students the reading extracts were not too difficult. This in itself does not indicate that the extracts were easy for the students but tends to support the data obtained about reading ages and reading extracts. These showed that most students were not being challenged by the FLA100 course, in reading.

Reading Standards at The Correspondence School

A comparison between The Correspondence School Year 7 reading ages and those of Year 7 students at a non-distance school indicates variation in the level of achievement. Fifty-two percent of the non-distance school students were reading 2-3+ years above their chronological age compared to 32% at The Correspondence School. Nineteen percent of The Correspondence School students were reading 2-3 + years below their chronological age compared to only 4 percent at the non-distance school. It is possible that the range of ability for the non-distance students may be, on average, higher than in most New Zealand classrooms. The results in reading ages tends to support this. The same probably cannot be said of the Year 7 students at The Correspondence School given the changing character of the roll. The Correspondence School is inheriting from other schools more students who are in need of remedial help. (Appendix 2). This may partially explain the inter-school variation in the results where reading ages are nine years or below. This does not mean however, that The Correspondence School should not be concerned about the needs of its remedial students. It is also evident that more could be done to increase the level of achievement in reading for the more advanced students.

Discussion of Written English Results

Assessment of Written English

Results in this study revealed that just over two thirds of the teachers' estimations of the students' written English grades were the same as those graded independently by three teachers of English. Since two thirds of the written English samples were assessed accurately it can be said that most teachers have a good grasp of their students' level of achievement as represented by the work seen. The many limitations however, of the assessment process in this study such as not knowing how much help the student has had at their place of learning, means that it cannot be said with any great accuracy that the grades produced reflect student achievement. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the work received is usually that of the students as it is evident from the survey that there is room for improvement in written English. It is open to debate however, what constitutes a good standard of written English at the Year 7 level.

Suitability of Programme Placement

Of 57 students the number of written English grades that matched programme grades was 17. Of the 40 that did not match, five students were on programmes that appeared too difficult while 35 were on programmes that appeared too easy. Forty-six out of 77 supervisors considered that the written exercises in their students' English programme were suitable. The majority of students thought that the exercises were not easy. At the same time, teachers commented that the FLA100 course did produce some very good writing from the more able students. This is confirmed by the grade results which showed that 51% of students achieved a grade 1 or 2. It must also be recognised that the achievement of just under 50% of students was not good or only adequate. These results suggest that there may be some room for improvement in the programme placement of the students.

Text Complexity in Written English Skills

The written English samples were also graded for text complexity. Just over half of students showed very good development in fluency, clarity, depth and imagination while just under half showed adequate or poor development. In spelling, paragraphing, sentence structure and punctuation less than half showed developed skills. Of these 37% had poor paragraphing skills while 20% had adequate skills. Seventeen percent had poor skills in sentence structure while 45% were adequate. Of the punctuation skills 19% were poor and 46% were adequate. In spelling 22% had poor results and 33% were adequate. An adequate sentence structure is defined as a simple sentence. Adequate paragraphs are defined as being at a simple level without complex organisation or skilled usage.

Considering the variation in reading age results (75% of students were reasonably competent or very good readers, that is, 35% were reading at two to three years above their chronological age, and 40% at about their chronological age) there may be room for improvement in the use of more complex paragraphs and sentences, punctuation and spelling. It is also evident that a reasonable percentage of students still has not grasped the basic skills. This underlines the need for more supportive teaching at an appropriate level for these students.

The results of text complexity in written English, in this study, raise the question of how much sustained written English actually takes place apart from the written exercises in the FLA100 course. And to what extent the writing needs of students are followed up through comment and the sending of appropriate teaching materials. Could more be done in these areas at The Correspondence School?

The lack of sustained written English as an outcome of the Year 7 programme is evidenced by the difficulty in obtaining sufficient written English samples for this study. Also, when the teachers were asked whether there were enough opportunities for regular practice in written English overall they felt that there was not enough. The literature search revealed that in teaching written English, daily writing demonstration, modelling and learning to construct text with experienced writers are some of the keys to learning to write. When it came to following up the teaching needs of individual students, teachers were keen to do so but saw a lack of time and insufficient accessible resources as the main handicaps to achieving this. Teachers sought wider and more literary-based programmes to cater for the needs of more able students. Aids such as videos to model writing skills were seen as important.

Written English Standards at The Correspondence School

The written English grades of The Correspondence School were compared with those of a non-distance school. In making comparisons between these two schools, it should be noted that the non-distance school numbers were relatively low, that is, 28 compared to 62 from The Correspondence School. Also, the reading ages of the non-distance school were proportionally higher than those from The Correspondence School. Nor can it be assumed that the written English samples from The Correspondence School were written under the same test conditions as those students from the non-distance school. Some Correspondence School students may have had considerable help, while others may have been left to work entirely on their own. Several Correspondence School students wrote drafts before completing the final copy but this did not happen with the students at a non-distance school. Finally, the topic given to the non-distance school was about disadvantages and advantages of a given subject which resulted in most students listing their ideas and writing only a very few sentences or paragraphs.

These factors made comparison with the non-distance schools' written English unreliable. If results are to be both valid and reliable in future then other methods should be considered such as the regional representatives undertaking assessment of written English on their student visits and grading samples according to given criteria. In addition the same style of writing should be used when comparisons are being made with other schools.

Discussion of Class Teacher Interview Results

The results of the class teacher interviews have indicated that from their perspective several factors restrict them from meeting the needs of their students in relation to text complexity in reading and written English. These factors include their inability to obtain accurate assessment of text complexity for all their students, insufficient time in which to meet their students' learning needs, and a lack of sufficient or appropriate resources and library books.

Discussion of the Questionnaire Results

The main outcomes from the questionnaires that were of significance to this study were the responses to the questions about the suitability of the reading and written English levels (already referred to) and the pressure which supervisors felt they were under to get through all the work.

Programme Placement Stemming from Data Results

An analysis of the student records revealed that only two students had been placed on a different level in the English programme as the result of the independent reading age and written English assessment. It may be worthwhile to explore why this did not happen in greater numbers, especially as the new curriculum indicates that students should be working at their level of ability in text complexity.

Implications of the Results in Text Complexity in Reading and Written English

Two factors preclude the soundness of this study, that is, insufficient data from a population of approximately 130 students to allow for triangulation, and the inaccuracy of the data received. Both the written English and, to a much lesser extent, the reading results are open to question. Nevertheless, the data does indicate certain gaps in the assessment and teaching process of text complexity that could be addressed. Possible solutions are evident in the outcome of the teacher interviews.

The results of this study indicate that a discrepancy exists between assessment of reading ages and the teachers' estimation of them, and that programme placement of students often does not seem to match the students' reading and written English grades. This suggests that assessment and programme placement needs should be reassessed at the Year 7 level if the learning needs of students are to be addressed in text complexity for reading and written English. These results also have implications for the rest of the school including both the primary and secondary areas. Indeed some regional representatives have stated their belief that at the secondary level a much greater proportion of students, now being enrolled, work at a remedial level than was apparent in this Year 7 study. It is also possible that the level of placement, particularly at the secondary level, may be a significant factor in the retention rate of some students.

In considering the need to get valid and reliable assessment as soon as possible so that correct programme placement can take place, it is of concern that the current handbook "Visiting pupils at home" (The Correspondence School, 1988) actively discourages assessment on a first visit. The reasons given appear laudable on the surface. These reasons include concern that the assessment process may affect the development of good relationships and that not all regional representatives or teachers have sufficient training. However, if the assessment process is approached in a positive light as an opportunity to better provide for the educational needs of the student, if appropriate training is given to those regional representatives and teachers requiring it, then there seems to be no reason why assessment should not take place on a first visit.

Methods to bring about improved assessment of reading ages and written English need to be identified. Both the research and the teachers themselves have highlighted the need for more frequent and more accurate assessment. In addition to the suggestions already presented in this chapter it is possible that the increased regionalisation of students could facilitate the use of local schools to undertake valid and reliable assessment.

Suggestions put forward by the teachers in their interviews indicate that in order to meet their students' learning needs there should be less adherence to prescribed courses and that programmes should be individualised far more than is the case at the present. The literature search has shown that distance schools are ideally placed to provide individual programmes for students. Given that the new curriculum requires that students be placed at their level of ability, greater individualisation of programmes would seem the most viable way of meeting both the students' learning needs and the curriculum requirements.

Teachers also stressed that in their view, time was a factor in providing for their students. A move towards individualisation is likely to require more teacher time per student. It is evident, however, that class numbers are high at The Correspondence School in comparison with other distance primary schools. The average number of students per full time teacher at The Correspondence School is 38 (Appendix 17). Ratios at distance primary schools surveyed in Australia are as follows:

- 14 students per class teacher and 10 per assistant principal - Port MacQuarie Distance Education
- 14 students per class teacher, 12 per senior teacher and 10 per assistant principal - Sydney Distance Education Primary School
- 15 students per class teacher - Cairns School of Distance Education
- With Year 7 students the ratio is 1:15 for correspondence courses, on air lessons and field services, 1:18 for correspondence courses and field services, and 1:30 with correspondence courses only - Charleville School of Distance Education.
- 14 students per class teacher - New South Wales Distance Education

Obviously, there will be differences in the way in which programmes are conducted in the Australian distance schools compared to The Correspondence School. Teachers at other distance schools, for example, may write as well as teach. At The Correspondence School the courses are written by teachers other than the class teacher. Further research may be needed to obtain a clearer picture. Probably the closest comparison that could be made would be the 1:18 ratio at Charleville School as the field services would most likely be the same as the class teacher and regional representative visits, school days and class camps at The Correspondence School. Given that there are many unknowns in this comparison it is still evident that there is a large discrepancy between the Australian distance schools and The Correspondence School. Also teachers' class rolls are said to be increasing at The Correspondence School but information was not available for this. In addition, the increase in regional representative rolls (Appendix 16) is a cause for concern. Student ratio per teacher and regional representative rolls, in The Correspondence School, may therefore need to be reassessed if the learning needs of the student are to be taken into account.

One factor raised by the supervisor questionnaire was the amount of work the students were required to do in a year. Supervisors who work in isolation and are not trained or necessarily confident in their role as supervisors said that they felt under pressure to get through the work. It may be that with early and accurate assessment less but more appropriate work should be sent in future. Sending less work might alleviate some of the problems of time pressure posed by individualisation. A possible solution in helping to reduce the workload is to ensure that there is a cross-curricula approach to the teaching of skills in the curriculum areas, for example, incorporating report writing into the social studies programme.

With time being a factor in the teaching process consideration should be given to the role of mediated learning in providing for the students. Suitable computer software programmes with teaching components are already available. Although they would need to be adapted to meet the requirements of the new curriculum they might help to meet the individual learning needs of some of the students. These programmes may reduce the teacher workload because of their self marking and assessment facilities. This could lead

to more effective teaching. Computer technology may also provide opportunities to undertake effective formal assessment.

Teachers have highlighted their perception of the lack of sufficient item bank material in The Correspondence School to meet both the basic and extension literacy needs of their students. The provision of a wider range of resources and more suitable resources is therefore seen as essential in order to bring about the requirements of the new curriculum

The new curriculum places emphasis on the provision of literary texts as a basis for bringing about improved literacy. Concern has been expressed by the teachers about the lack of suitable library books for the primary students at The Correspondence School. Recently the school has looked to local libraries as a way of meeting the library book needs of these students. However, it cannot be assumed that all students will have access in this way because of distance and family circumstances. It also cannot be assumed that students will obtain texts suited to their needs. It may therefore be appropriate to have a selection of set texts for students at each level much as is done in the secondary school. In this way the primary school could be assured that students at least had a minimum coverage in meeting their literacy and literature needs.

Summary

The new curriculum with its emphasis on learning outcomes has been described as being driven by market forces rather than by the learning needs of students. Assessment is highlighted as the means by which better learning outcomes can be achieved. For learning to occur students are to be assessed against levels based on achievement objectives. Critics maintain that the new English curriculum is poorly conceived, is not based on sound learning theory and that it will not bring about the desired results. They criticise the curriculum as having no real progression in terms of structured learning and with achievement objectives that are open to interpretation. They see the curriculum as not addressing the way students learn, nor producing relevant educational outcomes, and therefore not meeting the right of the student to learn. This suggests that the new

curriculum may be in itself a barrier to student learning. Some critics don't believe the new curriculum is a curriculum but rather a guide to teaching. If this is the case teachers will need some direction if there is to be consistency in what is taught and assessed, especially if standards are to be compared between schools. However, whether or not the new curriculum is a barrier to learning, it is possible that some solutions could be found. Recently published Ministry of Education handbooks for the teaching of English could help but it will be up to each school to decide how to best meet these challenges.

An advantage of the new English curriculum is the wider coverage in some areas. This should result in a more comprehensive teaching of the English language and ensure that a wider coverage of skills is sustained in, for example, the range of writing styles and the more in-depth teaching of oral and visual English. Schools will need to ensure that this coverage is maintained and not limited to objectives developed for assessment purposes. The Correspondence School is in a good position in this regard as the new teaching programmes will be pre-developed. Progress through the curriculum requirements should therefore be assured, provided students complete the programmes.

The literature search has shown that the establishment of a new policy does not necessarily mean that it will be implemented in classroom practice. Teachers often choose to stay with what has been proven to be tried and true. This may continue to happen especially in non-distance schools where the teacher has some control about what is taught. However, because of the assessment requirements of the achievement-based objective system there is less likelihood of this occurring. At The Correspondence School teachers may have even less flexibility to make professional choices because most assessment and teaching processes are put into writing and therefore restrict what the teacher can or cannot do.

The new English curriculum emphasises teaching of text complexity in reading and written English. What does not seem to be defined is how progression in this area is to be achieved although recently published handbooks for teaching English appear to give clearer directions. Critics believe that progression in text complexity will not occur because the current levels and achievement objectives do not identify specific stages in learning. Progression is to occur in each of the three strands oral, written and visual via

the assessment of the achievement objectives. But how two parallel forms of progression, that is, text complexity and the achievement objectives, are to be combined does not seem to have been thought through. Compounding these problems is the lack of direction in regard to the type and level of texts used.

There is concern about the difficulty schools will face in determining what constitutes a standard, or how to achieve one. The emphasis in the new curriculum is on comparing students against a standard but the levels system does not create a uniform standard. Schools will be required to determine their own standards through moderation processes. This is fraught with difficulties due to the vague terminology in the achievement objectives. The Correspondence School will need to ensure that both the choice of assessment tasks and the achievement objectives used are the same as those of other schools involved in the moderation process. In addition, schools will need to decide upon common criteria for assessing standards in text complexity.

Problems with meeting the requirements of the curriculum framework have been highlighted. Concerns about the individual student's right to appropriate learning have been identified. Implementation of the curriculum is complex and varied and it requires a school to teach and assess the essential skills, to develop attitudes and values, to meet the needs of minority groups and recognise the nine underlying principles. It will take time for teachers, regional representatives and supervisors to be familiar with and understand the new curriculum. The impact that implementation and the carrying out of the new curriculum will have on teachers' workloads is also of concern. Student motivation is of particular importance when teaching at a distance. Programme delivery, and training of teachers, regional representatives and supervisors will be significant in bringing about successful motivation. Also the application of interactive learning using computers may be of assistance in developing student motivation.

A contradiction has been detected between the new curriculum's emphasis on assessment for accountability and the need for diagnostic assessment to help promote improved learning. The difficulty for teachers will be in administering a scheme in which criterion-based assessment is required by a performance-based system which provides achievement objectives that appear to be norm-referenced and because of their vagueness

self-evaluative in nature. Concern has been expressed about the emphasis on assessment in the new curriculum, and that this may be to the detriment of teaching. Teachers will need to be sure that assessment does not dominate the teaching process. In assessing students for levels placement teachers at The Correspondence School will have to decide how best to do this at a distance. Accuracy of assessment is an issue here especially if the achievement objectives are open to interpretation. A range of assessment approaches, interviews, for example, will also need to be developed to encompass all the assessment requirements.

As has already been noted in this chapter, the limitations of the data gathering processes and the amount of data gathered in this study mean results cannot be seen as conclusive. Nevertheless, there is evidence of gaps in the assessment and teaching process of text complexity in reading and written English at The Correspondence School. Accentuated is the inability of teachers to always obtain accurate assessment in regard to reading levels, and the inappropriate programme placement of students. The implication this may have for the rest of the school also needs to be considered. In identifying solutions to the problems of assessment and early assessment it may be timely to revisit the role of the regional representatives, if this has not already been done. Clear criteria should be in place in regard to their role in undertaking assessment of text complexity when visiting students. The same criteria should apply when teachers visit. In addition reading assessment packs should be available for teachers to send out so that ongoing assessment takes place when required. Ongoing assessment is essential if progression in text complexity is to be achieved.

Solutions to the other problems highlighted by the teacher interview point to the need for increased flexibility in the teaching process. This could include more individualisation of student programmes; more teacher time per student; less but more appropriate work being sent to each student; a cross-curricula approach to the teaching of skills; capitalisation of the advantages of regionalisation; and the utilisation of computer software to bring about mediated learning. The latter would hopefully, help free up teacher time. There would still be places for standardised courses and also more specific courses in some areas such as spelling and handwriting (although care would need to be taken in regard to maintaining an holistic approach). Obviously the current

Year 7 course will meet some of the students' needs but it is evidently not suitable for other students. More item bank material is required for the development of the basic literacy skills. Literature-based programmes are also needed and should include such components as writing styles. The provision of adequate levels of item bank material would give teachers greater flexibility to meet the needs of individual students. Finally, the provision of suitable texts at each curriculum level, will help ensure that the literature requirements of the students are being catered for.

Conclusion

While accepting the limitations of this study it can be said that the results identify some areas in the assessment and teaching of text complexity which need to be addressed at The Correspondence School. In particular, the ability to assess students' reading ages appropriately and the correct programme placement of students has been highlighted. It also needs to be recognised that the assessment requirements of the new curriculum could be a barrier to learning. A way will have to be found to ensure that both progression in the achievement objectives (which are open to interpretation) and in text complexity can happen without creating contradictions, or a loss on the focus of the assessment and teaching of text complexity. Consideration is needed in setting standards through a moderation process which overcomes both the problems of interpreting the achievement objectives and also sets standards in text complexity. In addition, teachers will have to ensure that all the other curriculum requirements such as the teaching of essential skills are incorporated into their teaching process. Training is essential for teachers, supervisors and regional representatives in assessment and in interpreting the new English curriculum. Providing appropriate texts and item bank material to meet the literacy and literature needs of the students is also essential. There is, then, an obligation for the school to address the problems identified in this study so that student needs in text complexity will be better met. If this happens, then the right of the individual student to achieve progression in text complexity in reading and written English is more likely to occur.

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Appendices

- Appendix 1 Increasing Roll of Maori Students at The Correspondence School
- Appendix 2 Increasing Roll of Remedial Students at The Correspondence School
- Appendix 3 Increasing Roll of Gifted Students at The Correspondence School
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Appendix 1**Increasing Maori Roll at The Correspondence School**

Roll count at the same date for each year.

	Primary	Secondary
1992	10	17
1993	14	154
1994	56	113
1995	96	365
1996	315	789
1997	233	820

Appendix 2

Increasing Roll of Remedial Students at The Correspondence School

N.B. This survey looks specifically at full time students in the Individual Programme Section in the primary school. It does not include other full time remedial students or students on adjusted programmes which are also said to be increasing in the primary area. The secondary roll which is much larger overall is said to be increasing proportionately.

Students on individual programmes

Year	Primary
1992	39
1993	53
1994	56
1995	64
1996	67
1997	60

The increase in teacher aide time for full time primary and secondary students in need of assistance is also an indicator of the changing character of the roll at The Correspondence School.

Year	Total of Teacher Aide Hours Supplied
1994	6406
1995	16603
1996	28696
1997	36188

Appendix 3**Increasing Roll of the Gifted and Talented Students at
The Correspondence School**

This roll reflects primary dual students only, as full-time gifted students are not identified at The Correspondence School. However, reading age results, in this Year 7 study, suggest that there is a significant group.

Year	Primary Dual Students
1992	192
1993	226
1994	264
1995	267
1996	273
1997	258

Appendix 4

Supervisors' Phoned Interview

1 The reading exercises within the sets are:				
Much Too Difficult	Too Difficult	About Right	Too Easy	Much Too Easy
2 The written language exercises within the sets are:				
Much Too Difficult	Too Difficult	About Right	Too Easy	Much Too Easy

Appendix 5

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE FORM 1/YEAR 7 LANGUAGE PROGRAMME

Please rate the following comments according to how you feel about your language programme. You are asked to circle only one of the following.

- **No** if you do not agree with what is being said
- **Yes** if you agree with what is being said
- **Unsure** if you are not sure how you feel

1	The reading exercises in the sets are too hard.	No	Yes	Unsure
2	The written language exercises in the sets are too easy.	No	Yes	Unsure
3	The answers at the back of the sets helps me to learn better.	No	Yes	Unsure
4	The amount of work in each lesson is just right.	No	Yes	Unsure
5	When my marked work is returned I look at only some of the marked work.	No	Yes	Unsure
6	When my marked work is returned I look at all of the marked work.	No	Yes	Unsure
7	When my marked work is returned I usually look at all of the teacher's comments.	No	Yes	Unsure
8	The teacher's comments help me to learn.	No	Yes	Unsure
9	Phone calls from the teacher help me to learn.	No	Yes	Unsure
10	I like to get praise about my work from the teacher.	No	Yes	Unsure
11	When my teacher asks me to repeat my work because it's not good enough I try harder.	No	Yes	Unsure
12	I like to read the teacher's comments about my work.	No	Yes	Unsure
13	I like it when the Regional Representative visits me.	No	Yes	Unsure
14	When the Regional Representative visits I usually learn something about my work.	No	Yes	Unsure
15	I do not enjoy the language work that I am sent.	No	Yes	Unsure
16	I do not enjoy talking on the phone to my teacher.	No	Yes	Unsure
17	I do not enjoy reading my teacher's letters.	No	Yes	Unsure

Please post this immediately. Thank you for your co-operation.

Appendix 6

SUPERVISOR QUESTIONNAIRE

FORM 1/YEAR 7 LANGUAGE PROGRAMME

The following questions seek your response to the Form 1/Year 7 **language programme** that you are currently supervising with your child/student. You are asked to give your responses on a rating of 1 to 5.

- if you strongly **disagree** about what is being asked, circle '1'
- if you strongly **agree** circle '5'
- if you feel less strongly either way, circle one of the numbers in between.

Please show the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements in regard to your student.

THE LEARNING CONTENT

	Disagree				Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
1 The words used to explain what your student has to learn are clear and easy to understand.	1	2	3	4	5
2 Explanations of what your student has to learn are easy to follow.	1	2	3	4	5
3 The language activities are suitable for your student.	1	2	3	4	5
4 The answers at the back of each set help your student to learn better.	1	2	3	4	5
5 The language programme meets the learning needs of your student.	1	2	3	4	5
6 The amount of work in each day is right for your student.	1	2	3	4	5
7 The amount of the fortnight's work sent is right for your student.	1	2	3	4	5

TEACHER MARKING AND INPUT

When the marked work is returned from each fortnightly pack you and your student should receive for the language programme

- **marked work**
- **teaching notes**
- a **letter or general comments** on your student's progress from the class teacher.

	Disagree					Agree				
8. All of the teacher's comments and marked work are looked at by your student.	1	2	3	4	5					
9. Additional teaching material sent is helpful to your student's learning.	1	2	3	4	5					
10 The teacher's comments about your student's work are helpful.	1	2	3	4	5					
11 Phone calls from the teacher about your student's work are helpful.	1	2	3	4	5					
12 The teacher makes constructive teaching remarks about your student's work.	1	2	3	4	5					
13 Praise from the teacher about your student's work has a positive effect on the student's self esteem.	1	2	3	4	5					
14 Censure (disapproval) from the teacher about the work has a positive effect on your student's learning.	1	2	3	4	5					
15 Teacher marking has a positive impact on your student's learning.	1	2	3	4	5					
16 Teacher marking and comments are more effective when only some of the student's work is covered.	1	2	3	4	5					
17 Teacher marking and comments are more effective when all of the student's work is covered.	1	2	3	4	5					
18 Helpful support is available from the teacher when asked for.	1	2	3	4	5					

GENERAL COMMENTS ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

The following asks you to rate additional aspects about the language programme.

	Disagree				Agree
19 Support given by other home tutors is helpful with the teaching process.	1	2	3	4	5
20 Support given by the Regional Representative is helpful in the teaching process.	1	2	3	4	5
21 Support given by the teacher when visiting is helpful with the teaching process.	1	2	3	4	5
22 Your student enjoys working with the teaching materials sent.	1	2	3	4	5
23 Your student enjoys the set exercises.	1	2	3	4	5
24 Your student enjoys the interaction with the teacher.	1	2	3	4	5
25 Your student finds the lessons relevant .	1	2	3	4	5
26 Your student finds the language programme exciting .	1	2	3	4	5
27 The written language materials have enough variation in presentation, style and tasks.	1	2	3	4	5
28 You get enough ideas from the school about motivation and effective work practices.	1	2	3	4	5
29 The programme has enough flexibility to allow for more time to be spent on areas of interest.	1	2	3	4	5
30 When you wish to make changes to the programme to meet the needs of the student you find that the school is supportive .	1	2	3	4	5
31 You feel pressured to get through the year's programme.	1	2	3	4	5
32 You feel that your teaching efforts on behalf of your student are recognised by the school.	1	2	3	4	5

Please post this immediately.

Thank you for your co-operation.

Appendix 7**Class Teacher Interview**

This interview was conducted in light of the research data gathered about the teaching and assessment process involved in text complexity in reading and written English of Year 7 students at The Correspondence School.

1. How do you assess the level of ability of your students at The Correspondence School in reading and written English?
 - a. Reading
 - b. Written English
2. What would help you to assess reading and written English levels?
3. When the reading and/or written English ability of your students is either above or below that of the Year 7 English course, that is, when the reading age is two years or more above or below the student's chronological age, what changes do you make to the programme?
 - a. More able students
 - b. Remedial students
4. In what way have you been restricted from making changes to your programme at The Correspondence School?
5. If you did not use the current English course FLA100 and you had sufficient time, how would you develop an English programme in reading and written English to meet the ability level of each student at The Correspondence School?
6. When a student has problems in a particular area, for example, varying sentence beginnings, using capitals and full stops, using paragraphs, what action do you take?
7. In what way are you restricted from dealing with problems/teaching points that arise with the students?
8. Do you feel that there are enough opportunities for regular written English practice in the current FLA100 course?

Appendix 8**Request to Undertake Research at The Correspondence School****V111 Endorsement Of Application**

-
1. The Head of Department or Institution agrees to accept this research within his or her department and undertakes to support for the duration of any grant the work described in this application by making available accommodation, basic facilities for research and the services necessary for fulfilment.

Signed: _____

Position: _____

Institution: _____

2. Referees

Nominate after obtaining their consent two referees, at least one of them shall be external to your institution.

1.

2.

Name

Position

Institution

Address

3. Applicant

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 9

Written Explanation of Thesis for Class Teachers

February 1996

Research Proposal

Research Title

An evaluation of the teaching process in the delivery of a distance education English programme in the primary school.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this evaluation is to describe the teaching process of Year 7 students at The Correspondence School in the area of English.

In order to gain numerical data for statistical purposes it will be necessary to have some means of measuring learning outcomes.

The areas to be measured are reading and written English.

Suggested Approach to the Measurement of Learning Outcomes.

Reading

Two reading age assessments may be sent out independent of the class teacher. The regional representatives will conduct an independent reading assessment in the students' place of learning (the regional representatives have already given support to this).

Written English

Early in the year a written English sample will be collected for the purpose of identifying teaching skills. It is planned to take a second sample 4 months later.

In order to describe the teaching process it will be necessary to analyse teacher logs and teaching points in letters as well as obtaining information by means of questionnaires. Obviously the co-operation of the class teachers, the senior teachers and the heads of section is essential if this research is to be undertaken. Privacy issues will be addressed in regard to teachers, students and supervisors. No teacher, student or supervisor will be identified as a coding system will be used. It is the teaching programme which is being examined and not the teacher.

Appendix 10

Written Explanation of Thesis for Regional Representatives

Research Project

To

From Hilary Capper

Dear

Earlier this year when you were at The Correspondence School I spoke to your Regional Representative Group about a research project I am planning to undertake towards a Master of Education. As part of this research project I wish to assess the reading levels of the Year 7 students. You may recall that I approached your group to ascertain whether you would be able to support me with this research by undertaking a Informal Prose Inventory Assessment with your Form 1/Year 7 students.

I am now formally approaching you in this regard.

OUTLINE OF RESEARCH PROJECT

Title of the Research Project

An evaluation of the teaching process in the delivery of a distance education English programme in the primary school.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this evaluation is to describe the teaching process of Year 7 (Form 1) students at The Correspondence School in the area of English.

Reason for Undertaking Prose Inventory Tests

In order to gain numerical data for statistical purposes some assessment to measure outcomes is necessary.

Privacy

Privacy issues will be fully addressed in regard to the teachers, students and regional representatives. No teacher, student, supervisor or regional representative will be identified, as a coding system will be used. It is the teaching programme which is being examined and not the people who carry it out.

Parent and Student Approval

Parents and students will be approached for approval to undertake this testing for research purposes.

Tasks Required from the Regional Representatives

1. To undertake an informal prose inventory assessment of the Year 7 students, using a kit currently being developed.

2. To return the results to Hilary Capper using the envelope supplied.

N.B. The testing process may take up to half an hour depending on the ability of the individual student. Along with any assessment a questionnaire will be undertaken with the supervisors and students. Regional Representatives will not be involved with this.

Invitation

You are invited to take part in an evaluation study of the Year 7 English programme that is provided by The Correspondence School. This evaluation is being carried out by Hilary Capper, a postgraduate M.Ed., student working under the supervision of the department of Education Massey University and the Research and Development Committee of The Correspondence School.

If you are willing to participate in the research project please fill in the form below and return in the envelope attached as soon as possible.

Name

I wish to/do not wish to participate in the research project.

Appendix 11**Letter to Supervisor and Student**

Dear Student and Supervisor,

This year I am undertaking a research project towards a Master of Education. My research will look at the teaching of an English programme for Year 7 (Form 1) students. This research will be of value to the school as it will be an opportunity to see how we could improve our approach to distance teaching and learning in the primary area.

The research project will involve the completion of the enclosed questionnaires and possibly one later in the year. Reading age and written English assessments will also be utilised in the research process.

The confidentiality of the results of the questionnaire, reading ages and written English will be guaranteed (the coding is for statistical purposes only). Please return the questionnaire via the ordinary mail system in the postage paid envelope enclosed in this package. Your teachers will not see your answers.

Could you please complete the questionnaire enclosed before undertaking the next lesson in your sets.

Please contact me if you have any concerns.

Yours sincerely,

Hilary Capper
Senior Teacher

Appendix 12**Letter to Parents at a Non-distance School**

Dear Parents/Caregivers,

I am currently undertaking a research project towards a Master of Education. My research is looking at the teaching of English for Year 7 (Form 1) students at The Correspondence School. In order to bring about reliability for aspects of this research, assessment of students' work from a non-distance school is necessary.

The data needed, includes student reading ages and samples of written English. I will be obtaining this data from Mrs ----- class. The confidentiality of the results of this research is guaranteed.

If you wish/do not wish your child to participate in this research, please return the accompanying response form. Students who do not wish to be participants themselves will not be included in the project.

Yours sincerely,

Hilary Capper

----- Normal Intermediate School

I/We give/do not give permission for _____ to participate in this research project.

Signed _____ (parent/caregiver)

Appendix 13

Instructions for Undertaking the Informal Prose Inventory Assessment

The purpose of this assessment is to establish the reading age of the student to help determine whether they are appropriately placed on our school programme.

The student's responses to the questions may also be useful as an indicator of the student's ability, especially with the more able student.

Instructions

1. Explain to the supervisor that you wish to undertake a reading assessment so that you and the class teacher can better meet the reading needs of the student.
2. If possible, find a place where you and the student will not be disturbed.
3. Sit the student beside you and help him/her to feel relaxed and comfortable.
4. Explain to the student that you going to ask him/her to read aloud and that at the end of each extract you will ask some questions about it.
5. Tell the student that you are not going to prompt him/her. Suggest that they tackle new words the way they would normally.
6. Find an extract that is at the approximate instructional level. If taping is required, **turn the tape on now.**
7. Read the title of the extract together. Ask the student to predict what the extract might be about. You may tell the student the name of a character or place if you think it may cause undue difficulty.
8. Ask the student to read the extract. Score the error and self correction rate as you go.
9. Read the questions provided and ask the student to respond. Note that there are no prepared questions for the 4 Ready To Read books. (reading ages for these are emergent to 8 years). For these texts ask questions that seem appropriate. Do not prompt the student but you may suggest that they reread the story to help develop a response. Two appropriate responses is an acceptable pass rate.
10. Move onto the extract at the next level if the student has
 - a 95-97 accuracy rate
 - two out of three appropriate responses.
 If you are uncertain about whether to go on or not, please try the next level.

Appendix 14**Regional Representative Survey**

The purpose of this questionnaire is to ascertain the previous experience you have had in taking informal prose inventory assessment.

Please answer this questionnaire either in written form or by phone.

1. How many years have you had teaching in the primary service?

2. Have you had experience in using informal prose tests prior to this research project?

3. What additional training have you had in reading instruction and assessment?

Appendix 15

Student Discussion about the Extract on Atomic Energy

Good Understanding

1. He would come up with a well thought out answer, and then he would come up with a really well-thought out answer which he had carefully considered before committing himself. His answers displayed concern and an interest in the problems related to nuclear reactions.
2. Her comprehension was excellent.
3. Knew very little about atomic energy before reading the text but was able to answer all the questions.
4. Excellent understanding - we got into an in depth discussion about atomic energy and nuclear waste around the world.
5. Fluent reader. Excellent comprehension. Very interested in the article.
6. Although little was known about the subject before reading the text she was able to answer the questions and expand on the answers.
7. Excellent comprehension.
8. Had no problems with understanding.

Little Understanding

1. Although ----- could read this extract, the comprehension of it was limited.
2. He read the extract but had difficulty answering questions.
3. Still unlocking well but struggling with understanding.
4. She was fluent and confident. She scored 1/3 of the answers on her own because the subject matter really threw her. She was better able to understand it after some explanation from myself.
5. He was able to answer from text but I felt he didn't fully understand why uranium was used.
6. Only really understood the text with discussion.
7. Could read the words but had no idea of the meaning.
8. Could read the text but had no idea of what it was about.

Appendix 16

Increase in Regional Representatives Rolls

N.B. No information could be obtained prior to 1994 but regional representatives have remarked that when rolls were much less than 200 most of the students could be visited once a term in a three term year. However, when rolls were smaller they were also more stable, that is, there were far fewer enrolments and withdrawals in the course of one year. The increase of enrolments and withdrawals is now said to have as much of an impact as the increased roll. Regional Representative rolls include Early Childhood, Primary full time and Secondary full time students.

Year	Number of Regional Representatives	Average Roll Per Regional Representative
1994	12.1	297
1995	11.8	330
1996	12.3	347
1997	12.4	359

Appendix 17**Student/Teacher Ratios at The Correspondence School**

Out of 34 primary teachers' class rolls examined on a particular date, 9 teachers were teaching full-time while the remainder were teaching part-time. The full-time teacher statistics were used for this analysis. None of these teachers held positions of responsibility.

Teacher	Roll Number
1	35
2	29
3	39
4	37
5	40
6	43
7	40
8	37
9	42

N.B. Although information was not available class rolls are said to have risen in the nineties.