

WRITING FROM THE EDGE

Reflections on 'Twenty Years of *L1*'

BILL GREEN

Charles Stuart University, Australia

It is indeed something to celebrate: twenty years of a journal such as *L1 – Educational Studies in Language and Literature*, the flagship of a still emerging and consolidating research community organised around what is now known as L1 education and the L1 subjects. I come to this as a long-time Anglophone scholar in antipodean English teaching and English curriculum studies. For me, turning to comparative work across other such fields, elsewhere in the world, seemed not only entirely appropriate, but even necessary. There is no doubt that making such a move has been productive, greatly expanding the ambit of my work. I welcome the opportunity, therefore, to comment on the article "Twenty Years of *L1*: The Journal and the Research Community Behind It". The *L1* editors provide an illuminating picture of the development of the journal and its associated research field, as it is now, at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century. They ask: "what has been accomplished thus far"—seeing this "as a starting point to review what still needs to be done".

The paper begins by reviewing the L1 project and the history of the field. Central to this is the shift from 'IAIMTE' to 'ARLE' and, relatedly, from 'mother-tongue education' to 'L1 education'. This is a significant matter in itself, and I would have appreciated some account being made of what this has meant for the journal. This is because it goes beyond a simple substitution of 'L1' for 'mother-tongue' in the published texts. Moreover, the official shift has been effectively anticipated by the journal's title – even though, with the journal presenting as "an international forum for research and discussion on the education in language and literature", its subtitle has provided some continuity in this regard, with its evocation of what has been called the traditional language-literature 'dyad'. It might have been interesting to see how this shift from 'mother tongue' to 'L1' was registered in the contributions since 2001,

1

Green, B. (2021). Writing from the edge. Reflections on 'Twenty Years of L1'. L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature, 21, 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.17239/L1ESLL-2021.21.04.02>

Corresponding author: Emeritus professor Bill Green, Charles Stuart University, Melbourne, Australia; email: bigreen@csu.edu.au

© 2021 International Association for Research in L1-Education.

if at all: was there, for instance, a different kind of article being submitted or published, or at least significant differences within them? This is important conceptually to the field as it evolves and matures, as I have argued elsewhere, and yet there is a marked silence about this, in this article and in the field more generally. Partly this is due, no doubt, to the journal's emphatic and indeed programmatic focus on 'empirical research', and moreover, on adherence to "the standards of rigorous empirical investigation *as established originally outside the domain of L1 education research*" (my added emphasis). This is described as an ongoing feature of the journal since its inception, and appropriately so. But it needs to be re-examined, in my view, and re-articulated. How is 'empirical' to be understood? On the evidence of recently-published papers, it would appear that it refers mainly to 'ethnographic' and 'quasi-experimental' research, and to research ranging across the 'qualitative' and the 'quantitative'. These categories seem untroubled by debates raging elsewhere, and make for a somewhat derivative character in this aspect of the work of the journal. Is this (still) something authorised outside the field itself, as a distinctive area of educational inquiry? Is it time to evaluate and review this aspect of the journal's project?

In this regard, I wonder whether it would be useful to open up the journal, and the field more generally, to other emphases and perspectives, for instance to historical and philosophical inquiry, and to more theoretical and conceptual work? Doing so, within limits, might enable discussion and debate of various important matters, including the historical significance of nation-building in the emergence and consolidation of L1 teaching and learning (and more recently, of nation *re*-building in a globalized world). This might readily be extended to due consideration of nation and empire as reference-points for the kinds of work that need to be done now, more urgently than ever before. Properly accounting for 'Spanish' or 'Portuguese' as L1 subjects, or 'French' or 'German' for that matter, to say nothing of 'English', surely warrants such radical re-consideration, and would be enormously productive. Reference is made in the article, rightly, to the problem of 'compartmentalization'. Yet an emphasis from the very outset – indeed, predating the 2001 emergence of the journal – has been a concern with the *comparative*, with seeking to understand what is happening within one country by drawing on insights from other countries, or by exploring particular pedagogical ('didaktik') challenges across countries. This is something that needs to be actively encouraged, with specific regard to drawing in comparative work, both substantively and methodologically. It is surely part of what is meant here when it says that "the *L1* journal must continually renew and redefine its true domain".

Shifting now to issues of audience and constituency, and also readership, I am struck by how distributed and yet specific the L1 research community is. Figure 1 in particular is very interesting, though perhaps, as the editors themselves suggest, also rather misleading. It can't be assumed either that "the *L1* audience [equates] to the group of registered users", or that there is any simple correspondence between the journal's readership and what is now ARLE, or indeed the (larger?) L1 research and

scholarly field. Even so, this is something to work on, in seeking to expand and develop that community of interest and inquiry, and to think about. With regard to publication in the journals, it is noted that “the bulk of *L1* publications (70%) come from Europe with another significant portion coming from North America (12%) and Asia (14%)”. Writing as I do, from the edge—that is, from Australia—I must say I’m intrigued why there is not greater representation of Australian (and indeed Australasian) *L1* scholars. Why don’t my compatriots publish in this context? Speaking from my own experience, it may be that the part of the problem here might be the particular empirical orientation of the journal. If anything, it has tended to seem more aligned to the European traditions of educational research than to that of the Anglophone world, where I would venture there has been a noticeable shift in recent decades to be more inclusive of new and emerging research perspectives and discourses. Of course, Australia and New Zealand are decidedly small research communities in this regard, albeit part of the larger English/*L1* empire. Still, it is intriguing that there is such a bias towards European scholars as participants, and rather selectively so too, as noted here. This is where it might be worth exploring more systematically issues of nation and empire, as indicated above, especially since changing patterns and forms of nationhood are clearly evidently not only in the historical record but also in the emerging new world order. Now more than ever it would seem important to encourage transnational inquiry in this regard, and to build on the promise inherent in the establishment of the *MT/L1* research program in the early 1980s.

Two final points. Firstly, there seems to be an emphasis on what I would see as more instrumental aspects of *L1* education—on *what* to teach in *L1* education and *how* best to teach it. This is important, but insufficient in itself. More attention needs to be given to *why* this particular content and these particular methods—why, indeed, this subject area at all? This is, incidentally, where a dialogue with contemporary curriculum inquiry might be productive. Secondly, I think there is a curious absence of consideration of the power relations that define the field, and of power more generally, along with related issues of culture and history. Nothing in the profile provided here of the field over the past twenty years indicates that this is something at issue or of interest—which leads me to ask whether or not exploring and encouraging such lines of inquiry might well be actively drawn into the ambit of concern, for this journal, and hence that of the field more generally, as it develops.