



The Australian Association for the Teaching of English Response to the draft K – 10 Australian Curriculum: English

The Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) is the national umbrella organisation for the state and territory associations for the teaching of English. Established in 1964, the association represents more than 5,000 English teachers and educators Australia wide.

The majority of our members teach English in secondary schools, that is English from years 7 to 12. As a result, although this is a response to the K – 10 Australian Curriculum: English in general, our focus has been on the content described in years 7 – 10.

AATE welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the draft K – 10 Australian Curriculum: English. This response is a consolidated response which captures the points on which the various state and territory associations agreed in their own responses to the draft curriculum.

AATE remains strongly supportive of the notion of a national curriculum and we appreciate the efforts of the writers and the significant pressures on them, not the least being the exceedingly short timeline for completing the task.

The serious concerns that our members have expressed about the draft curriculum stem from two identified and concerning weaknesses:

1. Inadequate conceptualisation of learning and learners in English has made the content development, sequencing and allocation highly problematic.
2. The organisation of the curriculum by the three identified strands of Language, Literature and Literacy does not provide a coherent view of the subject and presents unnecessary barriers to efficient and meaningful programming by teachers.

Development

The short timeline for the development of the new curriculum remains a significant issue and we wonder if this has contributed to the fact that the draft curriculum does not, in our view, represent a world class curriculum with the capacity to prepare students for living in the 21st century.

The short timeline also means that there has been insufficient time to provide the sort of detailed, useful feedback to bring about change and which will only be possible when the curriculum is trialled over a sustained period. An Australian curriculum deserves much discussion and redrafting to ensure that it is enriching and challenging but at the same time realistic and relevant for **all** students. Our first recommendation is that the curriculum published later this year for use in 2011 should be identified as a work in progress which will be reviewed as a result of feedback provided during 2011 and 2012 prior to the publication of a revised more definitive version for 2013.

Learning theory

The association also remains concerned that the curriculum does not seem to be predicated on any particular theory of learning, and despite mention of the Melbourne Declaration does not provide a clear statement of the skills and understandings that a learner will need to

acquire, to be an active participant in, and contributor to, 21st century Australian Society and the world in general. Indeed it could be argued that the focus is far more on the development of basic skills for a past workforce rather than on the development of flexible, creative people capable of working in a digital world, solving problems in new ways and developing a life-long love of learning. We recommend that the learning theory which underpins this curriculum is made explicit.

Assessment

The curriculum is also silent on the matter of assessment which is an undeniable driver of classroom practice. Some argue that unless the content described is assessed there is no guarantee that the curriculum will be delivered in schools. Others fear that the diagnostic assessment instrument, NAPLAN which currently exists to detect students who will struggle, without intervention in the next years of their schooling, will be expanded and will then fail to serve its original purpose. AATE supports assessment that is both 'of' and 'for' learning. We believe that a definitive statement on assessment needs to be made in the introduction to the curriculum.

The draft content descriptions (1-8)

Generally the associations disagreed with the statement that the draft content descriptions are clear and unambiguous. One association explained that the language was simple, but that this didn't mean that it was clear. Others said that without the elaborations it was difficult to interpret the content descriptions. That being said, it was also indicated that the draft elaborations are not always clear and do not always support the content they are supposedly elucidating.

A common concern was that there is a lack of cohesion. Concepts appear in some years but not in others. Sometimes a concept, for example vocabulary extension appears in the language strand in years 7-9, and then appears as vocabulary in the literacy strand at year 10. Several associations commented on the fact that the distinction between the language and literacy strands is blurred.

It is not always possible to find, or follow a developmental structure for particular content points. In Year 7 literature students are expected to consider puns and innuendo, then in Year 8 they are exposed to symbolism, allegory and allusion. There needs to be a stronger sense of development from one year to the next.

A number of associations also expressed concern about dividing content up by year level. A discussion of our concerns is found later in this response.

Some of this confusion could be because, as the document states, 'once a concept or skill is introduced at one year level it is not reiterated...' but this assumes or expects teachers of later year levels to have read and digested the content described for all the previous years. We ask if this is reasonable or realistic. At the very least this statement should be highlighted and reinforced at every year level, or else a summary should be provided at the start of each year level of the content students have previously had the opportunity to learn.

Even allowing for this there seems to be a lack of scope and sequence within the strands across the year levels. Some patterns are apparent, but these are not helped by for example the sudden appearance of content at a particular point, for example the study of language in Asia which appears in year 7 as the first point in the language strand, nor by the use of headings which do not continue across all year levels and which sometimes bear little relationship to the content descriptions and elaborations. Nevertheless, many members commented on the potential value of the use of sub-headings and believe that they would be useful if they were more thoughtfully conceived and applied more consistently.

Others remarked on the inconsistent structure of the content descriptions themselves. Some appear to acknowledge what students will do, that is those starting with a verb while others particularly in the language strand often seem to begin with a noun and could be

prefaced by “teachers will teach that...” We recommend a more consistent wording of these descriptions and prefer those largely found in the literature and literacy strands which imply that the learner is the subject.

The fact that the number of descriptions varies from one strand to the next is another cause for concern. This could suggest that those strands with the greater number of descriptors are the most important. This is despite the assurance in the introduction that ‘each strand is of equal importance’. It is also apparent that sometimes it would be possible and preferable to condense some of the content and express these more simply.

We appreciate the work done by the writers to specify the learning expected of students at each year level, contentious as this may be. We believe that the content is often misplaced in the sense of not according with current practice around the country and believe that this could unfairly disadvantage some individuals and groups. We discuss this at more length later in our response. Some specific concerns are that:

- Citing (Year 10) is more appropriately dealt with at year 11.
- Metonymy is typically considered in senior literature and language studies. Satire is frequently studied at years 11 and/or 12.

The number of descriptors was questioned by most member associations with the observation that the shopping-list presentation of small learning descriptors could invite ‘broken up learning’, or that the prescriptive content would make it hard to engage the interest of students or to cater for the diversity of their needs. Once again we discuss the number of descriptors at more length later in this response.

With regard to the content of the learning area members were largely comfortable with the content described in the literature strand although many were concerned that the small number of content descriptions relative to those in the other two strands could mean that this strand was devalued. The literature strand mostly matches what is already happening in English classrooms and seems both manageable and appropriate.

The content describe in the literacy strand does appear to move from a lower order to higher order skill level. However, the delineation of a discrete Literacy strand has led to concern being forcefully expressed that subject English is being developed as a service subject to meet the needs of the other subjects. That said, we welcome the fact that English can play a significant role in developing and promoting cultural understanding. It is our strong contention that literacy needs to be taught in all subject areas and that there should be a literacy strand in every curriculum document, particularly in years 7- 10.

The content of the language strand did not meet with the same level of approval. English teachers in Australia are committed to the explicit teaching of grammar; however, the way that grammar is presented in the draft document could result in outdated practices where grammar is taught as an end in itself rather than in context and as the means to effective communication. We recommend sample units of work to illustrate how grammar, as it is currently specified, can be taught in conjunction with the Literature and Literacy strands, in context and in a way that will engage the interest of all students. The assurance in the introduction that the ‘curriculum consistently makes reference to how our grammatical choices are influenced by such contextual factors as with whom we are interacting (audience), what we are talking/writing about (subject matter), the role played by language (mode and medium) and our purpose for using language’ is not apparent in the way the content descriptions are written in the language strand.

The association recommends that the following should be included:

- **Enjoyment of reading/pleasure of learning and learning how to learn:** If we are trying to foster a culture of life-long learning in Australia, learning needs to be seen as valuable and pleasurable in itself.

- **Creativity and design:** Although 'create' is listed as one of the modes in the Rationale it is undeveloped in the content descriptors where the focus appears to be more on a functional approach at the expense of the aesthetic.
- **ICTs:** These are not closely integrated into the curriculum and the ICT skills referred to don't encourage their use to apply and create. Students must be able to competently evaluate, use and create with ICTs.
- **Visual language and visual literacy:** Viewing is not explicitly outlined in the content descriptors and is absorbed into reading in the achievement standards. This represents a devaluing of visual literacy skills at a time when visual texts are growing in significance and influence. A recent news article reports that in French schools all students will be introduced to classic film texts
- **Purposes for grammar:** The heavy focus on grammar in the language strand content descriptors needs to be supported by a clear articulation of the ways in which grammatical structures are used.
- **Personal response to/evaluation of texts:** The literature content needs to provide students with the opportunity to evaluate texts and develop personal responses.
- **Assessment for as well as of learning:** This is linked to a concern that there seems to be little acknowledgement in the curriculum of the learning that students bring to the classroom, or of their backgrounds. Assessment too needs to be personalised and not simply about what students know, but also to help them develop new skills and understandings. A definitive statement on assessment needs to be included to inform planning and programming.
- **Collaboration:** While some might argue that this is a pedagogical issue, it is important that students are provided with opportunities for developing the skills to work as part of a team or group. There is, we believe, a strong argument for inscribing it in the listening and speaking content of the curriculum.
- **Greater emphasis on processes for presenting and responding to varied perspectives and positions:** The draft Australian Curriculum refers to research skills, technical skills and critical analysis however we believe that more emphasis needs to be given in the 7-10 curriculum to students understanding how the choices made by writers/directors position audiences, both in relation to their own texts and those of others.

Content elaborations (9-13)

Time has not really permitted a close investigation of the elaborations, however members have generally responded in a qualified manner to them as a positive element of the curriculum. More work needs to be done to ensure that they all illustrate content descriptions sufficiently and some could be more clearly expressed.

Some members revealed that they are unsure about the status and purpose of the elaborations and asked that these are made clear.

The draft achievement standards (14-20)

Initial feedback suggested that teachers were most comfortable with the achievement standards with some reporting that they could plan a classroom program based on them.

More considered responses reveal some concerns with these standards in that the language is clear but they do not always seem directly related to the content described and that in their current form they do not lend themselves to describing the quality of learning. Consequently, they do not therefore provide clear direction for assessment.

We recommend that the achievement standards should directly relate to the learning described in the content descriptors; that reading and viewing as well as writing and creating are acknowledged; and that 'research' should be omitted as it is not an essential nor a currently assessable part of the English (7-10) curriculum in most states and territories.

We recognise the difficulty of identifying discrete stages of development year by year and although the progression described seems clear and reflects growth we believe that the year based division is too rigid and doesn't cater adequately for the needs of individual students.

The achievement standards also fail to acknowledge the role that the student plays in his or her own learning. There is then little recognition of higher order thinking, or metacognition, or of a student's growing independence as a learner.

The draft structure of the curriculum (21-26)

It is the strongly held view of the association that the organisation of the curriculum does not provide a coherent view of the curriculum.

The division of the curriculum into three discrete strands discourages integration even though the introduction to the document states that the strands are 'interwoven and inform and support each other'.

Various suggestions have been made by individual associations to create a more coherent organisation. The most common being to make literature or texts the starting point and that this would lead naturally to an exploration of language and literacy in context.

Many members commented on the uneven nature of the draft, and in particular the large number of content descriptions in literacy and language compared to the number in literature. Some asked if this should be reflected in programming with proportional time allocation in the classroom.

The comment was made on a number of occasions that the structure with its myriad of content descriptors will encourage a superficial approach rather than in-depth and sustained learning. Planning a program using the current document could lead to a tick the box approach. It is recommended by some that the notion of 'making meaning' which appears at the hub in the graphic depiction of the curriculum should be more strongly emphasised and that the subject should be taught in big picture integrated topics. (Note: this recommendation does not amount to an endorsement of the graphic, which has not been well received. It is not held to add clarity to the curriculum design.)

It is also strongly felt that the current structure communicates an implied pedagogy: that of a teacher-centred curriculum and transmission model of teaching. This is most evident in the language strand. Perhaps this all emanates from the 'Rationale and Aims' of the learning area where the three strands come first and the learner comes last. That is, the content is emphasised but effective teaching and learning practices are not. The way the content is described devalues the role of the teachers and often presents the learner as a passive imbiber of knowledge. We recommend that the Rationale is rewritten and that the learner is placed first.

The Rationale in general tends to describe what is to be found in the document rather than providing a justification for the content. Most associations commented on the focus on texts from the Asian region. The intention to include cross curriculum dimensions is a worthy one, but to focus on Asian texts excludes many others who are represented in Australian society. We believe that English can make an important contribution to a student's multicultural understanding but the focus on 'understanding the cultures of Asia' is, in our view, inappropriately narrow.

With regard to the aims we offer the following observations:

- The foregrounding of "informed appreciation, criticism and literary history" might be appropriate for English in the senior years but we do not believe that it is suitable for students in K – 10.
- Formal, academic literary criticism is appropriate for the senior years but not students in K – 10.

- Reading for pleasure should be included in the aims, as should the importance of the development of critical thinking and critical reading and writing practices.
- Aim 3 needs to be expanded to include concepts such as reflect, record, wonder.

General capabilities (27-37)

It was generally thought that these are unarguable and can be found in the content descriptors

Cross curriculum dimensions (38-40)

Some of our concerns with these dimensions have been dealt with elsewhere in this response. It was generally agreed that many English teachers will require significant professional learning opportunities to enable them to effectively implement these elements of the curriculum.

Digital layout (42-44)

Although not all associations agreed, it was generally observed that the online layout of the curriculum is a significant improvement on the traditional paper format. Searches allow a reader to track key words and ideas; the filters could be helpful in preparing programs; and the glossary is essential and is presented in a user friendly fashion.

Some suggestions for improvement include:

- Provision of some means of differentiating content descriptors and elaborations by year level. This could be achieved with a navigation bar down one side which identifies the year level or incorporating the year level more frequently into the text.
- Making the glossary downloadable.
- Hyperlinks from introduction to specific part of the document when they are introduced such as: content descriptors, elaborations, achievement standards.
- Making the elaborations able to be filtered.

Sets challenging yet realistic standards is not supported and is covered elsewhere.

Enables pursuit of in-depth teaching and learning is not supported and is covered elsewhere.

Takes into account available evidence about the nature of the learner.

If this is the case it is not evident. Original drafts included the stem 'teachers will teach' and this published draft, although no longer containing this stem, still reads as a document for teachers rather than a curriculum for learners. One association noted that this isn't written for students, it treats them like 'cogs in a machine.' Particular attention was drawn to the lack of an emphasis on inquiry and higher order thinking, no recognition of collaborative learning and an implied transmission model, teacher-centred pedagogy.

Takes into account the needs of all students

Following on from our concerns expressed in the previous response, the association strongly disagrees with this statement. The curriculum as it is currently worded is teacher-centred, excessively prescriptive, and fails to acknowledge the diversity of student needs. The expectation that **all** students in year 10 will read a range of literature texts is not reasonable while others questioned the specific content at other levels such as idiomatic expression, innuendo and parody at Year 7, observing that these are extremely sophisticated concepts for this year level and would most likely be taught in a very superficial manner.

Draft Curriculum is not overcrowded

Most of the associations commented that there is overcrowding of lower order content to be learnt at the expense of higher order skills and understandings. There is also a real concern that the range of texts described, although appropriately broad, is too great a range for study at every year level. Peter Freebody talks about an 'intense focus on literature' suggesting that students should study fewer texts more deeply. We would recommend that the range of

texts should be covered over a stage, or phase of schooling rather than each year. There is also the concern which we have previously alluded to in that if there is too much content, it will encourage a shallow superficial approach rather than in depth learning.

Reflects a world-class curriculum

This begs the question: what is a world-class curriculum? but even without an answer to this, most associations were adamant that this is not an example of what we would expect from a world-class curriculum. It seems to many of us that this is a 20th century curriculum which fails to embody notions of change, flexibility, and problem-solving. It also falls short in its inscription of ICTs. It also, to our great chagrin, devalues the role of teacher judgement and professionalism, most obviously in the overly prescriptive nature of the Language strand, where the lack of verbs in the writing of the curriculum suggests a failure to adequately engage with the very significant issue of how language is best taught.

Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE)
PO Box 3203, Norwood SA 5067
Email: aate@aate.org.au
Contact: Guy Bayly-Jones, President