

SAETA feedback on the draft *Australian Curriculum: English* May 25, 2010

The South Australian English Teachers Associations welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the draft K-10 Australian Curriculum: English. Whilst we remain supportive of the notion of a national curriculum, we do have concerns about the draft curriculum as it is presented.

General Observations:

There has not been sufficient time to provide the sort of feedback possible when the curriculum is trialled over a sustained period. The schools trialling the new curriculum in SA reported that they had only just started the process and that although they could provide some broad comments, more detailed feedback would only emerge as the curriculum was trialled over time and across year levels. It is therefore our strong recommendation that when the curriculum is released in September 2010 it should be regarded as a work in progress and there should be an opportunity for stakeholder groups to provide further, more detailed feedback, after the first year of use.

Questions were also asked about assessment of the content described in the new curriculum. SAETA strongly supports assessment that is both 'of learning' and 'for learning'. Some members fear that if the content is not assessed the uptake of the new curriculum can not be guaranteed. Others fear that the NAPLAN test, which currently partly exists to detect students who will struggle with the next years of their schooling, will be expanded to test the content of the new curriculum and will therefore fail to serve its original purpose.

The content of the new curriculum is certainly challenging and this led some members to ask if it really is a curriculum for all Australian students. The new curriculum acknowledges that 'students learn at different rates and in different stages' (Australian Curriculum, English p.4). However, some members doubted that the content, particularly at Year 10, was achievable by all students.

The literacy strand remains a concern for the South Australian English Teachers Association. On the one hand the distinction between the language strand and the literacy strand is not always clear. On the other hand the literacy strand also seems to have become more important in the secondary years, at the expense of the literature strand. We remain committed to the notion that literacy is every teacher's responsibility and would like to believe that there will be a literacy strand in every learning area.

The association chose to respond to the new curriculum by considering it in the following sections:

1. Rationale/Aims/Organisation
2. Content Descriptions of Strands by year level (8, 9 and 10)
3. Preface Statements and Achievement Standards

English: Rationale/Aims

In the second paragraph we read that 'the curriculum also places emphasis on understanding the cultures of Asia.' We feel uncomfortable with this and do not believe that as English teachers we are responsible for teaching 'understanding the cultures of Asia.' We would be more comfortable with 'appreciating' or 'respecting' as appears on page 5 under Intercultural understanding where it states: 'The Australian Curriculum: English places emphasis on awareness of and respect for the literary traditions and expressions of other cultures in Asia.'

It was felt that the aims are appropriate, although the third aim - 'To use language to inform, persuade, entertain and argue' - was insufficient. We would certainly want students to be able to use language for these purposes, but would also consider other purposes such as reflect, record, wonder etc.

English: Organisation

Diagram

We believe that the diagram fails to demonstrate how the curriculum is structured or how it might be used. Questions asked included: Where do I start? Do I move around the edge of the circle? What happens when I get to the edge? Where are the cross-curricular elements? How does this fit with the other learning areas? Who is making meaning?

The strands

The opening sentence states that the curriculum is organised in three interrelated strands. A general observation is that the interrelationship between the three strands remains unclear. It might be possible to provide elaborations which link the strands more effectively than is currently the case.

Language

Generally we agreed with the description of this strand.

Literature

Once again most agreed with the description, although the focus on texts from the Asian region was questioned. As English teachers we believe that students should learn about the world they live in to be truly global citizens. We would want to ensure that students are also given the opportunity to read texts from Africa, North and South America, Europe, the United Kingdom and the Middle East.

Literacy

Although most members were comfortable with what is described here, there was a concern that the difference between the Language and Literacy strands was not clear enough.

For example, the Language strand states that students 'learn how language enables people to interact effectively, to build and maintain relationships, and to express and exchange knowledge, attitudes, feelings and opinions,' whilst in the Literacy strand we read that students 'learn about the different ways in which knowledge and opinion are represented and developed in texts...' The overlap between the two is significant.

Curriculum content

In this section we learn that in the content descriptions, 'once a concept or skill is introduced at one year level it is not reiterated, although it may be revisited and extended at a later year level.' We suggest that this statement needs to be emphasised in some way. There are many students who will need to have concepts or skills reinforced or taught once more in successive years if they were not developmentally ready for them in the year allocated by the curriculum. Teachers should be encouraged to do this, rather than thinking that they should only teach what is prescribed for that year level. Moreover, this assumes or expects teachers of later year levels to have read and digested the content described for all the previous years, which is not necessarily 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.

Preface statements and content elaborations are mentioned. These could be hyperlinks to the actual objects. (This could also be done with achievement standards – see below.)

Achievement standards

Members agreed with the description of these, but draw attention to the typographical error in the final line. There does not appear to be any need for a full stop after 'strands'. (There are other typos elsewhere in the draft.)

Texts

The final sentence of the third paragraph tells us that, 'In each year of the curriculum the range of literacy texts should include Australian literature (including traditional and contemporary Indigenous literature and world literature drawn from classic and contemporary texts including texts from Asia.' The association has no argument with the range described, but is concerned that this range is too large for study at every year level and could result in a tokenistic approach. We suggest that the range should be covered over two years rather than every year. There may also need to be lists of possible Indigenous texts and texts from Asia which are suitable for use at different year levels, although we would be loath to see a prescribed set of texts at any year level.

Grammar

The association strongly believes that grammar should be taught in context. We would like to see more elaborations which demonstrate how this might occur.

Spelling

Spelling remains an important part of the English curriculum. However, the strategies suggested do have 'a stronger focus in the early years.' The curriculum is strangely silent on strategies which are appropriate for older learners.

Handwriting

We hope that handwriting is a cross-curricular concern and is not mentioned only in the English Curriculum.

Implications for teaching and learning

The second paragraph reiterates that 'many aspects of the English curriculum are recursive...' Once again, we recommend that this important message should be highlighted in some way.

The final paragraph in this section, and the final sentence, met with strong agreement from the association. If it is possible to foreground this we believe it should be done.

Cross-curricular dimensions

The association agrees with the importance of representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dimensions. However, considerable resources will be required if every English teacher is to be able to execute the requirements of the second paragraph.

The draft Content descriptions Years 8-10

The general feeling of members was that the draft content descriptions were not very clear or unambiguous and without the elaborations could be difficult to interpret. Specific examples of these are noted below.

Although the Rationale for English emphasises the interrelated nature of language, literature and literacy, we fear that this division into the content strands will easily result in the three strands being taught in an unintegrated and unrewarding manner. Moreover, the language and literacy strands unsurprisingly overlap a great deal, but not always in a coherent and logical combination. Placing Literature first in the columns, followed by Language and Literature, and then ordering these so that it is clear how knowledge of aspects of language come from a study of texts, and then enhance students' literacy in using these aspects in their own texts, may make the integrated nature of the curriculum more obvious.

SAETA is concerned about dividing the content by year level and would prefer it to be in stages covering two years, such as 7 & 8, and 9 & 10. This would allow teachers to better cater for the large developmental differences amongst their students within a single class.

Concerns were also expressed about the lack of scope and sequence within the strands across the year levels. Some content seems misplaced in its year level, or simply unnecessary, as outlined below.

Moreover, the headings for the content descriptions are inconsistent in shifting between nouns and verbs and at times do not clearly indicate the actual content. We feel they should probably consistently use verbs, placing the student at the centre of the curriculum. Similarly the actual content descriptions shift constantly between nouns / titles and verbs / instructions and should also be made consistent.

SAETA believes there are too many individual elements to each strand. They should be condensed and expressed more simply and straightforwardly. Many of them are very difficult to understand unless read in conjunction with the elaborations, and sometimes these do not help either. The excessive number of descriptors could lead to broken up learning in which content is ticked off, rather than an integrated and engaging unit of work which caters for the diversity of student needs.

There is a major over-representation of Aboriginal and Asian texts in the literature required to be studied. Apart from the difficulty of finding appropriate texts at each year level with sufficient literary merit, no acknowledgement is made of the vast number of other cultural heritages that make up Australian society, as we have mentioned previously.

The following notes refer to specific details about the Content descriptions for years 8 to 10.

- **Year 8 Content descriptions**

There is an issue with the inclusion of Dreaming stories. In some parts of South Australia Dreaming stories are not to be treated as literature i.e. works of fiction. We believe that the document should explain that this is the case and provide advice on how Dreaming stories might be used in the English curriculum.

Re E8LNG13, symbolism, analogy and allusion are skills which would be better studied at a higher level or risk being studied in a simplistic way.

Training and development will need to be provided with regard to the explicit teaching of grammar, as well as use of the terminology. We recognise that the state and territory ministers of education are to play a key role in the implementation of the curriculum, but believe that English teacher associations can play a significant role in the process.

The inclusion of multimodal texts is applauded, but it seems strange that they should be mentioned separately from literary and non-literary texts when they could easily belong to either.

The new curriculum provides real opportunities to extend high achievers but must also allow weaker students to achieve success.

Links to NAPLAN testing need to be explicit. There is a need to acknowledge that the Year 9 test measures what students do in Year 8 and that NAPLAN is consistent with what is being taught.

Keeping up with the world of technology is important, but infrastructure/access is an ongoing issue. (No doubt we will be informed that the Digital Education Revolution is providing one computer for every student from Year 9 – 12 by 2013 and that additional funding has been provided to improve infrastructure...)

- **Year 9 Content descriptions**

Preface

The Preface concisely and clearly covers what should be taught.

Language

Some concepts such as 'Nominalisation' in E9LNG7 and the 'Abstract nouns' reference in E9LNG9 could be expressed more clearly.

Literature

E9LTR2. Appreciating

There could be further explicit mention of language/poetic devices such as simile, imagery, metaphor, alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia. Although most of these appear in earlier year levels, they are worth revisiting at a more sophisticated level at this year level. Moreover, assonance does not appear anywhere in the curriculum content descriptions.

Literacy:

[Please note: the labels for this strand are out of kilter starting from E9LCY3 which is incorrectly labelled E9LCY4]

E9LCY9. Organising information

The first elaboration does not value the constantly changing, growing perspectives of Year 9 students, but instead asks for 'consistency'.

E9LCY15. It is very difficult for ESL students especially to infer.

Generally

Do the descriptors match the standards? The descriptors are vigorous, challenging and clear. In particular the emphasis on oral literacy is valuable, but of course this is not assessed in the Year 9 NAPLAN test.

It is of concern that there seems to be a major emphasis on Literacy and a concomitant diminished emphasis on Literature in Year 9.

▪ **Year 10 Content descriptors**

Language Content Descriptions

E10LNG1. History of English: Finding resources for this could be problematic. There are issues with the required depth of study and the likely engagement of students if the history lesson goes on too long.

E10LNG3. Citing others: Citing is a sophisticated skill which may be more appropriate to specify in Year 11. Exposure at this level is useful, but one would expect greater development of skills in this area in Year 11.

E10LNG4. Inferring Attitudes is not a useful title. Perhaps 'Implied Meaning' would capture the concept better. The descriptor itself is not particularly clear.

E10LNG5. Vocabulary: What 'academic' means is not made clear, and there is no elaboration with examples. Does it mean 'formal' language as opposed to informal, or perhaps 'choice of language appropriate to the context'? Why should VET students have to study academic language? Surely academic discourse is hardly necessary for all Year 10s to study.

E10LNG6. Connecting ideas: This label is not at all clear, even after reading the elaboration.

E10LNG11. Punctuation: Perhaps 'Quoting and Referencing' would be a clearer label. This should go with E10LNG3. Citing others. Here is a good example of how the descriptors could be condensed and organised into useful groups.

Literature Content Descriptions

E10LTR1. Appreciating: 'Repertoire' is a curious word to use in this context and the elaboration is long-winded. 'Appreciating' for these first three descriptors does not sufficiently describe them. They need to be more specific to be useful.

E10LTR3. Appreciating: Metonymy is a very random inclusion in this list and hardly necessary to study at Year 10. Satire is much more usefully studied at Year 11 and 12. Not all Year 10s are developmentally ready for satire except on a fairly simple level, such as looking at the satirical nature of *The Simpsons*.

E10LTR4. Engaging with texts: This needs to be expressed more clearly.

E10LTR5. Evaluating: 'Evaluating' is not an appropriate label for this descriptor.

E10LTR8. Creating: This descriptor makes sense but the elaboration only mentions Aboriginal and Asian texts, which implies that they are the only texts worth teaching or studying in this regard.

Literacy Content Descriptions

E10LCY2. Comprehension strategies: This is not at all clear. What are 'synonymous pieces of information'? Why does one want to locate them? The first elaboration makes no sense whatsoever and is grammatically incorrect (subject-verb agreement).

E10LCY3. Comprehension strategies: Once again this is not clear. The elaborations offer some vague help, but still do not clarify what the students are to be taught.

E10LCY5. Reflecting on texts: This label does not really describe what this descriptor is asking students to do.

E10LCY7. Creating texts: This is clumsily expressed with the two uses of 'creates'. Are all the elements ('develop abstract concepts, generalise about and question human experience, and persuade others to action') meant to be achieved in the one piece?

E10LCY12. Oral Communication Skills: The descriptor does not deal with Oral Communication Skills. Only 'formal presentations' are mentioned. This needs clarification.

Achievement Standards

General observations

We believe that English as a subject does not demand major research from students other than material for expository writing, author background and film/novel reviews. Research is not in our view an assessable part of the curriculum – student response, whether written, oral or multimodal, should be the focus. We recommend that the research skills sections are either omitted or modified.

▪ Year 8

Listening & Speaking

What is meant by 'spoken texts'? Are these film/debating/radio podcasts/ speeches etc? One whole sentence is dedicated to this skill, but it needs clarification.

There is strong agreement with the second and third sentences.

In the second-to-last sentence we take issue with assessing 'appropriate strategies and protocols for participating...'. This would represent a high level skill for Year 8s.

Reading

The first sentence does not describe an achievement standard but is more about content. We suggest that you can only assess the concept of 'response' here, and question how 'read/view/navigate' can be assessed.

What exactly is meant by 'literal and non-literal language'?

'[L]ocating and using relevant research' is not a skill that is taught explicitly in English; it belongs more to studies of society and the environment. This is a high level skill that we in South Australia currently do not teach.

Writing

The second sentence does not describe an achievement standard. The sentence is, in our view, irrelevant. How can teachers collect evidence of this?

How can students 'create literary texts that select digital elements' if they have only limited access to ICTs? This sentence appears to exclude written texts without digital elements.

Is the Year 8 focus 'clause combinations'? If so, is this reflected in the scope and sequence at Year 8? If not, we recommend the use of more general terms. Are teachers expected to assess 'clause combinations' in isolation?

▪ **Year 9**

Listening & Speaking

The first sentence is more content driven and the last part of the sentence is difficult to assess: '...and how events, situations and people are represented from different perspectives.'

'They use a variety of strategies to participate...' is almost impossible to assess. We note that this will disadvantage students who are silent observers.

The word 'dramatic' is a poor choice for Year 9. Should this be 'drama texts'?

Omit the word 'rehearse', as for Year 8 we believe this is a teaching technique rather than an achievement standard.

Reading

'[R]ead/view/navigate' is a teaching point, not an achievement standard.

The literary criticism element is alarming. This seems to imply that students explore reviews, Sparknotes etc, which is essentially a university level skill. If 'interpretations presented by others' means other in the class we would support this statement, but perhaps this could be made clearer.

In SA we explore the student's opinions about texts, stressing the need for students to draw their own conclusions. The suggestion here is that looking at external reviews and Sparknotes (as a research skill) will mean that students could lose confidence in expressing their own views and come to rely heavily on web based interpretations.

'Evaluating online research tools for objectivity' is more a Studies of Society and Environment skill. We question whether it should have a strong role in English and whether it should be assessed here. Perhaps this is addressing critical literacy. If so it should be more clearly explained.

Writing

Much of this is awkwardly worded and could be communicated more clearly.

▪ **Year 10**

Listening and Speaking

'Listen attentively' is not really assessable and so is not an achievement standard. How do students 'interact appropriately with audiences?' How do teachers assess that this standard has been achieved? Also, what is meant by 'agreed protocols'? Agreed by whom?

Reading

As in our response to Year 8 and 9, 'read/view/navigate' is not an achievable or assessable outcome. Delete 'explore' - that is a discussion, but students can only be assessed on 'evaluate'. How is, 'They engage in informal discussions of these texts...' assessable? If ICT based, how do students access the technology given the limited resources in some schools? What is meant by 'make valid inferences'?

What do students research and why is this an English skill? Surely this is a skill for SOSE. There is more than enough content for English teachers to focus on. We believe that the last line should be omitted and indeed deleted throughout the scope and sequence of the document.

Writing

Define 'sustained' and be clear about the number of words.

'Persuade others to action' is very specific. Are students to be assessed on whether the action is taken by others? We suggest just leaving it as 'to persuade'.

Make sure 'active' and 'passive voice' is in the scope and sequence of the curriculum.

'Conventions of referencing' is not something which we currently use in English in South Australia. This is not a skill we would include under the English curriculum banner in the final document.

Final Comments

The draft curriculum for English does not show any evidence of considering the nature of the learner, has little emphasis on higher order thinking, and no recognition of collaborative learning. Instead it implies a teacher-centred pedagogy which fails to acknowledge the diversity of student needs. It is overcrowded with lower order content to be learnt at the expense of higher order skills and understandings, which are best achieved through in depth exploration of fewer texts rather than the broad range expected for study at every year level.

SAETA hopes that the next draft of the Australian Curriculum will take note of our feedback and in its next iteration get closer to creating the world class 21st century curriculum which it aims to achieve.

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