The states of English in Australia

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ABSTRACT: Under the Australian Constitution, education is primarily the concern of the six states and two territories: hence there are eight separate educational systems. This article attempts to report on some commonalities among these systems, as well as offer a closer discussion of the state of English in New South Wales (NSW). NSW has recently undergone reviews of the English Syllabuses in both compulsory (Years 7-10) and post-compulsory (Years 11-12) years. These reviews have produced quite liberal Syllabuses. Nevertheless, a separation exists between “English” and “literacy” in NSW and the assessment of “literacy” does not reflect the spirit or content of the Syllabuses in secondary English.

KEYWORDS: English, literacy, curriculum, syllabus development, Australia, models of English.

INTRODUCTION

Under the Australian Constitution, education is primarily the concern of the six states and two territories: hence there are eight separate educational systems. In the early 90’s, attempts to implement a national curriculum were defeated by differing state interests, though National Statements and National Profiles were developed in the “Key Learning Areas”, including English. Allegiance to these National Statements and National Profiles, and their influence on state curricula, now varies from state to state. One of the overarching commonalities across Australia has been the political imperative of accountability introducing a uniform framework of outcomes-based curricula into each state. Alongside this state-by-state movement, the Commonwealth government itself has also introduced a system of national benchmarking of literacy levels in selected years of schooling, though this is implemented through a series of local assessment procedures that differ from state to state. In this paper, I will attempt an overview of these separate systems through a brief discussion of their official curricula in the compulsory years of secondary schooling, followed by a closer case study of my own state, New South Wales (NSW), which has recently completed a review of secondary English Syllabuses for both the compulsory and post-compulsory years.

SYLLABUSES/ CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS AROUND AUSTRALIA

The general trend around Australia at the moment is for the development of longitudinal “curriculum frameworks” for each “Key Learning Area”. Certain trends are common across the states within the English frameworks. These include:

- integrating the language modes of listening, speaking, viewing, reading and writing in a variety of forms and situations (for example WA/TAS/ACT)
- an equal stress on production and reception language modes (for example WA/NT/VIC)
- a broad definition of “text” to include any form of written, spoken and visual communication
- (for example WA/TAS/NT/QLD/ACT)

1 The letters in brackets refer to the various state curriculum bodies as listed in the “Reference” section
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To give one expanded example: in the South Australian Curriculum Framework, the learning of English involves reflecting upon and using the integrated language modes of speaking, listening, reading, viewing and writing in three interrelated strands: texts and contexts, language and strategies. Students develop both functional and critical literacy skills in relation to spoken, written, visual and multi-media texts. Fictional, factual, non-print and media texts are studied and meant to reflect diverse cultural perspectives. “Text” is defined as any communication involving language and may be spoken, written or visual. Critical literacy approaches to textual study pervade this curriculum. Reference is made to such things as the analysis of the situational and social contexts of texts, identification of whose interests are served and whose are silenced in particular texts and contexts, investigation into how dominant ways of knowing have positioned people and groups in society, and understanding the impact of race, class and gender on the production and reception of texts.

Students learn how language works and is used to shape identity, meaning and reality and are encouraged to become critical users of the English language. “Critical awareness” appears frequently in the curriculum standard. Students gain knowledge of the diverse varieties of English, including Standard Australian English. They also develop “multiple literacies” that ensure that they can manage such things as burgeoning information and communication technologies and communicate in a range of modalities.

There are essential learnings identified as being achieved through the study of English relating to identity (as it connects with language), thinking (as it is enabled by language), interdependence (as it is enabled by language), futures (as they are conceivable within and communicable through language) and communications (as it relates to the shaping of values and world-views).
Students develop the capacity to envisage multiple perspectives, suggest possible solutions and develop reasoned arguments. Both independent and collaborative learning are valued (South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability Framework. *Curriculum Standards: English*).

**THE CASE OF NEW SOUTH WALES (NSW)**

In my own state of NSW, a new Syllabus for the post-compulsory Years 11-12 came into operation in 2000. (In NSW, English remains compulsory in Years 11-12, though this is not true of every state). The new Syllabus broadened the conception of English to include a cultural studies model with an accompanying critical literacy pedagogy, while retaining the traditional emphasis on close textual study. A welcome development was giving equality to the students’ own creating (“composing”) of texts alongside textual analysis (“responding”). For the first time, students could study four “units” (that is, eight hours) of English per week, potentially bringing it alongside Mathematics in time allocated on the curriculum. Those (very good) students who do opt for the full four units are able to develop Major Works in an area such as short story, critical analysis, poetry writing, script-writing, multi-media, speech writing and other designated areas. The Syllabus had the effect of widening the definition of “text” to include film and multi-media texts, as well as visual texts and popular culture. This broadening, alongside the equal weight given to creation and analysis means that the Syllabus can be represented thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>WRITTEN LANGUAGE</th>
<th>SPOKEN LANGUAGE</th>
<th>VISUAL LANGUAGE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>RESPONDING</strong></td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>Viewing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COMPOSING</strong></td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>Representing</td>
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The Syllabus was not without its critics, who objected to the alleged downgrading of the canon, to the alleged influence of trendy literary theory as manifested in Syllabus terminology (“responding”, “composing”, “representing”), to the fact that students approached texts in groupings and to the diversity of writing styles that required mastery, and use, even in the examination. On the whole, however, the new Syllabus was seen by most teachers as re-invigorating an area of English that for long had been seen as moribund and totally dominated by the examination system.

In the “junior” (compulsory) secondary years, 7-10, a new Syllabus is due to be released for implementation from 2004. A key contextual factor here is the existence of the Years 11-12 Syllabus discussed above and the development by the NSW Board of Studies of a new overarching Curriculum Framework for the K-10 years generally. The draft Syllabus in Years 7-10 seeks to hold in balance:

- students’ critical and imaginative faculties
- their composing and responding and
- explicit teaching with immersion in a diverse range of language experiences.

It aims to develop skills in all six areas of reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing and representing. The use of a range of media and technologies is mandated, as is the ability to both use and describe the appropriate forms, structures and features of a variety of language modes.

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2 “Responding” and “composing” were intended, in fact, as quite innocent “collective verbs”, which tried to represent all the different processes undergone by poets, dramatists, film-makers, novelists, web-site developers and all of their respective audiences. There was no sense in which students were meant to refer to “responders” when they simply meant, for example, “readers” – but this has become the object of much ignorant media satire.
The importance of context and of studying texts as expressions of culture is also central to the Syllabus.

The Syllabus is to be outcomes-based with draft outcomes including (in summary form):

- responding to and composing texts for understanding, interpretation, analysis and pleasure
- using and assessing a range of responding and composing processes
- responding and composing in different technologies
- using and describing language forms, structures and features appropriate to different audiences, purposes and contexts
- responding and composing imaginatively, interpretively and critically
- making connections between texts
- identifying and challenging cultural expression in texts
- using, assessing and reflecting on their learn(t)ing skills

As is obvious from the above discussion, critical literacy has become central to Australian curricula in English. In NSW itself, the two previous Syllabuses in Years 7-10 English – issued in 1972 and 1987 – had strongly represented a “growth” model of English in the tradition of Dixon (1975) and Moffett (1968). From the early 90s, this model began to come under challenge from critical literacy, which sees “growth” pedagogy as “individualist”, “liberal”, “progressive” “naturalising” and “expressive”, while critical literacy is “social”, “radical”, “problematising” “cultural” and, of course, “critical” (McCormick, 1994; Peim, 1993; Griffith, 1992; Patterson, 1992; Ball, Kenny and Gardiner, 1990; Boomer, 1989). It would be simplistic to characterise all writers on critical literacy as a single “school” and Morgan has discussed in some detail the differences between approaches in Australia (Morgan, 1997, Ch.1). Nevertheless, the perceived opposition of “personal” and “social” constitutes the most fundamental distinction between the “growth” model and critical literacy – at least as argued by adherents of the latter. Critical literacy celebrates the social and argues that “growth” model curricula place too much emphasis on the notion of the individual, without recognising that language users are socially constructed.

In the draft NSW Syllabus a genuine attempt has been made to privilege no particular school – rather the approach of creating an “intelligent and intellectualised eclecticism” in curriculum modeling has been taken (Sawyer and McFarlane, 2000).

The new Syllabus has been developed against a background of an increasing regimen of state-wide literacy tests from Years 3-10. An increasing separation between the teaching of “English” and the teaching of “literacy” in NSW means that these tests do not readily link with the English syllabuses. The Year 7-8 English Language and Literacy Assessment (ELLA) for government schools is especially notorious among English teachers for a highly reductive approach to literacy – based entirely on a “genre” (in NSW, “text type”) pedagogy. Broadly, this is the view which argues that generic structures ought to be directly taught and consciously chosen by writers and their writing conform to the particular genre’s structure. In this view of pedagogy, learning to write becomes primarily a matter of learning to control genres. Moreover, subject-based knowledge across the curriculum is constructed by, and in turn, constructs, particular generic forms (“genres make meaning”). ELLA tests this kind of conformity to a generic formula, along with aspects of spelling, punctuation and grammar. While “English” in NSW had formerly included the notion of “literacy”, and had also been synonymous with the concept “language”, “literacy” (from 1988) in official state curriculum documents became both separated from “English” and narrowed, at least as far as writing was concerned, into such “genre-based” approaches.

In 1997, the then Department of School Education in NSW released a major strategy on literacy in NSW. The aims of the strategy were that students:

- be able to express themselves well and clearly in English, and enjoy doing so
• read widely for pleasure and instruction, with discernment and understanding
• be articulate in speaking
• be good listeners in terms of comprehension and evaluation
• gain an appreciation of that part of the cultural heritage embodied in English (NSW Department of School Education Curriculum Directorate, 1997a, p. 3).

These aims generally echoed the objectives of the “Modes” of the then still current 1987 English Syllabus. The definition of “literacy” contained in the document was from The Australian language and literacy policy:

Literacy is the ability to read and use written information and to write appropriately, in a range of contexts. It is used to develop knowledge and understanding, to achieve personal growth and to function effectively in our society. Literacy also includes the recognition of number and basic mathematical signs and symbols within text.

Literacy involves the integration of speaking, listening and critical thinking with reading and writing. Effective literacy is intrinsically purposeful, flexible and dynamic and continues to develop throughout an individual’s lifetime.

All Australians need to have effective literacy in English, not only for their personal benefit and welfare but also for Australia to reach its social and economic goals (DEET, 1991, p. 9).

Three main features of the policy were: explicit teaching, systematic teaching and a whole-school focus guided by a School Literacy Support Team. Despite echoing the “Mode” objectives of the 1987 English Syllabus, “literacy” in the policy was/is totally equated with “across the curriculum”. “Literacy”, in practice, replaced the concept “language across the curriculum” in NSW. Moreover, a particular view of that concept is adopted, in which the language of the subject areas are not problematic, nor are they considered problematic for student learning. Direct instruction in those forms is the very point of “literacy”:

In the secondary school....All subjects have literacy demands that are specific to the reading and writing needed by students to participate in that subject. It is the responsibility of all teachers of all subjects to teach students explicitly how to address these specific features. (NSW Department of School Education Curriculum Directorate, 1997a, p. 12).

Drawing on the work of Freebody and Luke (1990), the teaching of reading is divided into four “roles”: code-breaker, text-user, text-participant and text-analyst (NSW Department of Education and Training Curriculum Support Directorate, 1999). In practice, this entails the use of traditional DARTS-oriented (Lunzer and Gardiner, 1984) strategies such as prediction, cloze and retelling (NSW Department of School Education Curriculum Directorate, 1997b). In writing, the approach in early documents was based strongly on modeling of “text types” – an approach still reinforced by the form of assessment. Specific “text types” were identified for specific Key Learning Areas and these were to be taught on the basis of:

• text processes (social purposes and specific “stages” that relate to overall structure)
• text features (language and organisational features appropriate to specific text types)
• sentence features (grammatical features)
• word features (vocabulary and spelling) (NSW Department of Education and Training Curriculum Support Directorate, 1999a).

For secondary schools, the Education Department (known as both the Department of School Education and then as the Department of Education and Training over this period) produced, over the next two years, documents for each of the secondary Key Learning Areas, each entitled “Teaching literacy in....”. The degree to which the language of the subject areas was considered as unproblematic in itself, as well as unproblematic for student learning, can be gauged from
material produced in order to review school programs – as well as the degree to which “literacy” had become synonymous with “learning about language”:

Several schools are using text types as a unifying focus for their school’s literacy program. Teachers in all KLAs agree that their students need to be able to interpret and produce texts in the forms and formats that conform to the language conventions of the subject...while teaching particular text types, they uncover other aspects of literacy needing attention, for example, sentence structure, grammar punctuation and spelling (NSW Department of Education and Training Curriculum Support Directorate, 1999b, p. 37).

With the production of Teaching literacy in English in Year 7 in 1998, the split between the concepts “English” and “literacy” would seem to have become entrenched, at least for government schools. This, of course, is not necessarily a negative thing, provided teachers outside English do, in fact, take “on board” the teaching of literacy in their subject areas. What does appear to be negative about the particular definition of “literacy”, however, is the unproblematic acceptance of the language of the subject being automatically appropriate for all learners.

**CONCLUSION**

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which practices of “literacy” have supplanted practices of “English” in classrooms. Evidence is largely anecdotal – and many anecdotes revolve around the effect that public examinations of “literacy” have had on English classrooms, since, despite the official “across-the-curriculum” rhetoric, school authorities still look to the English Faculty as the source of literacy instruction. “Literacy” is examined by public examination at Year 7 – the first year of high school – and at Year 10. In the Year 7 case, particularly, students are expected to demonstrate, in great detail, through writing, knowledge of the textual and grammatical features of specific genres. The secondary school Syllabuses in English are far broader in orientation and pedagogy than the government system’s approach to literacy and it is to be hoped that any future public assessment that is to carry the term “English” reflects more accurately the content and spirit of that subject.

**REFERENCES**


NSW Board of Secondary Education. (1987). *Syllabus in English, Years 7-10.* Sydney: NSW Board of Secondary Education.


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