

# ENGLISH AS MOTHER-TONGUE IN AUSTRALIA

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**Abstract:** This article reports on some commonalities among the eight education systems in Australia in terms of mother-tongue education. It discusses the context in which mother-tongue education is conducted in Australia, in particular the 'competition' to English-as-discipline that comes from 'literacy' and from a growing trend towards inter-disciplinary, cross-curricular education.

**Dutch. Samenvatting** [Translation Tanja Janssen] Deze bijdrage bevat een beschrijving van enkele overeenkomsten tussen de acht onderwijssystemen in Australië, met betrekking tot het moedertaalonderwijs. De context van het moedertaalonderwijs in Australië wordt besproken, in het bijzonder de 'wedijver' ten aanzien van het vak Engels tussen 'geletterdheid' en een groeiende trend naar interdisciplinair, vakoverstijgend onderwijs.

**French. Résumé.** [Translation Laurence Pasa]

Cet article rend compte de quelques aspects des huit systèmes éducatifs de l'Australie du point de vue de l'enseignement de la langue maternelle. Il discute le contexte dans lequel l'enseignement de la langue maternelle est conduit en Australie et en particulier les dissensions entre d'un côté l'anglais en tant que

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discipline sous-tendue par la littérature et de l'autre une tendance croissante pour un enseignement interdisciplinaire et intégré.

**German. Zusammenfassung.** [Translation Irene Pieper].

Englisch als Muttersprache in Australien

Der Artikel stellt einige Gemeinsamkeiten der acht Erziehungssysteme im Bereich des australischen Muttersprachenunterrichts dar. Er diskutiert den Kontext des muttersprachlichen Unterrichts, und zwar insbesondere den „Wettbewerb“ zwischen Englisch als einer Disziplin, die sich von Literacy herleitet, und einem an Bedeutung gewinnenden Trend zu interdisziplinärem, fachübergreifenden Unterricht.

**Polish. Streszczenie** [translation Elżbieta Awramiuk]

Niniejszy artykuł relacjonuje pewne wspólne cechy procesu kształcenia języka ojczystego w ośmioletnim systemie edukacyjnym w Australii. Omawia kontekst, w jakim prowadzona jest edukacja języka ojczystego w Australii, w szczególności ‘wyścig’ do języka angielskiego jako dyscypliny, który wywodzi się z nauki czytania i pisanie i z narastających trendów ku edukacji interdyscyplinarnej, międzyprogramowej.

**Portuguese. Resumo** [Translation Paulo Feytor Pinto]

Este artigo dá conta de alguns aspectos comuns do ensino da língua materna nos oito sistemas educativos da Austrália. É nele debatido o contexto em que o ensino da língua materna é conduzido na Austrália, em particular, a ‘competição’ entre o Inglês como disciplina ligada à ‘literacia’ e uma tendência crescente para uma abordagem interdisciplinar e transversal ao currículo.

Key words: curriculum, curriculum frameworks, English literacy, mother-tongue education.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Under the Australian Constitution, education is primarily the concern of the six states and two territories – hence there are eight separate educational systems. These systems design and implement their own separate curricula and administer their own separate education bureaucracies. Hence, it is difficult to characterise *the* Australian system as one entity. However, generalisations are possible. In general, schooling is for thirteen years in each state. Most states divide schooling into primary (from a ‘Reception’ or ‘Kindergarten’ year to Year 6), lower secondary (Years 7-10) and upper secondary or senior school (Years 11-12). Some state vary this slightly with ‘middle schools’ of Years 5-8, 6-8 or 7-9. The final year – Year 12 – includes some form of assessment to university. Within this system, in most states (exceptions and new developments are explained below) English-as-mother-tongue is compulsory throughout schooling, though some states separate ‘English’ and ‘Literature’ in Years 11 and 12, with the latter as an elective subject. Subjects within each state are often grouped into Key Learning Areas (KLAs) – for example, the KLA of Social Science (or ‘Studies of Society and Environment’ in some states, ‘Human Society and its Environment’ in others) would generally include Geography, History, Economics etc. ‘English’, however, usually stands alone – both as a subject and its own KLA.

In the early 90s, 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, though at the time of writing the current national government is making a strong attempt to introduce national curricula and national assessment. One of the overarching commonalities that does exist across Australia is a

uniform framework of outcomes-based curricula in each state. In this paper, I will attempt an overview of these separate systems through a brief discussion of their official curricula, especially in the compulsory years of secondary schooling, followed by a discussion of the issue of literacy and the move towards interdisciplinary, cross-curricular 'Essentials' frameworks.

## 2. SYLLABUSES/ CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS AROUND AUSTRALIA IN THE FIELD OF ENGLISH-AS-MOTHER-TONGUE

The general trend around Australia at the moment is for the development of longitudinal statements of general 'curriculum frameworks' for each KLA including English. Only the states of New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland refer to the English curriculum of the compulsory high school years (7-10) as a 'Syllabus'. In general, Syllabuses are more specific about the detail and content of study than Frameworks, however, both Syllabuses and Frameworks tend to be organised around sets of outcomes. Certain trends are common across the states within these English Frameworks and Syllabuses. For example, most states aim at integrating the language modes of listening, speaking, viewing, reading and writing in a variety of forms and situations<sup>1</sup>. There is generally an equal stress on the production (eg writing) and reception (eg reading) language modes. There is generally a broad definition of 'text' to include any form of written, spoken and visual communication, with the specific texts of the subject 'English' being usually defined as: media, literature, 'everyday', and 'workplace' texts. While there is obviously an emphasis on functional literacy, there is also across Australia a strong emphasis on critical literacy and its concerns with the positioning of readers, reading for textual ideology and creating resistant readings – hence also the teaching of a keen awareness of the constructed nature of texts. Most states do not set specific texts for study until Years 11 and 12, though some states do stress the need to study in earlier years texts which deal with Australian identity, and these should reflect the cultural diversity of Australia's population. Education into Standard Australian English is a common theme, while still recognising and valuing the existence of a diverse variety of Englishes. Language is viewed as a social process with some consequent stress on textual and generic conventions and the explicit teaching of the linguistic structures and features of texts. When pedagogy is mentioned at all in outcomes-based curricula, it usually emphasises teamwork, social interaction and collaborative problem-solving skills as well as skills in research and investigation. Most states include a series of cross-curricula links, especially in ICT, citizenship and environmental perspectives (ACTDET, nd; BOSNSW, 2002; CCWA, nd; DETT, 2004; DEETNT, 2005; QSA, 2005; VCAA, 2002; SADECS, 2001).

To give one slightly expanded example: in the *English Language Curriculum Framework* for the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), the learning of English in-

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<sup>1</sup> NSW has coined an additional term – 'representing' – to refer to the production (as opposed to the reception) of visual language. Thus, as well as 'viewing' film, students can create film. They can also create collages, cartoons, posters and these would all be examples of 'representing'.

volves using the language modes of speaking and listening, reading and viewing and writing in two interrelated content strands – *texts* and *language*. In terms of text content, students address written, spoken and visual texts, which occur in three overlapping categories: *literature* (classical, contemporary and popular), *mass media* and *everyday* texts. In terms of language content, students address *contextual understanding* (socio-cultural and situational), *linguistic structures and features* (organisational patterns, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling and handwriting) and *strategies* (speaking, listening, reading, viewing and writing, but also thinking, problem-solving, composing and comprehending). ‘Text’ is defined as any communication, spoken or visual or written involving language. English *is* English because of its special role in focusing on knowledge about language and how language works in a variety of contexts. Students gain knowledge of the diverse varieties of English, including Standard Australian English. English is essentially concerned with language development and this means *learning language* (acquiring and developing control of the basic language modes of speaking, listening, reading, viewing and writing) *learning through language* (imagining, identifying, clarifying and organising thought and feeling and through this acquiring, understanding, critically analysing and shaping the knowledge and values of the culture) and *learning about language* (learning about vocabulary, language structures – oral, visual and written – and the ways in which language is used for different purposes). English also needs to take account of particular cross-curriculum perspectives, such as Indigenous Australian and more general Australian culture, environment education, gender equity information technology, multicultural education, special needs education, work education and language for understanding (ACTDET, nd).

### 3. A BRIEF HISTORY OF MOTHER-TONGUE EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO NEW SOUTH WALES (NSW)

To set the debates around curriculum into a context, I would like to first briefly present the history of the subject English in Australia, with special, but not exclusive, reference to my own state of NSW, since it is this example on which I will expand in the next section.

Christie’s (1976) historical study of English teaching in NSW, though covering only the period 1848-1900 and set in elementary schools, nevertheless raises some issues relevant to the present study. Christie argues two key propositions:

- Literacy was about social utility in this period – to create a people capable of functioning as citizens and industrious workers (Ch. 1). In high school, English was regarded as for the ‘dullards’ and was offered to those intending to enter commercial pursuits, as opposed to the offering of Classics and Mathematics to those suited for university study (Ch. 2).
- The study of grammar was paramount – only after prolonged exercises in parsing and analysis was the child capable of writing a sentence him/herself. Grammar, in fact, gained more time in the curriculum as the child moved up the school, partly because of a belief in its efficacy for training logical and abstract thought. This dominance of grammar continued despite objections from the

1870s by Professor Charles Badham of Sydney University, by University examiners and by school Inspectors – all of whom complained that students were ‘parroting’ exercises and terminology with little understanding, and that delaying writing for the study of grammar was self-defeating (Chs. 5-6).

According to Homer (1973) whose work is probably the earliest substantial history of the subject in Australia, Australia inherited a ‘skills’ model of English in primary education and a ‘style’ model (a compromise between utilitarian and Classical emphases that stressed the study of the ‘style’ of literature) in secondary. Essentially, English in Australia, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was preoccupied with correctness, forms and patterns (Ch.2). Lasting right through the first half of the twentieth century was ‘a uniform Australian faith in the value of grammar to a child’s writing’ (pp. 96-98). Importantly, Homer sees little sense of a ‘cultural heritage’ model of English in the Australia of the first half of the twentieth century. In Australia, the emphasis, he argues, was on the knowledge of grammar and the accomplishment of good speech. Composition lessons were on formal elements of instruction in style (pp.100-104).

Brock’s histories of the development of the subject have been wide-ranging. He sees the ruling paradigm for NSW secondary English at least dominated by ‘heavy’ literature, grammar and ‘formal’ written expression (1983a: 177). His emphasis on ‘heavy’ literature gives him a somewhat different stance from Homer. For Brock and Watson, it was not the Syllabuses which directed teaching from the early 1900s until the 1950s, but rather external examinations, text-books and English teaching folklore (Brock, 1983a: 177ff; 1983b: 28-29; Watson, 1994: 34). The two key themes in which this scenario was played out were in debates over the role of literature in English and on the issue of the usefulness of grammatical study to improving writing. For example, nowhere is the prominence of ‘teaching folklore’ more evident than in the strong emphasis on teaching the rules of grammar through parsing and analysis, which was downplayed in two of the four Years 7-10 (or equivalent) Syllabuses written between 1911 and 1962, but remained ever-present in classrooms (Brock, 1983a: 176ff; 1983b: 19-22; Nay-Brock, 1984a; Watson, 1994: 34-37).

By the early 60s, although most state examination systems had dropped questions on formal analysis, popular textbooks still represented the fundamental issues of English in Australian schools as word building, sentences, paragraphs, composition, dictionary practice, paraphrasing, sentence correction, comprehension, reported speech and literary and grammatical terms. When standards were perceived as dropping with the rapid growth of secondary and technical schools after the war, the reaction was to intensify the drills. Even a major reform of secondary education in NSW in the 1960s still emphasised drill and discipline, spelling and grammar – along with some emphasis on the cultural heritage (Homer, 1973: 139-62). This period prior to 1960 was characterised by a large degree of national conformity: the use of sets of anthologies of poetry and short stories and one-act plays, spelling lists, comprehension passages, parsing, analysis, sentence correction and a fragmented curriculum (Davis & Watson, 1990: 154-56).

New Syllabuses which re-defined English in terms of new approaches such as the ‘growth’ model were to appear later, led by the revolutionary 1972 Syllabus for Years 7-10 in NSW (Homer, 1973: 162-67, 212; Brock, 1983a: 179; 1983b: 27;

1996: 46ff; Nay-Brock, 1984a: 56ff; 1984b: Ch.9). By 1970, John Dixon's influential *Growth through English*<sup>2</sup> had been widely read in Australia and was influencing the actual implementation of this latter Syllabus, as was the work of James Moffett (1968) (cf Nay-Brock, 1984b and Sawyer, 2002)<sup>3</sup>. During the 1970s and 1980s, it was not unusual to talk of English in terms of 'language development'. The 1972 Syllabus in NSW conceptualised the aim of English as 'develop(ing) in pupils the utmost personal competence in using the language' (NSW Secondary Schools Board, 1971: 4) and the content of the subjects as a triad consisting of:

- language (knowledge and manipulation of usage, vocabulary, structure, style)
- in use (skill in reading, writing, listening, speaking)
- in context (of literature, media, personal expression and everyday communication).

Slightly later in Australia, 'language development' came to be thought of in terms of another triad, this time popularised by Halliday (1980) as:

- learning language
- learning through language and
- learning about language.

This triad was well represented in, for example, the national Language Development Project, which began as a purely 'English' project at a time when 'English' and 'language' were synonymous terms (Christie, 1981).

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<sup>2</sup> *Dixon's favoured model of English, which he termed 'personal growth' focused on re-examining learning processes and the meaning for the individual student of what was being covered in English lessons. The revolution brought about by this model was in re-defining English not in terms of curriculum content, but in terms of processes. This was in contrast to what he characterised as the 'skills' and 'cultural heritage' models. The 'skills' model emphasised drills in aspects of language and literacy. The 'cultural heritage' model stressed the 'given-ness' of 'high' culture. The problem with these approaches, argued Dixon, was in ignoring the lived experience of the learner. Under the 'personal growth' model, English became defined as activity. Central activities were talking and writing and the ordering of experience that these involved. The importance of personal experience meant in turn a necessary respect for the language which students brought to the classroom and a recognition that identity was bound up with that language. As language learning up to school-age had been based on an active use of language in varying contexts, the school ought to attempt to replicate that situation, rather than to engage in 'dummy runs' at language (Dixon, 1975: Ch.2). The 1971 Syllabus' stress on active use, on processes and on communicative ability reflects these key notions. An approach that emphasised contexts and use, rather than isolated skills, required an integrated approach to curriculum structure, rather than the fragmentary approach. Thus 'integration' became a keystone of the growth model (Dixon, 1975: 32-33). The material of the classroom on which students brought to bear their organising and learning powers had usually been literature. Dixon wished to see other experiences valued as well, since 'one can also look at people and situations direct'. The life of city children, if it was to be valued as classroom experience, needed to have aspects of that experience examined. So, a thematic approach to curriculum organisation was envisaged as part of Dixon's model.*

<sup>3</sup> *The peculiarly Australian flavour of 'growth' was manifested in the widespread use of thematic teaching based on the publication of a rash of theme-based textbooks (Brock, 1983a: 178; 1983b: 28-29; Homer, 1973: 271-2).*

## 4. THE CASE OF NSW TODAY

While most of the Syllabuses or Frameworks described earlier cover the whole of schooling (or at least the compulsory years) with the same set of principles, in NSW, there are separate Syllabuses for the school levels Kindergarten – Year 6 (‘Stages 1-3’), Years 7-10 (‘Stages 4-5’: the compulsory years of high school) and Years 11-12 (‘Stage 6’: the post-compulsory years). The K-6 Syllabus is organised very much as the ACT Framework described in the previous section, with specific outcomes devoted to the skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. However, the high school (Years 7-10 and 11-12) Syllabuses are directed at outcomes which integrate these skills, such as:

- 1) responds to and composes texts for understanding, interpretation, critical analysis and pleasure
- 2) uses a range of processes for responding to and composing texts
- 3) responds to and composes texts in different technologies
- 4) uses and describes language forms and features and structures of texts appropriate to different purposes, audiences and contexts
- 8) makes connections between and among texts
- 10) identifies, considers and appreciates cultural expression in texts
- 11) uses, reflects on and assesses individual and collaborative skills for learning (BOSNSW, 2002: 13).

The current Syllabus for the post-compulsory Years 11-12 came into operation in 2000. (In NSW, ‘English’ remains compulsory in Years 11-12). 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. Thus, it was this Syllabus which helped broaden the model of English to include cultural studies with an accompanying critical literacy pedagogy, while still 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 4 ‘units’ (ie 8 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 4 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 can be represented thus:

	Written Language	Spoken Language	Visual Language
Responding Composing	Reading Writing	Listening Speaking	Viewing Representing

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'<sup>4</sup>) 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. The first two of these objections continue even today to be played out in the pages of the popular press, with neoconservatives and neoliberal commentators in Australia throughout 2005 carrying out a concerted campaign against teachers, academics and 'trendy' literary theory (Slattery, 2005; see Sawyer, 2006). On the whole, however, the new Syllabus was seen by most teachers as re-invigorating an area of the curriculum that was tired and had become dominated by the end-of-schooling examinations. In fact, the previous Syllabuses had been quite liberal and emphasised a reader-response approach to literature (see, for example, Board of Senior School Studies, 1982), but in practice, because of the examination system, classrooms had been more dominated by notions of exam preparation and often of 'correct' readings (cf. Thomson, 1987 for a critique of the previous NSW Higher School Certificate in English on these and other grounds.)

In the 'junior' (compulsory) secondary years, 7-10, the new Syllabus from which the outcomes quoted above are drawn came into operation in 2004. This 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. The importance of context and of studying texts as expressions of culture is also central to the Syllabus. Some minimal content is laid down, including compulsory 'experience' of Shakespeare in Stage 5 (Years 9-10). A genuine attempt has been made to privilege no particular school or approach to English – rather the approach of creating an 'intelligent and intellectualised eclecticism' in curriculum modeling has been taken (Sawyer & McFarlane, 2000), so that teachers are given the maximum freedom to design the version of mother-tongue education most relevant to their students.

However, today, the teaching of the mother tongue is increasingly in competition with two other forces that are an important part of the context in which English operates in Australia. These are:

- the place of literacy and
- the increasing popularity of the notion of inter-disciplinary 'Essential Learnings'.

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<sup>4</sup> *'Responding' and 'composing' were intended, in fact, as quite innocent 'collective verbs', which tried to represent all the different processes undergone by poets, dramatists, filmmakers, 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 ill-informed media satire.*



## 5. LITERACY AND ENGLISH

One debate that has strongly driven curriculum discourse in Australia – and, indeed in the UK as well – over the past few years, has been the relationship between ‘English’ and ‘literacy’. It is difficult to find a definition of subject ‘English’ that is not couched almost entirely in terms of ‘literacy’<sup>5</sup>. This is to be expected. Ultimately, the skills being developed in English are literacy skills: various manifestations of response to, and creation of, texts that we identify as reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing and (in NSW) representing. Skills that we generally recognise as ‘literacy’ are, hence, what ‘English’ is aimed at developing.

This is obviously not to suggest that ‘literacy’ of itself is able to be simply defined. Some sense of the complexity of the concept in current debate in the English-speaking world can be gleaned from the following trends:

*The dominance of a sociocultural view of literacy as social practice contesting a psychological- individualist model* (Gee, 1990; Anstey & Bull, 2004; Hasan & Williams, 1996; Maybin & Mercer, 1996; Mercer & Swann, 1996; Schirato & Yell, 1996; Street, 1997; Christie & Misson, 1998; Kramsch, 1998). Under this view, emphasis is given to the way form, function and the meanings in literacy events differ across cultures, communities, social groups and ‘literacy domains’. Resulting perspectives on literacy teaching and learning include systemic functional linguistics (Hasan & Williams, 1996; Maybin & Mercer, 1996; Schirato & Yell, 1996; Christie & Misson, 1998) and related genre-based and discourse approaches (Gee, 1990; Mercer & Swann, 1996).

*The currency of the notion of ‘multiliteracies’, contesting a monocultural, generic print-based model and highlighting both the growing significance of cultural and linguistic diversity and the influence of new communications technologies* (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Work on multi-literacies stresses understanding of language and literacy codes, multimodal reading and writing practices, multimedia authoring skills, multimedia critical analysis and internet exploration strategies. Multi-literacy approaches argue that students should be able to apply multiple semiotic modes in design and gain control of information-management problems (Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997) in order to be designers of their own social futures (Kress, 1995). The key themes that emerge from these ‘New Literacy’ studies are ‘multiplicity’, ‘hybridisation’, ‘plurality’, ‘complexity’. Curricula based on the idea that simple and ‘pure’ genres exist to be imitated as the basis of writing pedagogy, for example, is an out-dated notion in the ‘New Literacy’ studies.

*The critical literacy paradigm* which contests the sufficiency of functional models and the ideological neutrality of reading practices (Griffith, 1992; McCormick, 1994; Morgan, 1997, 2004; Lankshear et al, 1997; Prain, 1998, Misson, 2004).

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, extensive literature reviews in Sawyer and McFarlane (2000) and Meiers and Sawyer (2004).

Critical literacy has taught us to examine how texts are positioning us because of their potential power in creating identities and belief systems. It has taught us to ask the crucial question of whose interests are being served by reading texts in certain ways. 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: 17-28). Nevertheless, the perceived opposition of 'personal' and 'social' is said to constitute a fundamental distinction between critical literacy and earlier models of English, which critical literacy adherents believe had placed too much emphasis on the notion of the individual, without recognising that language users are socially constructed. According to this argument, the 'growth' model of English that emerged from Dartmouth in the mid 1960s and was popularised by John Dixon valorised a Romantic notion of the individual. Behind 'growth', it is argued, lay a particular notion of the individual as one who fashioned and shaped his/ her own world in private, often independent, ways - and also a particular notion of the responsibility of education to promote individual growth. At the same time, consequent on the cultural heritage model of English, based on the work of F. R. Leavis, was a belief in the privileged role of the English teacher as the guardian of culture and as one who offered moral positions. Thus, in this view, the 'cultural heritage' and 'growth' schools are seen as having much in common - each stressing a form of growth, and leading to a fear in teachers of intruding on the individual 'voice' (from the 'growth' model) or on individual 'response' (from Leavis) (cf Patterson, 1993, for an example of this argument). Critical literacy has become central to Australian curricula in English, though it has come under fire recently from the Right-wing press and, in response to this media criticism, at the time of writing, the Minister for Education in Queensland had ordered a revision of that state's English Syllabus.

*The notion of curriculum literacies* in which English has not just a generalised role in the development of literacy(ies), but has its own repertoire of literacy practices, which distinctively define 'English' - and that these practices parallel specific 'curriculum literacies' in other subject areas (Wyatt-Smith, 2002; Green, 2002). Each subject in effect is treated as having a peculiar set of 'literacies'. In this construction of the relationship between literacy and English, the particular 'literacies' of English include those of imagination and creativity and the systematic study of language.

In the English-speaking world generally, the relationship between those areas of the curriculum known as 'English' and 'literacy' has been notoriously hard to define. This is partly because of the complexities in defining 'literacy' outlined above, though historically these are relatively new complexities. Partly it is the simple truth that the skills developed in English *are* literacy skills - but partly, it has to do with the extent of the claims made for the territory of the subject 'English' itself. These latter have varied wildly throughout the history of the subject - from implicit claims by Moffett (1968) that English was effectively congruent with the total curriculum to views such as that of Marenbon (1994), who questions whether English should be dealing with speaking and listening at all, and argues that government mandate of

English curriculum should not go beyond teaching pupils to read fluently and accurately and to write Standard English correctly using a reasonably wide vocabulary. Such a minimalist curriculum need not go beyond the requirement that literature should be studied in some form.

In negotiating the range of possible claims for ‘English’, political concerns are as important to consider as curricular ones. We are increasingly in an era when English is having to defend its territory. Goodwyn has written extensively about current concern among English teachers in England with the effects of national rhetoric on literacy (Goodwyn, 2001, 2003) through the National Literacy strategy (NLS). The secondary version of England’s primary Literacy Hour is the Framework for English in which secondary teachers are expected to use the format and much of the content of the Literacy Hour. The resulting frustration among British teachers of English is summed up well in a chapter of his entitled ‘We teach English not literacy’:

The NLS (and literacy as defined by the NLS) is actually very dull stuff, which does little to nurture children’s imaginations. It neglects the aesthetic experience of English.

It is lamentable that the term ‘English’ and ‘Literature’ are progressively (like a spreading fungus) being usurped by the term ‘Literacy’. (Goodwyn, 2003: 125).

In fact, the new NSW Syllabus in English has been developed against a background of an increasing regimen of state-wide literacy tests from Years 3-10 in that state – a regimen that has recently been given increasingly high stakes by the national Minister for Education who has mandated national reporting of schools’ results in a ‘league table’ model. Testing regimes are not dominating in Australia because of any genuine lack of literacy ability among students – in PISA 2000 and 2003 only Finland scored higher than Australia in reading literacy in a statistically significant sense. Rather, the testing regimes are about political messages around the accountability of teachers. Moreover, Australia has a strong tradition of ignoring the reality of students’ test scores in literacy and manufacturing literacy crises for a range of political ends (Sawyer, 1999, 2006). Currently those ends are carried by neoliberal discourses around ‘choice’ in education in ways that directly echo the Thatcher agenda in the 1980s UK. Manufactured literacy crises are always the first plank of the Right in downgrading the public system through an emphasis on ‘choice’ (Sawyer, 2006).

Literacy and English do not necessarily marry easily. It is probably in NSW that the separation of the two is most stark. In NSW, literacy 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 the late 1980s became both separated from 'English' and narrowed, at least as far as the assessment of 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 (NSWDSECD, 1997a: 3).

These aims generally echoed the objectives of the 'Modes' of the then still current 1987 English Syllabus for Years 7-10. The definition of 'literacy' contained in the former 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: 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', ie there is genuine cross-curricular imperative driving it, rather than one based only in English. 'Literacy', in practice, has replaced the concept 'language across the curriculum' in NSW. Moreover, a particular view of that concept was 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. (NSWDSECD,1997a: 12).

Drawing on the work of Freebody & Luke (1990), the teaching of reading is divided into four 'roles': code-breaker, text-user, text-participant and text-analyst (NSW

DETCSD, 1999). In practice, this entails the use of traditional DARTS<sup>6</sup>-oriented (cf Lunzer & Gardiner, 1984) strategies such as prediction, cloze and retelling (NSWSECD 1997b). In writing, the approach in early documents was based strongly on modelling of genres (or ‘text types’) as described above – an approach that has broadened greatly in official documentation, but is still reinforced by the form of assessment (NSWDETCSD, 1999).

With the production of *Teaching literacy in English in Year 7* (NSWDETCSD, 1998), the split between the concepts ‘English’ and ‘literacy’ in NSW would seem to have become entrenched, at least for government schools.

## 6. ESSENTIAL LEARNINGS

A similarly important issue for English is an increasing trend among state governments in Australia to prioritise inter/trans-disciplinary generic skills as the basis of schooling outcomes. Three examples will suffice.

From 2006, the state of Victoria has replaced its Curriculum Standards Framework as the basis for organising the curriculum with ‘Essential Learning Standards’. These are organised into three ‘strands’ of learning:

- Physical, personal and social learning (ie Health and physical education; Interpersonal development; Personal learning; Civics and citizenship)
- Discipline-based learning (ie The Arts; English; Humanities, Languages other than English; Mathematics; Science) and
- Interdisciplinary learning (ie Communication; Design, creativity and technology; Information and communications technology; Thinking) (VCAA, 2005)

This organisation reaches a compromise between traditional discipline-based curriculum such as English and interdisciplinary curriculum such as Communication, with the latter stressing a range of literacies (eg print, digital, visual) and a range of media.

The state of Queensland continues to trial the New Basics project in which fifty-nine schools throughout Queensland are embarked upon a trans-disciplinary curriculum plan of ‘rich tasks’ (QDEA, 2004). The ‘new basics’ curriculum organisers are:

- Life pathways and social futures
- Multiliteracies and communications media
- Active citizenship
- Environments and technologies

An example of a ‘rich task’ for Year 9 that reflects the strands of ‘active citizenship’ and ‘multiliteracies and communications media’ is: ‘Students will make forceful speeches on an issue of international or national significance to three unlike audiences in different forums’. Research into the topic itself and into the linguistic demands of different audiences is seen to drive the ‘richness’ of the task.

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<sup>6</sup> Lunzer and Gardiner coined the term DARTS – Directed Activities Related to Texts – to refer to a range of strategies aimed at active comprehension – such as cloze, sequencing, prediction etc.

The most radical approach has been in Australia's smallest state, Tasmania. Tasmania has developed an Essential Learnings Framework, mandating its curriculum around five 'curriculum organisers':

- Thinking (creating inquiring and reflective thinkers)
- Communicating (creating effective communicators in a range of symbolic systems)
- Personal Futures (creating self-directed, ethical people)
- Social Responsibility (creating responsible citizens prepared to participate actively in a democratic community) and
- World Futures (creating citizens willing to act to maintain and enhance local and global environments) (DETT, 2004).

However, unlike Victoria, assessment and reporting is to be done entirely based on the Essential Learnings framework, rather than through traditional disciplines such as English. Hence, in Tasmania, schools doing admittedly very innovative and worthwhile things in inter-disciplinary curricula could theoretically effectively avoid the study of literature or film, for example. 'Literacy' is a part of Communicating, but the study and analysis of language for its own sake, or in the aesthetic mode such as through literature or film, is not mandated. A very functional approach to literacy could be taken in a Communicating paradigm<sup>7</sup>.

Of course, my separating the issue of literacy from the issue of inter-disciplinary essential learnings is somewhat artificial. A glance at those Essential Learnings-type frameworks outlined above reveals a common emphasis on literacy skills ('communication' in Victoria, 'multiliteracies' in Queensland and 'communicating' in Tasmania).

## 7. CONSTRUCTIONS OF ENGLISH-AS-MOTHER-TONGUE

Will English-as-mother-tongue be engaged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a territorial battle to defend its central place in school curriculum? Are the twin drives towards 'essential skills' and literacy driving a particular construction of 'English'? To answer that, we need to consider again just what we mean by 'English' as a discipline of study. Earlier I discussed the tendency in the 1970s and 1980s to equate 'English' with 'language'. In the conceptualisations of the subject as 'learning language', 'learning about language' and 'learning through language', one could conceive of the discipline English in that era as about:

- developing knowledge about aspects of language such as items of usage
- developing knowledge about the ways creators of texts manipulate aspects of structure and style
- developing knowledge about specific literary and media texts
- developing knowledge about specific techniques used in literary and media texts

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<sup>7</sup> *At the time of this article going to press, Tasmania has significantly modified this curriculum and schools will now be reporting against traditional discipline skills*

- developing knowledge about specific techniques in items of everyday communication
- widening one's vocabulary
- developing one's own skills in the usage and the manipulation of aspects of structure and style
- developing one's own macro-skills as a reader, writer, listener and speaker
- developing one's own ability to make sense of one's world through using reading, writing, listening and speaking
- using reading, writing, listening and speaking as tools for developing one's understanding of subject content.

This list would be considered ambitious even today, let alone 20-30 years ago, but the subject has moved into more complex realms as outlined earlier. The current Syllabus for Years 7-10 in NSW revolves around a set of outcomes which:

- extend the earlier sets of skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing by adding the visual language skills of *viewing* and *representing*
- extend the objective of language *appropriateness* into language *effectiveness*
- extend the areas of thinking encompassed by previous Syllabuses from the imaginative and interpretive into the *critical* (in the sense encompassed by the term 'critical literacy' )
- extend the notion of self-expression into an expression of *relationships with others and the world* and
- add a significant element of *reflection* and *meta-cognition* (BOSNSW, 2002: 13).

Another way of conceptualising English is to view it through the lens of the various models of the subject. One set of such models is that put forward by Cox:

- the 'personal growth' model, which emphasises the relationship between language and learning in the individual child and the role of literature in developing imaginative and aesthetic lives
- a 'cross-curricular' view which emphasises the role of all teachers in teaching subject language
- an 'adult needs' view, which emphasises communicative skills
- a 'cultural heritage' view which stresses appreciation of the great works of the language
- a 'cultural analysis' view – which by Cox's definition combines what in Australia we would probably disaggregate into 'cultural studies' as content and 'critical literacy' as a method (Cox, 1991: 21-22).

In these conceptualisations of the subject, English would probably be thought of as at least:

- developing one's imaginative capabilities
- developing one's ability to use language to shape one's understandings of the world ('personal growth')
- developing one's ability to manipulate the language structures and forms of various subject disciplines ('cross curricular')

- developing one's own skills in the usage and the manipulation of aspects of structure and style
- developing one's own macro-skills as a reader, writer, listener and speaker ('adult needs')
- developing knowledge in the broadest sense about specific literary texts ('cultural heritage')
- developing knowledge in the broadest sense about a broad range of texts
- bringing to bear on textual analysis the techniques of a range of disciplines
- developing one's ability to critique the ideology(ies) of a broad range of texts ('cultural analysis')

With the exception of the 'cross-curricular' model – almost by definition, not actually 'English' – the 'intelligent and intellectualised eclecticism' mentioned earlier can be seen in the ways the current NSW Syllabus reflects these models. The issue becomes, then, whether such Syllabuses can meet the twin challenges of the drive to literacy and the drive to inter-disciplinary 'Essential Learnings'.

One of the most promising developments in English in Australia for some time has been a curriculum model put forward by Howie (2005), which suggests that the competing models of the last forty years could be reconciled in classroom programming if teachers were to take an approach to English through sets of 'frames'. Howie's model reconciles:

- the personal growth model (as 'subjective frame') with
- a social view of language (as 'structural frame') and with
- a view that students' responding and composing are culturally situated (as 'cultural frame') and with
- critical literacy (as 'critical frame').

His is a recursive model in which texts are re-visited through the different frames for increasingly deeper understandings within any lesson sequence. The model has great potential for taking English into the future and beyond some of the 'either-or' positions which proponents of, say, any of Cox's models seem to take.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The breadth of subject matter designated under the discipline heading 'English' is greater than that so far valued as 'literacy', the latter partly represented in NSW by the ELLA tests. Whether the inter-disciplinary nature of Essential Learnings will reflect a similar breadth in its approach is yet to be seen. Among the designers of the Queensland 'New Basics', for example, is one prominent curriculum theorist who apparently sees poetry as 'a minority interest, a kind of cultural and aesthetic specialty' to be indulged 'outside school' (quoted in Misson & Morgan, 2005). Even allowing for rhetorical flourish here, and for the fact that the quoted theorist is far from a traditionalist on curriculum and literacy issues, being a leading advocate of critical literacy, the quote highlights essentially different world views between English-as-discipline and English-as-literacy.

The whole issue is further muddied by the fact that the New Right in particular in Australia has created a public outcry against frameworks such as Essential Learn-



ings as part of a more general attack on outcomes-based education. This debate has not originated within education circles but in the media, where the main objection to outcomes-based education seems to be that it is content-free (for example, Donnelly, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). These commentators seem to be – or pretend to be – unaware that content-based Syllabuses can also have outcomes – as is the case in NSW. The attack, however, is an opportunistic one itself played out within a more general attack on standards of literacy and on education generally (cf Sawyer, 2006). The extent of the criticism in the media was such during 2005-6 that the Western Australian Premier withdrew plans for an outcomes-based Year 12 certificate.

Given these current media attacks on standards of literacy in Australia, it seems ironic that they should attack the very curriculum framework model which potentially puts an emphasis on literacy skills ahead of a richer, conceptually broader notion of English. Of course, such attacks are mounted in the name of a traditional canon, not in the name of an inclusive curriculum which values both the canon and more contemporary texts and media. The attacks on outcomes-based education remain ironic nevertheless and seem to be a case where neoconservative valuing of cultural tradition comes up against neoliberal valuing of skills for the economy.

Neoconservatives want a return to cultural traditionalism, whilst fellow traveller neoliberals want a skills-based curriculum, even if they do not recognise one when they see it in the form of Essential Learnings. Some critical literacy theorists and architects of Essential Learnings-type frameworks see English-disciplinary concerns as outdated, despite attacks from media commentators on those same curricula for being too ‘trendy’. Thus English-as-discipline creates a set of odd bedfellows as opponents. In the midst of this is a Syllabus like that in NSW attempting to be inclusive. As always, what we have in Australia is a very volatile public space being occupied by the teaching of the mother tongue.

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