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Arts and Language Education Department

November 15 2006

Draft Curriculum Feedback
Ministry of Education
PO Box 1666
Thorndon
Wellington

Dear people

We are making this submission as a literacy team in the Department of Arts and Language Education Department. All of us are engaged in teacher education and in research into English/literacy/language education in some form.

Our submission is quite specific in its focus and addresses the following concerns:

1. The eight-level structure of achievement objectives
2. The essence statement
3. Textual categorization in relation to English and the use of the term "visual"
4. Knowledge about language
5. Key competencies: Thinking

1. The eight-level structure of achievement objectives

There are two issues here. The first is an issue of process. Our understanding is that the persistence of eight-level "competence ladders" was never negotiable. This is startling and disturbing in view of submissions on the *1993 Draft: English in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Duthie Educational Consultancy, 1994). Let us quote from Duthie's executive summary as a reminder that *all* sectors saw the eight-level structure as flawed:

Duthie's recommendation:

"...the eight-level structure be reconsidered in the light of the strong body of critical opinion."

Key Submissions:

"There is little confidence in the eight-level model as it is not based on any supporting educational research."

Primary Schools:

"...It is felt by many teachers that there is no justification for the division into eight

levels.”

Secondary Schools:

“There is strong and forcefully expression opposition to the eight levels outlined in the document.”

Individual Submissions:

“The division into eight levels remains controversial; no responses support either the linear structure or the divisions of the levels which are perceived to be vague, artificially constructed and lacking a research base.”

“The apparent linear nature of the levels “...contradicts what is known about the spiral nature of language development, and seems to run counter to the document”’s emphasis on a holistic approach to student-centred learning.”

Quoting Warwick Elley:

“He believes that it does not succeed in presenting a clear progression of achievement, and that it is quite inadequate as a basis for summative assessment by classroom teachers.”

Professor Elley contends that a logician would have a field day identifying the faults in the statements of achievement objectives which were intended to show the progression from Level 1 to Level 8. Most are characterised by vague to relative terms which may be useful for teaching objectives but are quite unhelpful for distinguishing children’s performance levels.”

We believe that these comments are as relevant in 2006 as they were in 1993 and we wonder why it is that these concerns have never been taken seriously. Subsequent research by one of us into responses of two generations of English teachers to curriculum and assessment reforms (Locke, 2001), found that a clear majority of all respondents preferred the way objectives were formulated in the old *Statement of Aims* (Department of Education, 1983) to the eight-level, AO structure of *English in the New Zealand Curriculum*. A significantly larger majority of older teachers preferred the 1983 *Statement*, $X^2(1, N = 107) = 4.86, p < .05$. But even among newer teachers, a clear majority preferred the older document as compared to the minority preferring the new curriculum’s formulation of outcomes.

Of course teachers need to be concerned with sequenced learning. That is what good teaching is about. The second issue for us, and the key basis for our opposition to the current system of levels, is that the implied sequence is flawed and illogical. Our argument, which in some ways restates the Duthie concerns, is as follows (see Figure 1). A young person developing increased literacy competence might be expected, as he or she becomes older, to increase both the range and degree of sophistication of texts they are competent in as readers and composers (y and z axes of Figure 1). One might reasonably expect a curriculum document avowedly concerned with sequenced learning to have these aspects covered. However, the notion of increased sophistication has a rather muted presence in only the “Processes and Strategies” strand and is problematically connected to “expressing” ideas rather than “reading” them. Curiously, it finds a mention in the last section of the “essence” statement, but this is not reflected in the wording of the AO (outcomes) ladders.

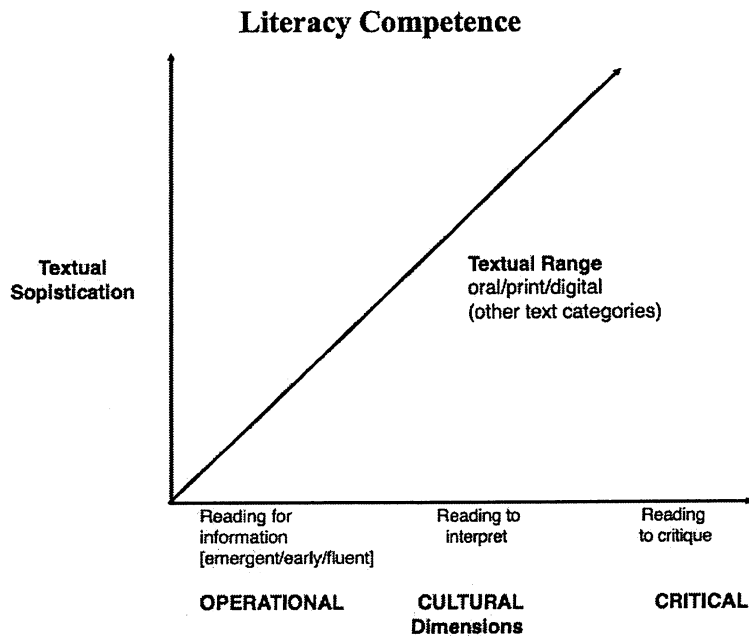


Figure 1: Aspects of literacy development

What we term “dimensions” of literacy in Figure 1 (x-axis) are generally constructed in the new document’s AO ladders as some kind of developmental sequence. In this respect the model is flawed. There is plenty of research (including research in New Zealand) which finds that young readers and writers can be critical thinkers, “show a discriminating understanding”, be “insightful”, and so on. In suggesting that such abilities appertain only to older readers and writers, we are at risk of publishing a “nonsense” curriculum and “dumbing down” the learning of our younger pupils.

Recommendation:

Scrap the eight levels and replace them with sets of indicative learning and programme objectives in four bands.

2. The essence statement

The essence statement is a reductivist and simplistic text that glides over issues related to language, literacy and subject English. See Appendix 1 for a text that deconstructs the current essence statement.

Recommendation:

Scrap the essence statements and make the production of well written, well researched, small, teacher-friendly and usable Learning Area Handbooks a priority in the next year. Such handbooks should open up debate, identify issues, be research based, and resist simplistic closure on complex issues.

3. Textual categorization in relation to English and the use of the term “visual”

The draft curriculum of 2006 constantly refers to “oral, written, and visual texts”. This apparently straightforward set of categories is actually a miscategorisation since, for example, written texts are examples of visual language. We find ourselves drawing the inescapable conclusion that not a lot of thinking has occurred on the nature of the visual since the publication of *Exploring Language* in 1996. Now that the 21st Century has arrived, one wonders why there was no consideration to dividing texts into oral, print and digital categories. These categories *are* mutually exclusive.

In respect of the “visual”, we would make the following points:

- Considerations of the visual and its relationship to literacy cannot be separated from broad considerations about human meaning-making, or the way human beings deploy “meaning-making resources”.
- Non-linguistic imaging has a place in human meaning-making.
- There is a difference between visual perception and human cognition.
- Images can be visual, aural, tactile, gustatory and olifactory.
- Images have personal and socio-cultural (discursive) associations.
- Non-linguistic imaging has a part to play in meaning-making around the reception and production of both oral language and written texts because words and images are closely associated in memory. The role of spontaneous and induced imagery in enhancing reading comprehension in science and other domains is well documented.
- The visual is not always linguistic; nor is the linguistic always visual.
- There is a broad category of language which can be categorized as visual.
- “Visual literacy” and “visual language” are not synonymous.
- “Visual language” has a number of categories.
- Literacies are technologies.
- “Visual literacy” has two dimensions:
 1. A critical understanding of the way a range of visual language features function as meaning-making resources in a range of texts.
 2. An understanding of the role of non-linguistic imaging in meaning-making around texts.
- Categorising texts as aural, written or visual is misleading. All texts are multimodal. Written texts should be read with the ear and the eye, for example. A story read aloud will appeal to a listener’s reservoir of images and this reservoir will be drawn on in meaning-making.
- Different kinds of texts engage readers and writers in different kinds of thinking. Changes in literate practices produce changes in cognition.
- While one can think about human meaning-making as a single and singular capacity, different kinds of texts (genres) serving different purposes with different audience pose unique challenges for composers and readers.

- Bill Cope, Mary Kalantzis, Gunther Kress and other members of the New London Group, draw attention to two factors productive of a state of affairs they associate with the term “multiliteracies”:
 1. A proliferation of meaning-making resources and the affordances offered by digitization to combine these multimodally in new and hybrid text-types.
 2. Increased cultural and linguistic diversity in a range of settings.
- If all texts are multimodal, then the visual has a place in all teaching concerned with the composition and reading/listening to of texts.
- At the same time, attention needs to be given to the judicious selection of text types across core papers so that student-teachers become conversant with the demands of a range of texts.

As indicated in our second recommendation, a Learning Area Handbook would help develop and disseminate some basic understandings about text, medium, mode, representational resource, meaning-making, and so on.

Recommendation:

Replace the categories “oral, written and visual” with “oral, print, and digital”.

4. Knowledge about language

It is clear that the draft curriculum has been developed without a clear understanding of what knowledge about language means in the context of an English/literacy programme. Teachers in New Zealand began grappling with the issue of grammar, metalanguage and issues of appropriate classroom discourse using a metalanguage during the development phase of *Exploring Language* (Learning Media, 1996). However, the Ministry of Education failed to fund the follow-up professional development programme that was recommended at the time. Ten years down the track we are paying for it. Metalinguistic knowledge may well be the single biggest current “gap” in teachers’ content knowledge.

Currently, there are some major unresolved issues about knowledge about language, and this irresolution is reflected in the inadequate way both the English essence statement and the AO ladders “construct” knowledge about language. These issues include:

- What is meant by grammar or knowledge about language?
- Which and whose grammar provides the best basis for developing a metalanguage suited to classroom talk around texts?
- How can metalinguistic knowledge reflected in classroom talk help learning?

We argue that the strand headings use the term “language feature” in a problematic and reductive way. We say reductive, because they appear to be telling teachers that

“language features” can be reduced to word, sentence and punctuation features, and that structure is *not* a language feature. We could say a lot more about this.

Recommendation: Replace the “Language Features” and “Structure” strands with a single strand “Understandings about language”.

5. Key Competencies: Thinking

This section of the Draft Curriculum that describes types of thinking processes uses terminology that is somewhat problematic. For example, it is unclear why it was felt necessary to make a distinction between metacognitive and reflective processes, and indeed whether there is any distinction between the two processes, and what this distinction, if any, would mean in practice.

This section also describes three (or four) types of thinking (or thinking processes), creative, critical and reflective, consistent with the literature. What is not clear from the document is why caring thinking and memory thinking have been silenced? In respect to caring thinking (Lipman, Millet and others) this seems especially curious given the emphasis on values (see page 10 of the *Draft Curriculum*).

This section also refers to “Students who have well-developed thinking and problem-solving skills...” There are at least two concerns around the use of the nomenclature “skills”. The first is the use of “skills” rather than “strategies” or “tools”. Skills are largely automatic, subconscious and over-learned behaviours that by definition lack a metacognitive or reflective dimension. Is this the competency the Draft Curriculum should capture or is the document referring to the strategic behaviour of a literate thinker? The intention is unclear. Secondly, there seems to be an inconsistency between the use of “skill” in this section and the use of “Processes and Strategies” in the English Achievement Objectives Levels One – Eight that deserves further attention.

On a much broader level, the focus on thinking generally and the use of appropriate comprehension strategies and on thinking critically about texts (which accommodates a range of approaches) is welcomed. However, the Victorian (Australia) Curriculum, especially in respect to their construction of a Thinking Domain within an Inter-Disciplinary strand captures a dimension that might be included in the Ministry’s Draft Curriculum.

Recommendation: Attend to the nomenclature around thinking and add caring and memory thinking as descriptors. Consider the advantages of an Interdisciplinary Strand to the Draft Curriculum.

These comments and recommendations are our contribution to what we hope is a genuine debate about some very serious issues. We trust that the experience of those who sent submissions in response to the 1993 Draft English curriculum document is not repeated in 2006.

Yours sincerely

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*For myself and
behalf of the below.*

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Appendix 1: The quintessentially non-essential character of English

English is irreducible, multifarious, plenitudinous. An umbrella to gather under. A gathering place for the enactment of rich, heteroglossic conversations about the nature of textual practices in a welter of contexts – about the ways in which texts are produced, read and disseminated and the forces at work in all of these processes.

Do we contradict ourselves. Yes, we contradict ourselves.

English is more than literacy. Literacy is a cognitive, social and technologically mediated practice, utilizing agreed systems of signification, to communicate messages about experience. It is in some ways bigger than English, yet has the potential to reduce it. English as literacy is in danger of being de-historised, of becoming a mere shadow of itself.

English is yoked to the history of a language. It carries with it into classrooms the burden and glory of countless invasions, triumphs, oppressions, insights, injustices and accords. It is written large in its many transformations over time and in the thoughts of the peoples and cultures that have both mastered and been mastered by it.

To think of it as one thing is to suppress knowledge of the discourses that are woven into its history as a subject, and to render invisible and speechless the marvelous voices that have spoken out of those discourses.

There is no single version of subject English.

One discursive orientation seeks out the ground of a traditional body of knowledge (including a canon of precious texts and knowledge about language) which is to be valued and inculcated as a means of “rounding out” learners so that they become fully participating and discriminating members of a society or culture. Such an orientation values appreciation and emulation, deference and acculturation. But English is more than that.

Another orientation argues that it is valuable to engage in literary and language-centred enterprises because this facilitates the personal, individual growth of learners, for whom the acquisition of certain linguistic competencies will play a central role in their ongoing task of making sense of their world. Such a view values self-realisation through meaning-making, creative exploration and personal integration. But English is more than that.

Another orientation, at its worst, promotes a decontextualised knowledge about language and the acquisition of grammatical skills based on narrow definitions of competence. On the other hand, such an emphasis can also mean valuing the mastery of the forms and conventions of a range of textual practices or genres deemed to be socially significant. Such an orientation values the formal mastery of textual practices, pragmatic competence and social adeptness. But English is more than that.

A socio-critical orientation puts a value on encouraging language-users to see themselves as engaged in textual acts which are part of a wider set of discursive practices that actively produce and sustain patterns of dominance and subordination in the wider society and offer members of society prescribed ways of being particular sorts of people. Such a view values critical linguistic analysis, detachment and social transformation. But English is more than that.

English is more than all of these things.

It was when I said,
“There is no such thing as the truth,”
That the grapes seemed fatter.
The fox ran out of his hole.

You. . . You said,
“There are many truths,
But they are not parts of a truth.”
Wallace Stevens (“On the Way Home”)

There is no such thing as “the English essence”. Likewise, there are many truths about the text maker, the reader or attender to texts, the text, the meaning-making mind, meaning itself, language and other sign systems, technological mediation and the influence of social context. Acknowledging this multiplicity enriches our conversations around texts, deepens the savour of the fruit and unleashes the foxes of thought.

Terry Locke