



The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English Inc

## **Introduction**

The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English is a voluntary group of professionals drawn from the three educational sectors: Government, Catholic and Independent, and includes as well individuals who work or have interests in other spheres of education. VATE's major focus is secondary English.

Feedback compiled in this document has been informed by responses from:

- members of VATE Curriculum Committee
- participants in a National Curriculum working-party
- participants in a National Curriculum forum held at the VATE State Conference 2008
- members of VATE Council
- participants in the VATE Middle Years Conference

It should be noted from the outset that there have been real concerns about the impact of time constraints on organisations such as VATE, wishing to inform and effectively canvass the views of members and provide representative feedback on the framing document. For this reason, the following document is offered as a reflection of the views of a range of people within the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE) community.

## **General Comments**

It is gratifying that this document provides a way to draw upon expertise and knowledge of English curriculum and pedagogy from around Australia. Overall the National English Curriculum: Framing Paper has been received very well. Many teachers have welcomed the consultation process and the fact they have a voice in the development of the National English Curriculum.

For some time, Federal and State governments have been committed to increasing levels of post-compulsory student retention. No-one can doubt the centrality of competency in English as a core component of this commitment. Consequently, a variety of versions and forms of English have emerged in Years 10-12. In Victoria, like other states and territories, a range of forms of English has evolved, including the uniquely Victorian study of English Language (linguistics) and the Literacy strand of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). It is imperative that the final version of the National English Curriculum is neither prescriptive nor proscriptive, and that considerable flexibility in specific content and pedagogy is available so that individual providers can make appropriate decisions based on local needs.

The document highlights the fact that the acquisition of language, literature and literacy skill is a continuous process. Literacy skills include the capacity not only to read and understand the printed word, but to understand also the ways in which spoken and visual texts seek to entertain, inform, persuade and argue. It is essential that students be able, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,

to read and understand an array of text types, printed, spoken, visual and digital, since all of these are used to convey information and ideas in our contemporary world.

The National English curriculum documents must be designed so that individual teachers are enabled to implement locally designed curricula across the (enormous) range of Australia-wide teaching and learning contexts. The view that current or at least recent classroom practitioners, rather than writers removed from the contemporary classroom situation, should be centrally involved in the writing, was widely held.

The final curriculum documents will inevitably give rise to decisions about assessment. Teachers have raised concerns about test and exam-driven curricula which rob teachers of much of their professional discretion and wherein students are drilled to perform effectively in national tests or subjected to a curriculum that has 'trickled down' from the assessment regime in place for the final year of schooling.

Such pressures inevitably lead to an enacted curriculum that is narrower and more reductive – and ultimately far less effective- than might otherwise have been the case.

Assessment of a national curriculum needs to be discussed openly. The creation of units of work by curriculum writers will invariably lead to ways to assess. The final version of these essential and critically important curricular documents needs to be highly attuned to the real needs of students in school and the ramifications of such curriculum in practice in the classroom.

There were questions about the meaning of 'norms of curriculum' (paragraph 42) Can this be clarified?

There was strong support for the sentiments stated in the Futures Orientation of the framing paper. Specifically

- the recognition that students in Australian schools are heading for a variety of work sites and vocational pathways
- the recognition of diversity. Victoria, like other states, offers a range of Englishes including the study of English Language. It is important that there are choices in the later years of English to cater for the diversity of students.

There are numbers of skills that most teachers see as integral to the teaching of English that cut across the three elements, in quality learning and teaching. These should be reflected in the document. They are

- Awareness of learning  
Students need to be able to reflect on and critically analyse their own learning, their own and others subjectivities and their own and others use of language (Victoria has addressed this through the introduction of the interdisciplinary strands in the Victorian Essential Learning Statements (VELS), for example 'Personal Learning');
- Oral communication  
This needs stronger emphasis in the document. Reading and writing is incorporated across all three elements whereas speaking & listening appears to be somewhat devalued as a form of communication. Students also 'read' and produce spoken texts. For example paragraph 71 could read: 'Similarly processes and strategies that support comprehension and expression in reading, writing and **speaking** will also underpin more proficient, analytic and

effective uses of English.’

- **Active Citizenship**  
(In Victoria this comes under the interdisciplinary strand of ‘Civics and Citizenship’). Perhaps paragraph 44 could mention active understanding of and participation in a democratic society (for which individuals need effective understanding of the language of reason and persuasion and the ways that different contexts shape the language chosen).
  - **Critical Literacy skills**  
While this term is not used in the document the skills must be emphasised as important in the elements. (These sentiments were particularly strong and consistent in the feedback received by VATE).
- **Collaborative Learning and Working**  
Students need to be able to communicate collaboratively and critically across differing contexts and texts. A strong component of this is speaking and listening skills, which are not emphasised enough in the document. The feedback received suggested there needs to be more mention of speaking and listening skills.
- **Awareness of purpose, audience and context in language, literature and literacy**
- **Visual literacy**  
This could receive greater emphasis in the Framing Document. For example, film is rarely mentioned and more examples could be provided in the body of the document.
- The feedback received also suggested learning how to label so-called ‘persuasive techniques’ is insufficient to prepare students to effectively participate in the adult world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Rather, students should be enabled to undertake a close analysis of the ways that language is used to persuade, across a wide range of contexts, including the media, and learn how to present and support their own views effectively.

## **The three elements**

### **Element 1: Language: Knowledge about English**

#### **We support**

- paragraph 51, that English makes possible the coherence and cumulative learning across the school years
- further development of paragraph 55, since language should be taught in context using a range of texts that reflect student diversities.

#### **We recommend that**

- greater clarification be given about the notion of grammar and the concept metalanguage (eg. para 79). Concerns were raised about students’ abilities to ‘label’ or ‘list’ metalanguage becoming the main focus, rather than its use as a language tool to assist students discussing their written and spoken texts (and those of other writers/speakers), and to assist teachers when discussing ways students can improve their work.
- notions of appropriateness and effectiveness of language features be preferred over those of ‘correctness’.

## Element 2: Literature: Informed Appreciation of Literature

### We support

- paragraphs 58 – 65, that literature is vital for enriching young learners' lives and expanding the scope of their experience. However, this must be facilitated through the inclusion of a range of texts that are both accessible and appropriate for the extraordinarily diverse Australian student cohort at any level of schooling. Guidelines provided in the selection of texts and pedagogical approaches must reflect this diversity and range (literature also includes texts such as films, cartoons and blogs) and allow for the exercise of teachers' professional judgement.
- a pedagogical model which allows for the advocacy of a range of views and presents the opportunity for the development of consensus through constructive exploration of difference.

### We recommend that

- the notion of a variety of modalities is emphasised more strongly. In the current document, literature is defined largely as print; the examples provided are all print. Passing mention is made of multimodal forms but the document does not refer to visual texts and film as such. Non-fiction forms include documentary, for example – commonly used in English classrooms. 'Modalities' should acknowledge the advent of e-language (which contains features of both spoken and written modes) and the consequential blurring of lines between spoken and written language. Rather than stating that the modes have different 'strengths and weaknesses', it would be preferable to focus on the relative appropriateness of modes according to the context and purpose for which they are used. The danger is that the written form will seem to have greater status in the document, or that spoken and written modalities are not distinguished sufficiently from each other. For example, they are lumped together as having a particular function and contrasted with 'other modalities' – a vague term in itself.
- clarifications of terms such as the 'canon' of Australian Literature be considered. There was some concern about the strong focus on the 'canonical'. Is 'canonical' literature always appropriate in all classes; how does this address diversity of needs and interests? The aesthetic/imaginative/emotional/creative side of subject English needs to be reclaimed, but in combination with critical literacy (see Misson & Morgan, 2006). Texts should not be valued merely for their canonic place in Western society. Similarly, the range of what constitutes 'literary texts' needs exploration.
- issues of cultural capital, disadvantage and inequities within what is taught in the classroom be taken into account in shaping the National English Curriculum. Teachers need to be assured that there will be no set text lists (point 99 states 'systematic program of study in literature'.) Mandated text lists do not allow for the diversity of students across Australia.
- Australian literature that recognises multiple Australian identities existing in our multicultural society (eg *Unpolished Gem* by Alice Pung) be highly valued in the national English curriculum.
- while Australian literature is an essential part of the English curriculum, world literature also has a part to play. Australian people come from all over the world, so students should have the opportunity to experience world literature, not just Australian and Asian literature. This could also include literature originally written in a language other than English. The statement should be broadened to acknowledge this.

- reference be made to students creating texts, not only to ‘reading and viewing’ texts. The document emphasises receptive appreciation by students but says much less about their active production of texts.
- greater emphasis be given to the overall discourse structure of text and its relationship with the constructedness of meaning in text.

### **Element 3: Literacy: Evolving Repertoires of English Usage**

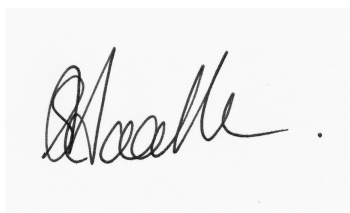
#### **We support**

- paragraph 66, specifically as it presents the opportunity to engage students with a range of oral and written texts, perhaps broadening to visual texts, as well as emphasising multi-modal forms of communication.
- paragraph 68, with its focus on the application of Language
- paragraph 69, in that it suggests the importance of multi-modal texts throughout all school years.
- paragraphs 70-72, as it highlights the need for purposeful and productive communication in a variety of modalities, and that knowledge about language should be not only practical and purposeful, but also analytical, critical and enabling.

#### **We recommend that**

- since paragraphs 43 and 46 establish the case for English as a discipline within its own right, greater emphasis should be given to the fact that all teachers are teachers of language and thus *all* teachers are literacy teachers. On the other hand, the idea that English teachers are specialists in the relationship between language, ideas and culture, should be acknowledged by the framing paper.
- greater recognition be given to the idea that notions of literacy relate not only to print but also visual and digital texts.
- the notion of multiliteracies be emphasised more strongly in the Elements.

Submitted on behalf of VATE

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Susanne Haake', followed by a period. The signature is written in a cursive style.

Susanne Haake  
President.  
27.2.09