

## *Editorial*

### *Knowledge about Language and the Australian Curriculum: Implications for teachers and students*

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In this Special Focus Issue, our concern is primarily, but not exclusively with implications of The Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2012), developed as part of the new Australian Curriculum. The nature of the English Curriculum has placed questions about the language and knowledge about language at the forefront of educational debates in Australia. With its central Strands of **Language**, **Literacy** and **Literature**, this Curriculum highlights the role of language in learning. It points to the importance of teachers' understanding of the increasing demands of academic language and literacy that students face as they engage at deeper levels with discipline knowledge across the years of primary school and into secondary school. It also raises questions about the extent to which students need to develop an explicit knowledge about language.

Debates about language and knowledge about language, in Australia and elsewhere, are not new. At various times in the past, questions about the nature of language and literacy and the value of teaching about language and literacy (and which language and literacy) have generated hot debate. Examples of this were evident during the early 1990s in Australia with the introduction of genre pedagogy; in the late 1990s with the release of the NSW English K-6 curriculum and then the Commonwealth Literacy for All Strategy. However, in recent years such questions have been largely subsumed under more general debates about assessment, benchmarks and national standards, and about overall quality of teaching.

As in the past when questions about language and literacy were prominent, current debates around the Australian Curriculum: English have been wide-ranging and intense. They have raised questions about the relationship between language and literacy; about the relationship between digital literacy and language. Some of the most vocal participants in the debates have argued for the place of the 'basics', including phonological awareness, spelling, punctuation and grammar in language and literacy education. Ensuing debates have generally not questioned the importance of these components, but their relative priority in relation to a broader emphasis on text level organisation and cohesion; on overall fluency in reading and writing; and on the place of multimodal and critical literacy in language and literacy education. There is evidence of broad agreement amongst educators that grammar should be part of the English Curriculum, but intense disagreement over which grammar,

and to what end grammar should be taught. There is agreement that oral language needs to be included, but disagreement over what this means. There is agreement that students should be able to engage critically with information that is available to them aurally, digitally or in written texts, but disagreement about the place and priority of critical literacy.

There is general acknowledgement amongst educators of the importance of language and literacy support for students; however, there is also persistent research evidence that teachers lack confidence in the extent of their knowledge of language and literacy and in their abilities to provide support for their students in this area. For example, in an investigation of primary teachers' responses to the NSW English K-6 curriculum, some years ago, the majority of teachers stated that knowledge about language, including grammar, was crucial to good literacy teaching, but very few of these teachers felt confident in their abilities to teach about language (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 2001). More recently, in research undertaken during a professional development program targeting the teaching of grammar, Jones and her colleagues found that teachers' own knowledge of language was very uneven and that most lacked confidence to include any substantial teaching of language, especially grammar, in their programs (Jones, Chen, Derewianka & Lewis, 2010). In recent research into teachers' responses to the Quality Teaching initiative in NSW, Hammond and colleagues found that although the majority of teachers saw support in language and literacy development as their EAL students' greatest need, few were confident in their ability to provide this support (Hammond, 2008). One very experienced teacher explained:

Most teachers don't have the skills to do that (i.e. to teach more complex aspects of language), and I don't. I look at it (students' written work), I say, 'you haven't expressed this very clearly'. To pinpoint what they need to do is sometime quite difficult and it's very time consuming.

As Macken-Horarik and her colleagues point out, the problem is not confined to teachers in Australia, with teachers in other OECD countries exhibiting similar low levels of confidence in regard to language teaching (Macken-Horarik, Love & Unsworth, 2011, p. 12).

Such evidence reinforces the priority accorded to language and knowledge about language in *The Australian Curriculum: English*. It also suggests considerable work needs to be done to assist teachers to extend their own knowledge about language and to explore ways of drawing on that knowledge to support their students. This Special Focus Issue and the various papers within it seek to contribute to that enterprise. Although each paper in the Issue stands as an independent contribution to discussions and debates around the Curriculum and its implementation, the sequence of papers contributes to the overall cohesion of the Issue as a whole. The papers are sequenced around the following broad headings:

- The model of language underpinning the English Curriculum (paper 1)
- Teachers' knowledge about language and literacy (papers 2 and 3)
- Students' knowledge about language and literacy (papers 4 and 5)
- Implications of the new English curriculum for English as a Second Language students (paper 6)

The first paper, by Beverly Derewianka, serves as an introduction to the Issue. It addresses ways in which knowledge about language are conceived in the English Curriculum; it outlines key features of the model of language that underpins the Curriculum, and it introduces some of the issues that are raised, in particular, by implementation of the Language strand. These issues include: impact on students' outcomes; use of terminology; and appropriate pedagogies for teaching about language, including grammar.

The second and third papers address implications of the English Curriculum for **teachers' knowledge** about language and literacy. Pauline Jones and Honglin Chen report outcomes from a small-scale research project into the extent (or lack) of teacher's own knowledge about language. Their research confirms the consistent evidence, in Australia and elsewhere, that many teachers lack knowledge and confidence in teaching about language. Their paper thus highlights the need for extensive, nuanced and appropriate professional learning programs to support teachers in the implementation of the English Curriculum. The following paper by Kristina Love and Sally Humphrey draws on a number of persuasive texts to tease out the multi-level language framework provided in the Curriculum and to point to its potential for helping teachers to help their students. The authors highlight the kind of linguistically informed knowledge about language that is available in the Curriculum, and argue that teachers' abilities to draw on such knowledge will enhance students' capacity in use of language – in this case to persuade audiences and negotiate with institutions. The paper thus provides an example of the kind of knowledge about language that could be included in professional learning programs for teachers to support implementation of the Curriculum.

Papers 4 and 5 address implications of the English Curriculum for **students' knowledge** about language and literacy. Beryl Exley and Kathy Mills argue that the functionally oriented approach to language that underpins the English Curriculum offers a new approach to grammar – one that focuses on both form and function. They demonstrate the possibilities of this approach through analysis of two Coca Cola advertisements – from Korea and Australia – to illustrate how students can better achieve relevant curriculum outcomes through a deep understanding of the form and function of multimodal semiotics. Ruth French's paper reports outcomes from small-scale research into the impact of an integrated approach to the teaching of grammar. Her research investigated the impact of teaching verbal processes on students' punctuation of quoted speech and on their use of expression in

oral reading of dialogue. Outcomes provide evidence of the benefits of functionally oriented, explicit and contextualised teaching about language of the kind outlined in the English Curriculum. Both papers in this section highlight the potential for students' learning offered by the theoretical coherence and the detail of knowledge about language and literacy that is available in The Australian Curriculum: English.

While five of the six papers in this Issue focus specifically on the nature and implications for teachers and students of The Australian Curriculum: English, the final paper addresses the place of one minority group, English as an Additional Language (EAL) students, in the Curriculum as a whole, and hence queries the place of language and literacy more broadly across disciplines. While clearly the Curriculum has implications for all minority students, the constraint of space within this Special Focus Issue has led us to limit our focus to implications for EAL students. In this final paper Jenny Hammond argues that The Australian Curriculum offer both hope and challenge for EAL students and their teachers – hope in the depth and rigour of knowledge about language and literacy that is available in the English Curriculum; and challenge from the limited acknowledgement of the role of language and literacy in disciplines other than English.

We hope the papers in this Issue provide a constructive contribution to on going discussions and debates about The Australian Curriculum, and its implications both for teachers and students.

## References

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