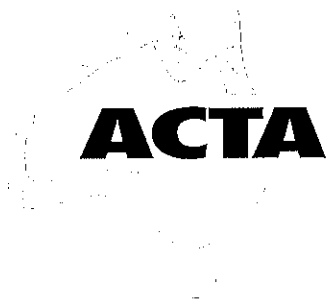


Australian Council of TESOL Associations



ACTA Background Papers No. 2

Literacy

ESL

Broadbanding

Benchmarking

Papers by:

Penny McKay

Joseph Lo Bianco

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ACTA President's Foreword

The ESL profession is in a period of change as it attempts to come to terms with new government policies and initiatives. In particular, the Literacy Benchmarks, introduced to monitor and improve literacy standards in our schools, are being used to gauge the performance of ESL students as well. Because the Benchmarks currently do not take into consideration the special characteristics of second-language acquisition, the profession is concerned that ESL students will inevitably appear to be under-achieving.

Further, as part of the government's policy of 'broadbanding', there is a danger that special programs catering for the interests of ESL students will be merged into general purpose programs.

The changes themselves need to be seen within the wider political context - the context of economic rationalism, corporatisation, privatisation, managerialism and so on. These forces emphasise the need for accountability and efficiency, aims that are all positive in themselves, but questionable when they begin to impact detrimentally upon the quality of the service being offered.

The contributors to this volume consider these issues at length, in some cases making recommendations about how the new policies and standards might be modified to take into account the needs of ESL students. At the same time, the writers acknowledge that ESL teachers might have to review their own ways of approaching these matters without relinquishing their core values, if their concerns are not to fall on deaf ears.

ACTA presents this set of papers as one of a series of Background papers commissioned to address current issues in TESOL. ACTA's aim in publishing the papers is to provide state and territory associations with material for discussion and debate and for informing others of TESOL issues.

ACTA thanks Joe Lo Bianco, Penny McKay and Dorothy Hoddinott for allowing the reprint of their papers and Penny McKay for further developing her initial paper for ACTA.

Chris Howell
November 1998

The Literacy Benchmarks and ESL

Penny McKay

This paper has been invited by ACTA in order to provide a statement on ESL and the Literacy Benchmarks (Curriculum Corporation, 1998), as background to policy decisions by the association. Rather than provide a full independent statement, I have chosen to build on the recent article by Professor Joseph Lo Bianco on the state of ESL in Australia and the influence of broadbanding and benchmarking within the current political context (Lo Bianco 1998; reprinted in this volume). I will also be drawing on my own notes 'Discriminatory Features for ESL Learners in the Literacy Benchmarks', which appear as an appendix to the current paper.

Lo Bianco's paper, to which I had some input, provides an articulate statement of the current position of ESL in Australia. It provides a comprehensive picture of the contextual and political realities that have given rise to the Literacy Benchmarks. At the same time it defines, and explains the crucial importance of, ESL teaching in our schools. My own notes give my reactions to the details of the Literacy Benchmarks and their implications for ESL learners being assessed through them, after I attended a DEETYA-organised professional association meeting in Canberra as the ACTA representative.

The present paper has been written following discussions with a range of people, and after perusal of a number of documents, articles and reports. There are ESL professionals who have been closer to decision-making in State and Commonwealth ESL committees than I have, and I am aware that there may be more to add, or that adjustments may need to be made, based on a closer understanding of recent political developments.

The Literacy Benchmarks

The final versions of the Year 3 and Year 5 Literacy Benchmarks were completed in April 1998 after a number of drafts and after some consultation sessions with key members of the literacy profession. Soon afterwards, the Literacy Benchmarks were approved by Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers of Education at a meeting of the Ministerial Council of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) as a tool for the national assessment and reporting of students' literacy performance. The Benchmarks materials comprise Benchmark standards (written for non-specialist understanding), work samples and professional elaborations (written for educators).

The Literacy Benchmarks will be used as a common reference for the inclusion of common items in State-based assessment procedures to assess performance against the Benchmarks from 1998. The Benchmarking Taskforce, organised through the Curriculum Corporation, is now turning its attention to the development of further Benchmarks at these levels for Speaking, Listening and Viewing, and Benchmarks for Year 7.

Starting from a firm base: a strong sense of the ESL

As a precursor to a discussion on Benchmarking and ESL, I would like to refer readers to Lo Bianco's strong sense of what ESL teaching is, and to his awareness of its crucial importance in our schools:

Central to ESL is the idea that the acquisition of a second language and the ability to participate fully in formal learning contexts cannot be left to osmotic processes and blind faith. Or, to put it more technically, that ESL learning cannot be left entirely to incidental, indirect, inductive or implicit acquisitional processes. Nor is there some natural or inevitable developmental progression such that targeted intervention (the famed 6 months of intensive initial instruction) will be sufficient to activate a subsequent automatic learning process. A sort of kick-start ESL. That is because ESL involves expert intervention at all stages of learning, as the student progresses (through individual pathways) from non English-speaking status towards full participation in learning. There is a need for explicit support at each stage of learning, as the growing complexity of domains and literacy practices of the curriculum unfold. In ESL teaching there may often be a shift from deliberate focus on language to a sort of ESL-informed general teaching. Whatever practices are favoured in any case they all derive from the trained expertise of the ESL specialist.

As a pre-condition for an effective response to Literacy Benchmarks, or other moves by government which 'talk ESL into subordination', the ESL profession needs a confident, clearly articulated and agreed position (such as Lo Bianco's) about the definition and importance of ESL teaching.¹ The association needs to ensure that it can convey a position to its members that will help them to 'stand tall' against the current re-naming and colonisation that is taking place, as there is clearly a sense of erosion of confidence in the ESL field at present.

Reference to current research into ESL success and failure in schools should be part of this: it makes strategic sense to call on government-initiated research as much as possible in this endeavour. Lo Bianco refers to Des Cahill's large project *Immigration and Schooling in the 1990s* (Cahill 1996); to Masters' *Literacy Standards in Australia* (Masters 1997); and to Masters and Forster's *Mapping Literacy Achievement: Results of the 1996 National School English Literacy Survey*. These projects provide data which highlight the fact that ESL learners make up a large proportion of students who are failing according to these surveys. Other research, such as the summary provided in the USA by August and Hakuta (1997) and the recent report of the Bilingual Interface Project (McKay et al. 1997), provide a reference for further professional argument to support the legitimacy of our ESL work in schools.

But as Lo Bianco points out, despite the scope of the research that supports the need for more attention to ESL, the response has been minimal.

The findings from the surveys, made so public in the months of September and October of 1997, appear not to have stimulated any serious interest in ESL. And yet so many of the children identified as 'underperforming' are categorised as ESL learners. (Lo Bianco 1997: 7)

¹ See Raso (1997) for another set of recent statements defining ESL.

In order to understand why, we need to examine, and if possible be aware of, the wider political context in which we are operating at present.

Understanding the place of ESL in the wider political context

ESL is being reconstructed by the Commonwealth as part of its current reforms in education. Much of this is being done through changes in terminology, tied to a wider package of administrative changes. Lo Bianco writes initially in his article in frustration at the use of the term 'migrant literacy' by Commonwealth and State ministers of education. He writes that ESL is much more than literacy, it 'makes possible the ability of children to participate fully in the various contexts of the culture, and of course the curriculum...' (Lo Bianco 1997: 1). He then describes the broader political moves which have firstly 'talked ESL into subordination' under literacy, and subsequently introduced broadbanding of funding. He traces the way in which language has been used in the political arena to reshape the landscape as a precursor to a shift in funding arrangements. The need for the ESL profession to understand this phenomenon has been recognised by Lo Bianco and other writers for some time (see for example Moore 1995). I will describe the political context of the Benchmarks in more detail below.

Our confusion about who we are and what is happening is understandable, not only because of the deliberate change of language that is used to refer to literacy (of which more later), but also because of the broader government moves in relation to education and to the teaching profession that are occurring at present. Brian Cambourne (1997: 8) suggests angrily that the real agenda behind the setting up of a literacy crisis and the misrepresentation of literacy results that occurred in 1996 and 1997 may be 'the end of a 100 year tradition of bipartisan support for a strong public education system dedicated to quality education for every student who fronts up'. I am not sure of this wider educational agenda, but it may be there. Barbara Kamler (1998) has spoken recently of a similar process, initiated by Minister Kemp and supported by the media, which has implied the existence of a major crisis in education. Teacher competence generally has been constructed as a problem. Kamler speaks of the resulting crisis in teacher morale, and argues that teachers themselves must become 'critically literate about the cultural narratives used to speak about their work'.

The Literacy Benchmarks are part of a political package deal

The Literacy Benchmarks are part of a wider phenomenon related to managerial culture in government, and to economic rationalism and microeconomic reform applied to education. Any examination of or move against the Literacy Benchmarks in isolation from the wider political package of government strategies, such as those discussed above (and below), is almost bound to fail. To take a pessimistic view, it may be that because the Benchmarks are embedded within such a broad government policy, they may be virtually impossible to shift, at least during the life of this managerial style in government.

Current government favours the introduction of competition into the market-place, and the use of outcomes-based measuring tools to establish and compare gains. Clear information about effectiveness through the measuring tools will give clients or users the opportunity to make an informed choice about where to go to buy what they need. Competition ensures (theoretically) that students and parents have the opportunity to access the best educational services. Outcomes-based measuring tools help the government to set the achievement

standards and to know who is achieving or not achieving according to these standards. They also give government the chance to push forward the required achievement by allocating funds according to their own statements of outcomes.

This approach to government is evident in the following statements from a document sent from DEETYA to the ministers of education in October 1987 (DEETYA 1997: 3-4):

- 4.1 At the March 1997 meeting of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers of Education agreed to a national literacy and numeracy goal: *That every child leaving primary school should be numerate, and be able to read, write and spell at an appropriate level.* Ministers also agreed on a sub-goal: *That every child commencing school from 1998 will achieve a minimum acceptable literacy and numeracy standard within four years.*
- 4.2 The goals will be achieved through a National Plan focused on the crucial early years of school. The National Plan includes:
 - 4.2.1 comprehensive assessment of all students as early as possible, to identify those students at risk of not making adequate progress towards the national literacy and numeracy goals;
 - 4.2.2 intervening as early as possible to address the needs of students identified as at risk;
 - 4.2.3 development of national benchmarks in literacy and numeracy;
 - 4.2.4 assessing students against national benchmarks in reading, writing, spelling and numeracy for Year 3 from 1998 and for Year 5 as soon as possible, using rigorous State-based assessment procedures;
 - 4.2.5 progress towards national reporting by systems on student achievement; and
 - 4.2.6 agreement to provide professional development to support the key elements of the National Plan.

The elements of this DEETYA plan appear later in the Commonwealth's Literacy Plan.

Thus the Benchmarks are a key element in a political package which involves a measurable value-added product, a measurement or reporting tool, and funding tied to accountability and progress.

As far as I understand, the results of measurement of literacy through the Benchmarks are designed by the Commonwealth to provide data to help it differentially allocate Commonwealth funding to the States (or more accurately government and non-government school authorities). From 1998 onwards, the school authorities will be required to provide a detailed plan outlining how they will allocate funds to 'achieve measurable improvements in literacy and numeracy outcomes'; that is, to explain how they will realise the agreed National Literacy and Numeracy Goal described in point 4.1 in the above quotation, and elaborated in Benchmarks.

The prime objective of the component of funding called Literacy Grants to Schools is to 'measurably improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for educationally disadvantaged

students', defined as 'students with poor literacy and numeracy outcomes (as measured against national benchmarks in literacy and numeracy)' (DEETYA 1997: 3). Difficulty in developing English literacy and numeracy skills has been identified as a major influence on student outcomes (ibid.: 3).

Assessment of students, which up to now has been of an 'insufficient sample size', diverse, infrequent and unsuitable (ibid.: 4) for the Commonwealth's purposes, will move to being universal; that is, all students will be assessed. The agreed Literacy Benchmarks will provide a common reference for State-based assessment, to ensure 'comparative reporting' (ibid.: 5). The movement to outcomes-based funding will be a staged-process 'in the context of an increased national focus on the collection and reporting of outcomes data' (ibid.: 6).

These extracts illustrate the extent of the changes to the Commonwealth's approach to education and educational administration. ESL is fundamentally 'caught up' in this approach, in which the Literacy Benchmarks play an integral part.

The political package and the definition of literacy

An outcomes-based measurement tool that is used in a managerial style of educational administration needs to be clear and understandable for those who use it—managers and consumers (in other words, administrators and parents). It also needs to reflect what are believed to be the required abilities. In the recent shift to the managerial approach it is the Commonwealth, rather than the teaching profession, that has determined the definition of literacy and the content of the Benchmarks. Teachers have been marginalised in this process. It is true that some consultation has occurred, but these consultations have been based on a set of materials already broadly defined. A cynical view of the government's position regarding teachers' involvement might be that the Commonwealth is reluctant to seek teachers' wider involvement because they may (a) describe literacy in too complex terms, (b) through this try to defend their territory and (c) render the managerial process unworkable.

The literacy profession is, indeed, defining literacy much more broadly than the Literacy Benchmarks. The Benchmarks are fundamentally skills-based. The Commonwealth, in defence of this, defines them as 'minimum' standards.

A recent literacy-focused (DEETYA-funded) report entitled *The Literacy-Curriculum Interface* (Cumming et al. 1998) uses a definition of literacy adapted from the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (Australian Government 1991) as follows:

... the ability to read and use written information and to write appropriately in a range of contexts; to develop knowledge and understanding; to achieve personal growth; and, to function effectively in our society. Literacy also includes the recognition of numbers and basic mathematical signs and symbols within text plus the integration of speaking, listening and critical thinking with reading and writing. (Lokan, J et al. 1995: 34)

The Cumming report reiterates Street's (1994) observations that this definition 'assumes a broad view of literacy and curriculum as being interactive and fully independent, a dynamic process closely bound up with cultural meanings'.

Lankshear (1998) has argued that a definition of literacy should explicitly include the use of technology:

... reading and writing as meaningful practice is always inherently bound up with some ways or ways of being in the world. The tools or technologies of literacy (from print to computers) are always situated and employed within contexts or practice which permit certain productions of meaning and constrain others. (Lankshear 1998:18)

The literacy field therefore sees literacy as much more than a set of skills. In reality the literacy field is moving further towards more complex definitions and understandings of literacy. The 'Literacy-Curriculum Interface' project broadened the definition of literacy much further than the initial definition quoted above suggests. The writers moved towards diverse and plural definitions of curriculum literacies, which accommodate 'the development of an increased pedagogic sharpness':

This position makes possible also a pedagogic sharpening of what I meant by the term literacy. It indicates a shift away from the profligate use of 'literacy' as synonymous with 'fluency' or a 'knowledgeable state' to the conceptualisation of literacies in terms of the integrating of reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and critical thinking practices in recognisably appropriate subject-specific ways. By way of example, we advocate the use of the term 'Science literacies' to describe the Science-literacy interface, and more specifically, perhaps, 'Physics literacies', 'English literacies' or 'Food Technology literacies'. (Cumming et al., Executive Summary: 12)

One can imagine managers/administrators throwing up their hands in despair at this kind of complexity, which is attempting to acknowledge and come to grips with the realities of the integrated nature of literacy in the context of school learning. This is before the ESL profession begins to move in to describe its own position on second language literacy and literacy pathways (see below).

We might accept that the Commonwealth needs to establish a manageable set of descriptors for literacy in order to be able to raise standards. This is a noble aim.

As is increasingly clear, the success of the early years can be judged most effectively and efficiently through the surrogate measures of literacy and numeracy. We can be confident that the child who achieves essential knowledge and skills in those areas in the first three years has a necessary but not sufficient basis for an education worth having. That is why literacy and numeracy benchmarks are being developed for years 3 and 5. They are like a judgement of the first line of a poem or story. They tell us whether the critical first step has been taken. (Wilson 1998: 3)

The questions which arise are whether these nominated 'essential knowledge and skills' can be adequately represented through a set of outcomes, which necessarily simplify the picture, and whether those outcomes that are nominated do indeed form the 'necessary but not sufficient basis' for learners that is claimed. These questions relate firstly to English speaking background (ESB) students, and secondly to other groups of learners such as ESL learners.

The political package and the definition of ESL

Lo Bianco argues strongly against the construction of ESL as literacy. Most worrying, however, is the subsuming of ESL within the broader term 'literacy'. Broadbanding of funds is therefore possible, as is the benchmarking of ESL learners against common outcomes-

based literacy standards. As many ESL professionals have been stating with some alarm, this approach can lead to the real danger of ESL disappearing out of people's consciousness, and quickly out of the decision-making agenda in systems and schools. Subsequent loss of ESL perspectives in literacy research can follow.

A confident and articulate definition of ESL, and through this a strengthening of the identity of ESL, may be crucial to the well-being of our field, and to our ability to ensure that the internationally admired programs and expertise we have in Australia remain.

The political package and the ESL learner

The incorporation of ESL under 'literacy' carries with it the danger of the ESL learner being constructed and taught as just one of the many learners of literacy in our classrooms. Inclusion rather than marginalisation is certainly crucial for ESL learners in our schools, but *submersion* rather than ESL-informed and ESL-specialist teaching is something we have successfully fought against for many years in Australia (see Lo Bianco's article).

The impact of the Literacy Benchmarks on ESL learners in schools will depend ultimately on the way the Literacy Benchmarks are used. The Commonwealth is interested in using the Benchmarks as a common reference for the comparable assessment of progress at the State level, and then through the allocation of funds in pushing forward literacy standards across Australia. At the Commonwealth level there is no interest, I understand, in providing direct feedback to individuals about their progress. At the State/system level, however, students' results could conceivably be used to compare schools and to inform teachers and parents of individual students' progress (I do not know what the States' positions are in this regard).

If results are used for individual progress information to teachers and parents, those who do not meet the standards are constructed as failures. ESL learners will also see themselves as failures. Establishing a sense of failure (especially where inappropriate) is not the way in which we have built foundations for education in the recent past.

If results are used at the school level then we may have comparisons of schools based on Benchmark results. If funding or parent interest is withdrawn because of failure against benchmarking data, ESL students may be positioned as burdens for schools as they compete against each other. If funding is allocated to schools where students are measured as failing this will certainly be beneficial, though the accountability measures for project spending will put schools under pressure to teach students towards unsuitable benchmarks.

This is not to say that some ESL learners do not fall behind. Developmental curriculum and assessment work in the development of documents such as the ESL Scales (Curriculum Corporation 1994) and the ESL Bandscales (McKay et al. 1994) has helped us to move some way towards the long-term monitoring of ESL students' progress, and part of this purpose has been to check a tendency for some students to fall behind in their development. With this information weaknesses can be addressed through more effectively targeted (and as such cheaper) programs.

Finally, if teachers use the Literacy Benchmarks to inform their teaching—Masters (1997: 7) suggests standards should be viewed as *goals*—which after all is what the Commonwealth wants when it sets standards to be achieved, then ESL learners will be taught as one group

with all students towards the Benchmarks. I have heard some teachers say that ESL learners have the range of problems that ESB learners have, and that some are doing better. The problem I have with those who argue for this position is that they are denying a huge body of expertise and knowledge about second language learning in the classroom (see for example August and Hakuta 1997; Davies et al. 1997). We should be drawing on this expertise and knowledge to ensure ESL learners' success in our classrooms.

Thus, in the worst scenario, the ESL learner can become quickly disadvantaged by being made invisible in the wider group of 'literacy' learners in this new political package. As Lo Bianco says, this negates the enormous 'nation-building' gains we have been proud of in Australian education to date.

The discriminatory features for ESL learners within the Benchmarks

Both Lo Bianco (1998) and McKay (1998), both of which are included in the present volume, contain further details of discriminatory features in the Literacy Benchmarks for ESL learners. These relate to the actual expectations and outcomes/marketing criteria, the lack of acknowledgment of ESL learners in the professional elaborations, and the possible consequences of the use of the Benchmarks in high-stakes (funding-related) situations.

What are the alternatives for ESL?

Given the powerful restriction placed on the literacy field by the political package, what are possible alternatives for ESL? I have indicated already that it might be impossible to find an acceptable alternative for ESL in the current political climate. Cambourne (1997) writes that there may not be an educational solution to the problem, which is, he believes, politically-driven. Some possible alternatives, some of which may be taken up concurrently, are presented below. I am conscious that some of these suggestions sound idealistic in the current climate, but I present them here as ideas for further exploration.

Develop a series of ESL Benchmarks out of current ESL Scales/ESL Bandscales

Ideally, a series of ESL Benchmarks could be developed. Based on these, (a) additional items on State-based tests could be included for ESL learners, and/or (b) criteria/outcomes derived from the ESL Benchmarks could be used to assess ESL students' performance on items.

Research would be needed to (a) re-work the ESL Scales, ESL Bandscales and other similar materials to suit this new purpose, and (b) pin-point the range of levels of achievement expected at Years 3, 5 and 7, depending on time learning English.

There is no doubt that the type of information collected from the use of a series of ESL Benchmarks would be valuable for the government for funding and accountability purposes, and for teachers for long-term monitoring purposes. ESL Benchmarks would have a beneficial effect on the curriculum in the same way that the ESB Literacy Benchmarks are designed to improve learning—ways would be found by educators to ensure that the expected progress is achieved. The physical presence of a series of ESL Benchmarks would help to

raise professional awareness and understanding, and ensure that ESL learners achieve the expected and appropriate standards.

A major block to this alternative, other than the strong political and conceptual blocks already mentioned, is that the picture can immediately look too complex to be realistically used in a national benchmarking exercise. If the Commonwealth wants to assess all ESL learners at set year levels, then there will be different achievement levels for ESL learners, depending on their time learning English.

A further block may be student identification: who needs to perform against the ESB Literacy Benchmarks and who needs to perform against the ESL Literacy Benchmarks? Teachers might nominate some ESL students to sit for assessment items in the State-developed tests, which are drawn from both the ESB and ESL Benchmarks, because they are not sure which is most appropriate at this stage in the ESL learner's development.

Perhaps one of the most difficult blocks is the argument that alternative ESL Benchmarks would be second level or deficient Benchmarks. That is, ESL Benchmarks would marginalise ESL learners, and set them aside as failures. My argument against this position is that if ESL learners are assessed against ESB Literacy Benchmarks they are implicitly marginalised and labelled as failures through their (in-built) inability to achieve the Literacy Benchmarks. This is despite their good progress according to ESL expectations. Australia has already accepted separate scales and bandscales for ESL learners, and in some States separate curricula for ESL learners at Year 12. These are not seen as deficient. With proper professional development and awareness-raising in public arenas, ESL Benchmarks, like ESL Scales and ESL Bandscales, can be accepted as valid and important educational reference points in the education of ESL learners.

Develop a set of ESL Benchmarks for one group

Even if the Commonwealth accepted the concept of ESL Benchmarks (which is highly unlikely), it would probably require something simple and manageable. It might be more feasible to begin with one set of ESL Benchmarks for one large and identifiable group of learners—probably those students born in Australia who speak a language other than English at home. Recognising that even this group of learners will have had variable exposure to English (through the media, siblings, parents, grandparents and so on), it might be possible to identify expected levels of progress in English literacy for these students by Years 3, 5 and 7.

Promote the use of a set of ESL criteria/ESL characteristics, to alert setters and markers of State-based tests to include ESL learners, and to recognise their success

ESL perspectives may be able to be added to the Literacy Benchmarks and accompanying State-based assessment procedures in the form of (a) additional descriptions of the likely performance of ESL learners in the standards themselves, (b) examples of work samples from ESL learners, (c) further elaboration of ESL learners' performance characteristics in the

professional elaborations, (d) instructions to assessors that tasks are included in State-based procedures which are inclusive of ESL learners' cultural and performance level needs, and (e) instructions to markers of these procedures that they follow ESL-identified characteristics for ESL learners.

In other words, ESL perspectives would need to be added at each stage of the benchmarking process. Accompanying professional development activities would also need to include ESL perspectives. This might be the most politically acceptable of the three suggestions so far, but one that I believe would still be rejected because of reasons already outlined.

Promote professional development so that all teachers are ESL-informed

At a greater distance from the benchmarking process, the ESL field may be able to push for funding for professional development in ESL in order to raise and/or maintain awareness of ESL learning and ESL pathways among teachers. The most common defence against changes to the benchmarking process from administrators will probably be similar to the following:

But benchmarks are not everything. They don't, and are not intended to, define all the purposes of the early years of schooling. Teachers will continue to collect much richer information about the learning of their students: deeper, more powerful diagnostic information about specific strengths and weaknesses in literacy and numeracy, along with broader information about progress across the full range of learning areas. (Wilson 1998: 3)

That is, that the teacher will fill in the gaps for ESL learners. The ESL field will need to work harder than ever towards ensuring that every teacher is sufficiently ESL informed to do this effectively.

Promote self-confidence and self-definition in the ESL field

As discussed above, ACTA might undertake a strong initiative to promote ESL self-confidence and self-definition through, for example, articles like Joe Lo Bianco's, through research and research publication, and through the exchange of ESL perspectives among teaching and research colleagues.²

Conclusion

Despite the pessimism, there have recently been some positive ESL initiatives; for example:

- Ministers of education have established their commitment 'to the literacy needs of all students, including Aboriginal students, students who speak English as a second language and students from low socio-economic backgrounds' (SYSCO document, 1997).
- MCEETYA has convened a Task Force for the Development of a National Policy Framework for ESL in Education and Training (first meeting December 1997), where a number of issues relating to ESL, including Benchmarks, are being debated. (A

² At least three projects are being funded to research literacy and the effect of evaluative frameworks (including the Benchmarks) in schools; these are Wyatt-Smith (A and B, both forthcoming) and Zimmit (forthcoming).

paper is being prepared on Benchmarking through this forum.)

- A change of government in Queensland has meant additional funding for ESL provision.
- The ESL profession continues to be strongly networked through ACTA and State association meetings, conferences and publications.

I have tried to pull together in this paper the various influences on and implications of the Literacy Benchmarks for education of ESL learners in Australia, and have discussed some possible alternatives, though these are suggested with little optimism in the current political climate. The paper may serve to help ACTA members to gather their thoughts and understandings on the issues at this point, and to move on to better understandings about how to promote the appropriate educational support for ESL learners in the challenging political, social and educational context in which we are currently working.

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ESL ...Is it Migrant Literacy?

...Is it History?

J. Lo Bianco

Recently I heard a radio debate between the Commonwealth and NSW Ministers for Education. They were discussing whether funding for the Commonwealth's literacy program for schools is adequate to meet identified needs.

The Commonwealth Minister said yes, the state Minister said no.

The state Minister said that something called *migrant literacy* needs attention.

The Commonwealth Minister said that literacy is the number-one priority, that the Commonwealth is putting in lots of money and that the states should target the main need areas.

Neither Minister said that 'migrant literacy' needs attention partly because of the way they talk about it. Naming only literacy they constitute it as 'the problem', therefore the focus of policy. In this way immigrant children's educational needs are reduced to a subset of general literacy acquisition.

Broadbanding

One immediate consequence of talking ESL into subordination has been administrative: the *broadbanding* of Commonwealth programs. Broadbanding involves collapsing specific purpose programs into general purpose programs. This is done via the creation of categories broader than those of the specific purpose programs. Problems arise when administrative, categories influence educational possibilities. Producing fewer programs means lowering administration costs and imposing fewer constraints on the use of funds by recipient jurisdictions. However, broadbanding can result in (across Australia this is now happening) a narrowing of ESL's scope and a reduction in ESL provision. In some places there is even a collapse of general support for ESL altogether.

One of the broadbanded programs is the General Support Element of the Child ESL Program (formerly the Child Migrant Education Program).

The CMEP was, without doubt, one of the great achievements of Australian language policy. It was created in 1970 after years of public agitation caused by the continuing failure of assimilation policies and the general neglect of immigrant children's educational needs. As it developed the CMEP evolved into two program elements: *on arrival* (intensive initial English, sometimes with first language support, often in special centres) and *ongoing* (general support within mainstream schools). Although known by different names at different times in the nearly 30 years since CMEP was established (and despite supporting a wide variety of initiatives) the CMEP has one simple idea behind it. ESL is distinctive.

ESL children learn spoken English. They learn culture as well as language. They also learn

¹ Thanks are due to Prof. Peter Freebody, Ms Chris Davison and Dr Penny McKay for helpful comments on this paper.

reading and writing. ESL has its own professionalism. ESL is not literacy. At least not in the narrow sense in which it is now used and not literacy-only. ESL *involves* literacy, but in a wide sense of the term literacy. ESL makes possible the ability of children to participate fully in the various contexts of the culture, and of course of the curriculum, those 'planned learning experiences' that educators put in place. ESL is not literacy teaching to migrants; although ESL learning can greatly assist the acquisition of literacy, and will involve every literacy practice of the curriculum and of out-of-school life. Ideally ESL will also produce bilingualism (if first language learning can accompany English acquisition) as, ideally, it may produce bi-literacy (if first language literacy can accompany English literacy acquisition) and bi-culturalism (if cultural inclusivity characterises schooling and the wider society).

Central to ESL is the idea that the acquisition of a second language and the ability to participate fully in formal learning contexts cannot be left to osmotic processes and blind faith. Or, to put it more technically, that ESL learning cannot be left entirely to incidental, indirect, inductive or implicit acquisitional processes. Nor is there some natural or inevitable developmental progression such that targeted intervention (the famed 6 months of intensive initial instruction) will be sufficient to activate a subsequent automatic learning process. A sort of kick-start ESL. This is because ESL involves expert intervention at all stages of learning, as the student progresses (through individual pathways) from non English speaking status towards full participation in learning. There is a need for explicit support at each stage of learning, as the growing complexity of domains and literacy practices of the curriculum unfold. In ESL teaching there may often be a shift from deliberate focus on language to a sort of ESL-informed general teaching. Whatever practices are favoured in any case they all derive from the trained expertise of the ESL specialist.

The Child ESL Program (and the Adult Migrant Education Program) are immensely productive public interventions. They allow Australia to say that immigration policy is accompanied by appropriate settlement policy. ESL policies have assisted in reducing inequalities of opportunity and life chances. ESL policy is a critically important element in social cohesion, and national communication. The provision by the Commonwealth of child ESL has been the difference between the neglect of the 1960s which added educational failure and intergenerational inequality to existing social disadvantage, and the public policy activism of later decades that reduced such disadvantages. There is more to it of course. I think appropriate bilingual education, productive home-school relationships and other factors also play a role. However, most of these have been eradicated, or drastically reduced in recent years. The time has come to insist the same does not happen to ESL.

In 1986 the Commonwealth government severely cut funding to the General Support element, arguing that the main responsibility for *ongoing* ESL lies with the state and territory governments. The lofty nation building and socially equalising principles of the CMEP were replaced by a jurisdictional hot-potato, to be tossed between states and commonwealth repeatedly.

In 1997 (as though to complete the previous government's work) the General Support element was 'broadbanded'. Essentially this means that the Commonwealth no longer imagines that supporting children's English learning warrants specific attention. By its own reasoning this is for reasons of administrative simplification.

In its document Commonwealth Programs for Schools Quadriennial Administrative

Guidelines 1997-2000 DEETYA describes the administrative changes as follows:

The legislation for 1997-2000 will incorporate a restructuring of around forty small Commonwealth Programs for schools into a simplified and more streamlined structure which complements the Government's priorities for schools.

Specifically, an overarching program name that makes literacy grants to schools now incorporates General Support ESL (and the former Disadvantaged Schools Program). Literacy frames all understandings of ESL support. The New Arrivals funding remains as a Special Learning Needs Program, but the force of thinking about ESL is that it is a subset of general literacy. *Migrant literacy.*

These changes have the effect of relegating to the margins oral English development for children from language backgrounds other than English and in effect write ESL students out as a specifically targeted need group for the Commonwealth. The results are already evident in many jurisdictions across Australia. ESL teachers are being 'relocated', despite their specialist training, skills and experience, mostly into general classroom duties.

In his review of Commonwealth responses to the education needs of immigrant children, published in 1996, Des Cahill concluded that 'the nation's strategic response to the educational needs of its children from immigrant families is in significant trouble' (p89). And this was *before* broadbanding. The 1997 moves complete the process of detachment of the Commonwealth from support for ongoing ESL teaching. It seems strange that at a time when the Commonwealth can justify its involvement in specific purpose programs of many types (teaching foreign languages, civics, literacy) all of which could just as easily, (more easily in some cases) be seen as state and territory responsibilities, that it fails to legitimise its settlement responsibilities for the immigrants it recruits.

When it comes to General Support ESL the jurisdictional issue has always loomed large.

At the time of the 1986 cuts the main Commonwealth goal was to determine how soon after *on arrival* intensive English its immigration responsibility transferred to the states. The problem lies in the constitution. The Commonwealth is constitutionally responsible for immigration, the states and territories for schooling. ESL messily overlaps these responsibilities.

In 1997 the ostensible rationale for changes to ESL is the streamlining of administration and the prioritising of literacy. But there is also an absence of awareness of distinctive nature of ESL and how if ESL teaching is to address the literacy needs of immigrant children specialist ESL teaching must be protected.

Some of the difficulties for the Commonwealth may derive from a highly critical 1992 evaluation by the Commonwealth Auditor General of DEET's administration of the ESL program. In its response to that report DEET stated that its function in relation to ESL was to provide *supplementary funding* and that it was the states and territories who are mainly responsible for child ESL. But the real 'difficulty' has nothing to do with administration at all. It is that not one Commonwealth Minister has ever paid the program enough attention to resolve jurisdictional questions, and not one state Minister has ever paid the program enough attention to devise a lasting compact with the Commonwealth. The last review of ESL occurred in 1985, the year before the program was severely curtailed. ESL will

inevitably be a shared responsibility between the states and the Commonwealth. What is required is a serious examination of its place and a commitment to its improvement.

Instead both the states and the Commonwealth have talked ESL into the margins.

It is not surprising then that history repeats itself. Evidence about immigrant children's educational attainments have an uncanny repetitive quality. In August 1977 the Australian Ethnic Affairs Council in a report entitled *Australia as a Multicultural Society* stated: '...information on the school performance or even the acquisition of basic skills of different ethnic groups is fragmentary and contradictory' (p11). Incredibly, almost twenty years later Des Cahill's review concluded: 'In reviewing the literature examining the relationship between immigration and achieving social mobility through education our assessment is that we simply do not fully know the participation rate of all sub-groups of NESB students' (p 42-43).

Given the effects of broadbanding in confounding unlike things, literacy and ESL, it is not likely that we will be answering such questions any more clearly soon. Worse than this however, all across Australia ESL teachers are being removed from specialist support roles and folded into new roles that school 'literacy plans' require, ones that only occasionally utilise their professional specialisation.

Benchmarking

However, the broadbanding of Commonwealth specialist programs takes on added importance in the light of the literacy debates of 1997.

In September 1997 two school literacy reports were issued by the Federal Minister for Schools. The first of these: *The National School English Literacy Survey: Mapping Literacy Achievement* found that, overall, students from a language background other than English on average have lower English literacy levels than students from English-speaking backgrounds (Masters 1997, p 20).

The accompanying document, *Literacy Standards in Australia*, outlines specific findings in reading and writing:

Reading. At Year 3 over one third of students of language background other than English did not meet the standard while almost four fifths of the students from the Special Indigenous Sample did not meet the standard. At Year 5 level forty-four per cent of students of language background other than English did not meet the standard and over three quarters of the students from the Special Indigenous Sample did not meet the standard.

Writing. At Year 3 level over one third of students of language background other than English did not meet the standard while seventy-one percent of the students from the Special Indigenous Sample did not meet the standard. For Year 5, around one third of students of language background other than English did not meet the standard while over three quarters of the students from the Special Indigenous Sample did not meet the standard.

The response to these data has been the production of national literacy *benchmarks* and a process of national testing to assess performance against these benchmarks.

But what effect will benchmarking have on ESL learners?

The benchmarks tend to describe features of literacy typical of mother tongue speakers of English, assumed to have home development of English. At year 3 this will involve an assumption of some 8 years at the time of testing. For ESL learners only a maximum of 3 years (ie the *school* years) can be assumed, though, of course, this will vary greatly since ESL learners are not a homogenous group. They vary in terms of length of residency in Australia, age on migration, mastery of first language, literacy level in the first language etc.

ESL learners approach the norms set out in the benchmarks from *different starting points* and along different *pathways*. The benchmarks seem to go out of their way not to acknowledge this.

ESL learners exhibit different linguistic features of English at the same chronological age as mother-tongue users of English. Will a benchmarked performance of ESL learners be valid under these circumstances?

The errors ESL learners make may be very different from those that mother-tongue speakers of English make on tests or tasks. ESL learners often make 'creative errors', ie errors which are in fact hypotheses about the required features of English in a particular context. This is because they are speculating about the target language, its norms and communicative requirements. Are these to be understood as learning failures or as guesses that ESL learners make about the required features of English in a given context? (McKay 1998).

Also, many ESL researchers believe that children's growing acquisition of a second language is subject to psychological-linguistic processing constraints. According to this view there is a *natural learning order* for the acquisition of forms in a given target language. If this is so then errors will also follow the path of the learners *internal* program. ESL learners may make errors that only time can sort out. Second language errors, in other words, are not the same as 'failure to learn English literacy errors' which the benchmarks are looking for (McKay 1998).

There are many other aspects of ESL learners' *second language-ness* that the benchmarks must either acknowledge, or confound. It appears they have chosen the latter course.

The result may be that many ESL learners will be found to be failing (when they may not be); while others may be 'found' to have literacy acquisition problems when in fact they may be 'creative testers' of English. Whenever such points were made to those responsible for the benchmarks they were interpreted as a claim for not benchmarking ESL learners, or for aiming for lower standards for them. They are not necessarily either. They are a challenge to the validity of norms that aren't interested in complexity.

ESL learners who are actively literate, or even partially literate, in another language (with similar or different script, and other writing conventions from those of English) will not be recognised in any way at all. Children's awareness of and skill in writing in a home language will be a source of their inferences about English literacy, in the same way that the spoken home language is a source of inferences about spoken English. There is no recognition (despite repeated suggestions to the appropriate personnel) that this is so, that it counts, or that the benchmarks and the accompanying professional elaborations ought to acknowledge such complexities. What effect will ignoring children's knowledge writing, when it is of

languages other than English, have?

In 1959, according to Cahill, the use of a flawed Queensland survey of children's educational achievements prevented progress in ESL for more than a decade.

We can only hope that benchmarking does not have the same exacerbating effect in 1998.

There are cultural problems as well. It is likely that 'inelegant' expression will mark the writing of many ESL children's English, and (though this is not a benchmark criterion) many ESL experts fear, rightly in my view, that 'inelegant expression' will impact on judgements about what has been learnt (or not learnt) by such children.

The professional elaborations which accompany the benchmarks make scant, if any, reference to ESL-ness. How will 'problems' be identified (addressed, understood, represented) with such omissions.

The findings from these surveys, made so public in the months of September and October of 1997, appear not to have stimulated any serious interest in ESL. And yet so many of the children identified as 'underperforming' are categorised as ESL learners. In fact the largest single underperforming group is the NESB category, the very one whose particular needs have been given least attention in the responses that have resulted from the survey data.

The assessment and reporting of students' literacy performance against the agreed national benchmarks, as adopted recently by all jurisdictions and the Commonwealth, will involve the use of state-based procedures to assess performance against the Year 3 benchmarks from 1998 onwards and later against the Year 5 benchmarks.

If the national literacy goal is to be achieved i.e., *that by the end of primary school, all children will be numerate, and able to read, write and spell at an appropriate level, and that the impetus of this will carry them forward into secondary schooling, post secondary education and employment* (DEETYA 1998 p44), then ESL needs must be taken seriously. ESL is a distinct area of curriculum activity and ought not be conflated with other areas through broadbanding and benchmarking.

Conclusion

Benchmarks and broadbanding, both a rock and both a hard place!

The critically important nation-building function of having a systematic, federally sanctioned, ongoing, professional ESL program seems to be lost in a haze of administration politics. There is no longer a vision to sustain this program and those who direct its fortunes are barely aware of the enormous but fragile achievement it represents. All discussions about English language acquisition by Australia's ever diversifying population (or about the uniquely Australian wisdom of providing for minority integration within a context of pluralism and diversity) have been reduced to either discourses of technique or to bureaucratic arrangements for sharing cost, transferring cost, or minimising cost.

ESL students are adding competence in an additional culture as well as an additional language. Their success is much more than linguistic. It deepens and widens the sense of Australianess, and the actual nature of the cultural compact that forms 'Australia'. This learning cannot be collapsed into things it is not. ESL requires its own space, draws on

distinctive practices, insights, research and teaching methods and means different things from the categories under which it has been located: literacy, disadvantage, migrants.

We risk cultural, ethical (and in the end economic) mediocrity by making it harder for such a large minority of Australians to achieve the resource of powerful English. It is no longer powerful or fashionable, as it used to be, to argue that such learning should be additional to the retention of the first language, to the evolution of a bi-culturalism, (an active, intellectualised, critical and competent bi-culturalism) that would benefit and change both the learner, and the society. It is, however, still right.

Immigrant recruitment is constitutionally a Commonwealth responsibility. Settlement policies are a direct and inescapable consequence. The Commonwealth and all relevant education jurisdictions must devise for it a new national rationale, and work out a new, invigorated, vision for child ESL before it is forced back into the broom-closets from which it had, until recently, escaped.

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Meeting the literacy needs of non-English speaking background students

Dorothy Hoddinott

Abstract

How far do the new national language and literacy strategies meet the needs of non-English speaking background school students?

This paper argues that the redefinition of literacy and disadvantage, and the subsuming of ESL into literacy funding, could mean ESL focus is lost and ESL will have to compete with English speaking background priorities to the detriment of ESL provision in schools.

Concerns with benchmarking to English-speaking background norms for ESL students are also considered and some suggestions made about how systems might ensure that ESL students do not get lost in the broadbanding process.

From targeted programs to broadbanding

A major issue for TESOL educators is whether the Commonwealth government's new literacy strategies will meet the needs of ESL learners in our schools. The concern arises as a result of the Commonwealth's decision to combine funding previously allocated to ESL General Support and the Disadvantaged Schools Component of the National Equity Programs with funding for the new National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

The Commonwealth has announced some forty-five million dollars over the next triennium for the new strategy.

Both ESL General Support and the Disadvantaged Schools Program were formerly targeted programs, which meant that funds received from the Commonwealth by the States had to be applied in these areas. That is no longer the case. English as a Second Language General Support and the Disadvantaged Schools Program are now broadbanded, transforming the basis on which previous specific purpose program funding was allocated and giving systems the discretion to develop their own priorities for allocation of the funds. There is, of course, no guarantee that funding will continue beyond the current quadrennium at current levels.

The danger in this is that ESL General Support will now be in direct competition with mainstream literacy priorities, that resources may not be directed to specific ESL needs, and that there will be a loss of focus on ESL as a program in its own right. The changes to the Commonwealth's literacy program guidelines are a complete break with past equity programs practice, where social and linguistic risk factors were used as predictors of students' literacy and learning needs, and resources allocated accordingly.

The New Arrivals Program (NAP), which provides for school-age non-English speaking background students in their first year in Australia, remains a targeted program but has been separated from ESL General Support where previously there was continuity between the programs. Again, there is no commitment to continue New Arrivals Program funding beyond 2001.

ESL students have essentially been removed from the guidelines as a target group and included in the more general category of low-achieving students in need of literacy

intervention. This does not take into account the causes of low performance in literacy nor does it direct resources to address known risk factors that limit literacy outcomes for non-English speaking background students. I would argue that there are fundamental difference between an underperforming ESL student and an under performing non-ESL student and that funding is most efficiently directed to these differences.

Benchmarking

The Commonwealth's goals for the National Literacy and Numeracy strategy are that:

Every child leaving primary school should be numerate and able to read, write and spell at an appropriate level; and,

Every child commencing school from 1998 will achieve a minimum acceptable literacy and numeracy standard within four years.

I am not disagreeing with either of these goals but, in the context of the cultural and linguistic diversity of our schools, it is necessary to ask how we will achieve them, particularly for those NESB students who may not undergo all their primary education in Australia.

To achieve the Commonwealth goals, a five point plan has been developed for early identification and assessment of students to ensure early intervention with student performance determined through regular assessment against national literacy and numeracy benchmarks in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9; however assessment of non-English speaking background students against the national benchmarks will inevitably demonstrate their overall lower achievement than English speaking background students and has already been shown by the 1996 National School English Literacy Survey.

The draft benchmarks presuppose full age functioning in English at each standard and are based on assumptions about what the majority of students in each age group should be able to do. Implicit in these standards is mother tongue fluency in English and formal learning of English from Kindergarten. Unfortunately, few ESL students would meet both of these criteria, and there is a substantial group that would meet neither.

Let me say something here about the nature of ESL learners in our schools. ESL learners are those students whose first language is not English and who are learning English as a second (ESL) or other (ESOL) language while studying the mainstream school curriculum. ESL students are all of non-English speaking background but not all non-English speaking background students need ESL support. The students who do need ESL support carry a double load, learning their second or other language at the same time as they must cope with the demands of the curriculum in their second language.

ESL students are not a homogeneous group. For a start, and this is an important consideration in looking at the benchmarks, ESL students have different entry points into the school system. There is also huge variation in background culture, language and previous educational experience. Significant numbers of recently arrived students have experienced substantial interruption to their schooling and a minority has had no schooling at all.

The number of students in our schools supported by existing ESL programs is not inconsiderable. In 1994 - the most recent year for which there are national figures - there were 121,304 students in the ESL General Support program in primary schools and 63,803 in secondary schools, as well as 12,296 students in the New Arrivals Program. Last year in NSW, there were 77,314 students K-12 in ESL General Support programs, three times the number in the next largest State system, Victoria. The Sydney metropolitan area alone

takes some 40 per cent of the total migration to Australia.

While the overall proportion of non-English speaking background students in government schools in NSW is 21.3 per cent (1997), in Sydney it is nearly 40 per cent of total enrolments.

This has considerable implications for literacy outcomes. First and most obvious, ESL students are very different to the majority English speaking background population, all of whom have acquired English before they commence school at five years of age. There are not multiple entry points into school and learning in English for English speaking background children. They have continuity of learning in English from home to school, from birth onwards.

An English speaking background student taking a Basic Skills Test in Year 3 has eight years uninterrupted English language learning to measure against the benchmarks. An ESL student of the same age may have three years or less. Time is an important factor in the ability to operate effectively in a second language. It can take five to seven years to learn to operate to full native competence in a second language, sometimes longer, depending upon prior educational experience (or lack of it), and factors such as language background.

The benchmarks are necessarily normed to native English speaking standards and can discriminate against ESL learners in a variety of ways, not least in that they are text-based, and do not assess communicative competence. Some States already take into account the needs of recently-arrived ESL students in their testing. In Victoria, for example, the Learning Assessment Project (LAP) in Years 3 and 5 does not assess ESL students against mainstream benchmarks in their first two years of learning English. There is, however, no general requirement that ESL students not be measured against the benchmarks while they are still in the early stages of English language acquisition.

Ways forward

Let's return to that Year 3 ESL student taking a Basic Skills Test. The Year 3 benchmark does not describe features of English literacy which an ESL student might be considered to exhibit after only three years of learning English. Nor should it. It is a standard of English, after all. The ESL student may be using English fairly successfully in learning and communication and be making satisfactory progress in terms of the expected ESL pathways as described in documents such as the ESL Scales, the ESL Bandscales (NLLIA) or the Victorian Companion to CSF, but is unlikely to be able to demonstrate that second language learning achievement against the benchmarks.

It is necessary also to recognise that ESL learners do not have identical pathways to literacy in English to mother-tongue speakers. That is not a bad thing. We need to get away from the deficit model for ESL students. What is needed are two benchmarks for ESL learners, showing where the students stand on the mainstream scale and on an ESL scale at a given point in time. This doesn't mean standing still but gives recognition to the multicultural nature of our schools, and the multilingual backgrounds of our students and their growth towards full proficiency in English. It doesn't fail students for not reaching mother-tongue proficiency before it is possible.

I am not arguing for ESL students not to be measured, nor would I ever advocate a watering down of the curriculum or of standards for ESL students, but if the benchmarks are to be valid for the student's language growth they must reflect the students' development as ESL

learners. This means acknowledging the particular nature of ESL learning, in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and a recognition that not meeting the standard of the benchmarks does not mean that ESL students are not achieving satisfactory outcomes in their learning.

To ensure equity for ESL students in the context of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy it will be necessary for explicit links to be made between mainstream and ESL programs and their assessment and reporting. Some States are already moving in this direction. In NSW, the new K-6 English Syllabus incorporates equivalent ESL Scales information at each level of achievement

There is an urgent need for national agreement on reporting ESL student achievement. The various ESL scales need to be used in conjunction with the benchmarks to establish learning rather than failing for ESL students, and the benchmarks themselves need to be more flexible to permit a broader, more contemporary view of literacy.

The Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) believes that it should have representation on the Benchmarking Taskforce, established to develop the national benchmarks. ACTA also believes that there is a need to establish a national working group to develop an ESL Framework Statement to guide ESL provision across the nation. There needs to be an agreed buffer zone for newly-arrived students, no matter their point of entry into the school system, to ensure that judgements are not made prematurely about their levels of literacy in English.

There must also be recognition of the needs of Australian-born non-English speaking background children enrolling in kindergarten with little or no English, and the particular needs of Aboriginal children in remote areas. Neither of these groups is currently covered by the provisions of the New Arrivals Program.

The New Arrivals Program needs to be realigned with ESL General Support and funds again targeted to ESL to ensure that adequate provision continues to be made for students with ESL needs as distinct from their literacy needs.

And last, the proposed professional development program for teachers to support the key elements of the governments National Plan for Literacy must include an understanding of ESL pedagogy for mainstream teachers. This does not mean that there would no longer be a need for specialist ESL teachers, rather it would be recognition that in a multicultural society, all teachers have responsibility for ensuring that the needs of ESL students are met.

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Discriminatory Features for ESL Learners in the Literacy Benchmarks

Penny McKay

General comments

ESL learners are not a homogenous group in terms of their English language development. They will be operating at various levels of ability in English, depending on various factors, including time: in Australia, whether they began school with no English and subsequently how long they have been at school, and so on. The Benchmarks will discriminate against students in different combinations of ways, depending on these factors.

The Year 3 Literacy Benchmarks describe features of literacy required for mother-tongue speakers of English who have learned English for around eight years at the time they are tested. ESL students, however, will have learned English (depending on their background) for three years or less when they are tested on their level of literacy in English. The Benchmark therefore does not describe features of English literacy which ESL students will exhibit after three years (or less) in school, even though they are using English (reading and writing) successfully in terms of learning and communication, and even though they may be progressing very successfully in terms of the expected ESL development pathways (see the range of work in this area for which Australia is highly regarded internationally, including the ESL Scales, the ESL Bandscales, and the Victorian ESL Companion to the CSF).

I am not arguing that ESL learners should not be 'benchmarked'. Checking on progress is an important strategy, as many ESL students' literacy could improve at faster rates than at present (see, for example, my recent case study in the BIP project, where ESL learners in Year 6 were still weak in aspects of English). However, the benchmark used should be valid—that is, it should reflect the reality of ESL development.

To have positive rather than negative literacy benchmarking in Australia, we need to recognise the realities of ESL development, particularly the particular features of ESL development, and the place and nature of errors. Errors made by ESL learners are often (not always) creative errors which, as second-language acquisition research has established, enable students to learn, and which are determined to some extent by psycholinguistic processing.¹ Psycholinguistic processing is believed to influence a natural learning order (which translates into a natural order of inevitable errors) which cannot be changed and which has to proceed over time. Thus it is not possible to 'teach out' these second language errors, even when the ESL student is progressing well.

Note therefore that the difficulty of the Year 3 Benchmark in its present form is not in the expected levels of ability to use and convey meaning through texts; rather, it is in the expected *textual features* (see below).

¹ See for example Pienemann and Johnston, 'Factors Influencing the Development of Language Proficiency', in Nunan, D.(ed) 1987, *Applying Second Language Acquisition Research*, Adelaide, National Curriculum Resource Centre.

Specific details of discrimination for ESL learners

1. Inappropriate and unattainable features of text in writing in English

Those ESL learners who are in the early to middle stages of English language learning (around Levels 1 to 5 on the JP/MP ESL Bandscales) are not likely to exhibit the same features of English literacy as those set out for mother-tongue speakers.

ESL learners may be able to write the range of texts described in the Benchmark, but they may not exhibit the required *textual features* (as described in the draft Benchmark), such as appropriate word order, ability to produce compound sentences, and other features of accurate English which will be expected but not listed. In addition to these structural features, ESL students are also likely to express ideas in 'clumsy English', which will give them lower scores (despite the fact that there is no mention of 'elegance' of expression in the Benchmarks).

The Benchmarks therefore give inappropriate targets for students at year 3, who will be singled out as failing when this may not be the case. This is highly inappropriate for children at such young ages.

Note that it is possible that even at Years 5 and again at Year 7, these students will still be exhibiting these structural, accuracy and expression errors, and may be unable to achieve the Year 3 Literacy Benchmark, even though they are able to participate in curriculum tasks at a level which enables them to learn and participate successfully, and even though they are progressing well.

2. Lack of cultural knowledge may cause non-achievement inappropriately

In both writing and reading, there are likely discriminatory expectations concerning cultural knowledge, particularly in reading. While this can be controlled to some extent by the selection of test items, the influence of cultural knowledge is likely to be underestimated in the marking of ESL students' work. There needs to be careful attention to this, as the assessment is literacy development. Negative influence on professional understanding of teachers of ESL learners

Professional development is planned for the Literacy Benchmarks. All teachers will be expected to aim for the described features of English literacy for all learners, without any reference to the nature of ESL development—indeed with an explicit statement that all learners are included.

The results of this can be:

- teachers teaching to the Benchmark (regardless of ESL development)
- teachers inserviced on LI literacy development only
- ESL learners becoming invisible in the classroom.

Questions for Literacy Benchmark developers

1. *How will the proposed tests accommodate the second language errors within the text, when the students are otherwise completing the task well?*

Suggestion: A set of acceptable features of the work produced by ESL students could be established for each Literacy Benchmark. For example, some clumsiness of expression, and some structural errors reflecting ESL developmental features, might be deemed acceptable, provided that meaning is conveyed, that there are a few related ideas, that there is some organisation of subject matter, and so on. There would need to be guidelines for teachers and assessors on these matters.

2. *How will you avoid the present very likely possibility that systems, teachers, parents and the students themselves will receive inaccurate, as well as negative and discouraging impressions about English literacy progress?*

Suggestion: I recognise the difficulty within the proposed uses of the Literacy Benchmarks of including ESL learners. If the above ESL features were to be included in the assessment procedures, it might be desirable to note this fact in the formal achievement statement:

'Yan Ting Achieved Year 3 ESL Benchmark (ESL).'

This would promote so much good practice, and show that multicultural education can work.

3. *How will you ensure that all teachers are reminded of the **learning** pathways and learning needs of ESL learners?*

Suggestion: Place some description in the professional elaborations of (acceptable) ESL features (as described above). If not, at least remind teachers in the professional elaborations that they need to know about and cater to the second language development needs of ESL learners, and refer them to the work that has already taken place (such as ESL Scales, ESL Bandscales and other materials).

4. *Will DEETYA encourage professional development to meet the needs of ESL learners in their guidelines for States/Territories?*

Suggestion: DEETYA could suggest to States that they include professional development about the features which are likely to emerge in ESL learners' responses in ESL Benchmarks tests. Professional development should include promoting understanding of this in teachers and others.

Summary points

- An environment now exists where any change is deemed to be good, and where those resisting or even questioning change are condemned as suspect or 'out of touch'.
- The government's Literacy Benchmarks, which are the result of the (reasonable) desire to monitor and improve literacy standards in our schools, will inevitably discriminate against ESL students.
- This is because ESL students operate at various levels of ability in English, depending on various factors.
- The Benchmarks themselves are a manifestation of the government's desire to foster a managerial culture in our public institutions.
- Collapsing ESL programs into mainstream programs does not allow for the fact that many ESL students encounter the language much later than mother tongue students.
- The move towards 'broadbanding' is effectively marginalising the ESL profession.
- Most ESL teachers will find their way through these changes, but their students may face considerable difficulties.
- The apparent 'errors' an ESL student makes may well be 'creative errors', which are a natural part of second-language acquisition.
- The incorporation of ESL under 'literacy' carries with it the danger of the ESL learner being constructed and taught as just one of the many learners of literacy in our classrooms. ***ESL learning involves expert intervention at all stages.***
- We risk cultural, ethical (and in the end economic) mediocrity by making it harder for such a large minority of Australians to achieve the resource of powerful English.

Notes on Contributors

Dr. Penny McKay is the President of QATESOL, the Queensland Association of TESOL. She is a senior lecturer and coordinator of the M.Ed.(TESOL) program in the School of Language and Literacy Education at Queensland University of Technology. She has published a number of articles on the education of ESL students in schools, and has been involved in and/or directed major curriculum and research initiatives in ESL and LOTE in Australia, including the Australian Language Levels Guidelines, the ESL Framework of Stages, the ESL Bandscales, and recently, the Bilingual Interface Project Report.

Professor Joseph Lo Bianco, is Chief Executive of Language Australia and also Director of the Research Centre for Language and Literacy Policy at the Australian National University. He is Visiting Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong and Adjunct Professor and Chair of the Advisory Board, Centre for Language and Literacy, University of Technology, Sydney. His publications include the *National Policy on Languages (1987)* and, with Peter Freebody, *Australian Literacies*. He was awarded the Order Of Australia (AM) in June 1998 "for service to the development of language policy and planning in Australia and overseas".

Dorothy Hoddinott is a past President of AATESOL (NSW) and a council member of ACTA. She has represented ACTA on the National Education Forum and the Australian Literacy Federation and has recently been appointed to the NSW Board of Studies. She is currently Principal of Holroyd High School.

ACTA AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF TESOL ASSOCIATIONS

MISSION STATEMENT

ACTA is the national coordinating body representing all teachers of English to speakers of other languages. It aims to promote and strengthen English whilst supporting and respecting people's linguistic and cultural heritage. English is the language of public communication and the lingua franca for the many different sociocultural groups in Australia, as well as a major language of international communication. For full and effective participation in education, society and in the international arena, competence in English is necessary.

TESOL is the teaching of English by specialist teachers to students of language backgrounds other than English in order to develop their skills in spoken and written English communication. At the same time, TESOL teachers strive to be sensitive to the diverse linguistic, cultural and learning needs of individuals.

TESOL draws on a knowledge of the nature of the English language, first and second language acquisition, crosscultural communication and appropriate curriculum, materials and methodology for multicultural contexts. It is an integral part of the broader social, educational and political context. It can inform and be informed by this context.

As a program, profession and field of study and research, TESOL shares certain understandings and practices with the subject English as a mother tongue, child and adult literacy, languages other than English (LOTE), and bilingual and multilingual education, but also has distinctive characteristics.

ACTA'S OBJECTIVES ARE:

TO REPRESENT AND SUPPORT THE INTERESTS OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH TO SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES

TO ENSURE ACCESS TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION FOR SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES

TO ENCOURAGE THE IMPLEMENTATION AND DELIVERY OF QUALITY PROFESSIONAL PROGRAMS

TO PROMOTE THE STUDY, RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT OF TESOL AT STATE, NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

ACTA Background Papers No. 2

Literacy ESL Broadbanding Benchmarking

The Literacy Benchmarks and ESL *Penny McKay*

McKay examines the impact that the federal government's Literacy Benchmarks will have on the ESL profession. She identifies the Benchmarks themselves as a manifestation of the government's desire to foster a managerial culture in our public institutions, whereby financial accountability is the overriding goal. McKay draws attention to the dangers that are inherent in the subsuming of ESL under the general heading of 'Literacy', and suggests possible ways of avoiding or minimising these dangers.

ESL ... Is it Migrant Literacy? ... Is it History? *Joseph Lo Bianco*

Lo Bianco argues that the government policy of 'broadbanding' specifically the focus on 'literacy' as the main issue is effectively 'talking ESL into subordination'. Lo Bianco makes several important points: for example, students whose mother-tongue is English will in effect have been learning the language for eight years by the time they reach year 3, whereas ESL students will probably only have been learning it for three years. Further, Lo Bianco argues, the 'errors' an ESL student makes may be creative errors, which are a natural part of the learning process. The ESL program, Prof Lo Bianco concludes, is becoming 'lost in a haze of administration politics'.

Literacy - meeting the needs of all learners *Dorothy Hoddinott*

Like many of her colleagues, Hoddinott fears that broadbanding will lead to a loss of focus on ESL students and their particular needs. Under the government's broadbanding policy, ESL students are being subsumed into the general category of under-performing students, whereas they may not be under-performing at all. Hoddinott stresses the importance of recognising the differences between ESL students and ESB students, and argues that new benchmarks should be established that acknowledges and cater for these differences.

Discriminatory Features for ESL Learners in the Literacy Benchmarks *Penny McKay*

In this paper McKay draws attention to some specific problems that the Literacy Benchmarks may present to ESL students (and their teachers). McKay discusses these issues, and offers suggestions relating to ESL learners that Benchmark developers may wish to consider.