

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF TESOL ASSOCIATIONS (ACTA)



RESPONSE TO THE VICTORIAN CURRICULUM F-10 ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE CONSULTATION

The Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) is the peak professional body for TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) educators in adult and school settings. It advocates for the interests of students who are learning English as their second or additional language. It comprises representatives from state and territory TESOL associations, whose members include teachers, researchers, consultants and curriculum developers.

ACTA welcomes the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority's (VCAA) commitment to developing an EAL curriculum that articulates the development of knowledge and skills for EAL learners in Victorian classrooms. This is a positive initiative acknowledging the English language learning of the large number of EAL learners in Victorian schools.

ACTA's response to the draft EAL curriculum document is outlined under the issues below.

ISSUE 1: WEAK RATIONALE FOR A NEW EAL CURRICULUM

The sole rationale given for the development of a new EAL curriculum is the need to align it with the new (and unclear) learning continuum format of the Victorian Curriculum F-10. The current EAL Companion is criticised for not articulating with new curriculum content descriptions and standards. However, as indicated below, the content descriptions and standards in the proposed EAL curriculum are little more than rebadged and selective descriptors from previous EAL curriculum material.

The stability of the current EAL Companion over the last two decades is due in large part to its basis in research in EAL, educational linguistics and language assessment, and EAL teaching practice and practical application. The hasty development of the new EAL curriculum document without these foundations risks loss of quality curriculum in Victoria. Not all that is new is improved.

ISSUE 2: UNCLEAR NATURE OF THE EAL CURRICULUM DOCUMENT

There is a fundamental lack of clarity as to what exactly is the nature of the EAL curriculum being proposed. Is the EAL curriculum essentially the EAL Scope and Sequence charts accompanied by a brief contextual statement? If so, EAL curriculum in Victoria is being reduced to an assessment and reporting instrument divorced from all pedagogical considerations. By itself, an assessment and reporting instrument cannot provide a curriculum framework for EAL teaching and learning.

If not, then the draft EAL curriculum document proposed for consultation is incomplete, with only two curriculum elements proposed – Rationale and Aims and the Scope and Sequence charts - and curriculum advice on EAL learning and EAL teaching elaborations yet to be developed.

There is further conceptual confusion regarding the EAL standards arising from the EAL Scope and Sequence charts. The Achievement Standards are simply compilations of the content descriptions in each Phase in the same way that level statements in previous EAL curriculum documents were

summaries of key level descriptors. What then does it mean to call these Phase statements 'standards'? Are EAL learners identified at a particular Phase required to meet all the descriptions in the sub-strands? And across all the modes? If so, this is antithetical to research and practice in EAL teaching and learning concerning variable EAL development. On the other hand, if Achievement Standards are just a name change, then they are little more than pseudo-standards.

It would appear that the EAL curriculum document has become something of a guinea pig for the development of a new Gonski curriculum model and that fundamental issues of curriculum design in the context of this reform are still being worked through. Curriculum design issues arising from Gonski reforms have implications for all curricula and require a separate, preliminary, systematic, prudential and transparent process of curriculum design and consultation rather than being considered on an ad hoc, subject by subject basis.

The current document does not acknowledge fundamental understandings such as the nature of EAL/D learning and the different access and learning trajectories relating to age on entry to school. A student who begins schooling in English at high school with prior schooling may be able to access some age-appropriate curriculum content while a student without prior schooling will have a different trajectory into school learning. Given that it takes 5-7 years to develop academic English language proficiency for a student with first language literacy, and up to 11 years for students with limited literacy in their first language, it is not feasible to set the equivalent curriculum standards as for non EAL/D students.

The paper sites that separate resources provide pedagogy advice and support and cover 'indicators of progress' aspects including:

- 'Texts and responses to text
- Cultural conventions of language use
- Linguistic structures and features
- Maintaining and negotiating communication'

These aspects should be part of an EAL/D curriculum. In fact, given these elements are part of Australian Curriculum, English then surely an EAL/D curriculum should articulate how students are progressing towards achieving these skills and understandings that are essential to learning not just in English but across all subject areas.

ISSUE 3: INADEQUATE EAL CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND CONSULTATION

ACTA understands the consultation paper to be a consultation draft study design for a major review of Victoria's EAL Curriculum and, as such, is subject to VCAA's principles, guidelines and processes for development and review of Victorian curricula.

We note that the current 1-15 June consultation period does not comply with the minimum four week period outlined in VCAA's principles document.

We also note the requirement that the consultation draft study design be independently reviewed by both an academic and a practicing teacher with expertise in the area with particular regard to the draft study design's accuracy, clarity and coherence, and that this is yet to occur. Similarly, development of the consultation draft has not been informed by the appointment of a critical friend with an established reputation in the EAL field.

There is a lack of transparency about the extent of EAL teaching expertise involved in its development, in particular, with regard to prior stakeholder consultation and the benchmarking workshop. No information is provided about the research and evidence base for the document.

ACTA believes that the current draft of the EAL Curriculum document does not reflect VCAA's own study design standards, namely:

- the knowledge and skills that are distinctive and characteristic of the field on which the proposed study is based
- enduring and contemporary approaches to the learning in the field
- the nature of discourse and activity in the field,

and therefore requires further development before being forwarded to the VCAA Board for approval.

ISSUE 4: SPECIFIC COMMENTS ON EAL CURRICULUM RATIONALE AND AIMS

The paper identifies EAL learners as including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students whose first language may be a creole. This is a significant change to EAL in Victoria with major implications for practice in the field. If the curriculum is intended to cater for this student group, then the nature of implications for learning English as an additional dialect needs to be explicitly acknowledged and reflected in the curriculum. The inclusive term recognised nationally by ACARA as English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D).

ISSUE 5: SPECIFIC COMMENTS ON THE EAL SCOPE AND SEQUENCE

In general, the Scope and Sequence across Speaking and Listening, Reading and Viewing and Writing do not accurately reflect EAL learning progressions or development in these modes. They are characterised by poor Phase calibration, conceptual confusion in strands and sub-strands and a paucity and developmentally inappropriate content descriptions, especially in the Linguistic features strand.

The Scope and Sequence charts lack an essential and systematic focus on communication in English and any notion of communicative competence underpinning effective communication. There is little sense of communicative purpose and audience in the modes' sub-strands and indicators. Essential components of communicative competence, such as textual, sociocultural, grammatical and strategic competence, with their respective communicative effectiveness criteria of coherence, appropriateness, accuracy and flexibility, are missing in the document.

Sub-strands and indicators under 'Texts' are, nevertheless, suggestive of communication skills through spoken and written texts. The 'Texts' sub-strand would be more appropriately renamed 'Communication'.

The Communicative strategies and word knowledge strand combines very different aspects of communicative competence and should be separated. Word knowledge would be more appropriately located under the Linguistic Features sub-strand.

EAL learners' cultural knowledge is critical for developing communicative competence and should be articulated throughout the modes. At present, a few content descriptors include a reference to grammatical understanding but this is not articulated consistently across phases. An important part of learning a new language is being able to articulate the grammatical and cultural differences between first and additional languages. Cultural understanding needs to be closely tied to students' language and communicative competence. It differs substantially from intercultural understanding and cannot be addressed by reference to a separate cross-curriculum capability. A section should be included that shows students developing understanding of language and culture.

Use of L1 is a critical transitional skill in the process of learning an additional language. Can you imagine learning another language without being able to reference your understandings in English?

The role of first language needs to be visible in the EAL curriculum. It is part of the learning progression not just an element of pedagogy.

It is assumed that a student can be assessed against the EAL Scope and Sequence as working across phases for different modes. This needs to be explicitly stated in an introduction to use of the EAL Scope and Sequence.

Speaking and Listening

Under 'Texts', it is unclear why procedural and factual texts are privileged at the expense of narrative texts. There are a range of texts used across subject areas. The Australian Curriculum is inclusive of a broad range of texts by describing them within the English curriculum under three broad text families. An important part of language development is the growing capacity to respond to and compose a growing range of texts types with increasing complexity. This is not captured in this document.

The Speaking and Listening mode lacks consistency in content descriptions relating to conversational speech that provide English learners with an essential communicative resource for social interaction, negotiation of meanings and academic learning.

The content descriptions of Speaking and Listening across the Phases do not consistently reflect the oral language development that research has shown to be critical to successful learning in school – the mode continuum from spoken-like to written-like language.

Reading and Viewing

There is no acknowledgement of a different pathway for students who enter school with limited literacy in their first language. For students with limited literacy in first language, Phase 1 is too high as these students may be developing awareness of the meaning of print and have beginning phonological awareness of the sounds of English.

Cultural knowledge and use of first language are critical resources in learning to read in a second language. They are not visible in this mode.

It is difficult to see how key reading skills are developing. Research clearly identifies, oral language, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, phonics and phonological awareness are all critical processes in the development of EAL reading.

The 'Identifying text types' sub-strand is misconceptualised and should focus on text structures and language features oriented to text purpose and audience.

Grammatical aspects of texts are limited, random and inconsistent. Text grammar should be understood in terms of whole text features, sentence level and word level features.

The 'Punctuation' sub-strand is misconceptualised. Punctuation relates to writing. Use of punctuation in reading aloud relates to (one aspect of) fluency.

Communicative strategies – strange to only put phonics and vocab in this section. Students use grammatical knowledge, semantic knowledge as well as decoding skills as reading strategies.

The Phonics sub-strand is misconceptualised. It erroneously includes grammatical knowledge and spelling and is confusing.

Writing

Cultural knowledge and use of first language is a critical element of learning to write in a second language. It is critical to creating meaning that is appropriate for the audience and purpose – a central tenant of the English curriculum. It is not visible in the document.

The phases of the Writing mode lack content descriptions relating to use of the student's first language and developing English as key oral language resources for writing.

The content descriptions of Writing across the Phases do not reflect the written language development that research has shown to be critical to successful writing in school – the mode continuum from spoken-like to written-like language.

Grammar content descriptors are limited and non essential. The Grammar sub-strand shows no clear developmental progression in the grammatical aspects of writing from simple, to compound to complex sentences, simple to complex noun groups, nor, at text level, in the development of paragraph writing with topic and supporting sentences.

Grammar should be reconceptualised as encompassing whole text, sentence level and word level features. The writing mode should show the grammatical features for different texts and students increasing flexibility and control of grammatical features.

CONCLUSION

The current draft of the EAL curriculum document does not meet the VCAA's stated objective of a design that addresses the students' specific learning requirements when teaching and ensuring equity of access to the Victorian Curriculum, or its own study design standards, namely:

- the knowledge and skills that are distinctive and characteristic of the field on which the proposed study is based
- enduring and contemporary approaches to the learning in the field
- the nature of discourse and activity in the field.

Given the plethora of issues outlined above and the need to ensure a reliable and valid curriculum instrument for EAL learners, further development of the EAL curriculum is required. This should minimally include revision of the current draft the document informed by consultation feedback and independent review, a report on consultation findings, and a trialling of the complete EAL curriculum by a representative sample of teachers of EAL learners, including EAL teachers, and validation of the complete EAL Curriculum document against a representative sample of the diverse range of EAL learners in Victorian schools across proposed EAL phases including new arrivals and continuing EAL learners.

While cognisant of VCAA's curriculum development timetable, on time promulgation of a defective EAL curriculum and assessment document risks fostering inaccurate and inappropriate assessment of their English language learning and achievement and entrenching long term educational disadvantage for EAL learners.

RECOMMENDATION

It is therefore recommended that:

1. VCAA conduct a separate, transparent process of curriculum design and consultation to resolve fundamental issues of curriculum design arising from the Gonski reform affecting all study areas and determine best models.
2. the consultation draft EAL curriculum document be independently reviewed by an academic and a practicing teacher with expertise in the EAL field
3. VCAA appoint a critical friend with an established reputation in the EAL field to provide independent advice to the Curriculum Manager on key directions and changes to the EAL curriculum
4. the consultation draft EAL curriculum document be revised incorporating advice from consultation feedback and the independent review
5. findings from the consultation, proposed changes and any research informing the new draft be outlined in a publically available consultation report
6. the consultation draft EAL curriculum document be completed incorporating all other curriculum elements
7. the completed draft EAL curriculum document be trialled by a representative sample of teachers of EAL learners, including EAL teachers, and validated against a representative sample of the diverse range of EAL learners in Victorian schools
8. the completed draft EAL curriculum document undergo a final consultation, feedback and revision.