ABSTRACT

In Australia’s changing curriculum landscape, it would be helpful for teachers of English, Languages (such as Indonesian or French) and English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) to work together to identify shared goals, to promote plurilingual notions of language and literacy and, where appropriate, to align language and literacy teaching practices. This article provides four suggestions for collaborative practices which should strengthen educational outcomes in our linguistically and culturally diverse school populations.

Introduction

As migration flows continue to evolve in complex ways around the world, so too do education systems and school populations. School systems in Australia receive students who not only bring a multitude of languages and cultures, but also a breadth of schooling experiences – from little, no or interrupted schooling, to substantial classroom-based capabilities. These students enter an already diverse school system. In Victoria, for example, 74 per cent of government school students are from an English-speaking background and 26 per cent from a non-English-speaking background. Among this latter cohort, 10 per cent of students are funded EAL/D (English as an Additional Language/Dialect) students, including recently arrived students (Department of Education and Training, Victoria, 2016).

Encouragingly, the diversity in our education systems is recognised and largely valued. The ongoing challenge for researchers and educators is to implement policies, curriculum and teaching practices around literacy learning which are inclusive and integrated. Two key tenets need to inform decision-making in relation to a plurilingual view of literacy teaching and learning. Firstly, that all languages and cultures have their own literacy practices, the maintenance and development of which are important for learners for personal, social and academic reasons (e.g., Cross, 2011; D’Warte, 2014, 2015; Truscott, 2016). Secondly, it is important that all stakeholders recognise that learners’ acquisition of formal literacy skills does not need to occur only through English (e.g., Brown, 2014; Lems, Miller, & Soro, 2010; Windle & Miller, 2012).

We would like to argue that English, Languages and EAL/D teachers, as a collective team, are key to advancing these arguments in schools – to challenge limiting viewpoints of everyday language practices which regard (Standard Australian) English and English literacy skills as being in competition with other languages. Here other languages include both home languages and study of an additional language at school, such as Indonesian or French. However, advancing these arguments and developing an integrated and cohesive approach to language and literacy learning is difficult for this group of key teachers, who can be structurally, and to some extent ideologically, separated within school environments. In the primary school setting, for example, the teacher of English is the classroom teacher, while primary EAL/D and Languages teachers are specialists, often employed part-time. Languages teachers may also be timetabled to facilitate planning time for classroom teachers and
opportunities to cooperatively plan goals, content or teaching techniques and to exchange information in relation to language and literacy learning are missed.

The introduction of the Australian Curriculum, which is being taken up and/or incorporated in different ways by the states and territories, provides an impetus for us to reflect on changes underway and how the curriculum is to be enacted in schools. We would like to provide four suggestions for increasing collaboration between these three important groups of teachers, who possess differing but overlapping perspectives on language and literacy. It is our view that a cohesive and complementary approach to literacy pedagogy will benefit teachers and learners.

**Suggestion 1: Recognise and share expertise between groups**

While English and EAL/D teachers often work closely together, this is not always the case with Languages teachers. We would encourage teachers of language and literacy to explore each others’ academic backgrounds and to consider how their different knowledge bases and skills might be utilised more effectively. At undergraduate level, future English teachers would typically have majored in English and focussed on literary studies. Future Languages teachers continue to develop their proficiency in their chosen language/s but often also study literature and culture of the language, as well as linguistics and sociolinguistics subjects. EAL/D teachers and many Languages teachers also study applied linguistics, including aspects of language (e.g., phonology, syntax and semantics), first and second language acquisition, bilingualism and the relationship between language, culture and society. Teachers with each of these trajectories bring a different, but commensurate, knowledge base and skill set to the task of teaching language, text and talk.

Being aware of a colleague’s academic background is a necessary first step in seeking them out for information exchange and potential opportunities for collaboration. For example, Languages and EAL/D teachers might look to their English teaching colleagues for innovative ways to approach the teaching of literary texts like poetry, plays and film. Similarly, an English teacher might refer to an EAL/D or Languages teacher for advice on the teaching and learning of grammar or the developmental pathway of a non-native speaker of English. Each group of teachers brings different but related perspectives on the learners, culture, language and pedagogy. Pooling these resources can only be mutually beneficial.

**Suggestion 2: Seek out curriculum commonalities**

The second suggestion relates to the English and Languages curricula since there is no separate EAL curriculum. The high challenge/high support approach for EAL/D learners facilitates a positive, close working relationship between English and EAL/D teachers.

We feel there is merit in the proposition that there is sufficient common ground in the *Australian Curriculum: English* (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2015a) and *Australian Curriculum: Languages* (ACARA, 2016), for example, to encourage closer collaboration between Languages, English and EAL/D teachers. Analysis of content descriptions in the Literature strand of the *Australian Curriculum: English* and the Creating sub-strand of the *Australian Curriculum: Languages* demonstrates a shared learning focus. One Years 9/10 German content description (ACARA, 2015b) for the Creating sub-strand asks learners to:

> Engage with a variety of imaginative texts, analysing the main ideas, values and techniques, and discussing issues and themes, using evidence from texts to support their views. (ACELGEC176)

We see clear parallels with the following Year 10 English content description (ACARA, 2015a):

> Analyse and evaluate text structures and language features of literary texts and make relevant thematic and intertextual connections with other texts. (ACELT1774)

Thus it seems to us that there is an opportunity for teachers of language and literacy (English,
Languages and EAL/D) to collaborate, to integrate or at least to reference and to build on the work of each other. The work of Loughran (2010) demonstrates the importance of students being able to make cognitive links within their learning, between tasks, lessons, units of work and subjects.

**Suggestion 3: Create and use a common metalanguage**

English, EAL/D and Languages teachers share a common focus on language, text and communication. We therefore see benefits for all stakeholders in the co-construction and adoption of a common metalanguage. While native speakers may learn to identify features and functions within their own language, they may struggle to see the importance of a metalanguage until they are challenged with acquiring another language. On the other hand, some EAL/D learners, who have acquired their English skills through traditional language teaching approaches, which focus on formal grammar study, may be more comfortable and confident users of grammatical metalanguage.

Some English and EAL/D teachers may only have knowledge of English and have an expert, but monolingual, understanding of metalanguage. This brings us back to the first point of the importance of understanding others’ academic backgrounds and expertise. In building a common metalanguage, a multilingual colleague may be able to contribute to discussions on positive transfer and negative interference between first and second/additional language learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2013) or on how literacy experience in the first language can assist in acquiring many of the components of reading in a second language (Lems, Miller, & Soro, 2010).

Once established, employing a common metalanguage and interrelated approaches to teaching about metalanguage enables English, EAL/D and Languages teachers to support and scaffold their students’ language learning more broadly. However, it is crucial not to forget the complex linguistic repertoires that students, particularly multilingual students, bring with them, which can also be elicited and woven into a shared metalanguage.

**Suggestion 4: Share pedagogic approaches and tools**

Professional literature for teachers, which describes best practice approaches and tools, tends to target either teachers of English as a first language (e.g., Cameron, 2009; Culham, 2010), English as a second language (Scrivener, 2011; Ur, 2009) or foreign languages (Barton, 2006; Blaz, 1998), mirroring the divide that can exist in the profession. However, we believe there is scope for pooling approaches, tools and resources given the common focus of language and literacy. For example, Burns’ (2001) genre-based approach to teaching writing, though originally intended for adult EAL learners, is a potential tool for English and Languages teachers. It shares common features with the *First steps* (Department of Education, Western Australia, 2013) approach to teaching writing. It highlights the importance of modelled and shared writing, but it adds the language and vocabulary dimension of ‘building the field’ and this could benefit all learners.

In the same vein, Languages teachers could make better use of graphic organisers to scaffold the creation of L2 texts – a widely used tool in EAL and particularly primary English teaching. Coherent, consistent approaches to language and literacy teaching, regardless of the focus language, represent a united front, promote common goals and are inclusive of all students.

**Conclusion**

While we have presented four seemingly straightforward suggestions – possibly enacted in schools already – the challenges and pressures of educational environments and the changing curriculum landscape remind us of the importance of reviewing and re-evaluating our stances and practices as teachers of language and literacy – English, EAL/D and Languages teachers together. Creating a collaborative and holistic notion of language, language learning and language and literacy teaching practices has the potential to strengthen educational outcomes for whole school populations.
References


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