

# Countdown on for the new National English Curriculum

*Concerns over teachers' confidence in delivering 'knowledge about language'*



Dr Beverly Derewianka

In what is a historic development, a National English Curriculum will soon be introduced into Australian schools with the support of all states and territories.

Following a period of community consultation, the National English Curriculum will be developed in 2009, trialled in 2010 and implemented in schools in 2011.

All schools, whether they are private or state, and all grades from kindergarten to Year 12, will be required to implement the new curriculum. Individual schools and teachers, however, will have

flexibility in deciding the details of the content and how the curriculum is best taught to meet the needs of their students.

The framing paper for the English Curriculum, written by Prof Peter Freebody, identifies three key elements: knowledge about language, learning to use language and literary appreciation.

The paper took about three months of intensive work to write, supported by an advisory panel including literature specialists, primary and secondary school teachers, professional associations and representatives of indigenous and ESL students.

According to Dr Beverly Derewianka, a member of the framing paper advisory panel, "knowledge about language" is an area of the curriculum which has been relatively neglected in recent years.

"It is acknowledged that there will need to be considerable professional development in this area, particularly for those teachers who were not taught about grammar in their school years," she said.

Dr Derewianka cautions that "knowledge about language" goes well beyond traditional grammar.

"In the framing paper, knowledge about language includes 'the basics,'" she said. "In other words, letters of the alphabet and their related sounds, handwriting, spelling, punctuation and grammatical accuracy.

"However, it also involves knowledge of how language is used in a variety of contexts.

"Students are taught how language is used for a range of purposes across the different areas of the curriculum.

"The language used in writing a science report, for example, is very different from the language used in writing a story.

"Students also need to learn how language changes according to the audience. They will make different choices when writing a letter to the editor as opposed to a postcard to a friend. They also need to learn how to comprehend and interpret different kinds of texts – including visual information."

Dr Derewianka, Professor of Language Education at the University of Wollongong, points out that this broader way of thinking about language has already been part of school English syllabuses in several states for the past decade.

In her university, trainee teachers undertake substantial preparation in learning about language.

"One subject, for example, introduces them to the teaching of basic skills such as phonics, spelling and sentence structure," she said.

"In other subjects, they are taught to identify the language demands made on learners in reading and writing complex texts in areas of the curriculum such as science, history and mathematics.

"In particular, they look at how to explicitly teach the language requirements of the English Curriculum, such as stories, poetry and essay writing."

Dr Derewianka says that the reaction of student-teachers to these subjects varies.

"Some students are very relieved and saying: 'Why didn't anybody ever teach us this in primary school and high school, particularly things to do with grammar and spelling strategies?'," she said.

"A lot of them are also resentful that they've not learned it beforehand. Many didn't even know what a noun or a verb was.

"A lot of them have found it difficult and challenging because it was quite new to them, but overall they feel a sense of achievement and have a greater awareness about how language works."

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