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# **Reviewing South Australian ESL programs and services: Implications for teachers and learners at senior secondary levels**

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*Currently each state and territory in Australia offers its own range of ESOL services and programs, guided by policy and supported by funding from both national and state and territory authorities, with some variations occurring across jurisdictions (government, independent and Catholic). The National Curriculum Board (now renamed the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA]) came into effect in January 2009 and released for consultation an English curriculum framing paper for a national English curriculum. It is timely, therefore, to consider what states and territories currently offer in terms of ESOL services and programs, and what might be learned from considering these in terms of useful models for framing national curriculum and programs. The paper examines the South Australian ESOL programs and services, focusing on the senior secondary years, and highlights the implications of the national English curriculum for ESL teachers and learners.*

**Keywords:** *national curriculum; South Australia; TESOL programs*

## **Introduction**

Curriculum planning is historically, politically, socially and economically contextualised (Smith & Lovat, 2006), targeting particular groups in particular contexts at particular times. It takes into account perceived community and learner needs and a desire to match these needs with changing circumstances (Scarino *et al.* 2008; Shepard, 2000; Smith & Lovat, 2006). Currently, in Australia, a shift in curriculum planning is occurring, with the establishment of the National Curriculum Board (NCB) (now ACARA) in January 2009.

The locus of control for framing curriculum is therefore shifting from individual states and territories to a centralised national position. The main objective of the NCB is to develop and implement a “single, world class” national curriculum of “essential content and achievement standards” for all Australian students, aimed at “invigorat[ing] a national effort to improve student learning”(NCB, 2008a, n. p.). The NCB has developed draft curriculum framing papers in the areas of English, maths, the sciences and history, and will develop further framing papers for languages, geography and (as a recent addition) the arts (NCB, 2008a; Ferrari & Perkin, 2009).

Curriculum that recognises not just different rates of development, but learner diversity and the range of learning contexts, is essential for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners. ESOL learners come to Australian classrooms from a range of sociocultural backgrounds and circumstances, for a range of purposes, and with a range of language and learning histories. This diversity of contexts has implications for learners and teachers, and needs to be considered in framing both mainstream English and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) curriculum and programs, from the level of the NCB to the classroom teacher and the individual learner. It is therefore timely to review and critique what states and territories currently offer in their ESL programs and services, with a view to identifying elements and models that can inform and contribute to discussions around the framing of a new national curriculum, its rationale, inclusions and priorities.

The South Australian schools sector provides a range of differently targeted programs for ESOL learners, across the three education jurisdictions: government, independent and Catholic. These programs range from government supported programs and services to full-fee-paying programs. The programs exist for all categories of migrants, temporary residents, permanent residents and international students studying in Australia or, in some instances, in their home nations, including parts of Malaysia and China, where the senior secondary South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) ESL Studies subject is offered, providing students with the requisite English qualification for Australian university entrance (Department of Education and Children’s Services [DECS], 2008a; DECS, 2008b; SACE Board, 2008a) .

This report begins with a brief description of the context and program options for ESOL learners in South Australia, and then

focuses on public sector (government) supported English as a Second Language programs, services and learner pathways, and on the Year 12 SACE ESL program in particular. These programs are critiqued with reference to the learner profile and learning environment, language and learning models, curriculum and assessment for the senior secondary years, and implications for both teachers and learners of ESL. It is hoped that through this analysis some of the critical issues that need to be considered in framing an English curriculum for ESOL learners will be foregrounded and relevant aspects of the South Australian programs and services highlighted. It is hoped that similar reviews of other states' and territories' programs will also contribute to the debate, so that collectively they can be used to inform development of the national curriculum and associated policy.

### **Political context considerations for ESL in South Australia**

The political context for ESL teaching in South Australia is complex, as issues of curriculum and pedagogical choices need also to be understood in the wider context of sensitive national, state and local issues regarding policy and perceptions of, for example, immigration, refugees, refugee detention, population pressure, the economy and economic development, globalisation, national identity, multiculturalism and multilingualism, racism, literacy targets and the development of the new national curriculum (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2007; McKay, 2000). It is important to be aware of the complexity of context for ESL teaching, of public and media perceptions, and of pedagogical and funding implications, for teachers, students, their families and the wider community (McKay, 2000). McKay (2000), for example, points out that the Western world's drive for common literacy standards, often associated with national English curricula, disadvantages ESL learners who are assessed with English Speaking Background (ESB) standard tools, rather than specific tests tailored for non-English Speaking Background (NESB) learners. This point is of relevance in relation to the "stages of schooling" and "standards" that learners are expected to achieve in the proposed national English curriculum, which indeed focus on achievement levels for mainstream ESB learners, as they are specifically age related, age being referenced against ESB learners.

### **South Australian ESL program options**

Programs and services for ESOL learners in South Australia fall into two main groups: government supported programs for migrants; new arrivals and humanitarian temporary residents; and full-fee-paying

programs for international students (DECS, 2008a; DECS, 2008b; Immigration SA, 2008). Both groups are served by all three education jurisdictions, each providing ESOL programs and services within their schools on both a government-supported and a full-fee-paying basis. A third option for ESOL services and programs is language classes available from private companies, though these services are targeted more at adults (e.g. *Learn English in Adelaide*, 2008).

The two main program pathways in South Australia for second language learners are “targeted groups” rather than options, as the cohorts of learners in each group are defined by their circumstances of need or grounds for arrival in Australia. Government supported programs are available to those meeting eligibility criteria: migrants (in all the immigration categories: skilled, family reunion, special eligibility and humanitarian) and permanent residents (DECS, 2008a; Australian Government, 2008). Programs for international students are provided on a fee-paying basis.

Two very different groups are targeted with these ESOL program options. The first group is migrants and permanent residents; the second is international students. The learner cohort varies widely within both groups across these programs, however, from person to person, depending on their own histories and backgrounds and the circumstances in which they are now living and studying (Scarino, Papademetre & Mercurio, 2008). This means that there are multidimensional and complex needs to take into account. Such considerations will include levels and amount of prior education, in any language; the amount and level, if any, of education in English; and personal context issues such as exposure to traumatic experiences, family dislocation, and current psychological and physical health states. International students bring with them their own personal needs, stressors and contexts for consideration (see, for example, Shakya & Horsfall, 2000; Barrett, Sonderegger & Xenos, 2003).

The message to take from this range of programs, therefore, is that although there are broad differences in the two major program offerings, individual needs and contexts must always be considered, and it cannot be assumed that policy, programming and curricula will be applicable to all ESOL groups, and to all ESOL learners, uniformly. How this diversity of contexts is treated, at classroom level and at a curriculum framing level will have crucial implications for ESL teachers and learners.

## **DECS ESL programs and services**

DECS is responsible for implementing policies and mechanisms for identification and differentiation of learners requiring ESL services in government schools; and for provision of the range of ESL services, programs, training and evaluation across all school year levels (DECS, 2008a). DECS is also responsible for ESL services and programs for adult learners, ESL educators and the wider school and local communities that support ESL learners in public schools, as well as ESL learners' transition pathways to mainstream education (DECS, 2008a). DECS ESL policy is to "provide services to improve participation and educational outcomes for ESL students and their families" and involves the provision of "intensive English programs for newly arrived students who have a language and cultural background other than English and limited English language, and programs for ESL students in mainstream settings including direct instruction in ESL and support within classrooms" (DECS, 2008a, p. 2).

### *DECS ESL programs and services: implications for teachers and learners*

Policy is directed towards reaching all potential ESL learners who fall within the migrant and permanent resident categories, through the range of services and programs offered for both the school years and for adult sectors. The services are linked and available concurrently, providing interrelated support for each other. An example of this is the provision of general support in the classroom with a dedicated ESL teacher, as well as bilingual school services officers (BSSOs) who assist the learner, in and out of class, to communicate with teachers, other learners and school administrators. The BSSOs are also mandated to assist with communication between learners' families and communities and the school as well as with external bodies such as government departments. Co-ordination of these services is overseen by district service providers (DSPs) and local case managers, responsible for each learner in the NAP programs, for example. The dedicated NAP schools provide extensive ESL support in schools oriented to the diversity of learner needs and backgrounds. The interconnectedness of services provides ESL learners with a greater chance at having their complex individual needs recognised and met. The services and programs in place flow and connect from one level of schooling to another, and across programs, such as in students' transition from NAP to the mainstream.

Teachers are supported through promotion of a culture of ongoing professional learning and a professional development program open to both ESL and, importantly, other teachers. DECS'

preferred model is to work with a whole school staff in developing a professional learning culture that is ESL aware and inclusive, as well as supporting individual teachers to pursue in-service professional learning and additional tertiary accredited qualifications (DECS, 2008a). DECS cooperates with all three local universities in the planning and provision of these courses, and also provides a number of scholarships to eligible teachers. In addition, there is evidence, on the DECS ESL website and in their professional learning programs, that research and practice, including reference to ESL teachers' professional associations, inform development of programs and services, enhancing the capacity for new policy and programming decisions to reflect professional opinion and current research thinking.

### DECS ESL language and learning models

The *ESL Scope and Scales* (Polias, 2003) is the key curriculum document guiding ESL practice in SA government schools (DECS, 2007). Developed to support the ESL component of the South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability (SACSA) framework (DECS, 2001), the *ESL Scope and Scales* moves beyond the earlier, nationally developed *ESL Scales* (Curriculum Corporation, 1994) to link achievement scales to the standards and levels in the SACSA framework. It is a planning, assessment and reporting tool that scopes appropriate learning for ESL learners, and determines student English language capability against criteria ranked in scales that can be compared with expected mainstream student (Standard Australian) English language levels. It is linked to the SACSA framework as indicated in Figure 1, below (DECS, 2001; DECS, 2008a). Mainstream students in Years 11 and 12 are expected to perform at the ESL scale level 14 (DECS, 2008c).

ESL Scales	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Year level				R	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Standard						1	2	3			4		5	

Figure 1: Comparison of *ESL Scales* with *Year Level* expectations and SACSA framework *Standards* (DECS, 2008a)

It is DECS' practice to assess ESL students' scales at least three times each year, using the *ESL Scope and Scales*, the results of which

are moderated with other ESL teachers for validity (DECS, 2007). The *ESL Scope and Scales* therefore provides a tool for regularly assessing student performance, benchmarked against need (the gap) in relation to anticipated performance of mainstream students and the state curriculum framework (see discussion below related to problems of scaling).

The DECS *ESL Scope and Scales* document is underpinned by a functional model of language, demonstrating “the complete interconnectedness of the cultural context and linguistic activity” (DECS, 2007, n.p.). This model of language is based on the functional grammar model of understanding language, as developed by Michael Halliday (1973, 1985, 1994) and others. This model of language has informed the ESL, and indeed, the English teaching context in Australia in the development of curriculum frameworks of the past few decades (see Derewianka, 1990, 1992, for example), including the NSW, Victorian and South Australian frameworks.

The main emphasis of this model is a focus on meaning rather than decontextualised language forms, and a view that language learning occurs through situated social interaction, as described in Vygotskian constructivist theory (Derewianka, 2007). The functional language model places all learning activities within a context of culture envelope, where texts that reflect shared beliefs, values and practices are generated into identifiable genres. Variations of the wider context of culture are seen as the context of situation or register. These variations are described in terms of three variables: field (content or topic of the social activity), tenor (nature of the relationships amongst those involved including writer and intended audience) and mode (the medium of communication and how it impacts on the organisational aspects of the text) (DECS, 2007; Derewianka, 1990, 1992, 2007).

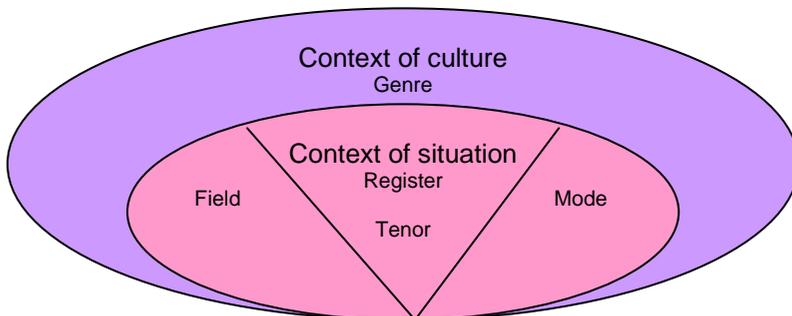


Figure 2: Model of language (1) for ESL in DECS (DECS, 2007)

Meanings that result in specific texts are expressed through the grammar: how the words, visuals, gestures and verbal elements are organised, which in turn is realised through sounds, letters, body movement, font, colour and image (DECS, 2007). These can be seen in the expanded model of language in the figure below.

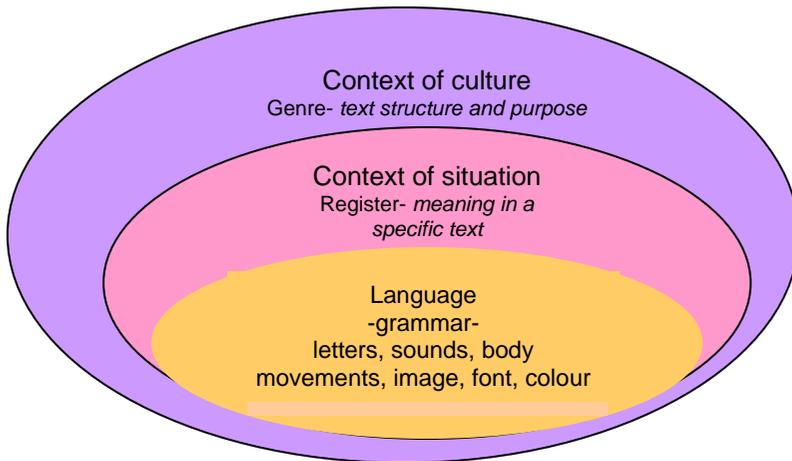


Figure 3: Model of language (2) for ESL in DECS (DECS 2007)

The teaching and learning model, using the above language model(s), involves a progressively independent process of learning, developed in four interrelated, progressive phases: building the field, modelling and deconstruction, joint construction and independent construction (Christie, 1999; DECS, 2007; Derewianka, 1990; Halliday, 1985). “Building the field” involves the teacher building on students existing knowledge and introducing new material as students become increasingly familiar with the topic or content. The modelling/deconstruction phase involves exploring how texts/authors make meaning through examining the social purpose, structure and language features (genre, field, tenor and mode) and introducing a metalanguage to enable students to talk about texts. In the joint construction phase, the teacher guides students to construct their own texts; and in the independent construction phase, students create their own texts, assisted with feedback from teachers.

*DECS ESL language and learning models: Implications for teachers and learners*

This issue of the significance of scales and assessing standards of performance for ESL learners has been widely considered by all the education jurisdictions across Australian states and territories for many years, and remains an area of debate (see Derewianka, 1997;

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McKay, 2000, 2007, for example). It needs to be borne in mind that using scales does not guarantee an accurate measure of performance, and scales will always be open to interpretation (McKay, 2000). McKay (2000, 2007) discusses a range of different scales used throughout the world for ESL learners and some of the problematic issues that arise through reliance on these for measuring both eligibility and progress. She says “ESL standards are not tests; they are dependent for their validity on the uses and interpretations that we make of the test response, rather than on the rating which is elicited from the combined use of the standards and the assessment activity used to observe a student’s performance” (McKay, 2000, p. 193). Scales nonetheless currently serve in these situations to guide teachers’ judgment of evidence that they can provide to both internal (school or system based) and external (government) funding authorities to indicate that students meet the ESL needs criteria. For these purposes, the ESL Scope and Scales usefully provide examples of levels that can be compared with both age related and curriculum standard outcomes.

Implications of the choice of a functional model of language and learning to underpin curriculum planning go to the heart of views on teaching and learning. As Derewianka (2007, p. 852) puts it “the way we conceptualise language has implications for the way we conceptualise learning and teaching”. In choosing Halliday’s functional model of language, an emphasis is placed on language viewed in its social contexts, with a focus on learners’ meaning making rather than on form of itself, and on language used to interpret the world and ourselves (Derewianka, 2007). Making this choice also has ideological and political ramifications, as a functional view of language “inherently... locates the individual within collective, material and historical contexts” (Derewianka, 2007, p. 854). The value of such an approach for second language learners, including ESL learners, is that it assists with the process of socialisation, where learners are “learning to construct new sociocultural realities and to reshape... subjectivity” in a way that recognises what individual learners bring to the learning situation and the meaning they make of it. Such an orientation to language learning provides opportunities to develop critical language awareness and literacy and to provide the skills necessary to create accurate and contextually appropriate texts (Derewianka, 2007, p. 855). In providing for these needs, a functional language model remains highly appropriate for consideration as the underpinning language model for the national curriculum, although

ongoing investigation into alternative models should continue to influence its development.

### **SACE ESL**

The South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) is the current end point qualification for Years 11 and 12 students in South Australian schools, although a new Future SACE is currently being phased in, and will impact on Year 12 in 2010 (SACE Board, 2008a). All SACE Stage 1 (Year 11) students are required to complete a full year subject in English, English as a Second Language (ESL) or Communication for the Hearing Impaired (SACE Board, 2008a). For SACE Stage 2 (Year 12), students are not required to include an English course. SACE Stage 2 ESL subjects are ESL and ESL Studies. Secondary ESL students attend mainstream schools, aside from those in the *New Arrivals* program attending the Adelaide School of English. In mainstream schools, ESL learners are in classes with mainstream students, although some ESL support may be provided (DECS, 2008a).

The ESL and ESL Studies curriculum statements focus on the importance of the functional grammar based, cultural and situational contexts of language and learning; on language as a resource for conveying meaning and on the need for ESL students to reflect critically on language choice and use. This focus is maintained through analysis of a range of texts on a variety of issues, and students are encouraged to develop English language skills in a range of modes as critical receivers (listening, viewing, reading) and as producers (speaking and writing), and to use a range of media (SACE Board, 2008a). Students' personal backgrounds are acknowledged, as is the impact of linguistic, cultural and social factors on students engagement levels (SACE Board, 2008a).

The Stage 2 subjects ESL and ESL Studies have the following curriculum and assessment components and values:

ESL		ESL STUDIES	
Communication	(20%)	Issue analysis	(10%)
Investigation	(20%)	Text production	(15%)
Text production	(30%)	Investigation	(25%)
Interaction	(30%)	Examination	(50%)

Figure 4: ESL subject curriculum and assessment components

Details of the curriculum are explained in hard copy and electronic documents and are supported by material such as past exam papers (which have similar formats, question types and tasks from year to year), sample responses, advice on writing and interpreting particular genres of texts, working with functional grammar, using persuasive, formal and informal language, sample programs and sample assessment plans (SACE Board, 2008a). The ease of availability of curriculum documents and resources has implications for both teachers and learners, especially those located internationally, who do not have physical access to libraries and resource centres in South Australia.

To understand the diversity of learners and their needs, it is important to know who the ESL learners are. A snapshot of the senior secondary ESL profile can be seen in Figure 5, below.

SA government schools offering SACE ESL subjects	27
NT government schools offering SACE ESL subjects	10
Asian schools offering SACE ESL subjects	6
Students in government schools recording a result in SACE Stage 1 ESL	1817
Students in all schools recording a result in SACE Stage 1 ESL	2962
Students in SA and NT completing ESL Stage 2 subjects (all schools)	2616
Students in SA and NT government schools completing SACE Stage 2 ESL	294
Students in SA and NT government schools completing SACE Stage 2 ESL Studies	299
Students in Asia completing SACE Stage 2 ESL Studies	1490

Figure 5: South Australian Senior Secondary ESL Profile 2007 (SACE Board, 2008b)

The largest student cohort taking SACE Stage 2 ESL subjects is international students in Asia. Anecdotal reports from ESL professionals indicates that it is international students, both in Australia and Asia, who comprise the large majority of Stage 2 ESL students as they require a tertiary entrance rank for university entrance, thereby maintaining its viability in South Australia. The majority of students taking ESL Stage 2 subjects in South Australian schools are international, full fee paying students, mostly from China,

and the majority of these take ESL rather than ESL Studies (SACE Board, 2008b).

### **Alignment of DECS ESL language and learning models and the proposed national English curriculum**

Though this paper does not seek to offer an in-depth analysis of the South Australian ESL learning model for its fit with the proposed national English curriculum, a few salient points of alignment may be suggested. Firstly, it should be noted that there is very little reference to ESL learners in the proposed framework, aside from recognition that the national English curriculum must “meet the needs of all English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) students” (National Curriculum Board [NCB], 2008b, p.3; NCB 2009). This minimal reference needs elaboration in terms of the curriculum being developed, to embrace the more specific and diverse needs of ESL learners under the umbrella of an English curriculum for all students. Such consideration might include, for example, some suggestions as to how ESL learners needs are determined (through scales or other mechanisms) and how the curriculum, and especially standards, which are prescribed in the current document based on age, for ESB learners, will apply to and take into account ESL learners, and how this can be framed to reflect positively on NESB learners.

The minimal reference to ESL learners aside, there are instances of alignment with the DECS ESL learning model and the outlined features of the national English curriculum that need careful consideration and further clarification as the consultation period and development of the final curriculum occurs. The proposed curriculum suggests four overall conclusions about a national English curriculum (NCB, 2008b, p. 5). These are:

- the need to explicitly teach phonological awareness and sound-script correspondence
- the need to teach spelling, punctuation and grammar with a focus on strategies that can be extended over the years of learning, using a common vocabulary (metalinguage) for discussing these
- deliberate attention to the expansion of learners’ vocabularies
- acknowledgement that the basics are not an end in themselves, but need to be connected to context and to genuine and rich language and literacy tasks (NCB, 2008b)

There is correspondence with the DECS ESL learning model in that all four elements could be embraced within a pedagogy of

practice that includes modeled and joint construction, moving to individual construction of texts and responses within an explicitly described grammar system; and attending to the fine detail of phonological awareness, spelling, grammar and punctuation in relation to texts explored and developed for relevance to the particular group of learners. A vocabulary for discussing language features (metalanguage) is inherent in the South Australian model, and a crucial point of connection with a functional model of language. Contextual consideration, given considerable emphasis in the DECS ESL learning and language models, aligns with the fourth point of the proposed curriculum on the need to go beyond basics and provide for personalised and meaningful learning experiences. Although further expansion of the language model underpinning these four points in the proposed framework needs further clarification, as all could be addressed within a functional model of meaning oriented learning, there is a potential for interpretation of at least the first and maybe also the second of these “conclusions” within a decontextualised form oriented model of language, which may run counter to the DECS functional language model.

Additionally, there is alignment with Item 30, on the need to understand, analyse, appreciate and construct texts; and with Items 40 to 42 on a pedagogical orientation that supports multiple perspectives, where sometimes *direct* teacher intervention is needed and sometimes more *indirect* guidance is more appropriate, allowing for wider imaginative and creative responses from students that supports a view of the complexity of learners using language effectively to express meaning. The three elements of the proposed curriculum: knowledge about English (language), informed appreciation of literature (literature) and evolving repertoires of English usage (literacy) are sufficiently broad to encompass wider modalities of texts (which would be understood as literature in this model) to fit comfortably with the DECS ESL learning model, and with the specified curriculum elements of the senior secondary ESL curriculum.

## Summary

As Cope and Kalantzis (2000, p. 18) state: “...to be relevant, learning processes need to recruit, rather than attempt to ignore and erase, the different subjectiveness, interests, intentions, commitments and purposes that students bring to learning”. Being relevant and catering for learner diversity and learners’ ranges of purposes for learning are desirable and appropriate aims of ESL teaching and learning, and must be considered when framing an English curriculum suitable for

all Australian students. To be relevant, and to build on existing knowledge of context, there is merit in considering current systems and practices throughout the states and territories of Australia to achieve meaningful outcomes for ESOL learners within an overarching national English curriculum. The place of ESL within the English curriculum needs to be loud, clear and inclusive, and the consultation process provides opportunity for this to occur. Existing practice and experience should be used to inform curriculum development, from the classroom and individual teacher and learner level to overarching national curriculum frameworks such as the one under current development.

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