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# Reclaiming the territory: Understanding the specialist knowledge of ESL education for literacy, curriculum, and multilingual learners

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*This paper aims to (re)engage ESL with the broader literacy debate, by calling for a better recognition of what literacy means for second language learners within contemporary Australian education systems, and acknowledging the specialist professional knowledge that ESL teachers bring to the mainstream. The literacy debate that has shaped so much of the educational reform in the last 10–15 years has assumed an almost exclusively monolingual, mother-tongue orientation about what it means to be a user and learner of English. The result has been a muddying of the specialist needs of those learning the same skills in English as a second or additional language, and this paper seeks to identify what must be reclaimed in understanding the nature of those needs as a specialist area of teaching and learning.*

Keywords: *teacher knowledge; literacy; curriculum; policy*

## Introduction

As a profession, considerable ground has been conceded in the last 10 to 15 years about what it means to be an ESL teacher. This has not necessarily occurred with deliberate intent or purpose, but it has nonetheless happened in ways that have now weakened the field as a distinct body of professional knowledge. Successive curriculum and policy developments, especially those from the mid-1990s through to the construction of language and literacy now set out under the new Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum & Assessment Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2011a), have resulted in a definite shift in the ways others are now positioned to tell us, as ESL educators, about what it means to be a teacher of English; and, as I demonstrate though this paper, this is a term I use very deliberately, “English”, rather than “English as a second language”.

This paper is an attempt to reclaim some of that “lost territory” by being clear about how this repositioning has happened. By understanding how the current discourse that now dominates language and literacy education with the context of the Australian

Curriculum has come to be, I also want to consider how the future might look by (re)asserting what is (or at least should be) special about our professional space for ESL. It is only through knowing our own past that we, as a profession, can make the best choices on how to move forward. I therefore begin with an overview of successive policy developments that now shape key ideas dominating the current discourse that underpins literacy education in Australia, including literacy as conceived in the new Australian Curriculum. I then finish by outlining key points I believe must become central for rethinking curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment if they are to genuinely address the needs of English *second language* learners within contemporary Australian schools.

### **Why bother? – The timeliness for (re)defining the profession**

Much of what I have to say has been said before. I draw on work that has already argued of the need to maintain what *is* particular—even “special”—about teaching and learning second languages (e.g., Hammond & Derewianka, 1999; McKay, 1999), and they build on arguments I have made elsewhere myself (Cross, 2009, 2011a, 2011b). Yet, perhaps for this very reason—that the arguments have been made before, sometimes as much as a decade ago at previous pivotal turns in policy (e.g., the introduction of national benchmarking in the late 1990s (Davison, 1999))—that this obligates us to “keep at it”. As a profession, there is an imperative need to both defend and articulate at each new turn (and opportunity) an understanding of how, why, and what has been lost, together with identifying what still remains possible in attempts to move most constructively forward.

The last few years have been tremendously exciting for the teaching of Languages *other than* English. Not only has Australia recently been governed by a prime minister who was himself bilingual, but one who actively championed a range of initiatives in the early 1990s that brought second languages into the core curriculum (Rudd, 1994). Perhaps not surprisingly, then, a similar flurry of activity followed in the late 2000s for teaching Languages other than English, and Asian languages in particular, with the introduction of the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP). Committing \$62.4 million over three years, the program aims to develop quality language outcomes in Japanese, Chinese, Indonesian and Mandarin as priorities for Australia’s future. Similarly, at the state level, Victoria has not only affirmed the place of Languages other than English within the core curriculum, for example, but has introduced new initiatives that will see the curriculum, itself, being taught through Languages other than English using “content and language integrated learning” (CLIL) pedagogies in the near future (Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2010).

Note, though, that I deliberately avoid using the new nomenclature for LOTE within the Australian Curriculum—Languages—to emphasise this heightened level of support and awareness for languages *other than* English. As someone with a deep commitment to all languages, I believe these moves must be commended for their progressive approach that recognises the importance of bilingualism and linguistic and cultural diversity for the wider Australian community; especially for Australian-born students who would otherwise have little or no opportunity to learn a second language and gain from its benefits (Baker, 2006). However, and in almost direct contrast to the investment in realising bilingual possibilities for the mainstream, there are already masses of students within our school system who are bilingual. Marginalised and less visible within the same policy space, these learners are given almost nowhere near the same degree of attention in terms of how they are framed or understood as bilingual students, with specialist bilingual teaching and learning needs.

Recognising the distinctiveness of English as a second language from a bilingual perspective does not mean that teachers necessarily speak two (or more) languages for instruction or teaching. Rather, and even more fundamentally, my argument is simply the need to recognise, and assert, that the ESL space is *not* an “English only” space, and when curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment default to monolingual (i.e., English) frameworks, it is not in the best interests of all students within culturally and linguistically diverse contexts such as contemporary Australia.

As ESL professionals, the learners with whom we work *are* bilingual. In the same way those responsible for “bilingual” Languages programs (e.g., German at Bayswater South in Melbourne, Italian at Yarralumla Primary in Canberra, etc.) would find it unacceptable to have a monolingual frame of reference imposed upon their students’ teaching and learning needs, this is precisely what ESL teachers face in attempts to navigate pathways for ESL learners in the mainstream: they are compared, measured, and assessed against standards that assume a monolingual-centric focus, rather than frameworks that recognise ESL students as having their own specialist—and different—language learning needs and patterns of development compared to their mother-tongue monolingual peers in the same space.

The Australian Curriculum, for example, has recently released a substantive companion document running at just over 100 pages on how to address ESL learners’ needs (ACARA, 2011b). However, published 8 months after the curriculum, the companion document seems “retrofitted” to the mainstream curriculum structure. Although information about other key curriculum elements (e.g., the learning areas, general capabilities, cross-curriculum priorities, etc.) can be accessed through an online integrated, interactive, and

dynamic platform to show teachers how each of these components relate to one another, the ESL information is completely separate. Downloaded from a different part of the website as a static, paginated PDF file, none of the text in the document appears within the curriculum itself. Similarly, the information set out in the ESL document seems disconnected from how English is presented within the curriculum (e.g., although the Curriculum conceives of English as having three strands, including literature, this is ignored within the ESL support material). Moreover, the information about ESL says nothing of how the first language can be used to support learners' second language development, but instead defaults to an "English only" orientation about what it means to be a learner and user of English, thus reinforcing fundamental monolingual assumptions that permeate throughout the curriculum as a whole.

It is ironic that the Australian school system is often critiqued for its poor bilingual outcomes (e.g., Macgibbon, 2011; Group of Eight, 2007) yet it does an excellent job of assimilating students who *are* bilingual into pathways of monolingualism or, worse still, semi-lingualism: at least in terms of their capacity to genuinely develop a full command English literacy (Baker, 2006). It is a teaching and learning context that, at least systemically, gives almost no consideration to ESL students as learners with specialist second language needs but, rather, positions them as merely weaker—even inferior—versions of their English native-speaking counterparts against whom they are ultimately taught, assessed, and evaluated.

### **Literacy for all ... assuming "all of you" are just like "all of us": The dominance of monolingual native standards in a context of cultural and linguistic diversity**

Although this introduction has painted a somewhat bleak picture with respect to the current policy settings for ESL, it is worth remembering that things have not always been this way; not least for the hope that there is potential for change. The 1970s through to the early 90s saw an era in which Australian ESL education was recognised throughout the world for progressiveness and excellence. This included a proliferation of publications on Australian research and innovation in this area (e.g., Hammond & Burns, 1999; Mohan, Leung, & Davison, 2001), together with specialist provisions for the needs of an increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse community (e.g., establishing the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), the AMEP, as well as its child-focused program, the CMEP, to provide dedicated ESL support within schools). Policy-wise, there was a national senate commission on the state of Australian languages in 1982 which led, in turn, to the *National Policy of Languages* (Lo Bianco, 1987), Australia's first policy specifically to deal with language.

However, 1998 was a defining point in the direction where ESL education was to move with the introduction of *Literacy for All* (Department of Employment, 1998): a commonwealth initiative that was a watershed for conceding the territory ESL specialists held as a specialist body of knowledge in relation to English as a mother-tongue. Although a policy of the Howard liberal government, key elements crystallised through the policy were already apparent in Labor's revision of the *National Policy on Languages* in 1991, entitled *Australia's Language* (Commonwealth Department of Employment, 1991). Officially designating English as "the" language of Australia, the policy also prioritised and ranked the importance of other languages according to economic potential, rather than their social or cultural value to the Australian community.

Although now rarely the immediate concern when considering literacy education in Australia, *Literacy for All* set out several goals for teaching literacy that have since become firmly established as a national frame of reference for continuing to think about literacy in Australian schools. Indeed, since replacing the Liberal government in 2007, subsequent Labor initiatives have only further intensified the monolingual English-centric initiatives for literacy established under *Literacy for All*, including *myschool.edu.au* (together with NAPLAN), and the Australian Curriculum.

The key premise of *Literacy for All* was "that every child leaving primary school should be numerate and be able to read, write and spell at an appropriate level" (Department of Employment, 1998, p. 9), together with a related sub-goal: "that every child commencing school from 1998 will achieve a minimum acceptable literacy and numeracy standard within four years" (p. 9). Rather than a pedagogical model of how those goals might be achieved, however, the model instead consists of six key "elements" (p. 10); four of which are directly related to a framework for assessment:

- assessment of all students by their teachers as early as possible in the first years of schooling
- the development of agreed benchmarks for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, against which all children's achievement in these years can be measured
- the measurement of students' progress against these benchmarks using rigorous state-based assessment procedures, with all Year 3 students being assessed against the benchmarks from 1998 onwards, and against the Year 5 benchmark as soon as possible
- progress towards national reporting on student achievement against the benchmarks, with reporting commencing in 1999 within the framework of the annual National Report on Schooling in Australia. (Department of Employment, 1998, p. 10).

A fifth element concerns teachers' professional development (p. 10), but again with a focus essentially about assessment to help teachers to achieve elements 1 through to 4 listed above; namely, the introduction of initiatives that will support teachers to:

- use screening strategies to identify students at risk,
- intervene to address students at risk, and
- assess progress against national benchmarks.  
(Department of Employment, 1998, p. 27).

Indeed, only one of the six elements concerns the actual teaching of literacy—"early intervention strategies for those students identified as having difficulty" (p. 9)—and then only for those students identified as failures against minimum benchmarks established on the basis of the previous 5 elements.

As mentioned earlier, although *Literacy for All* is now rarely mentioned when discussing literacy within current educational discourse, the framework it established continues to have a profound effect on how we understand and approach literacy, especially at systems level, within Australian schools. In particular, it is most evident through the impact of the *National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN) and its reporting mechanism, *myschool.edu.au* (Lobascher, 2011). NAPLAN not only directly affects how literacy is assessed, but through "washback" onto the teaching/learning cycle (Taylor, 2005), it has flow-on effects in how literacy is realised through curriculum and instruction. With the alignment of NAPLAN to the Australian Curriculum, both of which are developed and administered through the Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority (ACARA), it is reasonable to expect that this relationship will continue to intensify into the future.

### **Problematizing the framework of *Literacy for All***

For ESL, the most significant impact of the way literacy has been conceived through *Literacy for All* and subsequent curriculum and policy instruments has been the conflation of language with literacy (Davison, 1999). In contrast to recognising the distinctive needs of students acquiring literacy as a skill in their second language, literacy (i.e., "English") is instead reduced to a common "basic skill" for "all". As a result, "ESL-ness" is dissolved into a broad group of larger, general needs, alongside "socioeconomic disadvantage, poverty, low parental expectation, disability ... family or personal difficulties, geographic isolation, Indigenous background and gender" (Department of Employment, 1998, p. 6). This "broad-banding" (McKay, 1999) of ESL into an aggregated group of general educational "disadvantage" has seen dedicated support for ESL diminish under *Literacy for All* (Michell, 1999), and while some students may

receive ESL support upon being placed within the system, for most, there is often little explicit ongoing specialist assistance to address their bilingual learning needs within the mainstream framework.

A further problem of broad-banding established under *Literacy for All* is the connection between assessment and the allocation of funding for literacy intervention. The framework assumes that the same assessment benchmarks apply to all students in need, regardless of the underlying reasons behind those needs. As Davison (1999, p. 69) puts it, the framework operates on the belief “that the stages (and strategies) of ESL development are the same as mother tongue English, and that they can be measured by the same linguistic criteria”, despite research on second language acquisition having very clearly established that:

ESL patterns of literacy development do not conform to English speaking norms... They may display many similar reading and writing strategies to their Anglo-Australian peers, but there are also significant differences. They may make many errors in reading and writing, but their ‘second language errors’ are not an indicator of a failure to acquire English literacy, but an indication of their learning. (p. 69)

With its primary focus on assessment, rather than teaching, a related problem of literacy as conceived under *Literacy for All* is its emphasis on a skills-based approach to literacy to provide the most objective basis for measuring competence. To take NAPLAN, for instance, literacy has been operationalised in a way that allows it to be easily tested and measured. Focusing on test validity and reliability, literacy is reduced to an inventory of skills—such as sounding out words, reading quickly, and filling out the blanks—that can be easily managed, measured, and monitored to provide accountability in measuring the “production” of literacy “outcomes”.

The model of literacy that has emerged under *Literacy for All* is therefore problematic for at least two significant reasons.

First, the understanding of literacy that it provides has been shaped from an assessment-driven model for native speakers to determine the needs of second language learners. It is therefore assessing two entirely different constructs: for native speakers, the assessment process identifies what students have “failed” to acquire in their first language, whereas in the case of non-native speakers, it is in fact revealing the progress students have “achieved” in their second. Despite apparent attempts at “equity” by applying the same standards across all student groups, the results in fact become meaningless for identifying and understanding the literacy needs of second language groups. As Davison and McKay (2002) have pointed out, ESL students’ skills are either “underestimated (because the Literacy Benchmarks do not capture what they can do, only what they cannot)” or else they are “overestimated (because

it will be assumed that if they can perform selected literacy tasks at a level equal to their peers, they are the same as their peers)" (p. 88). The mainstream system is unable to identify the specific second language literacy needs of ESL learners, and instead renders them invisible with a lack of any clear differentiation between native and non-native speaker competence.

Second, and a problem not unrelated to the first, the mainstream system waits to allocate targeted literacy support until students are "certified" as "failures", and then only to the degree necessary to reach a "minimal acceptable level". On the face of it, it could almost be argued that a discrete focus on skills is precisely what ESL students need: i.e., specific attention to language. However, English *second* language provision is characterised by several key, significant differences. In attempting to reclaim any future territory to redress what has been lost, it is essential that those needs be clearly identified and articulated.

### **What is missing? Reclaiming (and rectifying) a literacy model for ESL**

In moving towards a conclusion, and identifying possibilities for the future, there are two key priorities that I believe are essential for any future model of ESL literacy. First, a recognition of what "ESL literacy skills" *are* necessary for students beyond those offered by a generic, "basic skills" approach, and, second, how any approach to the teaching of such skills must be grounded in a *bilingual* perspective of *second* language and literacy development, rather than a default literacy framework oriented to "monolingualism" that second language learners are somehow expected to "fit into".

Acquiring second language "skills" for communicative and academic purposes is simply not comparable with how first language speakers learn to identify and manipulate discrete sounds in their mother tongue. To use an argument advanced by Freeman and Freeman (2006), even if an L2 student can successfully manipulate, add, delete, or insert the correct sound in a skills-based task, what use are such "skills" beyond assessment—especially when ESL students need skills that actually enable them to communicate, both socially and academically, with peers and teachers across the broader curriculum (Miller, 2009)? ESL learners are caught in the middle: they are not clearly provided with opportunities to acquire second language skills, but nor are they acquiring useful skills from the basic model of literacy currently being imposed on mainstream classrooms. Part of the problem has been that, historically, these discrete needs were identified as "language", but now that language has been dissolved into literacy, realising that distinction has become much, much harder.

The findings from one analysis of ESL teacher practice across three different settings—a mainstream high-school, an adjunct language centre, and an ESL school (Cross, 2011b)—suggest that the

literacy needs of ESL students go significantly beyond basic skills, to include considerations such as:

“Literacy for learning”, or literacy as an understanding of the social and cultural practices that other language background students need to be able to engage in the learning environments of Australian classrooms;

“Language for literacy”, being not only an understanding of the language of texts, but the enabling language for talking about the texts themselves; and

“Language as literacy”, or the development of language to support, articulate, and convey abstract and higher-order thinking.

Due to a variety of reasons, including social, cultural, and educational circumstances, it must be recognised that there are, indeed, specialist literacy learning needs for students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

This then leads to the second point: recognising that any attempt to adequately develop such literacy skills must be grounded in a bilingual perspective of development. Second language and literacy skills are developed on the basis of *second* language acquisition, and a specialist knowledge of learning literacy in a language *other than* one’s mother tongue, rather than the general literacy support offered under broad-banding to “all in need” within mainstream contexts.

Indeed, even within the field of second language acquisition itself, there is a growing awareness of the need to reconsider fundamental assumptions underpinning current approaches to second language learning and teaching, and especially how ESL learners are positioned within the curriculum and classrooms. Perhaps most significantly, Cook (2007) argues of the importance of no longer viewing language students as “L2 learners”, but as “L2 users”, with the latter “rooted in difference rather than deficit” (p. 241). Such a distinction recognises that L2 users are *qualitatively* different from the monolingual native speaker, and therefore need to be evaluated as people who speak two languages, rather than inefficient versions of “the native” speaker. Drawing on the notion of “multi-competence”, Cook argues that it is wrong to “count” languages as if they exist as separate systems in one’s head (e.g., English “plus” Dinka, Italian, etc.). Instead, language exists within the human mind as a single whole (Selinker, 1972) and, given that bilingual users are the norm throughout the world (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), an alternative proposition is that monolingual speakers of English have the less developed, more basic system of literacy due to “their impoverished exposure to languages” (Cook, 2007, p. 241).

Within the current discourse that dominates literacy education in Australia, however, ESL learners are not considered “successful” until they reach levels of competence consistent with native speakers. For Cook (2007), “phrasing the goal [like we have] in terms of the native speaker means L2 learning can only lead to different degrees of failure, not degrees of success” (p. 240). Instead, the imperative is to identify more inclusive, better-suited pedagogies to engage such learners by recognising and rewarding the cognitive and linguistic resources they already bring to learning English as a second language as bilingual learners to promote greater opportunities for success, rather than denying it.

Put simply, the imperative is to rethink the ESL curriculum in a way that celebrates ESL students as Cook’s “L2 users” rather than “L2 learners”.

It is essential to rethink English literacy as it concerns non-native speakers in ways that move away from its current default monolingual orientation about what it means to be a user and learner of English literacy skills. The focus should be on enabling, rather than denying, the learners’ right to use language as “true bilinguals”, rather than “imitation monolinguals”. This includes, somewhat controversially, the need for systems as a whole to acknowledge and build on students’ first language systems to extend their existing repertoire of skills into a single holistic and more complex system for communication and meaning making. This, after all, is what literacy is ultimately about.

Drawing on various strategies from work such as Lucas and Katz (1994), Manyak (2004), and others, Cummins (2007, pp. 226–230) outlines several suggestions that go against the grain of established pedagogical principles, but nevertheless privilege the rich linguistic resources that students bring into classrooms as emergent bilinguals. Some include:

- writing stories in the students’ L1, which they then talk about in the L2 with other students
- pairing students from the same language backgrounds together so that students who are more fluent in English could help those less fluent
- encouraging students from literacy-based L1 backgrounds to use bilingual dictionaries (However, as noted by Brown, Miller, and Mitchell (2006), this may also require the use of structured pedagogic tasks to facilitate the appropriate use of such skills, rather than an overreliance on vocabulary translation, etc., alone)

- encouraging students to discuss school work and get assistance at home in their native languages (Again, this may require carefully structured 'at home' tasks, such as specific question prompts for discussion, or clearly defined outcomes, that takes into account the type of assistance available in the students' home/community context [e.g., parents with limited schooling backgrounds; encouraging access to local resources, such as new-arrival network groups with speakers of the students' first languages, etc.]
- providing books in the students' L1s that they are encouraged to read (selected to suit the students' needs (e.g., content area material [such as science magazines, etc.] for students in or transitioning into mainstream programs; literature or age-appropriate fiction for extensive reading in the case of students developing their core literacy skills, etc.)
- using translation as a way to promote the acquisition of English, to support bi-literacy, and to promote identities of competence (i.e., a feeling of confidence—and the esteem and respect of others—that develops from an ability to work across languages (Cummins, 2007, p. 228). As Cook (2007) argues, "most L2 users are expected to translate something at one time or another" (p. 242), and attention to developing this as a skill for the multilingual learner allows L2 users to acquire a skill that promotes "pride in bilingualism" (Malakoff & Kauta, 1991 in Cook, 2007, p. 242)).

Ideally, and the essence of the argument central to this paper, these strategies would be the basis for pedagogy incorporated into all forms of teaching and learning across the curriculum as a whole to allow and encourage the use of two languages amongst bilingual learners. Realistically, however, I acknowledge the difficulty in achieving such fundamental reform: both conceptually in terms of the inertia of mainstream curriculum development and the ingrained assumptions on the primacy of English as "the" (rather than "a") language of Australia (Lo Bianco, 2003)), as well as pragmatically in achieving mainstream teacher change (Fullan, 1997). I also recognise the need for such changes to be done very carefully if they are to achieve their desired aim—*genuine* competence in literacy (i.e., across both languages)—rather than an overreliance on the students' first language at the detriment of developing English as their second.

However, while difficult, I don't believe these ideas should be abandoned completely: the status quo, described earlier, offers no more benefits to the ESL learner.

As a compromise, the ESL sector at the very least has to recognise what has been conceded under successive curriculum and policy developments with respect the mainstream, and the wash-back effects this has had on ESL with its English-mono-centric assumptions. When ESL support is available, it should not be simple "stop gap" assistance that "feeds" students into the mainstream. We must advocate for more comprehensive models of ESL specialist literacy (e.g., those that address the nexus between language, literacy, and learning), rather than merely addresses those skills that require intervention as identified through NAPLAN. Second, in meeting those needs, we also need to be more informed about what current second language acquisition theory suggests is best practice for developing such skills, rather than simply defaulting to literacy practices borrowed from the mainstream. Such strategies would not necessarily require teachers to be speakers of students' first languages, but they would provide non-background speakers with bilingual spaces within which to best develop their literacy skills in English as their *additional* language.

In conclusion, although setting out a somewhat bleak picture for the extant state of ESL and literacy in the earlier sections of this paper, newer, more recent developments that have emerged from specialist perspectives on second language acquisition are useful for identifying an evidenced-based, research-informed way forward. Even if such innovations are not yet ready for widespread adoption within the mainstream, they nonetheless champion additive-pluralistic approaches to language development that are specific to the needs of English *second* language learners, rather than conceding yet further territory to the dominant, subtractive-monolingual orientation about what it means to be a "good" English language "learner". Sadly, at a systems level at least, it would seem that many of our ESL students who *do* excel in literacy within the mainstream do so in spite of the current curriculum context, rather than because of it.

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