ENGLISH
IN AUSTRALIA

English in Australia Terms of Use

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English in Australia

Guidelines for Contributors

English in Australia is the peer-reviewed national journal of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE).

The journal is committed to publishing material that is of importance to English educators. We welcome high quality teacher-oriented and scholarly submissions in any relevant field of English education, including literature and literacy education.

We are interested in submissions that reflect dilemmas, debates and concerns facing current contemporary English educators in Australia and elsewhere. Submissions may take the form of:

- A report on empirical research conducted with or by English teachers or students in classrooms

- A theorised discussion of English curriculum, or of the effects of policy on English teaching, or

- Practitioner inquiries, including reflective writing that takes a scholarly and methodical approach, that elaborates or illuminates aspects of the practices of English teachers.

Submissions should be explicitly linked to issues of English teaching, pedagogy or curriculum and demonstrate familiarity with current and pertinent scholarly literature.

Articles will be considered from any context where the learning and teaching of English is framed in ways that would engage and interest a secondary English teacher. Writers should take care to relate, early in their submission, the research context for the benefit of both Australian and international readers. The journal welcomes contributions that challenge traditional ways of thinking about English and that prompt readers to entertain new ways of conceptualising English curriculum and pedagogy

Contributors are encouraged to read previous issues of *English in Australia* to get a sense of the existing and ongoing scholarly conversations in our journal. Articles that share Higher Degree Research conducted by English teachers (e.g. Ph.D. and Ed.D. research findings) are welcome.

All articles are subject to double blind peer review by at least two reviewers. This means that the identity of the author is not divulged to the reviewers, nor are the reviewers' names revealed to the author.

Please refer to the following guidelines:

1. All articles should be submitted via Scholastica: https://english-in-australia.scholasticahq.com/
2. Recommended length of articles for publication is between 5000 and 7000 words (including references).
3. Ensure your name is removed from the article, including from the document properties.
4. All submissions should be typed with double spacing in an easy to read font (e.g. Times New Roman or Calibri, 11–12 point) with a 2.5 cm margin on all sides.
5. Your submission should begin with an abstract of 100–150 words that succinctly summarises the research: context; design or methodology; and findings.
6. All references should conform to the American Psychological Association (APA) style. Please consult the *APA Publication Manual*, 7th edition, or any guide to APA referencing available through university library websites.
7. Submissions are expected to have a high standard of written English. Please ensure that you have carefully edited and proofread your submission. Articles submitted with a poor standard of written English, style problems or inaccurate/missing references will be returned to the author for revision before being considered for blind review.
8. Where possible, avoid footnotes. Usually it is possible to incorporate them into the text. Where they cannot be avoided, they should be numbered with a superscript and listed at the end of the article (endnotes).
9. It is the responsibility of authors to seek copyright clearance for any materials quoted, as required.
10. It is the responsibility of authors to ensure that all required ethics approvals and relevant permissions have been received prior to the submission of an article for review. Please ensure that a statement about ethical issues appears in articles that include data collected from or about humans, including any pertinent information about approvals or permissions.
11. It is expected that a clear statement about the implications of the research for English education policy and/or practice appears in either the Introduction or Conclusion section of your article.
12. Please include in Scholastica a separate file with your full name and institutional affiliation for publication, and a 50-word biographical description.
13. You retain copyright of materials published in the journal; *English in Australia* holds first publication rights only. Authors retain the right to self-archive the final draft of their articles in their institution's eprint repository.

You can expect feedback from the reviewers and editor to help you shape your work effectively. Please feel free to contact the Editor or members of the Editorial team to discuss any contribution which you may be considering.

Although *English in Australia* is predominantly a curriculum research and practice journal, occasionally poems and short texts of other genres relevant to the themes and readership of the journal are also published. Such pieces should be relevant to the lives and work of English teachers and students and be accompanied by a short (300–800 word) abstract or reflection. Please email the Editor regarding submissions of this type.

Editorial

Kelli McGraw

In this issue of *English in Australia*, we present a range of scholarship from across the country. The topics of these papers draw from a diversity of interests, including curriculum design, assessment and pedagogy, literary genres, and text selection. English teachers reading this issue will find both scholarly discussion and practical insights across all papers, with less content directly responding to the recent (and continuing) pandemic giving the issue somewhat of a 'back to normal' feel.

In the opening paper by Mulder and Thomas, we learn the history of the VCE English Language course and are offered insight from student evaluations of its benefits and merits. Understanding the nature and purposes of this course, which the authors point out is unique in Australia due to the specific focus on contextualised linguistics, provides an important point of reference for English teachers outside Victoria with which to compare their respective senior English courses. In the paper by Finch, a model for providing feedback is explored through a comparison of two teachers' written feedback practices. Comparing the different types of feedback provided to Year 8 and Year 12 English students, Finch illuminates the role of institutional context in shaping feedback practices, and points of difference between feedback given in low- and high-stakes assessment contexts.

Turning to matters of text selection and study, the potential for exploring 'the dark side of Australian experience' through the Australian Gothic genre is presented in the paper by Mazza, de Boer & Rhodes, with guiding questions and potential texts for study also suggested. Cheung and O'Sullivan's paper homes in on the experiences of two English teachers from different schools, to explore their texts selected for study in Years 9-10 (New South Wales Stage 5). The specific focus on texts selected for 'aliterate', or 'reluctant' readers in their paper calls

us to consider the complexity of decision-making about text selection, and the interplay of pragmatic and philosophical concerns when seeking to make a productive text choice for students.

One paper in this issue that speaks to our more recent context of teaching online is Parisot's account of how short videos were used in a university literary studies course. Evaluating the use of short videos for 'microlearning' during 2017-2019, this paper reveals the extent of the changed learning and teaching conditions in higher education even preceding the pandemic, toward a more digital, online approach. Educators in schools and universities alike will no doubt read Parisot's findings on preferred video length, completion rates, and students' choice of devices for viewing, with great interest.

Editing this issue has thrown into light the question of how much of our work is shaped by the social context of enacting curriculum in certain kinds of physical or digital spaces, as opposed to the aspects of our work that transcend concerns about where, how and when the learning takes place. The contrast between the content of this issue, and our previous special issue 'English @ Home', is stark. Will we continue to reckon with the lessons learned from home-based learning? Or will we quickly come to view the lockdown/shutdown times as a social moment that has passed, from which we recovered and eagerly moved beyond?

The research shared in this volume would mostly have commenced prior to the pandemic. Can we expect upcoming research (about text selection, curriculum design, and assessment practices, for example) to grapple with changes to the nature of our work and our professional knowledge, in the contexts of continuing student and staff absenteeism due to illness, and learning environments infused with trauma that may be ongoing? And with increasingly apparent and alarming staff shortages

in the sector leading to reduced ethics approvals for research to be conducted in schools, what new approaches to research design, methodology, and participant recruiting can we expect to see?

The article chosen for our Perspectives from the Past section in this issue is one by Beavis from 1981. This short article, 'A secondary teacher looks at a primary school', takes us to a point in the archive exactly 40 years ago. In this article we are offered a view of what one primary school looked like four decades ago; what struck me upon reading the piece was how similar the description seemed to the local primary school I am most familiar with. The description of theme-based units of work, strings running overhead in the classroom with learning artefacts pegged on, vibrant displays of student work in all parts of the school, organisation of larger classes into small, rotating groups for formal instruction, and openness to team teaching, all resonated.

In recent issues of *English in Australia* we have focused on amplifying calls for greater attention to the secondary-tertiary 'nexus' in English education, to promote dialogue between educators in schools and universities. Beavis' article is selected to remind us that there is another nexus to be explored: the primary-secondary one. As we embark on new pandemic-contextual research that might address the shift in schooling toward increasingly digital ways of working, or the impact of disrupted schooling in 2020 and beyond, our research community might consider how attending to the experiences in contemporary primary school English and literacy learning could enhance our understanding as well.

VCE English Language

Evaluating VCE English Language Twenty Years On

Jean Mulder, University of Melbourne; Caroline Thomas

Abstract: Although *VCE English Language* (*EL*) has been offered for twenty years in Victoria, Australia, the subject, and especially students' experience of it, has had little evaluation. Using data from four surveys conducted across seven years with over 1500 Unit 3–4 *EL* students, augmented by VCAA enrolment data, a profile of *EL* students was compiled and their perceptions of *EL* analysed. Quantitative results reveal consistently high evaluations regarding enjoyment, raised awareness of English usage, relevance to everyday life, and strengthened written and spoken English skills, with qualitative analysis yielding rich insight into students' assessments of why they chose *EL*, what they enjoyed most and what they found most challenging. These findings provide a better understanding of *EL*'s place within English studies in Victoria, and validate *EL* as a model of a linguistics-centred approach to English language study that contextualises grammar teaching within texts reflective of everyday language use for extension nationally.

Keywords: language awareness, knowledge about language, grammar, linguistics, VCE English Language

1. Introduction

VCE English Language (*EL*), which is unique within Australia, is one of four senior secondary English subjects offered in Victoria. *EL* takes a contemporary linguistic approach, combining the explicit teaching of grammar in context with the actual real-world study of language (Mulder, 2007, 2010, 2011). In Victoria, *EL* acts as a culmination and extension of F–10 learning under the *Australian Curriculum: English* (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2022). The shaping paper that informs the curriculum states that 'a fundamental responsibility of the English curriculum is to develop students' understanding about how the English language works' (ACARA, 2009, p. 6). Although *EL* predates the evolution of the F–10 English curriculum, its objectives align with it.

Significantly, *EL* is an instantiation of the reimagining of the teaching of grammar in the light of knowledge about language advocated for by educational linguists across Anglophone and European nations (Boivin et al., 2018; Fontich et al., 2020; Kolln & Hancock, 2005; Macken-Horarik et al., 2011; Rättyä et al., 2019). Often such reimaginings are tied to aims of improving students' understanding and competence in standard language usage and writing, envisioning a pedagogy of writing that 'generate[s] new ways of knowing and understanding the relationship between a writer's authorial intention, linguistic choices which realise that intention, and their intended effect on the reader' (Myhill, 2019, p. 62). While upholding such aims, *EL* focuses equally on non-standard varieties of English and both spoken and written language across conventional and multimodal formats, encouraging students to become critical users of language who are sensitive to the larger contexts in which it exists (Denham, 2020).

EL is innovative internationally, with only the UK offering a comparable English linguistics subject, *GCE AS and A level English Language* (*UK EL*) (AQA, 2022). However, despite its long-standing success, *UK EL*, along with other A level English subjects, has experienced diminishing enrolments since 2012. The National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE) argues that 'the reduction in numbers derives from a growing student dissatisfaction and disengagement with English studies at earlier stages of education' (2020, p. 4). This negative response is attributed in part to a narrowing of the K–KS4 English curriculum, which has reduced the study of non-literary texts throughout and removed the spoken language

study at GCSE level. The focus has become 'student performance in literacy rather than a deeper and more satisfying engagement with language and literature' (NATE, 2020, p. 8). The decline in the number of students choosing A level English studies in the UK has clear implications for the pedagogical basis of English studies elsewhere.

Concern for the student experience and the perspective of a linguistic-centred approach to English studies motivates the present analysis. Although *EL* has now been offered for twenty years, with the study design for the subject undergoing two major revisions, there has been little detailed evaluation of it; the assessment in Mulder and Thomas (2009) uses small-scale methods, while those in Thomas and Wawer (2010) and Balsamo (2019) are largely anecdotal. Accordingly, this study provides a quantitative and qualitative evaluation of students' appraisals of the subject along with a profile of those who take it up.

In particular, we consider the following questions:

- Which students choose *EL* and why?
- Do they choose *EL* in addition to or instead of other offerings in the VCE English group?
- What benefits do students see in doing *EL*?
- What challenges do they find that they face in doing *EL*?
- Have students' perceptions of *EL* changed with its evolution?

The article begins with a snapshot of *EL* (Part 2) and an overview of its evolution and what can be gleaned from its enrolment history (Part 3). We then outline our methodological approach for surveying students (Part 4) and analyse our results to provide a student perspective of *EL* (Part 5). The conclusion (Part 6) incorporates a discussion of the insights provided and their relevance to maintaining linguistic-based English courses such as *UK EL*, the current evaluation and reaccreditation of *EL*, and establishing similar courses at both the national and state level, as (Midgley, 2019) has piloted in Western Australia.

2. A Snapshot of EL

EL, *English*, *Literature* and *English as an Additional Language* (*EAL*) make up the English field of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), which is the internationally recognised qualification undertaken by most students in their final two years of senior secondary school. Responsibility for providing the curriculum and assessment of VCE subjects comes under the auspices of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA).

As set out in the current *VCE EL Study Design* (VCAA, 2022), this subject constitutes four units each with two areas of study: 'Unit 1. Language and Communication', with the areas of study 'Nature and Functions of Language' and 'Language Acquisition'; 'Unit 2. Language Change', with 'English Across Time' and 'Englishes in Contact'; 'Unit 3. Language Variation and Social Purpose', with 'Informal Language' and 'Formal Language'; and 'Unit 4. Language Variation and Identity', with 'Language Variation in Australian Society' and 'Individual and Group Identities'.

Teachers can choose from a wide range of tasks to assess each outcome. While the assessment of levels of achievement in Units 1 and 2 is a matter for school decision, in Units 3 and 4 it is determined by school-assessed coursework (25% for each unit) and an external state-wide end-of-year examination (50%). The two-hour final examination currently comprises three sections: a set of short-answer questions and an analytical commentary on language use, each of which is based on one or more previously unseen formal or informal, spoken or written texts, and an essay on a

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Stimulus

'Nothing unites a country more than its common language because from a language comes a history and a culture.' John Howard, quoted in 'Migrants to sit English test', ABC News (online), 11 December 2006.

Linguists suggest that some people deliberately choose a low-status accent as a way of invoking prestige, although this is less common among women than men.

'The Australian-born children of migrants from Europe, Asia and the Pacific Islands are asserting their respective cultural blends each time they open their mouths, leading to dozens of different ethnic dialects such as "wogspeak", that much-parodied blend of Australian and various Mediterranean accents.' Peter Munro, 'Austrayan twang on the wane', The Age, 27 January 2008.

Question

'Your use of language sends out lots of little messages, not just about your level of education and where you come from, but about how you would like to be perceived.'

Discuss with reference to at least two subsystems of language.

Figure 1. Sample EL final examination essay question (source: https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/exams/englishlanguage/eng-lan-samp-w.pdf)

topic with added stimulus material, as exemplified in Figure 1.

3. The Evolution of EL

Since the inception of *EL*, the total number of students enrolled in Unit 4 English subjects each year has been relatively stable, averaging 53,253 (with a low of 51,597 in 2007 and a high of 54,113 in 2017). Against this backdrop, Figure 2 gives the student enrolments and number of schools providing *EL* Unit 4. (All data in Part 3 have been obtained from the VCAA website at www.vcaa.vic.edu.au: see Appendix 1 for full numerical data.)
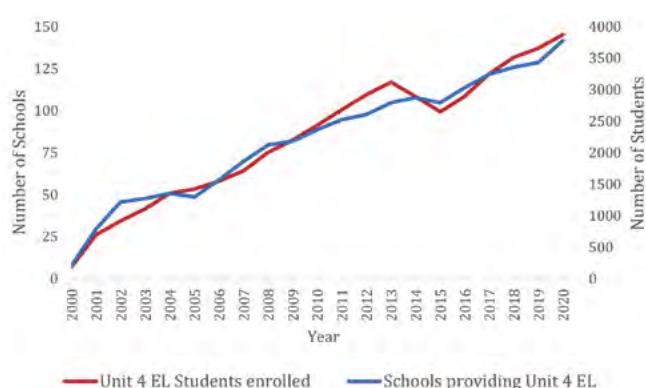
Figure 2. EL Unit 4 student enrolments and schools providing EL 2000-2020

In 2000, a pilot program began with eight schools and 195 students. The following year *EL* was fully accredited in the senior secondary curriculum, with Unit 4 offered at 30 schools and 707 students enrolled. The subject's growth was significantly influenced in 2006 when students were first allowed to take *EL* units alone to fulfil the English requirement of the VCE. Prior to this, students still had to do some units of *English/EAL* to satisfy this requirement. Not only did this change free up more students to take *EL* Units 3 and 4, it also resulted in a higher uptake of Units 1 and 2, with enrolments in Unit 1 almost doubling and Unit 2 almost tripling. Inexplicably, in 2005 and 2015 there was a slight drop in the number of schools providing Unit 4, and in 2014–2015 there was a noticeable drop in student numbers. By 2020, however, the subject was offered in 142 schools and 3,882 students were enrolled in Unit 4. Over this 20-year period, the numbers of schools and students undertaking *EL* have steadily increased, indicating the growing acceptance and popularity of the subject.

During this time, the study design for the subject has undergone two major revisions, implemented in 2006 and 2012, with a third revision currently projected for implementation in 2024. In the 2006 revision, most significantly, the number of outcomes per unit was reduced from three to two in line with all other VCE subjects, the amount of metalanguage was reduced, and stimulus materials were added to the essay section in the final examination (see Part 2). In 2012, more sweeping changes to the study design and final examination occurred. Notably, in Units 3 and 4, the focus shifted from contrasting spoken and written modes to differentiating informal and formal language, which entailed both a major change to the course content and the addition of some new metalanguage. Moreover, in the final examination, one short-answer section was replaced with an extended analytical commentary on language use in a previously unseen spoken or written text (see Part 2).

Interestingly, analysis of the yearly examiner's reports from 2001–2020 highlights two aspects of the evolution of the *EL* examination: the referencing of stimulus material and the use of contemporary examples. Firstly, when the stimulus material was introduced in 2006, students had the option of referencing it in their essay, but by 2009, they were required to do so. Secondly, since 2006 there has been increased emphasis on the examples used in the essay being contemporary, so much so that in 2014 there was a new emphasis on how recent the contemporary evidence should be, with better responses praised for including examples from the year of the examination.

An important aspect of the evolution of *EL* is the profile of the students taking up the subject. With the rise in numbers of students taking *EL*, the question becomes: where are the students coming from? To explore this, Figure 3 presents the number of students taking each of the Unit 4 English subjects out of total Unit 4 English subject enrolments since 2001.
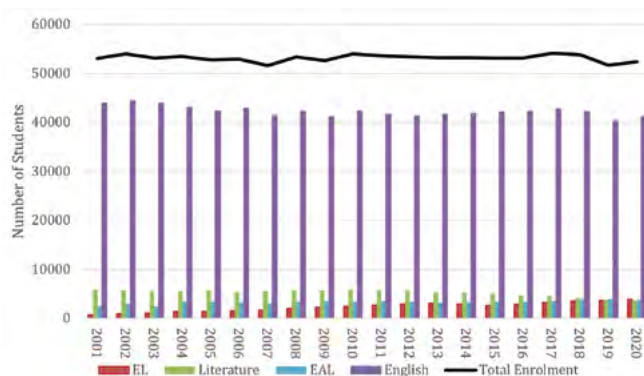
Figure 3. Unit 4 English subject enrolments 2001-2020

As can be seen, while *EL* has increased its cohort, both *Literature* and *English* have decreased somewhat. On

the face of it, it might appear that *EL* is encroaching on *Literature*, the other 'niche' English subject. However, as we show in Part 5, other factors come into play as well.

The VCE English subjects also differ as to the gender balance of their cohorts. Figure 4 charts the ratio of male students to female and gender X (added in 2017) for each of the four Unit 4 English subjects.
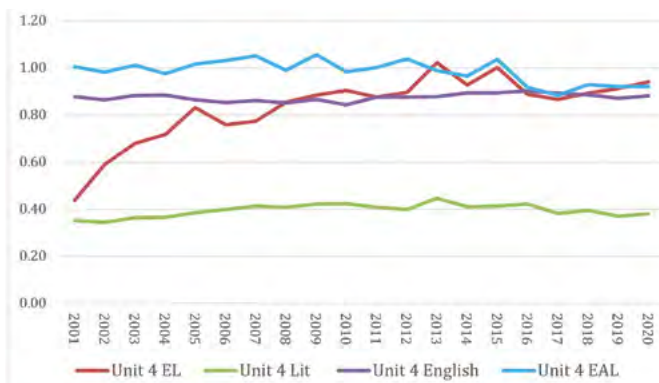
*Figure 4. Ratio of Male to Female and Gender X
in Unit 4 English subjects 2001-2020*

In the first 5 years of *EL*, the ratio of males was lower, though steadily increasing. Between 2001 to 2015, the ratio increased by 20%, resulting in an even ratio in 2015. Over the last five years, the gender ratio of *EL* has mirrored that of *English* (and *EAL*), maintaining a relatively even gender balance with a male ratio of 84%–90%. In comparison, *Literature* shows a distinct skew towards female participation for each year. Thus, in terms of gender, *EL* is more comparable to *English* than to *Literature*.

While such analysis provides some idea of the students who are drawn to *EL*, the picture is still quite limited. For example, many *EL* teachers comment that the subject attracts students with a strong 'logical-mathematical intelligence' (Gardner, 1983). To verify such impressions and explore more deeply why students choose *EL* and what their assessment of the subject is, we conducted a series of surveys.

4. EL **Unit 4 Student Surveys**

To explore students' perspectives on *EL*, a mixed-methods approach was taken utilising a single survey instrument with open-ended and Likert-scale questions (the 2015 survey is given in Appendix 2 as a sample). Adopting an approach involving two types of data collection (numerical and textual) and two types of data analysis (statistical and thematic) (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007) allowed both 'complementarity in which different methods are used to assess different study components or phenomena' (Greene et al., 1989,

p. 257) and 'completeness' in the sense of 'bring[ing] together a more comprehensive account of the area of enquiry' (Bryman, 2006, p. 106).

In the pen-and-paper survey instrument, students were asked to provide some personal data, including age, gender and schools attended, previous EL units completed, and their mix of Unit 3 and 4 subjects (e.g., Maths/Science, Humanities, Business, or a mixture). Since it is possible for students to do more than one Unit 3 and 4 English subject, in 2015 students were also asked if they were doing any additional English subjects. This data was used to build a profile of the students who take up EL. To get an understanding of their perception of the subject, students were then asked to complete three open-ended questions and six Likert-scale questions. The rationale for the open-ended questions was to explore students' motivations for choosing EL (question 4), and their experiences of what they found most enjoyable and most challenging (questions 5–6), along with the meanings they attached to them. The open survey response data was subjected to thematic analysis (Creswell, 2014), an approach that started with both authors' close reading of responses to identify the issues that emerged inductively from the data and coming to an agreement about the themes represented in the data across all years surveyed. Correspondingly, the rationale for the Likert-scale questions was to quantitatively assess students' level of agreement with a set of statements probing their enjoyment of the subject (Question 7), potential benefits from doing EL (Questions 8–10), and attitudes towards EL and further linguistic study (Questions 11–12). This numerical data enabled both yearly and longitudinal analysis.

The student surveys were conducted across a seven-year timespan in 2009, 2010, 2012 and 2015 under ethical approval from the first author's institution. Participants in the 2009, 2010 and 2012 surveys were all from schools that self-selected to attend a VCE EL enrichment day for Year 12 students offered by the School of Languages and Linguistics at the University of Melbourne. In 2015, the authors selected eight schools to be surveyed in order to more fully assess students' evaluation of EL once the new study design had been 'bedded down'. These eight schools were chosen to replicate the balance of schools that came to a VCE EL enrichment day in terms of sector (State, Independent, Catholic), gender (all girls, all boys, coed), urban/regional and selective entry. Thus the cohorts of students surveyed in 2015 can be taken as

similar in profile to those in the previous surveys.

Table 1 gives the number of students surveyed and their percentage of the total number of students enrolled in EL Unit 4 in each year.

Table 1. Unit 4 EL students surveyed

Year	Unit 4 *EL* students surveyed	% of Unit 4 *EL* students surveyed	Total Unit 4 *EL* students
2009	421	19%	2205
2010	414	17%	2442
2012	447	15%	2922
2015	253	10%	2654
Total	**1535**		

Across the four surveys, over 1,500 students were sampled, ranging from 10%–19% of Unit 4 *EL* students in each of the survey years.

Moreover, as Table 2 identifies, the cohorts of students surveyed included schools from all sectors: State, Independent and Catholic, as well as coeducational, all girls' and all boys' schools. As some schools participated in more than one year, the final column gives the total number of different participant schools across the four surveys. The final row gives the percentage of schools providing Unit 4 EL that were included each year.

In all, students from 54 different schools were surveyed, ranging from 8%–28% of schools providing Unit 4 *EL* in the survey years.

There are several limitations to the survey data. First is the relatively small sample size of Unit 4 *EL* students and schools providing the subject. Second is the sampling method, as it is unknown how restricting sampling in the first three surveys to schools self-selecting to enrol students in a university enhancement offering for *EL* and the selection of schools in the last survey may have biased the data. Third is the range and number of years surveyed. However, while it has been six years since the last survey was conducted, there have been no major changes in the study design since 2012; thus, further surveys would be unlikely to extend our findings. The four years surveyed provide a good opportunity to assess the development of the course, particularly in terms of the major changes to the study design and final examination implemented in 2012 and the increasing emphasis on contemporary examples in the final examination essay. Implementation of a revised study design, which has been foreshadowed for 2024, will enable further evaluation.

5. Results and Discussion

The presentation of results begins with the profile of Unit 4 *EL* students that emerges from the participant data in the surveys (Part 5.1) and is followed by analysis of the responses to the nine survey questions, giving a student perspective on *EL* (Part 5.2).

5.1. Student Profile

From the surveys, we garnered information about previous *EL* units that students had completed, the other VCE subjects they were studying, and whether they were undertaking any other English subjects (see Appendix 3 for full numerical data).

As is shown in Figure 5, the number of *EL* Unit 4 students who have completed Units 1 and 2 has risen steadily during the years that *EL* has been offered, with the overwhelming majority (80% in 2015) having completed both.

Table 2. Participant schools of students surveyed

School	2009	2010	2012	2015	Total Participant Schools
Sector	State	12	13	16	3	29
	Independent	7	6	4	3	13
	Catholic	4	3	7	2	12
Gender	Coed	16	17	21	6	40
	All girls	5	3	4	1	10
	All boys	2	2	2	1	4
Total		23	22	27	8	54
Total Schools providing Unit 4 *EL*		**82**	**89**	**98**	**105**	
% of Schools providing Unit 4 *EL* surveyed		**28%**	**25%**	**28%**	**8%**	
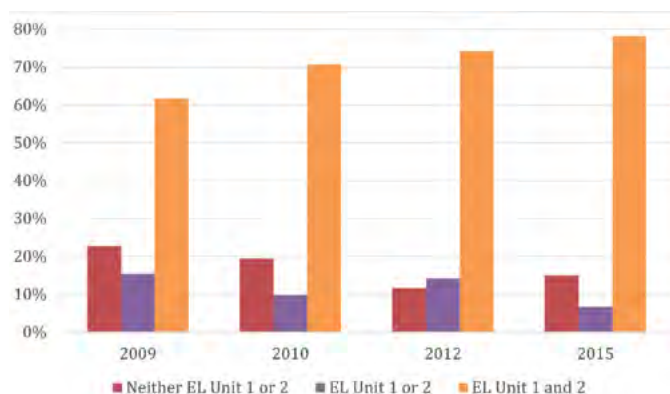
Figure 5. Previous EL units completed

Given that an increasing number of students are approaching *EL* Units 3 and 4 with a higher level of understanding, particularly in terms of metalanguage
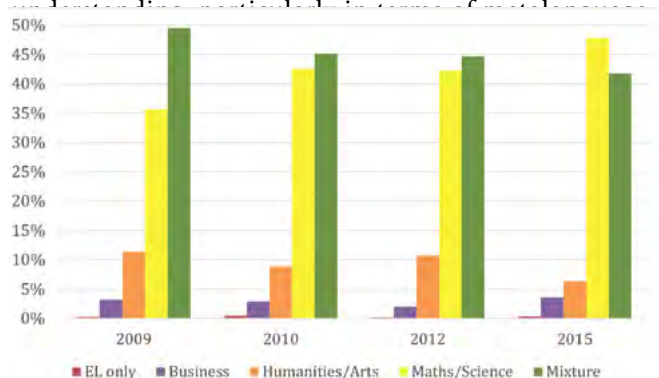
Figure 6. Unit 3 and 4 subject selections

As can be seen, the majority of *EL* students indicated they were doing primarily Maths/Science or a mixture of subjects, with relatively few in Business or Arts/Humanities streams.

Curious to know if students were choosing to do *EL* in addition to or as an alternative to the other English subjects, we added an extra survey question in 2015. Table 3 presents the range of English subjects that students reported they were taking.

Table 3. Unit 3 and 4 English subjects being taken

2015	Unit 4 *EL* students surveyed	% within Unit 4 *EL* students surveyed
EL only	239	94.5
EL & Literature	11	4.3
EL & English	3	1.2
EL & *EAL*	0	0
Total	**253**	**100**

The results show that even though the option to do more than one Unit 3 and 4 English is available, only 5.5% of students surveyed in 2015 chose to take it up, with the majority of those taking *EL* and *Literature*.
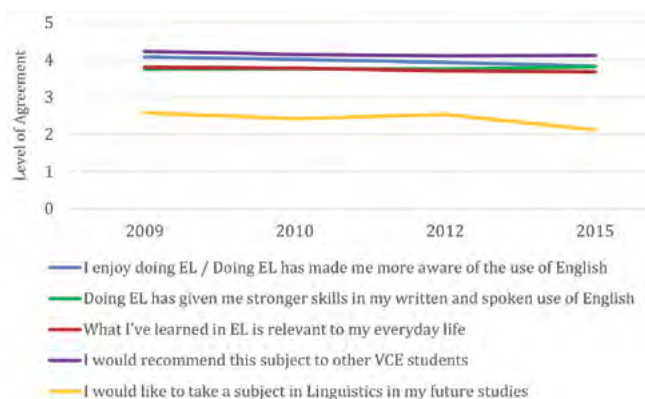
Figure 7. Results for Likert-scale questions

Why some students choose to do more than one English, and why their preference seems to be *EL* and *Literature*, remains to be explored.

5.2 Student Perspective

The Likert-scale questions (see Appendix 4 for full numerical data) probe students' level of agreement with a set of statements about their experience of *EL*. Figure 7 reports the mean results, with 5 indicating the most positive agreement with the statement and 1 the least.

Across the years, the results were quite consistent. Overall, students responded that they enjoyed doing

Table 4. Thematic Analysis of 'Why I chose to do EL'

In Comparison to Other Englishes
• more interesting than mainstream *English*
• didn't enjoy/like *English*; found mainstream *English* difficult
• different/new/a challenge
• easy/easier
• scaled up/can get better marks
• assessed differently; short-answer questions/shorter exams
EL-Specific
• science based, analytical, systematic and structured approach
• enjoyable/fun
Self-Oriented
• complements student's skills and strengths
• would like to pursue Linguistics as a career path
• can learn more about the English language/can improve their English
• will help in future studies or career
• assists with other subjects; LOTE
Other-Oriented
• recommended by sibling, friend or teacher
• because of teacher
• because of other student(s) doing EL
• because of timetable or blocking
Other

EL, that it made them more aware of their English use and strengthened their verbal and written language skills, and that what they learned in the subject was relevant to everyday life. The results also revealed that while students were highly likely to recommend *EL* to other VCE students, they were less likely to pursue further study of linguistics. Although we can surmise that this might be a result of post-VCE options, including the pressures of tertiary course selection for those who pursue such studies, it remains a matter for further research.

Moving to the open-ended questions (see Appendix 5 for full numerical data), students were first asked to comment on why they chose *EL*. Table 4 shows the thematic categories and subcategories that emerged from the data:

In the first category, comparison was for the most part between *English* and *EL*, while the '*EL*-specific' category indicates where student choice was made based on the nature of topics or tasks that are specific to *EL*. In contrast, responses where choice relied on a student's personal learning style or preference were analysed as 'self-oriented'. Responses where choice was influenced by the recommendation of others, or the presence of a particular student or teacher, were analysed as 'other-oriented'. The 'other' category included responses that were off-topic, incomplete or nonsensical.

The percentage of responses that fell into each category are shown in Figure 8.
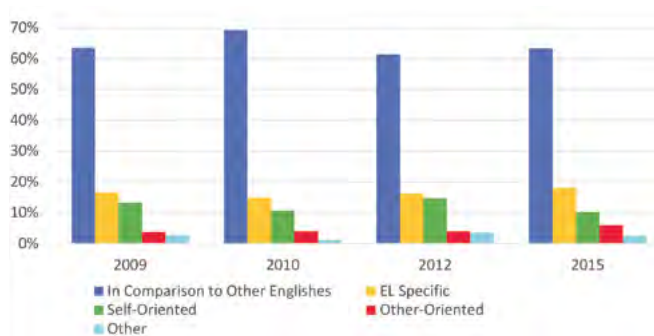
Figure 8. Thematic results for 'Why I chose to do EL'

It is significant that the relative weightings of responses in each category remain consistent over the years. Overwhelmingly, students said they chose *EL* as an alternative to the other English offerings as it was new, different from or more interesting than *English*, which they had studied throughout their primary and secondary years (note that all student responses are given exactly as written, with the survey year included for reference):

after doing mainstream English for years I wanted to do something different. (2012)

because it was an interesting alternative to the other Englishes. Everything about it was so much more appealing (2010)

However, given that a language strand was introduced in the F–10 English curriculum in 2013, the novelty factor of *EL* may diminish as students who have experienced this curriculum reach VCE.

Sadly, as the following two responses highlight, quite a large number of students had a negative opinion of the nature of *English* or were not confident in their ability to do well in *English*, and hence chose *EL* as an alternative:

I thought; why not? Normal English was extremely dull and the school had the option so I switched into Elang and am glad! (2015)

I suck at Normal English and it's compulsury. (2012)

Some students suggested that the choice was made for the enjoyment that *EL* offers, which could be linked to it being new or different. Alternatively, it could be the type of tasks conducted in classes:

Table 5. Thematic Analysis of 'What I most enjoy about EL'

In Comparison to Other Englishes • interesting/fun/challenging/new • easy • fewer essays/shorter exam/lighter workload
***EL*-Specific** • science based, analytical, systematic & structured approach • nothing about *EL* • everything about *EL*
Task-Oriented • analysing a variety of texts/understanding their function • class discussions • short-answer questions
Content-Oriented • learning about English language use & variation • topics/subject matter/content; application to real life • learning about Australian identity/attitudes to language • discussing/studying contemporary linguistic examples • learning about Australian English & other varieties of English • social, historical & cultural aspects of English language
Self-Oriented • improves skills • can transfer skills to other subjects; LOTE
Other-Oriented • because of teacher • because of class atmosphere/other students
Other

it seemed like fun analysing english (2009)

It's AWESOME (2012)

Other students responded that the nature of the course, its structure or its assessment suited their learning styles:

the coarse set up was better suited to my learning style than other English courses (2012)

this subject is more analytical than other English Subjects for VCE. (2012)

This may tie in with the finding in Part 5.1 that a large number of students undertaking *EL* also take Maths and Science, as these subjects feature analytical tasks.

The second open-ended question explored the specific aspects of *EL* that most appealed to students by asking them what they most enjoyed about the subject. Table 5 presents the thematic analysis of the responses.

As with the previous question, some responses centred on comparing *EL* to other Englishes or factors relating specifically to the *EL* course, with others focused on self- and other-oriented factors. Responses that drew specifically on aspects of the content and tasks undertaken in *EL* were categorised separately.

Figure 9 provides the percentage of responses in each category.
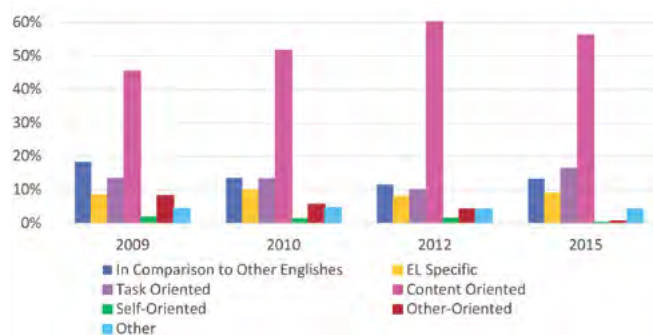
Figure 9. Thematic results for 'What I most enjoy about EL'

While the relative weightings of responses in each category were somewhat less consistent across the years than in the previous question, it is important to observe that what most students reported they enjoyed most about *EL* was its content. Significantly, responses focused on the range of topics covered, along with their application to the students' own lived experience of language in use:

that when you learn something you can hear it in everyday conversations after that. (2009)

learning about how/why people use specific choices in language and how language can be manipulated in different

circumstances (2010)

out of nowhere be able to identify words and syntax that your friends use in conversation and saying and knowing that it's a particular feature of English (2012)

its application to the real world and the understanding of how influential language is in our everyday lives (2015)

the variety, the interesting topics covered, the freedom to explore the language. (2010)

EL teachers have also commented on this aspect of the subject, with Swain (2010) observing that it creates the need for activity- and research-based learning centred on real-life samples of language in use. She argues this approach encourages 'breaking down the barriers between what is learned in the classroom and what is learned from life by making constant observers of my students' (p. 34). Through this process students 'establish a lifelong understanding of the role language plays in their own lives and in society' (p. 35).

Of the specific topics named, many students found aspects of language and identity and social and cultural interaction most engaging:

Learning how the different features of language affect societal interaction (2010)

Getting a broader view on how languages and cultures shift and change and the attitudes towards them, especially for english. (2010)

the sociological aspects of the course; how our personal backgrounds influence our language use, and how significant an indicator language is of social issues. (2012)

Interestingly, in some responses students' enthusiasm for Unit 1 and 2 content also came through, particularly regarding the history and the development of English as it is spoken today:

learning about other language varieties and history of the English language. (2010)

learning how the English language developed and particularly about the changes that led to Modern English (2012)

Notably, Figure 8 also shows that the percentage of content-oriented responses around enjoyment of the subject has increased over the years, especially in 2012 and 2015, which may relate to significant changes in the study design (see Part 3).

Responses under the theme 'in relation to other Englishes' centred around the different and refreshing quality of the course, with some students also suggesting that it gave them a new way of engaging with English:

The way we look at things in a different light and gain a different perspective. (2012)

Concerning relative workload in relation to other Englishes, a marked difference could be seen between the 2009 and 2010 responses and those in 2012 and 2015. In the 2009 and 2010 surveys, students referred to the different and lighter workload of *EL* as being attractive:

that I do not have to write as many essys and the lighter workload (2009)

This occurred less often in 2012 and 2015, which may be a result of incorporating an extended analytical commentary of language use in the 2012 revision of the study design (see Part 3).

Within the *EL*-specific theme, many students indicated that they enjoyed the systematic and analytical approach taken by *EL*, with some further contrasting this to aspects of English:

the predominantly scientific enquiry nature of the subject which I enjoy more than analysis of text perceptions (2010)

More specifically, the type of task undertaken was the appeal for some students:

the new found ability to analyse my everyday conversations,

Table 6. Thematic Analysis of 'What I find most challenging about *EL*'

***EL*-specific** • structure of the course is challenging/ambiguous • textbook is hard to understand/limited resources for *EL* • not having done Units 1 and 2 • everything challenging • nothing challenging
Task-Oriented • essays/analytical commentaries for *EL* assessment • finding contemporary linguistic examples • transcribing spoken language
Content-Oriented • understanding/analysing/remembering all the content • remembering /using metalanguage/grammar/terminology • application of knowledge/learnt concepts
Self-Oriented • time management • applying self/paying attention/staying awake • own language skills when doing a task
Other-Oriented • teacher/lack of a teacher/changing teachers
Other

and utterances, as well as written text (2009)

Analysing detail in depth and understanding how language is affected by purpose, content and identity (2015)

Finally, as might be expected, some stated that they enjoyed the subject because of other students in the class, and as always, the personal enthusiasm and charisma of an individual teacher was an element that engaged and motivated others:

my fun teacher; the way he teaches (2009)

My teachers interest in the subject, keeps me engaged. (2012)

The third open-ended question in the survey concerned the challenges of doing *EL*. The thematic categories and subcategories of the thematic analysis are shown in Table 6.

Unlike the previous open-ended questions, for this question student responses focused on aspects of *EL* rather than comparing it with the other English subjects. However, as with the other questions, responses ranged from assessment of *EL* overall to content- and task-specific assessment of the subject, and self- and other-oriented factors.

Figure 10 provides the percentage of responses in each category.
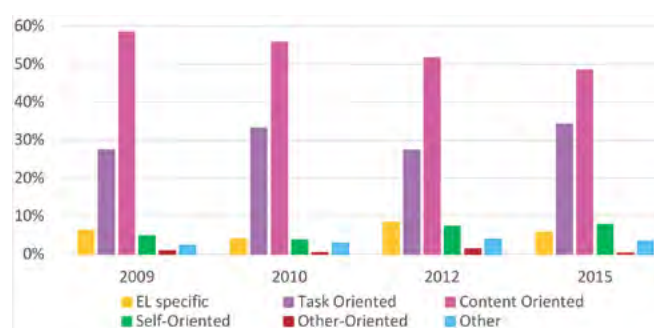
Figure 10. Thematic results for 'What I find most challenging about EL'

As with the two previous questions, there is a high degree of consistency in the relative weightings of responses in each category across the years surveyed. Significantly, for both the previous question and this one, the proportion of student responses is highest for the 'content-oriented' category, indicating that what students find both most enjoyable and most challenging about the subject is its content. Furthermore, given that the highest category of student responses to the first open-ended question is that they choose *EL* as it was new, different from or more interesting than the other English subjects, the survey responses suggest that overall, *EL* students welcome the new approach of the

subject, finding its content interesting but challenging at the same time.

The aspect of the content students found most challenging was by far the metalanguage, particularly the amount of it:

All the metalanguage!!! There is a lot of terminology to master, and it is incredibly different to standard English (2009)

wraping my head around all the metalanguage (2010)

In the first comment the three exclamation marks indicate the prominence of this challenge for this student, as does the use of the adverb *incredibly* to emphasise how different the subject is from *English*. It was certainly not unexpected that students would identify the amount of metalanguage as most challenging, as much of it is likely to be unfamiliar. However, such difficulties may decline as students who have been increasingly exposed to the use of metalanguage throughout the F–10 English curriculum that was introduced in 2013, reach VCE level.

Despite such challenges, at least some students maintain an enthusiasm for the subject:

Although I enjoy learning about the metalanguage, I find it hard to remember most and the features in a text (2015)

For others, the challenge is not just the amount of metalanguage, but also the grammatical concepts it represents:

incorporating metalanguage into my assessment and referencing the subsystems. Also some grammatical aspects, such as identifying sentence types (eg. compound-complex sentence.). (2012)

Note that as compound-complex refers to sentence structure, this student hasn't fully understood the difference between sentence structure and sentence type. Such comments reinforce the difficulties some students encounter.

The conceptual content of the course is also a challenge for many: partly because it is different from *English*, partly because there is more content to remember, and partly because the nature of the concepts is quite different:

how vast it is. There is so much to it. (2009)

Understanding concepts that are confusing and new. It sometimes requires us to think about language in a new way, which can be difficult. (2010)

there is a lot of information to consume and understand and it's all new to me. (2012)

Figure 9 also shows that the percentage of responses focusing on the content of *EL* as its most challenging aspect has lessened over time. There may be a variety of reasons for this. For example, as teachers have become more experienced with the content of the subject, they may be better able to target student needs. Another factor may be the major change in Unit 3 and 4 course content, which was implemented in 2012 (see Part 3). Student confidence may also be a factor, for, as observed in Part 5.1, the number of students who have completed Units 1 and 2 has risen over the years. Curious to assess the effect, if any, of previous *EL* study, we sought to test the effects of year and whether students who had completed Units 1 and/or 2 were less likely to comment about the content, and specifically the metalanguage, being challenging. However, given the limitations of the data in terms of confounding of school with year and being unable to tease those apart, appropriate statistical analysis could not be carried out, and this aspect remains a question for further research.

Finally, Figure 9 shows that the percentage of responses identifying task-oriented challenges was consistently high across the years surveyed. Not surprisingly, for quite a few students the major challenge is in composing extended responses such as essays:

putting everything I want to say into the one essay, that is, there are so many things you could talk about for each aspect of a topic. (2009)

Essays!!! I need much longer time to write an essay I can be proud of than just 60 mins. (2010)

linking relatively simple English lang features to very complex ideas e.g. identity, social purpose. etc. (2015)

However, the challenge of essay writing could also apply to other English offerings.

After the changes to the final examination in 2012 (see Part 3), student responses from 2012 and 2015 referred to the difficulty of formulating an analytical commentary in addition to writing an essay:

making sure I go into a deep description in analyses and essays rather then showing a basic understanding. (2012)

applying learnt information to explain real-life situations because there are so many way to explain why certain events occur. (2012)

Drawing relevant and effective conclusions, about features in my analytical/essay written pieces (2015)

Both sets of responses demonstrate careful reflection about task challenges such as selection of appropriate detail, writing coherently and convincingly under time

constraints, attaining sufficient depth, and being able to extrapolate meaningful commentary from texts or evidence from their study of language in use.

While the two extended tasks in the final examination require students to analyse and synthesise, they do so in different ways: the analytical commentary of an oral or written text requires students to analyse the use of language and its effects in the text and then construct a cogent exposition of it, whereas the essay involves a contention about language and its use, with students expected to formulate a viewpoint on the contention and support it with appropriate linguistic evidence. As reflected in survey responses, the complicating factor for each task also differs. For the analytic commentary, many students' concerns revolve around how to interpret the language use in the text and how to put their observations together into a lucid analysis:

> *it's sometimes really hard to identify things within texts, and it can be confusing and you don't know what to write because half the time you don't actually have much of an opinion on the context … so you really have to think hard about it* (2012)

> *analysing a text is my strong point but combining it all in an extended response is what I find most challenging* (2012)

> *thinking deeper about some aspects in lang analysis* (2015)

As the previously unseen text may be spoken or written, and from a wide range of contexts and of varying formality, 'what to say' is highly text-dependent, and thus quite unpredictable.

In contrast, while students must write an essay on one of three previously undisclosed contentions about language and its use, the range of possibilities is much more predictable. Instead, the complicating factor is about students having developed their own 'toolbox' of linguistic examples, and the ability to draw out relevant ones during the examination to support their line of argument. As noted in Part 3, analysis of the yearly examiner's reports shows that there has been an increasing emphasis on the examples used in the essay being contemporary, particularly since 2014. Interestingly, in the 2009, 2010 and 2012 surveys, only 1% (n=4–5) of responses to the third open-ended question explicitly mentioned finding contemporary linguistic examples as challenging, but in 2015 this rose to 4.7% (n=14). Although there has been less focus in subsequent years on examples having this degree of currency, the survey results underline the influence of the examiner's report on the teaching of the course.

In sum, the analytic commentary and the essay require students to demonstrate complex skills, identifying those who are well prepared, organised in their thinking and able to work well under pressure. As Andersson (2012) remarks, in approaching these extended tasks students must employ independent thinking skills in order to best utilise the key ideas and knowledge developed in the classroom. While such skills can discriminate those students who may perform well at tertiary studies, or indeed life in general, the survey responses also provide food for thought for future reviews of the subject and the yearly preparation of the final examination. Expressly, they suggest that in order to ensure accessibility for both the examination and the subject more generally, the scope and level of course content, particularly the metalanguage, needs to be carefully monitored, and a balance needs to be maintained across the three sections of the final examination, with a lower difficulty level for the initial short-answer section offsetting and leading into the complex demands of the two extended tasks.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study has taken a close look at the cohort of *EL* students and their experiences and perceptions of the subject. While there are limitations to the data in terms of sample size, sampling method and years surveyed, various conclusions can be drawn. First, looking at the student cohort, our findings show that a wide range of students choose *EL*, especially those with a strong logical-mathematical intelligence, with the majority doing primarily Maths/Science or a mixture of subjects, and relatively few doing Business or Arts/ Humanities. Students overwhelmingly reported that they choose *EL* instead of other English offerings as it provides a novel perspective for the study of English, and that they are very likely to recommend the subject to others. Increasingly, students are completing all four units of *EL*; however, they are unlikely to take up another English in addition to *EL*. The relatively even gender balance of *EL* mirrors that of *English* and *EAL*, but differs from *Literature*, which shows a distinct skew towards female participation. Together, the gender and subject selection results suggest that despite the growth of *EL* and relative decreases in *Literature* and *English*, *EL* is not causal in the decreased demand for *Literature*.

Second, in terms of benefits and challenges, students identified that *EL* presents a new way of engaging with the study of English, that it helps in strengthening their own skills in interpreting and using English in their everyday world, and that it addresses a range of topics directly relevant to their own lived experience

of language in use. Although the content of the *EL* course is broadly appealing, aspects of its content are challenging, particularly the grammatical concepts and metalanguage, and the different conceptual approach. In addition, for many students a major challenge is composing extended responses such as essays and analytical commentaries.

Third, this study's results also have potential to provide insights into the evolution of the subject, particularly given the significant changes to the study design and the addition of the extended analytical commentary to the final examination in 2012. Looking at the survey results before and after these changes, we see that while the percentage of content-oriented responses around enjoyment of the subject increased, comments about the different and lighter workload of *EL* being attractive decreased. Furthermore, findings around the use of contemporary examples underline the influence the examiner's report can have on the teaching of the course. Careful monitoring of both course content and final examination tasks needs to be maintained to ensure the balance and broad accessibility of the course.

These results have implications for the current review and ongoing development of *EL*, particularly in light of the UK experience. Maintaining continuity of pedagogical approach between the *EL* and F–10 curriculum is vital for providing a capstone experience of English language study at the senior secondary level. Specifically, this involves keeping the emphasis on knowledge about language rather than on literacy and standard language acquisition, along with employing a range of spoken, written and multimodal texts that are relevant to students.

While this study has added substantially to our understanding of students' perceptions of *EL*, a range of areas remain to be explored, such as whether the inclusion of the English language strand in the F–10 English curriculum and/or having completed previous units of *EL* ameliorate the challenges *EL* students face with respect to metalanguage and grammatical concepts.

Taken as a whole, this study documents students' engagement with and positive experience of *EL* in Victoria, giving a better understanding of the role of this subject within the F–12 study of English and its potential for extension nationally. Importantly, students perceive that *EL* has given them an increased awareness of linguistic choices and their effects, resulting in stronger spoken as well as written language

skills across conventional and multimodal formats. This has 'bigger picture' significance in terms of reimagining the pedagogical basis of English language studies, as it validates a linguistics-centred approach to the study of English that contextualises grammar teaching within a range of texts reflective of everyday language use in the twenty-first century.

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Dr Jean Mulder, Honorary Senior Fellow in the School of Languages and Linguistics, University of Melbourne, was instrumental in the conception and development of *VCE English Language*, including co-authoring the original study design and two textbooks. Her work with ACARA has included elaborating the grammatical framework underlying the *Australian Curriculum: English*.

Caroline Thomas taught English and ESL. Her interest in language and studies in linguistics and applied linguistics at the University of Melbourne inspired involvement in the conceptualisation of *VCE English Language*. She has contributed to its ongoing development as teacher, textbook co-author, provider of professional development, exam marker and tutor.

Appendix 1. Unit 4 English Subject Enrolments 2001–2020

Year	English Language					Literature					EAL					English					Total All Students
	Male	Female	Gender X	Total EL	% of All Students	Male	Female	Gender X	Total Literature	% of All Students	Male	Female	Gender X	Total EAL	% of All Students	Male	Female	Gender X	Total English	% of All Students	
2001	215	492		707	1.3	1523	4337		5860	11	1294	1289		2583	4.9	20548	23411		43959	82.8	53109
2002	343	582		925	1.7	1454	4229		5683	10.5	1467	1495		2962	5.5	20592	23817		44409	82.3	53979
2003	461	679		1117	2.1	1490	4096		5586	10.5	1647	1628		2498	4.7	20599	23332		43931	82.7	53132
2004	569	793		1362	2.5	1476	4044		5520	10.3	1702	1746		3448	6.5	20226	22871		43097	80.7	53427
2005	649	781		1430	2.7	1581	4109		5690	10.8	1693	1666		3359	6.4	19609	22704		42313	80.2	52792
2006	670	883		1553	2.9	1513	3809		5322	10.1	1617	1569		3186	6	19734	23153		42887	81	52948
2007	749	968		1717	3.3	1600	3871		5471	10.6	1554	1478		3032	5.9	19138	22239		41377	80.2	51597
2008	927	1086		2013	3.8	1660	4066		5726	10.7	1646	1664		3310	6.2	19449	22845		42294	79.3	53343
2009	1035	1170		2205	4.2	1689	4009		5698	10.8	1807	1711		3518	6.7	19119	22081		41200	78.3	52621
2010	1159	1283		2442	4.5	1738	4109		5847	10.8	1677	1705		3382	6.3	19360	22968		42328	78.4	53999
2011	1255	1433		2688	5	1673	4096		5769	10.8	1770	1767		3537	6.6	19435	22195		41630	77.6	53624
2012	1380	1542		2922	5.5	1619	4073		5692	10.7	1721	1659		3380	6.3	19303	22052		41355	77.5	53349
2013	1581	1547		3128	5.9	1630	3654		5284	9.9	1581	1599		3180	6	19449	22158		41607	78.2	53199
2014	1396	1507		2903	5.5	1518	3708		5226	9.8	1589	1647		3236	6.1	19748	22104		41852	78.6	53217
2015	1328	1326		2654	5	1472	3561		5033	9.5	1731	1671		3402	6.4	19864	22223		42087	79.1	53176
2016	1362	1536		2898	5.5	1362	3239		4601	8.7	1607	1754		3361	6.3	20031	22221		42252	79.6	53112
2017	1510	1742	3	3255	6	1282	3360	5	4647	8.6	1694	1919	0	3528	6.5	20144	22535	26	42683	78.9	54113
2018	1659	1857	2	3518	6.5	1180	2980	11	4171	7.8	1912	2058	0	3970	7.4	19798	22330	27	42155	78.3	53814
2019	1749	1912	4	3665	7.1	1003	2738	6	3747	7.2	1892	2062	0	3954	7.6	18827	21485	33	40345	78	51711
2020	1876	2004	2	3882	7.4	995	2610	18	3623	6.9	1776	1937	3	3716	7.1	19239	21889	51	41179	78.6	52400

Appendix 2. VCE English Language Units 3 & 4 Survey – 2015

Please tick the appropriate box(es):

1. I did Year 11 English Language:
   Unit 1   ❒   Unit 2   ❒

2. Of the Unit 3 & 4 English subjects offered, I am doing:

   English Language   ❒   English   ❒
   English Literature   ❒   EAL   ❒

3. This year, I am doing:
   mostly Humanities subjects ❒   mostly Maths/Science subjects   ❒
   mostly business subjects   ❒   a mixture of subjects   ❒
   only English Language   ❒

Complete the sentence:

4. I chose to do English Language because:

5. The thing I most enjoy about English Language is:

6. What I find most challenging about English Language is:

Circle the answer that best matches your opinion:

	Definitely	Somewhat	A little	Hardly at all	Not at all
7. I enjoy doing English Language	5	4	3	2	1
8. Doing English Language has made me more aware of the use of English	5	4	3	2	1
9. Doing English Language has given me stronger skills in my written and spoken use of English	5	4	3	2	1
10. What I've learned in English Language is relevant to my everyday life	5	4	3	2	1
	Absolutely	Likely	Maybe	Unlikely	Never
11. I would recommend this subject to other VCE students	5	4	3	2	1
12. I would like to take a subject in Linguistics in my future studies	5	4	3	2	1

Appendix 3. Survey Results – Previous EL Units Completed and Unit 3 & 4 Subject Selections

Year	Previous *EL* units completed				Unit 3 & 4 subject selections					
	Neither EL Unit 1 or 2	EL Unit 1 or 2	EL Unit 1 and 2	Total	EL Only	Business	Humanities/Arts	Maths/Science	Mixture	Total
2009	94	64	255	413	1	13	46	144	200	404
2010	77	39	279	395	2	11	34	163	173	383
2012	52	63	330	445	1	9	48	188	199	445
2015	38	17	198	253	1	9	16	120	105	251

Appendix 4. Survey Results – Likert-scale Questions (n = survey response)

Year	I enjoy doing EL			Doing EL has made me more aware of the use of English			Doing EL has given me stronger skills in my written and spoken use of English			What I've learned in EL is relevant to my everyday life			I would recommend this subject to other VCE students			I would like to take a subject in Linguistics in my future studies		
	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	n	Mean	Std. Deviation
2009	393	4.1	0.8	393	4.1	0.8	391	3.7	1.0	392	3.8	1.0	391	4.2	0.9	392	2.6	1.2
2010	403	4.0	0.9	403	4.0	0.9	402	3.8	0.9	403	3.8	1.0	403	4.2	0.9	402	2.4	1.1
2012	437	3.9	1.0	437	3.9	1.0	436	3.8	0.9	437	3.7	1.1	437	4.1	1.0	437	2.5	1.2
2015	248	3.8	0.8	248	3.8	0.8	248	3.8	0.8	248	3.7	1.0	248	4.1	0.9	248	2.1	1.0
Total	1481	4.0	0.9	1481	4.0	0.9	1477	3.8	0.9	1480	3.8	1.0	1479	4.2	0.9	1479	2.4	1.1

Appendix 5. Survey Results – Open-ended Questions (n = survey response)

	Theme (with total n and % survey responses)	2009		2010		2012		2015		Total	
	Sub-category (with n and % of survey responses)	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Why I chose to do EL	In Comparison to Other Englishes	333	63.5	367	69.2	354	61.4	203	63.2	1257	64.4
	more interesting than mainstream English	156	29.8	193	36.4	203	35.2	99	30.8	651	33.4
	didn't enjoy/like English; found mainstream English difficult	126	24.0	115	21.7	105	18.2	74	23.1	420	21.5
	different/new/a challenge	31	5.9	39	7.4	27	4.7	18	5.6	115	5.9
	easy/easier	11	2.1	8	1.5	9	1.6	2	0.6	30	1.5
	scaled up/can get better marks	4	0.8	7	1.3	6	1.0	4	1.2	21	1.1
	assessed differently; short-answer questions/shorter exams	5	1.0	5	0.9	4	0.7	6	1.9	20	1.0
	***EL*-Specific**	87	16.6	79	14.9	94	16.3	58	18.1	318	16.3
	science based, analytical, systematic and structured approach	37	7.1	43	8.1	49	8.5	35	10.9	164	8.4
	enjoyable/fun	50	9.5	36	6.8	45	7.8	23	7.2	154	7.9
	Self-Oriented	70	13.4	57	10.8	85	14.7	33	10.3	245	12.6
	complements student's skills and strengths	34	6.5	29	5.5	56	9.7	28	8.7	147	7.5
	would like to pursue Linguistics as a career path	3	0.6	0	0.0	7	1.2	0	0.0	10	0.5
	can learn more about the English language/can improve their English	19	3.6	18	3.4	16	2.8	3	0.9	56	2.9
	will help in future studies or career	8	1.5	4	0.8	2	0.3	0	0.0	14	0.7
	assists with other subjects; LOTE	6	1.1	6	1.1	4	0.7	2	0.6	18	0.9
	Other-Oriented	20	3.8	21	4.0	23	4.0	19	5.9	83	4.3
	recommended by sibling, friend or teacher	9	1.7	10	1.9	18	3.1	18	5.6	55	2.8
	because of teacher	1	0.2	3	0.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	0.2
	because of other student(s) doing *EL*	1	0.2	0	0.0	1	0.2	0	0.0	2	0.1
	because of timetable or blocking	9	1.7	8	1.5	4	0.7	1	0.3	22	1.1
	Other	14	2.7	6	1.1	21	3.6	8	2.5	49	2.5
	Question Total	524	100	530	100	577	100	321	100	1952	100

What I most enjoy about EL	In Comparison to Other Englishes	81	18.4	64	13.5	60	11.6	44	13.3	249	14.1
	interesting/fun/challenging/new	47	10.7	40	8.4	41	7.9	30	9.1	158	9.0
	easy	3	0.7	0	0.0	4	0.8	5	1.5	12	0.7
	fewer essays/shorter exam/lighter workload	31	7.0	24	5.1	15	2.9	9	2.7	79	4.5
	***EL*-Specific**	37	8.4	47	9.9	42	8.1	30	9.1	156	8.8
	science based, analytical, systematic and structured approach	24	5.4	37	7.8	33	6.4	25	7.6	119	6.7
	nothing about *EL*	9	2.0	7	1.5	7	1.4	4	1.2	27	1.5
	everything about *EL*	4	0.9	3	0.6	2	0.4	1	0.3	10	0.6
	Task-Oriented	59	13.4	63	13.3	52	10.0	54	16.3	228	12.9
	analysing a variety of texts/ understanding their function	34	7.7	35	7.4	28	5.4	35	10.6	132	7.5
	class discussions	22	5.0	24	5.1	20	3.9	13	3.9	79	4.5
	short-answer questions	3	0.7	4	0.8	4	0.8	6	1.8	17	1.0
	Content-Oriented	201	45.6	245	51.7	312	60.2	186	56.2	944	53.5
	learning about English language use and variation	25	5.7	25	5.3	44	8.5	25	7.6	119	6.7
	topics/subject matter /content; application to real life	132	29.9	144	30.4	141	27.2	89	26.9	506	28.7
	learning about Australian identity/ attitudes to language	5	1.1	8	1.7	9	1.7	17	5.1	39	2.2
	discussing/studying contemporary linguistic examples	1	0.2	6	1.3	8	1.5	8	2.4	23	1.3
	learning about Australian English and other varieties of English	5	1.1	17	3.6	29	5.6	14	4.2	65	3.7
	social, historical and cultural aspects of English language	33	7.5	45	9.5	81	15.6	33	10.0	192	10.9
	Self-Oriented	8	1.8	6	1.3	8	1.5	1	0.3	23	1.3
	improve skills	7	1.6	2	0.4	4	0.8	0	0.0	13	0.7
	can transfer skills to other subjects; LOTE	1	0.2	4	0.8	4	0.8	1	0.3	10	0.6
	Other-Oriented	36	8.2	27	5.7	22	4.2	2	0.6	87	4.9
	because of teacher	26	5.9	13	2.7	11	2.1	1	0.3	51	2.9
	because of class atmosphere/ other students	10	2.3	14	3.0	11	2.1	1	0.3	36	2.0
	Other	19	4.3	22	4.6	22	4.2	14	4.2	77	4.4
	Question Total	441	100	474	100	518	100	331	100	1764	100

What I find most challenging about EL										
EL-Specific	28	6.3	18	4.0	43	8.4	17	5.8	106	6.2
structure of the course challenging/ambiguous	2	0.5	3	0.7	18	3.5	7	2.4	30	1.8
textbook is hard to understand/ limited resources for EL	0	0	1	0.2	8	1.6	3	1.0	12	0.7
not having done Units 1 and 2	6	1.4	2	0.4	3	0.6	1	0.3	12	0.7
everything challenging	13	2.9	8	1.8	10	2.0	5	1.7	36	2.1
nothing challenging	7	1.6	4	0.9	4	0.8	1	0.3	16	0.9
Task-Oriented	121	27.4	150	33.2	139	27.3	101	34.2	511	30.1
essays/analytical commentaries for EL assessment	117	26.5	138	30.5	134	26.3	87	29.5	476	28.0
finding contemporary linguistic examples	4	0.9	5	1.1	5	1.0	14	4.7	28	1.6
transcribing spoken language	0	0	7	1.5	0	0	0	0	7	0
Content-Oriented	258	58.4	252	55.8	263	51.7	143	48.5	916	53.9
understanding/analysing/ remembering all the content	60	13.6	45	10.0	52	10.2	25	8.5	182	10.7
remembering /using metalanguage/ grammar/terminology	162	36.7	173	38.3	163	32.0	93	31.5	591	34.8
application of knowledge/learnt concepts	36	8.1	34	7.5	48	9.4	25	8.5	143	8.4
Self-Oriented	21	4.8	17	3.8	37	7.3	23	7.8	98	5.8
time management	7	1.6	6	1.3	11	2.2	7	2.4	31	1.8
applying self/paying attention/ staying awake	11	2.5	7	1.5	14	2.8	6	2.0	38	2.2
own language skills when doing a task	3	0.7	4	0.9	12	2.4	10	3.4	29	1.7
Other-Oriented	4	0.9	2	0.4	7	1.4	1	0.3	14	0.8
teacher/lack of teacher/changing teachers	4	0.9	2	0.4	7	1.4	1	0.3	14	0.8
Other	10	2.3	13	2.9	20	3.9	10	3.4	53	3.1
Question Total	442	100	452	100	509	100	295	100	1698	100

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More than Something Weird: Teaching Australian Gothic in the classroom

Donna Mazza, Narrelle de Boer and David Rhodes, Edith Cowan University

Teaching Australian Gothic (sidebar)

Abstract: Teaching Australian Gothic as a system of literary analysis can be challenging. Often linked to imprecise concepts that are difficult to identify, Australian Gothic is regularly reduced to 'something weird' or 'just a feeling'. However, the Gothic mode in Australia has established itself as an effective approach and developed some clear strategies for tackling some aspects of colonial legacy which are otherwise difficult to articulate. There is also within the Australian Gothic genre an opportunity to explore the dark side of the Australian experience. The landscape of Australia, the vastness of the continent, the perceived hostility of its natural environment, the violence of the European invasion, the experience of exile from Europe, the feelings of alienation faced by the early settlers, and the fear of the racial other (Doolan, 2019) combine to create the perfect tensions for the Gothic genre. The research presented here synthesises various authorities on this subject, driven by a broad review of recent fiction and theory on the topic, and provides a succinct list of guiding questions to use in the classroom. A selection of texts that may prove helpful to teachers seeking new sources to inform classroom discussion of contemporary fiction and film is also discussed.

Keywords: Australian Gothic, English teaching, gothic, fiction, Australian literature

Teaching a student to appreciate the Gothic can present challenges, but it is a very fertile space in which a reader can consider Australian literature and a complex array of social, cultural and political concerns relevant to our times. The terrain of the Gothic in Australia is built on the horrors of colonisation, misunderstandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and the difficult topic of national conscience, which are often veiled in cryptic narratives. Much of this makes Australians uncomfortable, and this unease has percolated into our storytelling, especially in the past twenty years. Yet this kind of writing and its relevance to readers of Australian fiction can yield a deeper knowledge of our literature and allow for fruitful discussion of contemporary issues linked to colonisation. Despite the fact that Australian Gothic belongs to a much broader tradition with clearly recognisable characteristics, however, its mutability means that it can sometimes be hard to recognise, particularly given its shift away from the origins of the Gothic in eighteenth-century Britain. The subtlety which is its strength also becomes its weakness in that students (and teachers) often struggle to pin down Australian Gothic as anything more than 'just a feeling' or 'something weird' (Gelder, 2012).

Amidst increasing anxiety about levels of student literacy, teachers have to balance (and account for) the requirement to ensure that all class content is relevant, has currency and is engaging for students, while also meeting the standards of an increasing array of external assessments – state, national and international – for benchmarking. The Australian Curriculum: English and its various state and territory interactions require teachers to move beyond the traditional canonical texts of the past, and to embrace new and exciting ways of (re)imagining the world through the use a range of texts and text types.

This research developed in response to the need to provide simple strategies for students of Australian literature to determine the genre of a text. It provides a starting point for teachers to support their students in easily recognising Australian Gothic and a way to articulate it with confidence. More than this, however, the guiding questions can be used to encourage students to engage deeply with often contentious issues which give rise to anxiety in contemporary Australian society.

Background: The bridge from Gothic to Australian Gothic

Originating in late eighteenth-century Europe and imported to Australia along with the convicts and settlers, the Gothic is a literary genre the defining characteristic of which is perhaps its capacity for reinvention (Warwick, 2007). Examining existing Gothic scholarship reveals that the term is notoriously difficult to define. Abrams and Harpham (2015) suggest that Gothic literature 'develops a brooding atmosphere of gloom and terror, represents events that are uncanny or macabre or melodramatically violent, and often deals with aberrant psychological states' (p. 152). Extending this idea, Punter and Byron (2009, pp. xviii–xix) consider the Gothic a form of psychological argument – a way in which repressed fears are represented in textual form. This psychological focus renders the term less tangible, with critics such as Bloom (2010, p. 4) referring to it as a 'feeling' and others concluding that there is no single, straightforward answer to the question 'What is Gothic?' (Spooner & McEvoy, 2007, p. 1). The difficulty in defining what is meant by the term Gothic underscores its unstable nature and offers a challenge to educators wishing to bring this rich genre into the classroom.

A summary of well-worn features in Gothic fiction includes its use of historical settings and subterranean spaces, doubles and binary oppositions, isolation and madness, the supernatural, monsters and undead characters, live burials, the possibility of incest, family secrets and the return of the repressed. A more specific list is given by Allan Lloyd-Smith in *American Gothic fiction* (as cited in Armitt, 2011), and includes

> …extreme situations, anxiety, darkness, threat, paranoia; exaggerated villains and innocent victims; subterfuge and plots; ancient houses, castles, monasteries, dungeons, crypts and passages, wild scenery, craggy mountains or winding maze-like tracts; stage machinery, hidden trapdoors, secret passageways; speaking portraits, ghosts, doubles, and other supernatural-seeming beings; monstrous and grotesque creatures; pain, terror, horror and sadism. (p. 2)

Gothic tales usually take place in a threatening space where secrets from the past return to haunt the characters and the boundaries between the real and the supernatural, and between what is real and what is imagined, are often blurred. A text well known to many students that illustrates this list almost fully is J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, and it is helpful to draw attention to this to engage students.

In addition to the above features of the narrative, the plot of the Gothic is often characterised by a lack of closure. Although it always works towards closure, it is often unable to achieve this (Turcotte, 2009b, p. 55), perhaps because of the psychological trauma surrounding the issues it raises. Hock Soon Ng (as cited in Rudd, 2010) considers this an essential element of Gothic literature and distils it down to one defining feature: 'a lingering presence of loss that refuses to dissolve' (p. 2). Reading the end of a work suspected to be Gothic will often confirm that it complies with this definition.

Increasingly, it is the psychological aspect of the Gothic that is its most notable feature in contemporary works, and often fascinates students. As Bloom (2010) asserts:

> [t]he gothic was not merely a playground for the imaginative, it was also the very foundation for a new sense of the imagination. It was not merely a set of exterior devices to have cosy inglenook adventures, but a mechanism for describing not only the workings of the mind, but also the mind in relationship with the supernatural, the universal and the divine. The gothic, therefore, perforce dealt in the unspoken, the difficult and the painful in ways that no other form of art could do. (p. 4)

The Gothic therefore provides a means of interrogating that which is generally unknowable, uncomfortable, unspeakable or taboo.

Since its inception, the Gothic has mutated, adapted and become firmly embedded in Western culture. As Marie Mulvey-Roberts (2009) says, 'This hot-house hybrid is constantly mutating, making new growths out of old as in its propensity for parody and pastiche. What remains consistent…is the retention of a "singular moral function – that of provoking unease"' (p. xxii). This is evident in the spread of the Gothic beyond Europe in the nineteenth century, firstly to America, where it is particularly recognisable in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, H.P. Lovecraft and Henry James. Poe is credited by Baldick (1992, p. xviii) with reworking Gothic conventions 'towards a far more concentrated effect' in the form of the short story, and his economy and 'consistency of effect' set the blueprint for the future of Gothic fiction. At the same time, stories like 'The fall of the House of Usher' emphasise a familiar Gothic theme – 'the decline and the extinction of the old family line … the house as habitation linked irrevocably with the house as

dynasty' (Baldick, 1992, p. xviii). Poe's stories (and poetry) are often used by English teachers and offer, perhaps, the best introduction to concepts of the old Gothic and its relationship to the new. Contemporary American authors Cormac McCarthy, Anne Rice and Stephen King have continued to work in the Gothic genre, honing a tradition beyond the shores of its original home that imaginatively articulates the legacy of colonisation in America.

The Gothic has adapted itself to America's local conditions, transporting and reinventing the motifs of the Old World to suit the conditions and inheritance of the new. One such country that clearly exhibits its propensity adaptation and reinvention is Australia.

Once in Australia, the Gothic began to take on a distinctly local form in colonial fiction – one which reinscribes traditional Gothic settings, tropes and motifs. Here, the haunted manor becomes the run-down homestead or the derelict outback town, and the English woods and moors are replaced by the bush or the endless scrub of the outback (Doig, 2013, pp. 12–13). Central to Australian re-inscription of the Gothic is the complex relationship of the text with the Australian landscape.

It is hardly surprising that the Gothic took hold in Australian colonial literature. Botany Bay was established as a British penal colony in 1788, just two decades after the publication of Walpole's *The castle of Otranto* (1764) and while the Gothic was in full swing in the literature of the British Empire. According to Turcotte (2009a), '[t]he Antipodes was a world of reversals, the dark subconscious of Britain. It was, for all intents and purposes, *Gothic par excellence*, the dungeon of the world' (p. 278). Robert Hughes (1986/2003) cites the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who argued that transportation

> was indeed a measure of experiment … but the subject matter of experiment was, in this case, a peculiarly commodious one; a set of *animae viles*, a sort of excrementious mass, that could be projected, and accordingly was projected…as far out of sight as possible. (p. 2)

The British convicts were viewed, quite literally, as the abject – expelled from Mother England to the other side of the world to be forgotten about and swallowed up by the newly discovered and unexplored continent. The status of Australia as a penal colony meant that it was a place of alienation and exile, and it was particularly effective in terms of distance from Britain, and also in relation to the landscape itself: the environment was such that prison walls were often not as necessary, and many convicts quickly became exiled settlers with a ticket of leave and no hope of returning to their homeland.

The relationship between Australian and British literature is fraught, and often negates the status of Australian literature as 'distinct and diverse' from that of the 'motherland' (McLean Davies, Martin & Buzacott, 2017, p. 24). The Gothic offers evidence of this diversity in its breaks from the original eighteenth-century template, but it is not a clean break, and Australian works still reference traditional Gothic features.

Traditional British Gothic works have often been reduced to a list of conventions, but Gothic works written in 'new world' contexts evolved and stepped away from that original template so they could speak to their audience in the new context. Colonial authors created a new way of speaking: an early American or Australian form of Gothic. Australian short story writers of this period, including Rosa Praed, Ernest Favenc, Barbara Baynton and Henry Lawson, make effective examples to use in the classroom.

Bringing the Gothic into a contemporary Australian context involves a further break from tradition, with writers 'riffing' off colonial texts already removed from their original source and thereby forming a new Gothic, even less likely to adhere to a fixed concept that identifies with Mother England. The landscape in Australian film and fiction, for example, is commonly depicted in what only can be described as Gothic terms even in narratives that do not necessarily conform to other Gothic conventions. As such, Gothic motifs, narrative structures or images can arise in a variety of settings that may not otherwise seem Gothic in any predictable way.

It is the flexibility of the Gothic that leads many critics to celebrate it as a 'set of discourses rather than simply as a genre' (Spooner & McEvoy, 2007, p. 2). Both Raducanu (2014) and Jones (2009) cite Derrida's argument that a text can participate in a genre without simply belonging to it. Looser than genre, the Gothic is considered by Warwick (2007, p. 26) to be more suitably termed a 'mode', thereby allowing for its mutability, which is so vital to its role in Australian literature. For the purposes of this research, the Gothic is referred to as a genre; however, given its nebulous nature, students should be prepared for it to appear in seemingly odd places and for their reading practices to be disrupted in unexpected ways. Providing students

with a range of example texts, including Australian colonial and contemporary literary works and films as well as select European or American fiction, will illustrate this aspect of the Gothic.

It is apparent in teaching English that Gothics old and new are important to a critical reading strategy designed to tease out these features of a text. The particularly Australian characteristics that arise are often based in early impressions of Australia in the narratives of explorers and settlers. These were the stuff of Gothic horror and this was, perhaps, heightened by the prevalence of Gothic fiction in these authors' reading experiences. Relationship with the landscape is central to Australian Gothic, drawing on those early writers who found the emptiness or 'void' of the Australian desert particularly discomfiting (Haynes, 1998, p. 77). Despite the expansiveness of the desert, explorers of the Australian interior paradoxically portrayed the landscape in Gothic terms of enclosure and entrapment:

> Isolation through distance is no less absolute or terrifying than imprisonment by walls; the unassailable natural powers of heat, thirst, desolation are no less despotic than those of the aristocratic villain; the arbitrary terrors of the Gothic are given physical form in the violent and unpredictable storms that can obliterate all geographical markers in a few minutes; the apparition of ghostly forms is parodied in the phenomenon of the mirage, while a more subtle sense of the supernatural is supplied by the eeriness, silence and loneliness experienced in the desert. (Haynes, 1998, pp. 184–85)

The 'ruined abbeys, burial vaults, subterranean passages or convent cells' so commonly the motifs of entrapment in British Gothic literature were substituted in the desert for the obstacles constructed by nature, including ridge after ridge of inescapable sandhills, and the imprisonment caused by 'drought, heat, thirst and the legitimate fear of being lost, both physically and spiritually' (Haynes, 1998, p. 77). Haynes explains that along with the sense of imprisonment ascribed to the desert, the explorers also attributed to it 'solitude, stillness, desolation and an unspecified sense of dread' – essentially the same 'weird melancholy' that colonial writer Marcus Clarke assigned to the bush.

Clarke illustrates this sense of alienation from the Australian landscape and describes the bush as a place of fear and hopelessness. He also transforms it into 'a monstrous occulted place [where there] … is something that animates and spectralises the bush as the definitive setting for nightmare and terror' (Gelder

& Weaver, 2007, p. 4). Wilding (cited in McCann 2003) suggests that in Clarke's descriptions, 'conceptual distinctions between inner and outer landscapes begin to dissolve' (p. 142), and McCann (2003) extends this, positing that in Clarke's bush 'the liminal state in which interiority and exteriority, the imagined and the spectacular, slip into and express each other' (p. 143). This rendering is not a literal representation of the bush, but a literary expression of the feeling or 'weird melancholy' that it evokes. It is this 'weird' sensibility of the bush, along with its associated 'melancholy, anxiety and dread' (Gelder, 2012, p. 384), that informs much of the investment contemporary authors have in the Australian Gothic.

Films and books have long used Australian landscapes 'to represent alien, hostile environments that threaten or even attack [their] human inhabitants' (Weaver, 2011, p. 84), and given the fears and anxieties that haunted European settlers in relation to the landscape, it is hardly surprising that it is often portrayed as an actively malevolent force. Gerry Turcotte (2009c) argues that the Gothic offered one of the most appropriate ways for colonial writers to articulate their experiences in the New World due to its nature as

> a literature that deals with alienation, disjunction, terror and conflict; it frequently projects its protagonist into an alien place where the character is tried and tested; and this protagonist is almost always victimized by a powerful oppressor … The colonist is uprooted, estranged, terrified, on alien territory, and pursued (if sometimes only in the imagination) by a daunting predator: which in Australia was alternatively perceived as the Bush, the convict past, bush rangers or the Aboriginal population. (p. 129)

This tradition has continued, and in contemporary Australian Gothic literature and film the landscape is always more than just a benign backdrop for the story. It is often portrayed as a character in its own right, one that actively works to thwart its human inhabitants. As Wilkie (2015) points out:

> The rural outback holds sinister possibilities of madness, depravity and profound loss … [T]he gothic tradition of Australian storytelling … sets human characters against the omnipresent Australian landscape: their identity and very existence is frequently defined in relation to an often foreboding, unwelcoming land that violently opposes their presence.

Of course, the fear of becoming lost in the bush was (and still is) a legitimate one, and Australian history

is littered with the real-life stories of those who have been taken by the bush. It is not difficult, then, to make the link between real-life experiences and those reflected in Australian Gothic stories.

There is an ongoing narrative, or what critics such as Harry Heseltine (2000) and Peter Pierce (1997) refer to as an 'obsessive' theme in Australian colonial culture, in which people are 'lost in the bush' or 'consumed by the land'. Examples of this include Rosa Praed's 'The Sea-birds' message' (1891), Barbara Baynton's 'The chosen vessel' (1902), Marcus Clarke's 'Pretty Dick' (1896) and Mary Gaunt's 'The lost white woman' (1916). It is hardly surprising that this is a preoccupation of the national literature of the abandoned children of Mother England, compounding numerous real-life examples of lost children.

Pierce (1997) argues that, especially in relation to children, this is suggestive of 'an abiding anxiety in colonial Australia' (p. 27). Kim Torney (2003), like Pierce, looks specifically at lost-child narratives, and posits that fears about children becoming lost in the bush are particular to Australia. She also suggests that incidents of children becoming lost in the bush highlight the complicated relationship the settlers had with the landscape in which they lived; as a means of livelihood and also a place of play, the bush was considered 'tamed' until a child became lost, whereby it then 'took on a threatening aspect that reminded the colonists that this was an alien environment for them and their society' (Torney, 2004, p. 52). Elspeth Tilley (2012) also explores the powerful political dimensions of the 'lost in the bush' myth, renaming it the 'white-vanishing myth' given that those who disappeared in the texts she uncovered were invariably white, as were the authors who wrote them (p. 9).

Australian 'lost in the bush' narratives are not confined to children. Alan Lawson (2004) points to a trope he calls 'incorporation' in settler narratives in which the settler is consumed by the land, suggesting that the different types of stories that involve this trope include 'the lost child, the captivity narrative, shipwrecked sailor or vanished explorer, each of whom may be captive, foundling, or merely vanished' (p. 1220). Beyond colonial literature, the 'lost in the bush' trope is one that continues to appear in contemporary texts, influenced by disappearances in colonial times and contemporary real-life mysteries such as the disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain. The 'lost in the bush' trope appeared in Australian texts such as Patrick White's *Voss* (1957) and *A fringe of*

leaves (1976) and Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967), and is perpetuated by Louis Nowra's *Into that forest* (2012), Jane Harper's 2017 novels *The dry* and *Force of nature*, Felicity McLean's *The Van Apfel girls are gone* (2019) and many others.

Intimately connected to the landscape are those who inhabit it, and despite the empty land that the myth of *terra nullius* promised, Australia was clearly occupied. According to Van Toorn (1992), Aboriginal peoples became the Other onto whom the colonists projected their fears, suggesting that '[t]he Aborigine is made to stand for all that lies outside, or stands against, or is suppressed within the civilized world: sexuality, violence, unreason, malevolent supernatural power, even the mythic figure of death itself' (p. 88). This construction of Aboriginal peoples as Other, and anxieties about their existence and what it meant for the colonists, permeates Australian colonial literature. Fear about whether non-Aboriginal Australians can ever be truly reconciled with the landscape and/or its Indigenous peoples and the anxiety this induces continue to be exhibited in contemporary Australian works. The attempt to repress Australia's pre-colonial history has been a continuing theme in Australian fiction, and contemporary Australian writers such as Kate Grenville, Carmel Bird, Andrew McGahan, Tim Winton and Rohan Wilson have used the Gothic to explore these issues, as well as Australian histories that are often otherwise unspeakable or remain hidden. Likewise, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors such as Kim Scott, Clare G. Coleman, Alexis Wright, Vivienne Cleven, Tara June Winch and Melissa Lucashenko have reworked the Gothic, subverting the form into an Aboriginal Gothic which challenges dominant discourses of European settlement. Considering this, Australian Gothic is a prime site for postcolonial resistance, and remains an effective mode with which 'to challenge traditional concepts such as truth and reality, and of suggesting alternatives to the privileged "master narratives"' (Rombouts, 1994, p. 10).

Teaching Australian Gothic: Text selection and pedagogical culture wars

When considering the complexity of this theory, it soon becomes apparent that conveying it to students of literature is challenging, especially when the background for the subject involves reading, understanding and appreciating both traditional Gothic works and colonial stories that act as a conduit

into the Australian context. There is limited time and scope available to read across this context in order to develop a deep understanding.

Text selection has long been considered 'problematic' in the subject English classroom (McLean Davies, Martin, & Buzacott, 2017; Reid, 1988). The decision to employ canonical and/or non-canonical texts has often been at the centre of this debate. The *Australian Curriculum: English* (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2017) and its various manifestations in each of the Australian states and territories have brought a renewed status to Australian literature. Since its inception, the *Australian Curriculum: English* has mandated the use of Australian literature throughout the compulsory years of schooling, explicitly including literatures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (McLean Davies et al., 2017).

As with any curriculum document, the mandatory inclusion of Australian literature has not been without debate (Doecke, McLean Davies & Sawyer, 2018). The fraught nature of Australia's past, invasion/colonisation/settlement, imperialism, racism and national identit/ies combine to create further binaries. This debate has generated much discussion about which texts are appropriate for inclusion for study in secondary schools (Donnelly, 2010, p.26). Text selection in subject English garners its controversy from a number of directions, including the appropriateness of the content and themes, age-appropriateness, sexuality and socio-political content, and issues related to national identity, history, religion, race and gender (among a myriad of other social and political issues). However, the Gothic provides opportunities for students, accompanied and guided by their teachers, to not only engage with imaginative literature, but also imagine what the world could really be like and how they might bring about change (Dowsett, Rees & Wharton, 2020).

While Australian texts have been studied in Australian schools since the nineteenth century, the context of the post-World War Two decades helped to shape Australian literature's place in Australian schools, through 'economic pressures, population growth, social change (such as multiculturalism and the search for a national identity) and the establishment of separate state-based education systems' (McLean Davies et al., 2017, p. 132).

The introduction of the national *Australian Curriculum: English* followed many years of reform and change in the teaching of subject English beginning

in the 1960s and 1970s. A diverse range of 'literary, philosophical, educational, and social thought had developed locally' and internationally, including (but in no way limited to) Bourdieu, Vygotsky, Freire, and Halliday, opened various ways of examining power, social control and students learning, producing new pedagogies and approaches to texts (Jackel, 2018).

Amid increasing anxiety about levels of student literacy, teachers have to balance (and account for) the requirement to ensure all content is relevant, has currency and is engaging for students, while also meeting the standards of an increasing array of state, national and international assessments for benchmarking. The *Australian Curriculum: English* requires teachers to move beyond the traditional canonical texts of the past, and to embrace new and exciting ways of (re)imagining the world, through the use a range of texts and text types.

Ian Reid's *The making of literature* (1988) remains a seminal text in the corpus of scholarly educational research. Drawing on post-structuralist understandings of literature, Reid innovated a new approach to the teaching of literature in schools (Bellis, Parr, & Doecke, 2009). A wave of academic research followed which, like Reid's publication, 'challenged the traditional literary canon and the place of literature within Australian English curriculum and pedagogy' (Bellis, Parr & Doecke, 2009, p. 165). A politically conservative backlash has subsequently echoed throughout Australian education, and particularly since the introduction of the *Australian Curriculum*, attempting to 'reaffirm Australia's so-called literary heritage, and to return to more traditional methods of teaching texts (Bellis, Parr & Doecke, 2009, p. 165).

Reid's 1988 publication challenged the status quo of the landscape of English teaching, drawing on literary theory to challenge the binaries that embody many aspects of education generally and subject English more specifically (Bellis, Parr & Doecke, 2009). However, the battles fought and to some extent won by Reid have been replayed over the past decade. At the time of the initial draft papers for the then new 'National Curriculum', Kevin Donnelly argued, quite vocally that, … 'Australia is a Western nation, and our language and literature are built on the English language and cultural tradition' (Donnelly, 2010). The resultant privileging of white (mostly male) canonical authors does little to promote critical thinking or develop the skills that twenty-first century learners will need to equip them for life and work, or to promote

inclusivity and celebrate diversity in a multicultural society.

Education is highly politicised. Successive Australian governments have increased this politicisation. High-stakes testing throughout the primary and secondary years of formal education have come to increasingly focus on 'traditional' educational outcomes such as literacy and numeracy, and on learning in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM). In higher education, the humanities have faced decreased funding, and in many universities many areas of study in the humanities have been annihilated. As Reid (1988) observes, '… any innovative influence, along with any reinforcement of the status quo, must make its way through a tightly controlled discursive framework, which links each level of organisation with other levels' (p. 76). Reid identifies in Australia 'a sector gap, wider than in some countries' between primary, secondary, and tertiary teacher's pedagogical approaches to literacy. Often, information about new teaching developments does not flow from one sector to the other' (Reid, 1988, p. 77). The incorporation of texts from the Gothic genre provides opportunities for teachers to transcend this divide – to develop interest in texts, and as a consequence develop literacy and cultural understandings.

Young adults and the Gothic

The *Australian Curriculum: English* is not prescriptive about text selection in the K–10 Curriculum, and teachers often have the ability to select texts for study for their students which are age and ability appropriate and will inspire and engage their students. Even in the senior years, lists of appropriate texts are extensive and include a range of genres.

In the lower years of secondary education, particularly Years 7 and 8, teachers may feel pressure (whether real or perceived) that parents or the school, may disapprove of text selections that may be considered to be age inappropriate. However, educational research indicates that young adults enjoy reading texts that 'contain elements of either horror or romance… or both' (Rodabaugh, 1996, p. 68), perfect terrain for the inclusion of Gothic genre texts, through the design of teaching sequences which assist students to navigate and make sense of worlds that are both strange and strangely familiar (Dowsett, Rees, & Wharton, 2020).

If one of the biggest obstacles that teachers of subject English are presented with, is arousing interest in reading among their students, then the next obstacle is maintaining that interest once aroused. Garth Boomer (1992) argued that 'If teachers set out to teach according to a planned curriculum, without engaging the interests of the students, the quality of learning will suffer. Student interest involves student investment and personal commitment' (p. 13).

Subject English is often regarded by (male) students 'as a feminised subject … There is a belief that the subject is trying to rob boys of their (heterosexual) masculinity, and so any attempt to develop sensitivity … will be undermined by suspicion of the motives, and by deep-seated resistance based on the rejection of English-induced sensitivity as unmasculine' (Misson, 2018, p. 90). The research of Erikson and Kohlberg (as examples) indicate 'that adolescence is a period which is conducive to thinking about many of the underlying themes in Gothic Literature' (Rodabaugh, 1996, p. 69). Rodabaugh (1996) suggests that 'many of the characteristics which are inherent in the genre itself, which make Gothic literature 'Gothic', are also characteristic of the period of adolescence… and may, then, encourage … a positive experience with the text' (p. 69). The Bronte sisters and Mary Shelley, seminal authors of the Gothic classics, wrote them as adolescents, as were the protagonists of *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre* and novels by Ann Radcliffe, a tradition which is echoed in Australian Gothic works *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Van Apfel girls are gone*, among others.

The Gothic also provides the ideal entry point to explore 'the grotesque and frightening aspects of coming of age, and metaphorically representing pressing social issues such as racism and gender inequality' (Smith & Moruzi, 2018). Therefore, text selection, and the way that texts are engaged with by students, is significant and a list of suggested texts which will appeal to young adult readers is included below.

Exploring the dark side

There is within the Australian Gothic, an opportunity for students of subject English to explore the dark side of the Australian experience. The landscape of Australia, the vastness of the continent, the perceived hostility of the natural environment, the violence of the European invasion, the experience of exile from Europe, the feelings of alienation faced by the early settlers, and the fear of the racial other (Doolan, 2019), combine to create the perfect tensions for the Gothic.

Gothic literature of the eighteenth century was

written and published for a largely adult readership, even if the protagonist or author was, what we now consider, a young adult. In the twenty-first century, there has been a shift to Gothic fiction also being written specifically for, and read by, a target audience of young adults (YA). Indeed, the Gothic has become a significant inclusion for some secondary subject English teaching programs (Smith & Moruzi, 2018). Rodabaugh (1996) discusses how studying the Gothic is a 'journey of self-revelation' and lends itself to personal reflection, so it is important that teachers allow time for this reflection to occur. Discovering the Gothic in a text is a way of supporting a student on this journey of 'self-revelation'.

Guiding an Australian Gothic reading

The guiding questions presented below can inform discussion of contemporary fiction and film, providing parameters that simplify theory with clear directions to support students in undertaking a critical reading. Where an extensive list of conventions might be overwhelming and impose inaccurate limitations, this targeted series of questions will lead towards reading with specific purpose, and guide a student's process of reflection to identify and articulate the Gothic features of a text and ultimately decide whether they can justify the choice to consider it Australian Gothic, and argue the case.

Of course, there is rarely a contemporary work that embodies all of these features. Based on research of contemporary Australian fiction and current concepts of the Gothic, however, the guiding questions provide a framework for critical thinking rather than a prescriptive checklist, which would be limiting given the mutability of the genre.

The questions can be presented to students alongside their reading and/or viewing to support them in determining whether a work should be considered Australian Gothic and how it exhibits features of the genre. The first subset of questions relates to specific features that arise in Australian works, and the second relates to broader Gothic features that are apparent in traditional and contemporary works, and so could also be applied to works such as Poe's short fictions to provide a clear demonstration of the difference the Australian context makes to how the Gothic is exhibited in a text.

Teachers can support their students in using the questions as a starting point for thinking about how the features of Australian Gothic are evident in texts being studied. They can also use them to lead class discussion about the different manifestations of the Australian Gothic in literature and ways in which this is linked to colonisation. If there is a good case for considering a work to be Australian Gothic, the majority of the first questions will be easily detected in the text, and some of the second will also be evident. These questions are not hierarchical, but should be considered in terms of how easily they can be detected in a literary work, and provide some guides for critical readings which are easily accessible for young readers. The questions also lead to students making immediate links to specific features of the work under study and teachers to guide them to actively identify examples in the texts and empower them to draw on these examples in class discussion and written analysis.

Australian Gothic
1. Is the landscape in some way threatening or violent? Are there suggestions of something hidden or mysterious in the landscape?
2. Is the story set in the past? Or do events from the past rise up to haunt the present?
3. Is there a sense of uneasiness? Meaning a feeling at once familiar and unfamiliar; caught in a tension between belonging and not (the Uncanny).
4. Are the characters isolated? This might be physical or psychological.
5. Is there violence, trauma or a sense of loss which refuses to go away? Do secrets around these remain unspoken?
6. Does the setting involve eerie bushland, an abandoned homestead, a small, isolated town or open desert that seems claustrophobic?
7. Are characters chased through the landscape, or does anyone get lost in it?
Traditional Gothic
1. Is there closure at the end of the story or is it left unresolved? Are you left wondering about the fate of the characters? Do any of them really get a happy ending?
2. Are there strange or taboo relationships between some of the characters that hint at unusual sexual relationships?
3. Do animals act as agents of human will?
4. Is there a sense of impending doom or disaster?
5. Is there murder or an awful death in the story?
6. Do any of the characters display disturbed psychological states?
7. Do any characters present as grotesque and physically abnormal?
8. Do characters sometimes seem imprisoned or trapped?
9. Does the story involve the supernatural, or suggestions of it? These might be through ghosts, monsters or dreams.

There are innumerable contemporary and classic

Australian works that can be used to illustrate the ways in which these guiding questions can be applied to facilitate critical analysis, many of which have already been referred to within this article. Classic Australian novels which embody these features, such as Randolph Stow's *To the islands* and Kenneth Cook's *Wake in fright*, are suitable for senior students, as are contemporary works by Tim Winton and Craig Silvey's *Jasper Jones*. Texts aimed at young adult readers that exhibit the features of Australian Gothic include *A monster calls* by Patrick Ness, *Catching Teller Crow* by Ambelin Kwaymullina and Ezekial Kwaymullina, *The watertower* by Gary Crew and Steven Woolman, *Tales of outer suburbia* by Shaun Tan, and A.J. Betts's novel duology *Hive* and *Rogue*. The Australian Gothic also features strongly in the works of Sonya Hartnett, particularly *Surrender, Thursday's child* and *The ghost child*, and Louis Nowra's novella *Into that forest*, which also provides interesting opportunities to consider vernacular and dialect in the English classroom and the 'white vanishing' trope. Another short, accessible work is Vietnamese-Australian author Chi Vu's novella *Anguli Ma*, a subversive work that exhibits an urban facet of the Australian Gothic and also provides opportunities to discuss cultural diversity and its relationship to the Gothic tradition.For an in-depth study, the pairing of Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (or Peter Weir's 1975 film adaptation) with Felicity McLean's *The Van Apfel girls are gone* is an excellent combination to explore the 'lost in the bush' concept, and could be complemented by a colonial story such as 'The Sea-bird's Message' by Rosa Praed.

Indigenous works such as Vivienne Cleven's funny novel *Bitin' back* (2001), which also interrogates race and Australian masculinity, engage with the Gothic in particularly subversive and contemporary ways suited to a YA readership. Others that withstand scrutiny under a Gothic lens using this series of guiding questions are the novels of Claire G. Coleman and more serious works by Melissa Lucashenko and Kim Scott. This can be supported by television series such as *Cleverman* and *Grace beside me*, which have a younger target audience.

Australian films such as *The dressmaker, The tracker, Sweet country, Goldstone, Wolf Creek* or *Mad Max: Fury Road*, and television series such as *Glitch* and *Mystery road* and visual art works such as Arthur Boyd's Bride series and works by Sidney Nolan might also be considered for critical analysis as Australian Gothic texts.

Conclusion

Not all Australian Gothic deals with the traumas associated with European dislocation and dispossession, nor do the tales always provide a counter-narrative to the peaceful 'settler' stories with which most Australians are familiar. However, it is fair to say that the violence, trauma and loss that mark texts that do address these issues also mark all Australian Gothic texts in some way. Whether it presents as a malevolent landscape that actively works to thwart characters who are lost or pursued, a gloomy atmosphere, unsettling relationships, murdered or abused women and children, colonial violence, haunted houses, decaying homesteads or past misdeeds that return to haunt the present, it is likely that in their reading and viewing lives, today's audiences will encounter narratives that, in part or as a whole, give rise to the uneasy feelings associated with the Australian Gothic.

From colonial writings through to the early twenty-first century, the Gothic continues as a way to interrogate trauma, violence and loss, as well as all those other things which are generally unknowable, uncomfortable, unspeakable or taboo. The support for teaching presented here provides some pivotal ways for readers and viewers to recognise the Australian Gothic and articulate the reponse that arises when the Gothic comes into play, and provides a clear and effective resource for teaching Australian Gothic concepts and putting them into practice. It is designed to be an entry point to interrogate and think deeply about the important issues Australian authors raise in their works as they endeavour to pursue some resolution of and justice for acts of the past, and to critique issues and events that affect contemporary society in the present.

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Microlearning Literary History

Microlearning Literary History: Using Videos as a Resource for English Literature

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Abstract: This article reports on the effective use of short videos as part of a microlearning strategy aimed at improving student success and satisfaction in an undergraduate literary history course at Flinders University. Although the pedagogical tenets of microlearning ostensibly contradict the deep, sustained critical attention literary study typically demands, this case study exemplifies how videos can be tailored for knowledge transfer and incorporated to supplement other parts of the syllabus that might require more traditional forms of interactive and individual application and practice. Video analytics from 2017 to 2019, in conjunction with the feedback gathered by subsequent university student evaluations and personally administered surveys, reveal important insights into both pedagogical efficacy and study and viewing patterns including: preferred viewing times; video completion rates; student attention span; repeat viewings; use of study spaces; and use of devices. Collectively, these paint a timely picture of the modern English undergraduate student, and how English syllabi and teaching resources can be tailored to meet their needs.

Keywords: tertiary English studies, literary history, educational videos, microlearning

Many current trends in the way students learn, expect to be taught, and relate to educational resources seem to work against the sustained critical attention that literary studies so often demands. Popular consensus suggests the modern undergraduate student expects an unprecedented level of content segmentation, has a shorter attention span, and craves instant gratification (Bradbury, 2016; Kissam, 2021; Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2019; McSpadden, 2015). This is, of course, an over-simplification, but one not without an element of truth. The educational landscape has indeed changed in recent years due to rapid advances in technology and attendant trends towards mobile and flexible learning, a process accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes pose several challenges to traditional methods of teaching English literature at tertiary level.

One of the greatest challenges facing teachers of English literature is the pedagogical paradigm of microlearning. Microlearning, or bite-sized learning, is now an increasingly popular mode of learning that demands short bursts of attention to give students greater flexibility in deciding when to learn (Hug, 2006; Hug & Friessen, 2009; Jomah et al., 2016; Malamed, 2015; Rennie & Smyth, 2019). Although there are neurological foundations for this mode of delivery, it is essentially geared to enable learning amidst the many competing demands of modern life, utilising flexible technologies to facilitate mobile learning and – with all its pros and cons – multi-tasking (Díaz Redondo et al., 2021; Jomah et al., 2016). Microlearning as an education strategy has been employed successfully in other disciplines, such as the health sciences (De Gagne et al., 2019), but on face value, it is a strategy that seems at odds with many of the foundational skills of literary studies. Textual analysis, or close reading, asks for quite the opposite: deep critical thinking, persistence and sustained attention. This is particularly so when reading poetry, a form of writing that is taught less frequently in secondary school and is increasingly unfamiliar – nay, frightening – to early undergraduates.

In hindsight, these were the challenges facing Flinders University's undergraduate subject *ENGL2140 Epochs of English*. Launched in 2011 as a core component of the English major, the subject surveys English and British literary history through poetry from the medieval period to the mid-twentieth century. It was designed to provide students majoring in English literature with a longer narrative of literary evolution and an understanding of crucial historical and cultural contexts that have shaped key literary developments to lay a foundation for wider cultural literacy. These objectives served a specific, local need. The majority of undergraduate students majoring in English at Flinders University do so as part of a Bachelor of Education or Bachelor of Education/Bachelor of Arts, with the aim of becoming English teachers at secondary school; consequently, the subject was designed with an eye to their future professional needs, and more idealistically, to ultimately serve the future of the discipline in Australia (or, as one colleague quipped, to ensure that the next wave of English teachers in secondary schools would know that the Renaissance came before Romanticism).

By 2016, the subject was evidently not working as well as hoped. Delivering what many might call an old-fashioned subject by way of traditional means – that is, lectures, tutorials and a textbook – was proving unsuccessful. But in recent years the subject has been revived by changes to teaching delivery modes, and most importantly, by the introduction of tailored videos as an education resource. This article primarily reflects upon the effectiveness of using short videos to introduce students to historical and cultural contexts as a microlearning strategy to complement textbook reading and poetic analysis in seminars. Quantitative and qualitative data drawn from viewing analytics, student evaluations and personally administered surveys between 2017 and 2019 offer significant insights into the learning needs and habits of the modern English undergraduate in Australia, and make a case for video content as a bespoke, engaging and time-efficient resource for the study of literary history.

Context: The problem with *Epochs of English*

When teaching *Epochs of English* in 2016 – my second year teaching in the subject and my first as the subject coordinator – it became clear that students were struggling to engage with both the contextual and literary material. At the time, the subject was being delivered via one-hour weekly lectures and one-hour weekly tutorials. The lectures were very poorly attended; by the tail end of semester, it was common to have only a dozen or so of the 150-strong student cohort in attendance. The one-hour tutorials were also unsuited to the subject's and students' needs, being too short to allow the development of a deep understanding of the poetry and its connection to historical and cultural conditions. The subject's mode of delivery was clearly not working.

The lecture and tutorials were supported by a prescribed textbook, but this was also problematic. While the use of textbooks is increasingly rare in English undergraduate majors, the subject's emphasis on surveying literary history lent itself to systematic coverage through regular textbook reading. But the students were struggling with the chosen text – Paul Poplawski (ed.), *English Literature in Context* (Cambridge University Press) – which was ill-suited to the subject and educational context. The textbook is impressive in its scope and comprehensiveness, but it was too exhaustive for the subject's purposes. Students struggled to plough through its lengthy chapters, each about 100 B5-sized pages, as part of regular study. They also found it difficult to digest this vast amount of information, struggling to differentiate between critical and supplementary knowledge. The textbook is also evidently written for British undergraduates. Not only do British students typically study literary history across a full academic year rather than for one 13-week semester, which allows for more reading time and enables greater depth and complexity, the textbook also assumes a great deal of historical and cultural knowledge that is not typically part of an Australian secondary education. To illustrate with a brief example, the chapter on the Romantic period twice mentions the suspension of *habeas corpus* (in 1794 and 1820) without any explanation of what the term means. These observations were affirmed in student evaluations of teaching (SETs) from 2015–16. Students stated that they 'could not manage 100 pages of Poplawksi a week' in their routine, and as a result the textbook was 'ineffective in assisting our [knowledge of] historical background', that its historical detail made the topic 'feel more like a History topic than an English one', that 'a lot of history was expected knowledge by the text', that the textbook was 'hard to read' and 'very wordy', and that it was 'often irrelevant' to the poetry being studied.

All of these factors resulted in an indifferent student experience. The degree of student dissatisfaction was

quantified by 2015–16 SET data: only 65% of students in each year believed the course learning resources were of high quality, and only 70% (2015) and 61% (2016) found the topic a worthwhile learning experience. As a result, the place of *ENGL2140 Epochs of English* in the Flinders University English major was being questioned by both students and departmental staff. Changes were sorely needed.

Rationale: Tailoring videos for microlearning

Three key changes were made as the topic was redesigned ahead of the 2017 academic year: (i) the weekly one-hour lecture and one-hour tutorial were replaced with a weekly two-hour seminar to allow more time for close reading and for considering the connection between the literature and potential historical and cultural contexts; (ii) the Poplawski textbook was replaced with *British literature: A historical overview*, edited by Joseph Black (Broadview), a Canadian textbook pitched at a more appropriate level for English-speaking non-British undergraduates; and (iii) traditional lectures were replaced with a series of videos on historical, cultural and literary contexts that spoke directly to the subject's and students' needs. It is the production of the videos as a bespoke visual resource, and the important insights gained from this innovation, that this essay will focus on.

Several principles informed by both existing scholarship and local experience guided the production of the first batch of customised videos in 2017. The first centred on the issue of video length. It was important to me as subject coordinator and to the teaching team that we did not view the videos as direct substitutes for the lecture; consequently, we did not feel the need to equate total video length to the length of the lecture it was ostensibly replacing. This allowed us some freedom to explore what worked best for students. University colleagues teaching in social sciences had already informally collected data that pointed to 12 minutes as students' preferred video length (other research on this topic is discussed below); given the contextual proximity of these findings, we adopted this as our ideal. Importantly, the desire to find the ideal video length to maximise student engagement preceded and informed subsequent decisions on how best to divide our subject material.

The issue of an ideal length for educational videos remains open to some conjecture (Bradbury, 2016). While 'keeping it short' seems to be the operative theme, the question remains: how short is short? In an examination of video length in four edX MOOCs which analysed 6.9 million video-watching sessions, Guo et al. (2014) established 6–9 minutes as the ideal range for maximum student engagement; making longer videos is therefore likely to be wasted effort (Brame, 2016). However, Cheryl Schelbach, Learning Designer at Flinders University's Centre for Innovation, Leaning and Teaching, suggests that such claims are not straightforward, and that the existing literature 'indicates a lack of clear evidence in award courses in higher education that can be used to clearly identify an ideal length for educational videos' (Schelbach 2020; see also Doolittle et al., 2015, Giannakos, 2013; Giannakos et al., 2016, Guo et al., 2014, Lawlor & Donnelly, 2010, and Pi & Hong, 2016). Educational context matters, and in this instance, 12-minute videos intuitively seemed an appropriate length for a brief contextual survey of any given aspect of literary history. As a result, each period of literary history – the Medieval period, the Renaissance, the Restoration and Enlightenment, the Romantic period, the Victorian period, and the early twentieth century – was introduced to the students in three separate videos focusing on: (i) historical contexts; (ii) literary and cultural contexts; and (iii) a 'Big Idea' from the period that still resonates for modern society. Shorter videos might have resulted in over-segmentation, and risked decreasing levels of engagement and increased student annoyance (Doolittle et al., 2015). However, despite these intentions, the staff producing the content often found it difficult to restrict their videos to 12 minutes, even after some judicious editing. Video lengths ranged from 6 to 17 minutes, the implications of which will be discussed in the next section.

Style was also an important consideration in maximising student engagement. The videos needed to capture and sustain the students' attention to a greater extent than a live or recorded lecture, so a visual style that blended the pedagogical elements of the traditional lecture with the entertainment value of a TV documentary became the objective. Each video was recorded using a high-definition webcam, with PowerPoint slides used for video graphics. Each staff member producing the content brought their own visual style to their PowerPoint slides. This created some inconsistency across the series in terms of the presentation of material, and, in some cases, false or unfulfilled student expectations. For example, one staff member's use of a chronological table as the basis for their visual presentation might have created

a false expectation that students would see the same in subsequent videos, leading to disappointment and a need to adjust their approach to learning. Each video was carefully edited using licensed software Camtasia, for which the University provided training. This provided greater scope for using a variety of media and stylistic techniques. Chronological tables and text-rich slides were left in view for longer to allow students to pause and digest the content; we were also aware that students would likely pause at or return to these moments to take notes. Static images were used to complement the presenter's monologues, and slow zooming and panning were often employed to highlight particular details for educative purposes, or to simply render such moments more stylistically dynamic. Audio recordings were sometimes inserted in post-production as a way to introduce another voice and break up any potential sense of monotony; for example, a staff member's reading of a Shakespearean soliloquy might be replaced with a professional actor's reading of the same soliloquy. 'Talking heads' – that is, lecturers speaking directly into the camera – were used sparingly, in the videos' introductions and conclusions, and whenever a significant point needed to be highlighted. As Guo et al. (2014) show, students can be engaged more effectively by the talking head, suggesting that a human face provides a more personal feel in what can be an impersonal medium. But while Guo et al. (2014) recommend a picture-within-picture approach – that is, having a smaller inset image of a talking head laid over another image or slide of text to avoid any potential jarring effects created by editorial transitions – this option was rejected to avoid placing competing demands on student attention. Instead, the lecturer was filmed in a tight frame and to fill the screen, as a way to mimic eye-to-eye contact and demand attention.

Inadequate technical resources also unduly influenced some production values. Staff producing the content relied on microphones built into laptops for audio recording, which in some cases proved deficient and caused difficulties for students. This was exacerbated, we discovered, when students chose to watch the videos in noisy environments. With 18 videos being produced for the semester, adequate storage also became an issue, both for individuals and on the University's Learning Management System (LMS). Reducing video file sizes (and ultimately our storage needs) was the primary motivation for producing the videos in standard HD (720p) resolution rather than full HD (1080p). However, this would also have ramifications for some students in some learning situations, as will be discussed below.

All of these choices were made to maximise student engagement and offer students greater learning flexibility. This is particularly important at Flinders University, which is dedicated to servicing students from lower socio-economic groups where the pressure of competing commitments is high.

The videos, and the choices made in production, address in some capacity all of Theo Hug's (2006) seven dimensions of microlearning (see also Díaz Redondo et al., 2021):

> *Time*: At 12 minutes in length, the videos demanded attention for short periods of time.
> *Content*: The videos were short units of material restricted to well-delimited subjects.
> *Curriculum*: The videos constituted segmented parts of the curricular content.
> *Format*: The videos introduced a new diversity of format and delivery mode.
> *Process*: The videos were geared to knowledge acquisition, and integrated into a larger process of literary analysis.
> *Media*: The videos included a variety of media, including text, image, video and audio.
> *Learning models*: The videos enabled repetitive viewing and learning, readying students for the application of contextual knowledge in other parts of the curriculum.

This adherence to Hug's (2006) dimensions was affirmed in the feedback and data captured between 2017 and 2019 – the first three years in which videos were used. But what was not anticipated was how the feedback and data also painted an image of the modern English undergraduate, complete with insights into their study habits, routines, use of devices and preferred learning spaces.

Results: Patterns of usage
The following feedback and data trends were captured via three methods: (i) university SETs from 2017 to 2019; (ii) personally administered surveys seeking feedback on the efficacy and use of the videos in the same period; and (iii) viewing statistics captured on the university's LMS.

Student satisfaction and progress
Based on official measures, the student response to the

redesigned subject was very positive. The 2017–19 SETs show 78–93% agreement that the learning resources were of high quality, an increase of 13–28% from 2015–16. Similarly, 82–89% of students found the topic to be a worthwhile learning experience in 2017–19, an increase of 12–28% from 2015–16.

The specific role of the videos in this shift was made clear in SET comments, where 52% of respondents identified the videos as the aspect that most helped them to learn. One key trend centred on segmentation: students enjoyed how the videos were 'concentrated' and 'concise', and focused on 'specific sections' of the curriculum; they also enjoyed their brevity, commenting on them being 'short and sharp' and 'quick and effective'. The second identifiable trend centred on flexibility: students were able to 'go at [their] own pace', watch the videos 'in [their] own time' and 'work [the videos] around other classes and assignments'. Some students commended the videos for being 'well structured'; this speaks to the recommendation for heavy investment in pre-production planning to maximise engagement in short educational videos (Guo et al., 2014).

In personally administered surveys, when respondents were asked to nominate a preference between short videos and traditional lectures, 87% of 340 found that the videos worked better for them than a scheduled weekly one-hour lecture. Some students cited the three-part structure and length of the videos as positives enabling short periods of intensive concentration; they enjoyed the ease with which the videos facilitated repeat watching and revision; and most clearly, they enjoyed the flexible study patterns the videos enabled, as they could fit the videos around other commitments such as employment or family duties.

The changes also appeared to further enable progress and high achievement. When questioned on the videos' effectiveness, 95% of the students surveyed stated that they aided their understanding of and progress in the topic. This translated into a higher proportion of high-achieving students: while in 2016, only 7% of students achieved a grade of high distinction (HD, 85+), in 2017–19 this percentage roughly doubled (to 12-16%).

Time flexibility

In the personally administered surveys, students were questioned on their viewing patterns, including details of when they watched the videos. Of the respondents, 47% watched the videos during unscheduled spare time midweek, while 42% watched them at night.

These results seem to quantify student satisfaction with increased learning flexibility outlined above. They also speak to the competing time pressures students face while studying at university, whether from other study commitments, employment or family duties. Watching the videos seemed to be a learning activity flexible enough to be pushed to the interstices and margins of a long working day.

Other results perhaps point to diminishing patterns of study. Only 27% of students scheduled viewing times as part of their working week; it appears that as competing demands for their time become less predictable, maintaining study routines is becoming more difficult or less convenient. Surprisingly, only 9% of students watched the videos on weekends; this may well reflect increased employment or family responsibilities on weekends, and/or a greater appreciation of work-life balance in modern undergraduate students.

Devices

Students were quizzed about the devices they used to access the videos. Unsurprisingly, 83% of students watched the videos on personal laptops. However, the other devices mentioned highlight the technological variety that educational videos need to accommodate. Some students used other portable screens: 18% of students used their phone, and 9% of students used a tablet. Others accessed the videos from non-portable PCs: 16% of students used home PCs, and 6% used university PCs. Some students – although only 1% – watched videos on their home TVs. This is perhaps a very small measure of our success in creating videos that were both pedagogically sound and entertaining, but it is also an indication of how adaptable the format is to various learning situations.

Spaces

Students accessed the videos in a wide variety of spaces, not all conducive to concentrated study. Almost all students (94%) watched the videos at home. This is undoubtedly the primary convenience of the medium. Some students accessed the videos on the university campus: 47% indicated that they had watched them in the university library, while 12% had watched them on campus but outside the library. Other spaces were used less frequently, but their variety poses challenges for content producers in terms of audio and video quality: one in ten students had watched the videos while in transit, some on buses, some on trains, and some had

listened to them as podcasts in the car via Bluetooth as an initial 'viewing'. Other students watched in cafés (4%), public libraries (1%) and at their places of employment (1%).

Viewing patterns: Engagement

According to post-census enrolment figures, 424 students were enrolled in *ENGL2140 Epochs of English* from 2017 to 2019. This figure is complicated by attrition across each semester, meaning that the number of students enrolled at the start of each semester is likely to be greater than that in the official census figures. Nevertheless, the number of unique viewers per video equates to 82–97% of the (post-census) student cohort over the period, suggesting a very high rate of student engagement. Anecdotally speaking, this is highly likely to be an improvement on the proportion of students that attended lectures or watched them online in the 2015–16 iterations of the subject. This result may also speak to the way videos of short duration help to mitigate a reluctance to engage compared to one-hour recorded lectures.

Viewing patterns: Attention span

Video analytics captured by the university's LMS offer limited insight into the proportion of students who watched the videos in their entirety, and for how long they watched if the viewing was incomplete. Kaltura Analytics provides an 'average completion rate' and 'average drop-off rate', but what both actually measure is the average percentage of videos viewed per viewing according to different formulas (Kaltura, 2021): the raw data for individual views is not available, so a true completion rate – i.e., what proportion of viewings was complete – is not available). Table 1 reveals a curious pattern: students on average watched 66–84% of each video per viewing, irrespective of video length. At face value, this is both quite consistent and at odds with the expectation of a universal tendency to drop-off after 6–9 minutes (Guo et al., 2014). On the other hand, the two weak outliers at either end of the data spectrum (Q1 = 72.2, Q3 = 77.5, IQR = 5.3) may reveal a weak correlation with video length; the 'Renaissance – Big Idea' video, which at 16:16 minutes duration was one of the longest, produced the lowest average completion rate (66.8%), while the 'Victorian – Big Idea' video, which was one of the shortest at 7:40, produced the highest (83.65%). However, the small data set does not confirm the hypothesis that the rate of drop-off is dependent on the length of the video, and that

viewers will tend to switch off due to mental fatigue or disinterest after a defined period.

Viewing patterns: Repeat viewings

Table 1 also offers some insight into the number of first-time versus repeat viewings. Repeat viewings constituted 21–43% of total viewings across all videos, which from a pedagogical perspective is an encouraging observation. It affirms the consistent message from students in SETs and the personally administered surveys that short videos encouraged repeat viewings as part of revision and regular study, especially compared to a one-hour lecture.

Recommendations: Microlearning, videos and English

Microlearning via videos and English literature is viewed by some as an incongruent pairing of teaching mode and subject. At an anecdotal level, it seems that microlearning strategies such as the use of short videos are viewed with scepticism by many English faculty worried that the interactivity crucial to discussion and textual analysis is lost through such digital means. However, this case study stakes a claim for how such strategies can work when used in conjunction with other modes of teaching that preserve time and space for interactive learning.

In the context of Flinders University's *ENGL2140 Epochs of English*, tailored short videos seem to have met the needs of both the subject and its students by adhering to two fundamental principles:

(i) *content segmentation*: videos were short (6–17 minutes) and focused on well-delimited subjects, with heavy investment in pre-production planning.

(ii) *curricular segmentation*: videos were presented to students as only one part of the subject's curriculum, a part focused on knowledge acquisition that would inform other learning processes and activities.

It is possible, then, to find useful application of microlearning strategies to complement the deep, immersive learning that so often accompanies literary analysis. As this example shows, one such case might be the study of literary history, which requires the acquisition of a body of knowledge that in turn can be applied to literary interpretation in other parts of the curriculum.

The adoption of short videos as part of a microlearning strategy in English curriculum can therefore open the discipline up to the advantages of flexible learning at undergraduate level. As these results show, the videos

Table 1. Viewing analytics of short videos used in *ENGL2140 Epochs of English* (2017–19)

Video	Total views	Unique viewers	% repeat views	Video length	Ave % of video watched per view
Medieval – History	717	411	42.7	16:38	71.8
Medieval – Literature	629	391	37.8	14:44	75.9
Medieval – Big Idea	535	380	29	6:02	71
Renaissance – History	649	391	39.8	12:11	72.4
Renaissance – Literature	598	382	36.1	15:26	74.6
Renaissance – Big Idea	557	381	31.6	16:16	66.8
Restoration & Enlightenment – History	626	376	39.9	17:24	74.2
Restoration & Enlightenment – Literature	559	357	36.1	16:07	75.5
Restoration & Enlightenment – Big Idea	532	349	34.4	17:28	71.5
Romantic – History	558	368	34.1	12:09	73.1
Romantic – Literature	477	358	24.9	11:05	81.8
Romantic – Big Idea	483	351	27.3	15:21	77.6
Victorian – History	591	367	37.9	15:23	72.2
Victorian – Literature	493	358	27.4	13:31	81.1
Victorian – Big Idea	451	352	21.9	7:48	83.5
Early 20thC – History	535	372	30.5	15:26	75.4
Early 20thC – Literature	499	363	27.3	11:08	77.5
Early 20thC – Big Idea	487	351	27.9	14:07	75.9

enabled a level of learning flexibility unavailable to student cohorts in previous iterations of the subject. Students accessed the videos when convenient, often at night or during unscheduled breaks during the day; they accessed the videos via a variety of devices, primarily portable laptops; and they utilised a variety of spaces, the most frequent being the home.

Such flexibility engenders a variety of learning experiences, which in turn come with technological and production demands. Production quality is an important factor. Quality audio is required to combat the background noise in various environments. So too are captions, which were not used in the batch of videos under discussion here but have been used since to mitigate background noise and facilitate better access for hearing-impaired students. The potential use of larger screens such as PC monitors and TVs means that videos need to be produced in high resolution (minimum 1080p), especially if they are designed to blend the pedagogical elements of the traditional lecture with the entertainment value of a TV documentary, as they were here. This also means that incorporated images need to be high resolution, particularly to avoid the pixilation of visual details in images that require enlargement or zooming. File sizes

will, as a result, be larger, which can place a strain on local virtual storage and impact downloading times. For instance, one 12-minute video recently created for the 2021 iteration of this subject (now called *English Literature: Evolutions and Revolutions*) and produced with the high production values recommended here, is 1.32 GB in size.

Existing scholarship points to the importance of considering video length in maximising student engagement. Accepted wisdom seems to suggest a length of 6–12 minutes, after which drop-off is likely to occur. This is not confirmed by our viewing analytics, although data on drop-off rates and video completion is limited. The videos under discussion ranged from 6 to 17 minutes in length, despite the fact that the teaching team aimed to make 12-minute videos on the advice of local colleagues. This may point to inexperience in producing this kind of content, insufficient pre-planning, and – in the case of longer videos – a tension between time restrictions and the amount of content the subject demanded. Greater consistency in video duration is, however, recommended, both to establish student expectations and to avoid the potential viewing reluctance that might accompany less predictable video lengths.

What has not been captured by the data presented here is the flexibility that short videos offers a teacher of literary history. As outlined above, part of the reason for adopting videos was the difficulty in finding the right textbook to use as an appropriate resource. In days gone by, the solution might have been to write a new textbook, updated and configured for a discrete Australian market. However, this takes energy and time, and does not guard against obsolescence. Now, with affordable technology at our fingertips, it is easier to adopt a DIY approach and produce our own bespoke teaching resources as required. Videos can also be tailored to address anticipated sticking points – for example, to explain the differences between the terms Jacobean, Jacobin and Jacobite in a way that a textbook never will. Videos can also be updated more regularly than a textbook; the 2021 batch of videos, for instance, draws comparisons between the Black Death and the COVID-19 pandemic and between King Henry VIII and Donald Trump, and introduces the notion of the Anthropocene in discussing the Romantic rise of environmental consciousness. These are the kinds of timely, contemporary references and developments in scholarship that cannot be quickly incorporated into a printed textbook. At the same time, the bulk of the content captured in these videos is stable. Literary history does not change year to year, only the way we might teach and present it. Accordingly, videos in a literary history subject do not need updating as regularly as other English literature subjects that are more susceptible to contemporary cultural and scholarly developments. This results in more value for the initial investment in time and labour.

These are timely insights. The COVID-19 pandemic forced tertiary education online, and some universities have subsequently taken the opportunity to encourage or even enforce a move towards digital education. This trend is a source of scepticism and even fear for some. This case study shows that it need not be. It demonstrates how microlearning and accessible technology can be used to complement more traditional methods of teaching in English studies – methods that continue to preserve the integrity of the subject and discipline.

Ethics statement

This research has been deemed exempt from ethical review by Flinders University's Human Research Ethics Committee, as risk is negligible and it draws on existing collections of data or records that contain only non-identifiable data.

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Feedback for wirting

Context and Cognitive Levels of Teachers' Written Feedback: Probing Hattie and Timperley's (2007) Model in Action in Feedback for Writing

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Abstract: Hattie and Timperley's (2007) model of effective feedback, widely used in teacher professional development, provides an easily-applied framework for thinking about the information contained in feedback. However, the model simplifies a complex phenomenon shaped in practice by interpersonal, disciplinary and institutional aspects. Examining the model in practice reveals links between the types of information offered and their context, highlighting the advantages of using the model strategically. This paper reports a qualitative study of four Australian secondary English teachers' written feedback. Teachers' annotations on student texts were analysed using Hattie and Timperley's model. Combining this analysis with interview data demonstrates how teachers' targeting of thinking levels is linked to assessment practices, cultural tools and their own beliefs about feedback and learning. The study underlines the need to invite teachers to consider how their context shapes their application of the model.

Keywords: secondary English, teacher professional development, disciplinary feedback practices, feedback for writing

Teachers' ability to provide effective feedback can be a powerful component in student writing development (Parr & Timperley, 2010). However, feedback is complex, with cognitive, social-affective and structural dimensions (Yang & Carless, 2013). There are different models which may be holistic (e.g., Yang & Carless) or have a narrower focus (e.g., Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Taking an incremental approach to improving their feedback practices can assist teachers in navigating this complexity. One such approach is to use a feedback model to self-evaluate aspects of feedback practices. Using a model in this way can be a productive part of deepening the theoretical insights that contribute to enhanced feedback practices. It can assist teachers in interrogating their beliefs about feedback and learning, revealing aspects of practice previously hidden from view by established routines based on tacit knowledge (Dixon, 2005).

This paper explores one model of feedback – Hattie and Timperley's (2007) model – applied in the context of secondary school subject English. This theoretically-based feedback model is widely used in teacher professional learning in Australia and internationally (Hattie & Clarke, 2019). Its strength is to direct attention to the information in feedback that supports learning. Hattie and Timperley (2007) maintain that information about task performance is a prerequisite for feedback that assists learning. A further strength of the model is that it defines four cognitive levels of feedback that direct attention to the types of learning targeted, distinguishing feedback that encourages surface learning from feedback targeting transferable learning processes and self-regulation. The crystallisation of this distinction in the model assists teachers to consider how their feedback targets deeper learning, defined as the construction of understanding related to 'relationships, cognitive process and transference to other more

difficult or untried tasks' (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 93). This model thus directs attention to cognitive aspects which are essential for feedback to support learning, including deeper learning.

However, the focus on information excludes many significant non-cognitive factors in effective feedback practices including timing, tone and the ability of the receiver to understand and apply the feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Furthermore, scholars have drawn attention to how context shapes feedback in different teaching/learning situations (e.g., Esterhazy, 2018; Smith & Lipnevich, 2018). Context includes national cultures, disciplinary areas, and students' ages and levels of development (Smith & Lipnevich). For example, Esterhazy showed how feedback practices within a tertiary software engineering course reflected the course design, its assessment, professional practices within the software engineering industry and the feedback tools used. Appreciating how context affects practice enhances implementation of feedback models.

Teachers' written feedback as reception-transmission feedback

This paper reports a study examining teachers' written feedback, which in this case is typically reception-transmission feedback – a one-way communication from teacher to student (Askew & Lodge, 2000). More recent conceptualisations of feedback have expanded to include peer- and self-feedback (e.g., Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) and development of students' evaluative expertise (e.g., Sadler, 2010; Tai et al., 2018), reflecting constructivist models of learning (Askew & Lodge, 2000). However, receptive-transmission feedback remains a dominant classroom feedback form alongside these newer models (Harris & Brown, 2013), reflecting historical practices. Moreover, it is a source of expert guidance beyond that available to students from alternative classroom sources such as peer feedback. Teachers develop deep subject-matter and evaluative knowledge along with repertoires of improvement strategies through their training and teaching experience (Sadler, 1989), making their feedback an accessible source of expertise for improving tasks for students. This paper discusses teacher-initiated feedback, defined as 'information provided by an agent … regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding' (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 81).

The paper reports an analysis of written feedback using Hattie and Timperley's (2007) model as a typology. Previous studies using this model (e.g., Arts

et al., 2016; Harris et al., 2013; Radstake, 2018) have interpreted statistical analyses of ratios of the feedback elements defined by the model. These analyses examined the relative proportions of different types of information in feedback, leading to conclusions about feedback that targets deeper learning. A similar study in the previously unreported context of secondary school English is reported here. This analysis identifies the ratios of feedback targeting different cognitive levels but lacks the power to explain the underlying choices that created these ratios. This motivates an exploration of the links between the levels targeted and aspects of context, including assessment processes, teachers' beliefs about feedback and learning, and feedback tools used.

The paper views teachers' feedback as occurring within an interdependent socio-cultural learning context in which feedback is seen as a response to teachers' understanding of students' learning needs in their current educational context. It examines how the patterns of information identified by the analysis have been shaped by the context of subject English in a secondary school in Queensland, Australia. It addresses two questions. First, what ratios of task, process, self-regulation learning and self feedback levels (as defined by Hattie and Timperley's (2007) model) have the participants used in their written feedback? Second, how do the ratios of the levels used link to aspects of the pedagogical context?

The paper next presents an overview of Hattie and Timperley's (2007) model, reports previous studies of written feedback using the model and of links between feedback and pedagogical context, and then presents the current study, its findings and implications.

Hattie and Timperley's (2007) model

Hattie and Timperley's (2007) model of effective feedback directs attention to cognitive aspects of feedback – the information about the task in the feedback and the types of thinking targeted by that information (see Figure 1). The model contains two parts. Its first part is that effective feedback answers three questions: 'What are the goals? ... What progress has been made towards the goals? … What activities need to be undertaken to make better progress?' (Hattie & Timperley, p. 86).

The second part of the model systematises how different types of feedback direct attention to different types of learning. Each of the three questions can be answered at four levels: the task, process, self-regulation
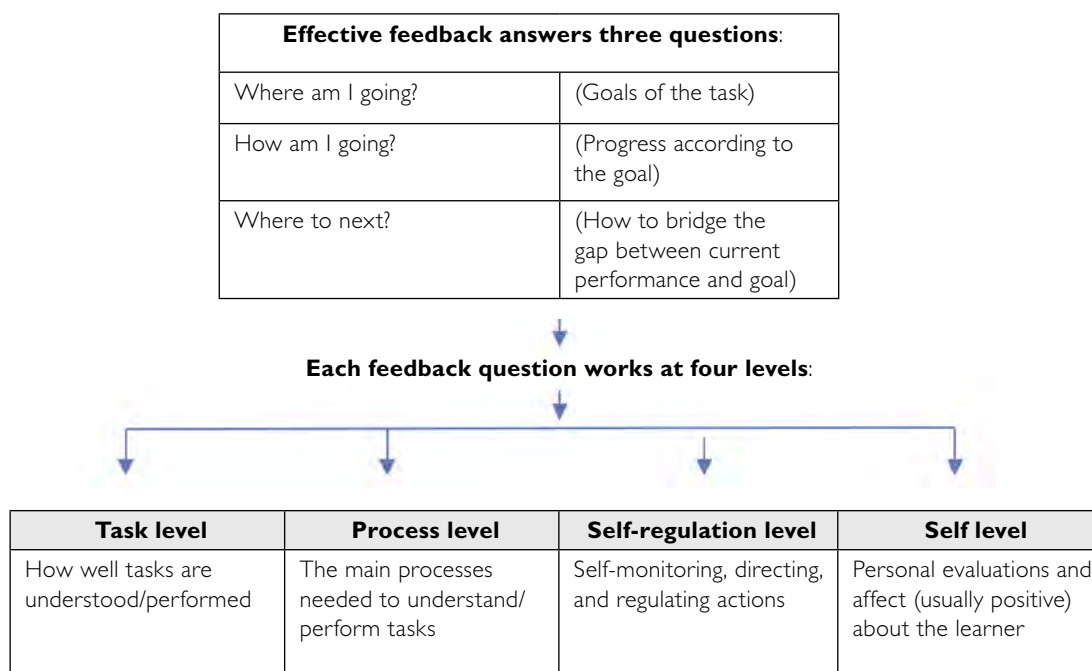
Effective feedback answers three questions:	
Where am I going?	(Goals of the task)
How am I going?	(Progress according to the goal)
Where to next?	(How to bridge the gap between current performance and goal)

Each feedback question works at four levels:

Task level	**Process level**	**Self-regulation level**	**Self level**
How well tasks are understood/performed	The main processes needed to understand/perform tasks	Self-monitoring, directing, and regulating actions	Personal evaluations and affect (usually positive) about the learner

Figure 1. Hattie and Timperley's (2007) model of effective feedback (after Figure 1 p. 87)

and self levels. Task level feedback contains information about the content of the task, such as if the answer is correct, complete, relevant. Hattie and Timperley (2007) explain that while task level feedback such as having correct information is the basis on which the processing and self-regulation levels are built, its weakness is that the learning it facilitates is often not generalised for transfer to later tasks. The process level addresses the underlying processes needed to perform the task, fostering transferable learning. The self-regulation level addresses monitoring, evaluating and regulating actions regarding task goals, targeting the metacognitive skills that enable independent learning. The self level contains personal evaluations of the student, such as praise, but insufficient information to enable the student to improve the task. Self level comments are the least helpful, with potential negative effects on learning, especially by directing learners' attention away from the task (Kluger & DeNisi, 1998). This paper reports an analysis using the second part of the model, the four cognitive levels.

Understanding the four cognitive levels in feedback assists teachers to align feedback with educational purposes. Hattie and Timperley (2007) point out that while surface learning involves the acquisition, storage and use of information, deep learning involves processing information to construct meaning, enabling transfer to later tasks. Task level feedback targets surface learning, while process feedback targets deeper learning. Furthermore, self-regulation strategies support effective learning; the least successful learners apply minimal self-regulation strategies. Directing feedback to the highest level the student can apply maximises learning.

Previous studies using Hattie and Timperley's (2007) model

Previous studies analysing teachers' written feedback using Hattie and Timperley's (2007) model as a typography (e.g., Arts et al., 2016; Harris et al., 2013; Radstake, 2018) offer perspectives on the analysis reported here. These studies raised questions about how often teachers' feedback fostered transferable learning and self-regulation learning capabilities – cognitive skills underpinning autonomous learning. They reported analyses of feedback levels ratios (see Table 1). Analysing the ratios of the different levels of feedback defined in the model enabled consideration of how much of the feedback targeted surface learning via task level feedback and how much was directed at deeper learning via process and self-regulation feedback. The analyses also identified how much feedback consisted of comments about the student without information about how to improve the task (self level feedback). The contexts of these studies enabled comparisons of cognitive aspects of feedback practices across tertiary, secondary and primary educational contexts.

The two tertiary-context studies found common ground. Arts (2016) and his colleagues found that approximately half of Dutch tertiary-level tutors'

Table 1. Cognitive levels of feedback reported in four studies

Study and its context	% Task level	% Process level	% Self-regulation level	% Self level
Arts et al., 2016: Netherlands tertiary	48	26	24	1.3
Radstake, 2018: Netherlands tertiary 2014–15 academic year	70	16	14	0
2015–16 academic year	49	28	23	0
Harris et al., 2013: New Zealand Years 5–10 Comprehensive data	80	7	1.5	11
Comment-only data	68	14	3	15
Finch, 2020: Australian secondary	75	23	1.5	0.5

formative written comments on students' assignments were at task level, with the balance evenly divided between process and self-regulation levels, and few self level comments. Radstake's (2018) self-study found that written comments to her Dutch distance-education tertiary students were 70% task level, 16% process and 14% self-regulation in the 2014–15 academic year. In 2015–16, she fine-tuned her practices and found 49% task, 28% process and 23% self-regulation comments, comparable with Arts and his colleagues' ratios. Radstake concluded that her 2015–16 results represented an improvement, while Arts and his colleagues judged that they needed greater focus on process and self-regulation feedback.

In a school-context study, Harris (2013) and her colleagues collected written feedback by 14 primary and middle-school New Zealand teachers and found 80% task, 7% process, 1.5 % self-regulation and 11% self level feedback. Furthermore, noticing that approximately two-thirds of the data were symbols and corrections, they analysed the comment-only data, finding 68% task, 14% process, 3% self-regulation, and 15% self level. In this school setting, task level feedback predominated and symbols and error corrections were the most common feedback forms, contributing substantially to large ratios of task feedback. The amount of self level feedback was of concern, especially because it was most prominent at a low socio-economic status (SES) school. One teacher's comments at this school were 40% self level feedback, meaning that for these disadvantaged students, praise seemed often to displace information about how to improve.

Studies of links between feedback and its context
Institutional and disciplinary contexts shape feedback

practices (Yang & Carless, 2013), as illustrated in four empirical studies of feedback practices. Lee's (2007, 2008, 2011) studies of Hong Kong secondary school English as a Foreign Language teachers' written feedback showed that teachers used blanket correction of errors (correcting every error) despite believing that selective correction (selecting patterns of errors for comment) was more effective. Blanket correction was demanded by school leadership and parents in preparation for high-stakes university entrance exams. Lee attributed this contradictory behaviour to the influence of cultural and institutional contexts and socio-political power issues within the education system. Hyland's (2013) study of feedback in a Hong Kong English-media university also highlighted how institutional context can shape feedback. Hyland found that teachers' feedback conformed to disciplinary faculty norms: teachers focused feedback on aspects of tasks valued in their disciplines such as use of evidence. He noted that English language learners could be surprised at first by the relative lack of feedback about conventional accuracy compared to that received at high school. These studies illustrate the influence of institutional contexts on teachers' feedback practices. My study identified classroom-context and institutional-context elements that shaped the teachers' feedback practices.

Investigating the model in the context of secondary school English
The data for this paper come from a larger study (Finch, 2020) and provide insights into feedback practices in a secondary school in which most students were from the most socio-educationally advantaged quartile of society in Queensland, Australia (ACARA, 2017). Data comprised naturally occurring written feedback

selected by the participants, a convenience sample of four English teachers who were not consciously using Hattie and Timperley's (2007) model. With prior written consent of students, their parents and the school principal, each of the teachers provided six completed written assignments, one each for six of their students, making 24 sets of texts. Each assignment included formative feedback written on planning and drafting documents, and summative feedback. One-hour semi-structured interviews probed participants' beliefs about feedback and their practices and included a stimulated recall process intended to access tacit beliefs about feedback. During stimulated recall, participants explained the purpose of the feedback on their samples of previously- marked student texts.

After full transcription, artefact data (feedback comments, language correction annotations and symbols) were analysed using deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using Hattie and Timperley's (2007) four cognitive levels as a typology. This involved converting qualitative data to quantitative. This simplifying device facilitated pattern identification (Sandelowski et al., 2009), allowing the teachers' practices to be compared with findings of prior studies. The unit of analysis was a single piece of feedback that a student could be expected to consider as pertaining to one topic. This made a punctuation correction such as an inserted comma equivalent to a multi-sentence comment, the rationale being that the analytical purpose was to examine the ratios of the cognitive levels addressed in all feedback. Thus, inclusion of corrections and symbols made for a comprehensive survey of the written feedback. Whereas prior tertiary-level studies (e.g., Arts et al., 2016; Radstake, 2018) used comment-only data, including all language corrections, annotations and symbols made for a more accurate reflection of secondary school subject English feedback practices, since language accuracy is part of the content of subject English.

Codebooks enhanced the consistency of judgements. Initial coding was discussed with two experienced researchers, supervisors of the project, and Table 2 provides examples. As other researchers (e.g., Arts et al., 2016; Harris et al., 2013) have remarked, the distinction between process and self-regulation level feedback can be unclear, making some comments challenging to classify. Perhaps this challenge is a result of needing to use self-regulation processes such as evaluating alternative solutions to problems while applying process feedback.

Table 2. Coding protocol using Hattie and Timperley's (2007) four levels of feedback

Definitions	Examples
Task level (Evaluations of how well tasks are understood/ performed)	A convincingly delivered speech with all the elements coming together to make you a committed and credible speaker. Explicit correction of facts, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling.
Process level (The main processes needed to understand/ perform tasks)	Coded error corrections (e.g., s/v for subject/verb agreement error). You don't follow through to the logical end point and in turn link this back to your thesis and purpose for speaking.
Self-regulation level (Self-monitoring, directing, and regulating actions)	The idea of the first paragraph is unfinished. Read through the paragraph again. Read my suggestion for inclusions.
Self level (Personal evaluations and affect (usually positive) about the learner.)	This is a solid start. Good luck. Good. Keep going, Kelly.

The final analysis included two steps. First, group and individual teacher ratios for each level were calculated. Then selected excerpts were examined for links to contextual influences by exploring how the contextual elements defined by Allal's (2016) concept of assessment cultures related to teachers' choices of levels. Referencing Cobb and colleagues' (1997) situated cognition theory, Allal defines classroom assessment cultures as containing three interrelated components: the assessment practices implemented by teachers in which students participate; the assessment tools used; and the teachers' and students' beliefs about the purposes of assessment and its connections to learning. These components operate reciprocally as teachers and students jointly construct classroom learning cultures. This study focused on teachers' actions within such cultures. Since it was an exploratory descriptive study, the selected excerpts were chosen as illustrating teacher feedback practices across different contexts. Names used are pseudonyms.

Findings

The ratio comparison

The first research goal was to determine the ratios of the four levels of feedback. These were 75% task, 23% process, 1.5% self-regulation and 0.5% self (see Table 1). As in previous studies, task level feedback

predominated: teachers usually focused on evaluations of students' performance of the current task, including indicating errors, omissions and grades. Thus, much of their feedback supported surface-level learning. In the process level feedback, attention was directed to underlying processes supporting deeper learning in approximately one quarter of the feedback. For example, teachers suggested improvements such as explicitly linking thesis statements to evidence. There was limited self-regulation feedback such as advising students to monitor proofreading. Personal affirmations lacking information about how to improve, such as 'good work' (i.e., self level feedback), were rare.

Links between cognitive levels and aspects of context

The second research goal was to investigate links between the ratios of different types of feedback and their pedagogical context, that is, to explore how aspects of the context may have shaped the patterns in the ratio analysis. The artefact and interview data suggested that the teachers used feedback strategically, with attention to matters such as high- or low-stakes assessment situations, their beliefs about links between feedback and learning, and the feedback tools used.

Contrasts between task level and process and self-regulation levels highlight effects of context

The first issue examined was what shaped the ratios of feedback directed to surface and higher levels of learning. Hattie and Timperley (2007) explain that task level feedback targets surface-level learning, while process and self-regulation feedback target higher-level thinking. As discussed above, process and self-regulation feedback can be difficult to differentiate; combining them into one category focused attention on the surface-/higher-level thinking distinction. Using this distinction, and examining feedback from participants Steven and Anne in different contexts enabled an exploration of what may have driven the patterns in their feedback. Steven's task/process and self-regulation feedback ratio was 85%/14%, while Anne's was 65%/35%. These ratios reflect feedback choices shaped by aspects of the teachers' contexts.

Steven's and Anne's high-/low-stakes assessment situations shaped levels

One contextual difference shaping their feedback was Steven's high- and Anne's low-stakes assessment contexts. In high-stakes assessment situations, performance on current tasks tends to be prioritised over development. Since task level feedback focuses explicitly on the immediate task (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), a high-stakes assessment situation can favour task level feedback.

Steven's data came from feedback to a Year 12 class in which all tasks were summatively assessed. These outcomes then became the basis of a holistic exit grade from subject English – high stakes for these students competing for university entrance. In 2017 when the data were collected, school-based assessment was an important element of exit grades in the Queensland system of assessment, and all Year 12 English assessments counted towards the exit grade. In response, students prioritised current performance. Furthermore, some of the genres used (e.g., short story) were unlikely to matter in their future writing. Anne's context was low stakes. For Year 8 students targeting tertiary entrance four years hence, development was prioritised. Anne's greater emphasis on process and self-regulation feedback reflected her priority of developing students' skills and understanding.

Teachers' beliefs about feedback and learning shaped feedback levels

In addition to their classroom assessment contexts, Steven's and Anne's assumptions about what learning goals their feedback should support affected their ratios of task/process and self-regulation feedback. Steven's written feedback was a relatively minor part of his total feedback for this class. He believed that his most effective feedback practice occurred during the initial planning of an assignment. His practice was to have each student present a plan for the assignment orally in a class setting, resulting in collective brainstorming about how to approach the task. Furthermore, having heard each student's plan and given spoken feedback on how it matched task expectations, Steven would suggest ways to extend the student's ideas. He considered that these suggestions increased students' engagement with the task by personalising their responses.

Steven's written formative feedback occurred in the context of this prior spoken feedback. Following the brainstorming session, students submitted a written plan and a section of a draft. In his written responses, Steven considered that he was '*just … doing a check that everything is functioning*'. He added '*I think feedback [at this later stage] is as much as anything to let [the student] know that he … is on the right track*'. This goal may link to Steven's dominant feedback focus on language corrections and factual details, making for a strong

emphasis on task level feedback.

Anne's beliefs about feedback and learning also concerned student engagement. She prioritised active learning, explaining that she found many students passive learners. A pattern in her formative feedback was prompting students to think independently rather than supplying solutions. For example, to Spencer she wrote '*Consider this conjunction – is it really 'but' you need here?*' Unlike a task level explicit correction for Spencer to copy without real engagement in learning, this self-regulation feedback obliged Spencer to evaluate his choice and create his own solution. Anne's emphasis on process and self-regulation feedback linked to her preference for encouraging active engagement in learning and the developmental priority of the class situation.

Cultural tools shaped feedback ratios

Steven's and Anne's choices about the cultural tools they used to write their feedback also affected the balance of their task/process and self-regulation feedback. Cultural tools relate to both the disciplinary area and the wider cultural context. One such tool in subject English in Australia is the set of language correction conventions (annotating spelling, vocabulary, punctuation and sentence structure errors) common in Western Anglophone schooling. For example, teachers cross out and replace words used or spelled incorrectly and rewrite incorrect punctuation. As information about correct/incorrect usage, this is task feedback. Figure 2 shows punctuation correction conventions in use.
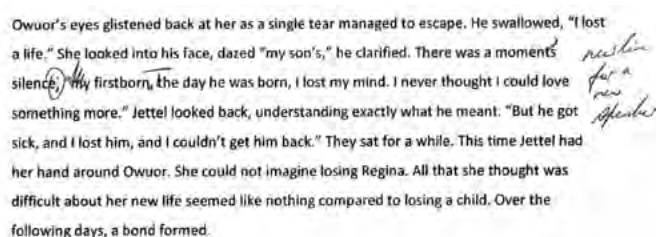

Figure 2. Example of correction conventions

A variation on explicit correction is the use of correction codes. For example, a correction code for subject/verb agreement (e.g., s/v) indicates that a grammatical rule has been mis-applied and directs the student to supply the correction. Coded corrections are process feedback, as they refer to applying underlying processes such as applying grammatical rules correctly. For example, in Figure 3, Q? means acknowledge quotation and P? means punctuation error. Moreover,

teachers may choose blanket or selective corrections; selective correction decreases the number of corrections.
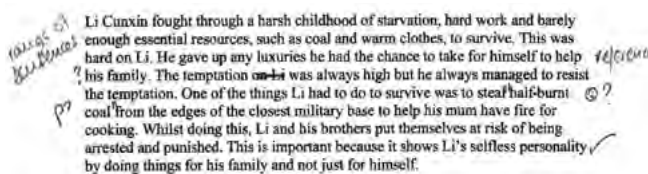

Figure 3. Example of coded corrections

In data coding, each separate correction constituted one unit. Therefore, the data were affected by teachers' choices of blanket or selective correction and explicit or coded correction, as well as the amount of student text submitted. Steven used explicit blanket correction of language errors on the several texts his students submitted, favouring the creation of more task level feedback. Anne selectively corrected errors using codes, preferencing process feedback. Furthermore, a large portion of her formative feedback was written on sheets of paper that were separate from the students' texts. The absence of these draft student texts reduced the number of language corrections in her data. Both of these circumstances shaped the lower task level feedback ratios in Anne's data, illustrating the effects on task/process ratios of easily-overlooked choices English teachers make in feedback on writing.

Self level feedback linked to criteria-based assessment and interpersonal aspects of feedback

Moving on from considering how context seems to have shaped ratios of task/process and self-regulation feedback levels as illustrated in Steven's and Anne's feedback, how and how often self level feedback was used across the full data set can be linked to disciplinary and cultural context in ways that provide further insights into Hattie and Timperley's (2007) model in action. Hattie and Timperley characterise self level feedback as the least effective form of feedback, unlikely to contribute to learning gains. The data contained 0.5% self level feedback. This linked to participants' beliefs about feedback.

Two beliefs about feedback appear relevant. An important shared belief was that the purpose of feedback is to assist learning. One participant remarked that feedback 'can't be as simple as a "well done" or a "good effort". That doesn't tell you anything'. These examples are self level comments. A related belief was that feedback should reference the task's assessment criteria. The use of criteria-based assessment is a longstanding practice in Queensland

secondary schooling, having been mandated in the 1980s (Maxwell & Cumming, 2011). It seems possible that during the extended period in which criteria-based assessment has been used, assessment practices favouring feedback addressing the criteria have displaced more traditional forms (e.g., 'good work') which are self level. David, another participant, recalled that its introduction changed his feedback practices because 'we were now looking for an overt set of specific skills … and so the nature of feedback became much more specific'. Anne explained, 'I've learned to tailor … my feedback around the criteria'. She elaborated that whereas formerly she had usually given two pieces of positive feedback and named one aspect to improve, she had begun using the three major criteria of assessment to organise her feedback, writing some feedback about each category. Focusing on the criteria made for feedback that specifically linked to the assessment criteria, as opposed to the more general model of two positives and an area of concern. Whereas the more general formula might include self level feedback such as 'good work' as a final positive comment, a focus on specific criteria almost completely precludes it.

The small amount of self level feedback given showed that participants focused their feedback on information about how to improve performance (Harris et al., 2015). However, examining the self level feedback in its context revealed a further aspect of the model in practice. The pattern of how self level feedback was used suggested that it was linked to the social-affective dimension of feedback (Yang & Carless, 2013). Steven's self level feedback added small touches of personal encouragement to large amounts of informative feedback. For example, at the end of formative feedback to Julie, Steven wrote, 'This is a solid effort, Julie. Good luck!' The context suggests that he intended to encourage Julie, whose struggles with previous stages of the task were clear in the data. While Hattie and Timperley (2007) state that self level feedback is unlikely to enhance learning because it lacks information about how to improve, this use of self level feedback to acknowledge the social-affective dimension of feedback suggests that strategic use with an understanding of its limitations may enhance overall feedback effectiveness.

Discussion

The predominance of task level feedback

The study found a predominance of task level feedback (75%), which aligns with the findings of three similar studies. As shown in Table 1, prior tertiary-context studies ranged from 48%–70% task level feedback, while Harris and colleagues' (2013) middle- and primary-school teachers gave 80% task level feedback. These figures endorse Hattie and Timperley's (2007) assessment of task level feedback as the predominant form. Examination of the nature of task level feedback and links between its use and the learning context suggested several factors that could underlie this predominance.

First, the predominance of task level feedback may relate to teachers' judgements about what kind of feedback students will be able to apply. Cognitively, task level feedback is generally more explicit and simpler to apply than process and self-regulation feedback, which require more reflection (Arts et al., 2016). When teachers must judge students' ability to apply written feedback based on an incomplete knowledge of the students, they may prefer task level feedback as a default choice.

Second, teachers' judgements about students' motivation to apply feedback may sometimes pre-dispose them to prefer task level feedback. Brown and Glover (2005) found that students did not apply feedback that pertained to topics they believed were unlikely be revisited. Steven's final-year students were unlikely to revisit writing genres such as short narrative. Perhaps, like Arts (2016) and his colleagues' final-year students, generally Steven's students focused on achieving high grades, and developing underlying skills was less important to them. Recognising this student attitude may have influenced Steven's preference for easier-to-apply task level feedback.

Third is the issue of the balance of priorities between development and current performance, as illustrated by Anne's and Steven's responses to different assessment contexts. Steven's students were focused on current performance of high-stakes assessment tasks, and his feedback was directed towards helping them achieve this, favouring task level feedback. Anne and her students had a long-term goal of achieving an excellent exit score after four more years of schooling; this made development a priority, a likely factor in Anne's preference for fostering transferable learning with more focus on process and self-regulation

feedback. Preferencing task level or process and self-regulation feedback in this way follows the logic of Hattie and Timperley's (2007) model, which holds that process and self-regulation feedback target deeper, transferable learning.

Fourth, some disciplinary practices or cultural tools can preference task level feedback to a greater or lesser degree. In this study, a disciplinary practice that made for a predominance of task level feedback was the attention given to language errors, and the use of the conventions of language-error feedback. While teachers at all educational levels and disciplines may correct language errors in student texts, in school-level subject English, this area of knowledge has special emphasis as it is part of the subject content. The previous school-level study, Harris et al. (2013), included this type of data, while the tertiary-level studies, Arts et al. (2016) and Radstake (2018), did not, reflecting the feedback practices of different institutional contexts. Disciplinary effects should therefore be acknowledged when using feedback level ratios to compare practices across contexts.

Within the disciplinary practices at school level, this study illustrates how teachers' choices of language correction conventions weighted the data ratios in different directions. Three aspects of corrections were instrumental: explicit or coded correction; blanket or selective approach; and amount of student text. Choosing either explicit or coded correction affected task level and process feedback. Explicit corrections are task level feedback because they constitute information about correct/incorrect usage, whereas coded corrections are process feedback because they direct attention to the underlying processes of producing standard English. The other two aspects affect the number of errors in the data, since the selective approach selects from a larger total of errors than would be included if blanket correction were used, and the amount of text, all other things being equal, affects the total number of errors. Feedback for writing in subject English that is written directly on student texts is likely to include language corrections, while other feedback tools such as rubrics may not. Such practice variations affect the amount of task feedback given. Awareness of the influence of disciplinary practices on feedback ratios adds nuance to evaluations of feedback using Hattie and Timperley's (2007) model.

Context affects self-regulation feedback

Notable in the findings was the substantial difference in the ratios of self-regulation feedback between tertiary- and school-context studies. The tertiary-context studies recorded 24%, 14% and 23% self-regulation feedback, while both this secondary school study and Harris and her colleagues' (2013) Years 5–10 study found 1.5%. Other school-context studies of teachers' spoken feedback (Brooks et al., 2019) and peers' written feedback (Gan & Hattie, 2014; Harris et al., 2015) also show little self-regulation feedback, suggesting that this level may be generally rare in school-context feedback. Hattie (2012) explained that task level feedback is most helpful for novice learners, while process and self-regulation feedback suit proficient learners. Thus the difference in provision of self-regulation feedback between tertiary and school contexts could reflect teachers' assumptions about students' levels of learning expertise. However, as the studies show that schoolteachers do provide some self-regulation feedback, these assumptions should be tested to find how to expand its provision as schoolteachers encourage more autonomous learning.

SES context may affect self level feedback

The low levels of self level feedback recorded in this study (0.5%) aligned with the practices shown in the tertiary-context studies which found 1.3 % or 0% self level feedback, indicating that feedback was oriented towards assisting learning directly rather than towards supporting students' well-being (Harris et al., 2015). The low ratios of self level feedback in the study may reflect participants' beliefs that feedback should reference the assessment criteria, a belief explicitly articulated by three of the four participants. Furthermore, the participants were working in an assessment culture where criteria-based assessment has long been mandated, legitimising it as conventional practice.

However, a further explanation might relate to the school's SES. The paucity of self level feedback in my study contrasts with the findings of the other school-context study by Harris (2013) and her colleagues. Comparing the comprehensive data from the two school studies, my study found 0.5% self level feedback, while the New Zealand study reported 11%. Different student SES levels could explain this difference. Whereas my study context was a high-SES school, Harris (2013) and her colleagues noted that feedback from their low-SES schools was characterised by higher levels of self level feedback, while that from middle- and high-SES schools averaged 4%. They

suggested that high levels of praise in the low-SES schools reflected teacher beliefs that low-SES students require regular morale-boosting praise to counter their lower levels of academic success. Since self level feedback is the least effective in improving learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), the possibility that use of self level feedback varies across schools according to students' SES merits further investigation.

Considering the use of self level feedback within a communication context may add further insight. In my study, the occasional use of self level feedback among feedback with a pronounced emphasis on communicating information was linked to the context of the teacher/student relationship. Hyland and Hyland (2006) posit that as feedback occurs in specific interpersonal and academic contexts, teachers' comments relate to both personal and academic goals. For example, Steven used self level feedback when he wished to encourage students. Hattie and Timperley (2007) maintain that personal feedback offers no information on how to improve and can be detrimental by deflecting students' attention from the task to their personal attributes and behaviours, which can reinforce beliefs that success depends on innate qualities rather than application. This pertinent warning about self level feedback should not deter teachers from its occasional strategic use to address the social-affective dimension of learning. Self level feedback becomes problematic only when it is overused and displaces information students can use to improve performance.

Practical implications

While new models can direct attention to new aspects of familiar practices, models simplify complex phenomena, rendering a partial view of reality (Bordage, 2009). A model is a framework for thinking, not a blueprint for action. Through its focus on the cognitive aspects of feedback, Hattie and Timperley's (2007) model describes some salient aspects of this complex phenomenon but downplays important non-cognitive aspects. In action research and self-evaluation, teachers should therefore maintain awareness of the strengths and limitations of this model.

The model enables evaluation of the information in feedback. For example, as shown in the studies reported, a ratio analysis can identify the mix of surface- and deeper-level learning being targeted. Understanding how different contexts and feedback conventions weight these ratios can assist teachers to evaluate the match between their feedback and their

learning goals so that the feedback targets their specific learning goals with information that the student can use. Levels ratios are not the whole picture; teachers need to interpret them within the holistic context of their learning goals, their students, the teacher/student relationship, the feedback tools they used, and other relevant factors. Using the model in this way can assist teachers to hone a micro-skill in their pedagogical repertoires.

Conclusion

This study has provided an analysis of the cognitive levels targeted by teachers' written feedback in a new context: secondary school subject English. As a small exploratory study, its findings are indicative rather than conclusive. It supports flexible rather than formulaic use of Hattie and Timperley's (2007) model by showing how aspects of context such as assessment practices, feedback tools and teachers' beliefs can affect teachers' choices of feedback levels. The study also raises further questions about feedback including the possibility of links between students' SES and the kinds of feedback teachers choose, and how to expand the use of self-regulation level feedback in schools.

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Keeping place in subject English: 'Well-worn' texts and teens 'waiting time'

Keeping place in English

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Abstract: This paper reports on the text selections of two English teachers from different schools in New South Wales, Australia who participated in a larger research study that explored the decision-making of teachers planning for and teaching Stage 5 (Years 9 and 10) English. The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon these teachers' reasons for choosing texts within their specific local contexts for students who may be characterised as 'aliterate' (Merga & Moon, 2016). These students are able to read and yet they decline to read their prescribed novels for the compulsory subject of English. One text, common to both sites, is explored here through a critical literacy lens to make visible the possibilities and limitations of text selections when resistant readers are positioned as students of English through mandated subject attendance. The focus of our examination is the young adult novel *The Wave* by Todd Strasser, writing under the pen name of Morton Rhue (1981). The case studies presented demonstrate to readers the significance of thinking critically about teachers' text selections while also understanding that particular contextual and local elements will be influential as to why some texts are privileged over others.

Keywords: popular culture, narrative inquiry, text choices, curriculum, subject English

Introduction

The challenge of engaging students with their studied novels is a perennial preoccupation for teachers of English. Rosy ideals frequently clash with competing realities. The New South Wales (NSW) K–10 English syllabus promotes an aspiration that learning English will 'develop a love of literature and learning' in students 'and be challenging and enjoyable' (NESA, 2012, p. 10). Such an aim arises from a personal growth model of English (Dixon, 1975). However, the progressive hopes of the 1970s embodied by Dixon's work are increasingly at odds with the instrumentalist structures that permeate the enactment of English in NSW. Systems-set performance indicators, the raising of the school leaving age, and the presence of standardised testing can exacerbate the friction between curriculum expectations, teacher ideals and the resistance of some teenagers to the conditions for learning in English. As a way of navigating these tensions for their Stage 5 (Years 9 and 10) students, the two teachers presented here, from two demographically different comprehensive schools in Western Sydney, chose the young adult novel *The Wave* by Todd Strasser (writing as Morton Rhue). This paper reports on the reasons for their choices and then explores the opportunities and limitations of such a curriculum choice.

In NSW, the consequence of compulsory participation in subject English and the state legislation raising the school leaving age has been that some students are obligated to engage with an academic discipline that does not favour their interests or skills. The NSW state government's response to student disengagement in the senior years of schooling was to introduce an additional English course, English Studies, suited to students developing academic competencies 'required for the world of work, as well as post-school training and education' (NESA, 2017, p. 10). The message is clear: English has been, is and will continue to be compulsory. This mandate has occurred alongside government expectations that schools

will enable more of their students to achieve HSC results in the top 2–3 bands, i.e., marks of 70 or above (NSW DET, 2020). How these expectations affect the teaching of English for Years 9 and 10 is one question this paper explores by drawing upon data from two comprehensive coeducational state high schools.

A review of a 'sticky' landscape for teaching and learning in English

The following section reviews historical and contemporary forces that pivot around the exploration of text choices, the teaching of English, and the challenge of engaging all students.

Instrumentalisation of English

Ahmed's (2010) exploration of affect theory is the lens we have chosen to explore aspects of the educational landscape that influence working conditions for English teaching in NSW. Affect is 'what sticks, or what sustains and preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 29). It enables us to see that:

1. Texts are sticky objects.

2. The English teacher is a sticky subject.

3. English teachers are subjects whose working lives coalesce in and through sticky political acts.

Seemingly stuck to subject English are individuals and groups seeking to make and shape social and cultural power. Such sticky affects can be seen in the multifaceted position subject English holds in Australia. It nominally holds its importance and its place as a compulsory subject as a semiotic signal for national identity: the NSW syllabus observes that 'In acknowledgment of its role as the national language, English is the mandatory subject from Kindergarten to Year 12 in the NSW curriculum' (NESA, 2012, p. 10.) The Australian Curriculum, which informs the NSW curriculum, identifies the contribution subject English makes 'to nation-building and to internationalisation' (ACARA, 2010, n.p.). Text selections and ideological approaches to knowledge undoubtedly shape values, beliefs and identities (Yates et al., 2019).

The subject also serves as a structural tool to sort and filter students for tertiary education and post-school opportunities. Thus, to be a student of English is to exist in a political setting that views students and their academic performance through an instrumentalist lens. For example, Teese (2013) used the Victorian model of subject English to demonstrate the persistence of social stratification in academic outcomes regardless of new pedagogical approaches or widenings of text selections for study. The value of subject English is marketed and sold through school stratification (Connell, 2013), as well as through the shadow economy of private tutoring (Bray, 2007; Butler, Ho & Vincent, 2017; Chrysanthos, 2020). Chrysanthos (2020) reports a common belief by students, and perhaps their parents, that Advanced English will result in a better Advanced Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) than, say, the Standard English course, quoting a director of a coaching college who says, 'A higher scaling subject combination will typically include English Advanced, Mathematics Extension 1 and 2, Chemistry, Physics and Economics' (n.p.). Note that the ATAR is a scaled number between 0.00 and 99.95 that indicates how a student performed by allocating them an overall rank relative to their cohort in their Year 12 exams. All of this melding of political, commercial, and social behaviour shapes beliefs, catalysing 'affect coalescence' towards the idea that studying subject English is purposeful because of the doors it will open to a future pathway.

Subject English has also increasingly become a lever for government policies, and thus an increasingly raw issue for English teachers and schools caught between aspirations, ideals, and realities (Yates et al., 2019). The rather long history of moral panic regarding the literacy capabilities of Australian students has also contributed to the instrumentalisation of the subject for political purposes. Attacking teacher quality has become a way of not addressing continuing systemic and structural inequalities (Ewing, 2006; Mockler, 2014). These miasmic tensions become part of the emotional and contested landscape through which teachers of English work.

Teens being teens

There are some observations that young people are demonstrating an increasing tendency towards 'aliteracy' (Merga & Moon, 2016), which is the rejection of reading even though the individual has the literacy capacity to read. There are some indications that young people are also dissatisfied with what is being taught in their English classes, with teenagers overwhelmingly identifying their compulsory texts in English as 'their worst book' (Manuel & Carter, 2015) when asked to identify the origin of the book they most loathed. But perhaps this dissatisfaction is nothing new. When Tucker (2004) reviewed research from the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, he found that while 'children

were reading widely for leisure… [v]ery little reading done at school or for school purposes was enjoyed' (p. 206). Perhaps the very nature of a mandated class novel reduces an individual's pleasure in reading and/or motivation to read. As Bacalja (2021) observes, 'English, after all, was something done to young people, to protect them from their own practices, rather than something done with them' (p. 84). Under such a lens, the selection of a class novel can be seen to have didactic rather than pleasurable intentions.

The findings of a Manuel and Carter (2015) poll on the leisure preferences of teenagers align with observations that Australian teenagers are becoming increasingly 'aliterate' (Merga & Moon, 2016 p. 122). Aliteracy is defined as having 'the skills to read but not the motivation' (Rutherford, Merga, & Singleton, 2018, p. 7). Of the respondents polled by Manuel and Carter (2015, p. 119), 32 percent identified reading a book as their least preferred leisure activity, beaten only by the even-less-tempting option of reading a newspaper (67.5 percent). Only a slender 19.5 percent of respondents indicated that reading a book was their most preferred leisure activity.

A 2017 study that drew upon a small sample of Year 8 teenagers in a focus group setting also found that their young participants didn't care either way if a book they were reading was of Australian origin or had an Australian setting: 'Don't know, don't care' (Throwsby, Zwar, & Morgan, 2017, p. 24) seemed to sum up the teenagers' attitudes.

Yet as Cheung & O'Sullivan (2017) reported, when students read texts of interest to them, such as manga or other kinds of graphic novels, they can be voracious and passionate readers, bringing their enthusiasm for reading into English classrooms. Peer influence and peer recommendations, and access to books of a suitable interest or genre, are also consequential upon students and their enthusiasm towards reading (Merga, 2018; Merga, McRae & Rutherford, 2017).

As any observer in a school can reflect, many teens otherwise considered aliterate can and do read, but when they choose to read they do so in a technology-mediated experience, consuming content that is most of interest to them. For instance, when online, 95 percent of surveyed teens identified the activity that most consumes their attention as 'researching things that interest me' (eSafety, 2021, p. 8). The eSafety report confirms that teens read content for pleasure and their own interest. What some teens appear to resist are the required reading behaviours of the English classroom.

This is a key challenge for English teachers to negotiate in their work with young people.

Teens 'waiting time'
In 2009, NSW was slightly below the national average in school retention, with less than 69 percent of students staying on to Year 12. In 2010, when the NSW government raised the school leaving age to 17 years, rhetoric positioned the change as being for students' benefit, as they would have 'better prospects' (Audit NSW, 2012, p. 8). Namely, staying on at school was pitched as a way to increase young people's lifelong earning potential while limiting their exposure to other temptations and statistically improving access to healthcare. By 2019, 75 percent of students completed their secondary schooling, with a caveat: girls significantly outnumbered boys in staying on beyond the compulsory years, at 81 percent and 69 percent respectively (CESE, 2019, p. 28). Of that group, 86 percent of boys stayed on from Year 7 to Year 11, but 17 percent of those left school before completion, as did 13 percent of the girls (CESE, 2019, p. 28). The gap between students who stay until completion and those who leave as soon as they can, and the difference between male and female completion rates, suggest that some of these young people are 'waiting time' in the classroom until they can legally exit compulsory schooling.

Teese (2007) puts it best when he notes:

> Comforting as high rates of school completion may be to politicians, they rest in the Australian context … on a collapsing full time labour market which effectively traps many young people in school … heavy investment by government and families over a long period of time has only tended to shift upwards the basis on which school inequalities are expressed rather than narrowing them. (p. 40)

Such economic and social pressures may increase issues of disengagement and resistance in Stage 5 (Years 9 and 10) classrooms even before the tensions come to a head in the Stage 6 (Years 11 and 12) years.

Well-worn texts
English teachers in Australia have relative freedom to select the texts they, in their professional knowledge, believe to be an appropriate curriculum fit for their K–11 students. Such freedom is limited by the educational systems and cultures to which a school belongs: for instance, teachers in the 80 Catholic schools in the diocese of Parramatta are explicitly prohibited

from teaching with texts that affirm or encourage 'gender fluidity' (Nguyen, 2021). This means that texts with trans representation, like the picture book *Julian is a mermaid*, cannot be used in the classroom as teaching materials. Teachers in public schools also need to select texts carefully, as they discovered in 2015 when the then Minister for Education, Adrian Piccoli, interrupted a screening of the documentary *Gayby Baby* planned as a LGBT tolerance initiative, which led to it being banned as a text used during learning time (Jeffries, 2018). As Hastie (2018) reminds us, reflecting on the 1997 banning of the play *Top Girls*, moral panics over text selection and subsequent attacks via the media are familiar stories. Teachers learn from these interventions that texts that align with identity representations of marginalised groups may draw community, religious, and/or community ire. Such tensions can encourage teachers to avoid such texts while simultaneously feeding a cycle of 'stale and pale' (Jogie, 2015) text selections.

Resourcing, including school finances, can also be a limiting factor in teacher text choices. As O'Sullivan (2020) observed, 'When there are more resources available, there is scope for teacher choice' (p.49). Equity issues continue to be a key concern within and across NSW school systems. While some independent schools may shift the cost of book purchases onto parents by having them buy the texts their children study, the authors of this paper have observed in their work in and with schools that public schools more commonly use a bookroom system, in which studied texts are loaned out again and again to subsequent cohorts over successive years. Any available funding is usually prioritised for the purchase of prescribed HSC texts, and teachers of other English classes then have to make their decisions based on what is left in the book room. As Bacalja and Bliss (2018) report in their work interrogating text selection patterns, texts from the Victorian Senior English Text List novels outnumber other textual mediums, male authors outnumber female, and sexuality, when it is addressed, is most often heterosexual representation. As Jogie (2015) found, NSW follows a similar pattern. The consequence of such patterns is that English teachers are limited in their text selections when programming for a novel study.

The research design

This paper is drawn from a doctoral study (Cheung, 2019) that focused on English teacher text choices in

public secondary schools that serve local communities and whose clientele are less likely to engage in school marketisation practices and more likely to attend the 'local' school for economic reasons. Such schools may also be characterised as the 'schools of last resort' for those families able to draw upon resources that enable them to make actual choices about school destinations for their children (Butler, 2015; Connell, 2013).

The overarching research question was: *For what reasons do secondary English teachers select and use popular culture texts with their Stage 5 English students?* The aim of this research was not to merely obtain a list of recommended popular culture titles with teacher evaluations as to whether they were suitable (or not) for classroom use. Such an aim would play to an instrumentalist 'what works' narrative, and in doing so would uncouple the expertise and experience of the investigated teacher participants within their respective contexts. What was highly valued in the study was the contextual microcosms of English teachers at work in their communities with their students. The distinctiveness of local communities was an essential part of storifying the work of these English teachers.

In order to answer the study's overarching question, four English teacher participants were interviewed one-on-one for approximately 40–60 minutes. Demographic data provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and other tools such as the MySchool website were used in the selection of the sample. These teachers worked in four schools that were geographically and demographically distinct from each other. Pseudonyms have been applied to all participants and their schools.

Storifying with Narrative Inquiry

The research data were analysed using an Arendtian Narrative Inquiry (Cheung, 2019) model which prioritised the researcher as non-fiction writer, spinning contextual details and data accrued from interviews into a story about particular schools and particular ways of teaching English. Cheung (2019) writes, 'Encounters between researcher and participants were oriented towards illuminating the at-times challenging work that can occur within neoliberalised cultures of schooling while providing limnings into the personal, creative, and relational actions of participants in their work with their students' (p. 106). Arendtian Narrative Inquiry bonds the theoretical work of Clandinin and Connelly's (1987) vision of a methodology that unites 'cognitive and affective understanding[s]... to

produce more living, viable understandings of what it means to educate and be educated' (p. 499) with the philosopher Hannah Arendt's (1958) proposal that public thought enacts political action. Such acts are necessary if narratives of teacher work are to take their place as counter-narratives to neoliberal and populist interpretations of schooling life. As Doecke, Kostogriz and Illesca (2010) note, 'Seeing things differently means seeing beyond the performance indicators and other mechanisms that currently mediate the professional practice of teachers' (p. 97).

Patterson (2011) writes of the 'complex, demanding' (p. 330) intellectual labour of English teachers in her observational study of 'Michael', who prioritised reading a studied novel aloud to his Year 8 students. Key to her definition is the interrelationship between structured moments and dynamic naturalness. Patterson (2011) submits that the work of English teachers 'at its best [is] a sincere performance of sympathy and empathy, a constructed capacity to link to students' lives through a combination of personality and narrative…' (p. 330). It is through smaller stories, conveyed through case studies and teacher reflections deliberately sought out for research posterity, that a rich tapestry of English teacher practice and praxis is woven. This study is a small contribution to the ideological counternarrative envisioned by Patterson (2011) and Doecke, Kostogriz and Illesca (2010) when they wrote of the significance of capturing discrete moments that illuminate the work of English teachers.

Illumination of English teachers' work

This article presents stories of two of the participants from the PhD project, 'Harry' and 'Selene'. Both teachers are within their first ten years of teaching and beyond their first five. They are active within professional circles for English teachers. Harry teaches at Louisa Lawson High School, a coeducational setting with a dominant Anglo-Australian population and (at the time of data collection) an Index of Community Socio-economic Advantage (ICSEA) rating of 978 (ACARA, 2017a). An ICSEA rating under 1000 is a sign of low socio-economic circumstances. Louisa Lawson High School operates in a suburb that was once marketed as an affluent niche in Western Sydney. It was a deliberately planned estate suburb that aimed to 'ameliorate the socio-cultural polarization prevalent in the area' (Markle, 2013, p. 1). However, population changes within the suburb and school marketisation practices have meant that Louisa Lawson High School

now caters more to students from lower socio-economic circumstances. At the time of the research, Louisa Lawson High School was facing some residualisation, with 'stronger' senior students being 'poached', as Harry explains, by nearby public and private offerings.

Selene's school is also a coeducational school, with an ICSEA rating of 990. Of the students at Selene's school, named in the study as Faith Bandler High School, 50 percent come from a language background other than English (ACARA, 2017b). The ABS (2016) reports Arabic, Maltese and Greek as the top three languages other than English spoken by those within the school's geographic catchment area. There are a number of low-fee Catholic system high schools and mid-fee Christian Independent schools in the local area that market themselves to families that might otherwise attend Faith Bandler High School. Given the competition for students, Faith Bandler also faces some residualisation.

Teacher text talk

When Harry and Selene were questioned as to popular culture texts that they have used and do use with their Stage 5 students, both referred to the novel *The Wave*. Harry identified this text when asked to recall 'a particularly powerful lesson' by the interviewer. He explained that the text is one that 'works'. Selene characterised it as 'engaging'. This phenomenon of two participants identifying the same rather obscure text was noted within the PhD thesis. Why characterise *The Wave* as obscure? To start with, the book is neither an Australian text nor a classic per se. It's American young adult fiction published in 1981, a contemporary of Judy Blume's *Tiger Eyes*. In this paper the significance of this choice has been closely scrutinised to illuminate complex phenomena within teacher decision-making. Content analysis of the interview scripts can deepen understanding as to the professional knowledge of teachers, making visible what can otherwise be hidden from outsiders (McGraw & van Leent, 2018). Such efforts work to counter populist narratives, an 'affective coalescence' that undermines teacher credibility and agency.

Both Selene and Harry were highly sensitive to the importance of text choices in the classroom, especially for students who can be characterised as reluctant readers or aliterate. As Selene remarks, '*When I do have a low-ability class or kids who don't like reading, it's finding texts that will bring them in and get them, "Oh Miss, this was the best thing we've ever read …"*' Revealed in the

data is that both Selene and Harry perceive *The Wave* as having some significance for teaching Stage 5 NSW English – that it can be a text that is 'the best thing' to engage their students. Yet they are not unanimous in their perspectives as to why this is so, with interesting divergences revealed in the data.

Selene and Harry were attentive to pragmatic considerations that shaped their curriculum and pedagogical choices. They both commented on the novel's brevity being an asset. *'It's engaging because it's short'*, said Selene, which was very like Harry's observation that *'[I]t's a very short text which works with low-ability classes'*. Appreciation for the novel's length likely pivots around a pedagogical practice Selene and Harry both prefer. These two teachers in their separate interviews both advocated reading aloud to their classes as a way of modelling and cultivating desired reading behaviours in their students. They also both spoke to the limitations of their schools' book supplies, and the personal and pedagogical consequences if students were able to take a school text home to read it themselves. Selene was aware of the financial limitations of public schools and the possible financial penalty to herself if she lent a book that a student didn't return: *'if the kids like a novel you want them to be able to let them take it home but the thing is, you're personally responsible'*.

Harry was more attentive to the futility of sending aliterate students home to read a book for English. Reflecting on the practice of loaning novels to students, he said,

> … you'd give it to the kids and you'd go okay we'll just read today. Then when you get to the next lesson some kids haven't touched it. Some kids have read the whole book, because they beg to take it home and finish it off. Other kids won't touch it at all. Then you're stuck with what can I do with the class…

As is evident in Harry's preoccupation with pedagogy, teaching a novel requires understanding that in a class of 30 students, there may be 30 different ways of responding to the instruction to read the book.

Notably, Harry's and Selene's interview data reveal a divergence in their positions as to the text's suitability. Harry thought the book was a valid choice for students who resist desired reading behaviours but who may be guided into deeper understanding through a well-chosen class novel. For Harry, Nazis are a familiar point of general reference that he can utilise. He can use *The Wave* to guide aliterate readers to deeper conceptual understanding of a vocabulary term like 'conformity':

> The kids all know who the Nazis are. They have that field already, so they can build their understanding of it. You can explore some good ideas. The lesson that worked really well with it was teaching the kids about conformity. They don't really know what that word is.

Selene was slightly different in her appraisal of student capacity. While Harry chose *The Wave* as a conceptual stepping-stone for a low-ability class, Selene identified the text as useful for a *high-ability* class *'because they have the intellectual capacity to understand and get that, they see that'*. The 'that' Selene is referring to is the term propaganda, and the relationship between propaganda and social and individual compliance. Differences in teacher perspectives about student aptitudes and text choices reveal interesting facets for discussion in the following section of this article.

In the discussion below we examine the nature of the choices the teachers made. Curriculum, pedagogy and context intertwine: lexical levels, plot, themes, teacher evaluations of students and their communities come to the fore. We reflect on why teachers may be choosing this text, but also reflect on why the choice can be problematic.

Teachers' text choices matter

If a 14- or 15-year-old teen in a Year 9 or Year 10 class is only going to read one book a year because it is assigned and because it is a compulsory activity to read it for subject English, then which text a teacher selects as *the class text* takes on considerable significance. Both of the two coeducational comprehensive schools in the research included Todd Strasser's *The Wave* as a text assigned for Stage 5 students, and this is the focus of the discussion.

As an early text in the young adult fiction movement, the 1981 novel seems to tick off a list of familiar American tropes. There is an intrepid and questioning heroine who is also the school newspaper's editor-in-chief. There is the slightly vapid best friend characterised by her sneaky smokes and desire to cement her social status via a relationship with one of the school's footballers. There is the football team on a losing streak which may turn successful if only the good-looking running back can find the right motivation to unite them. There are the anti-authoritarian music students. There is the class outcast. And then there is the experiment upon which these characters' lives all hinge.

The Wave appears a palatable choice for Stage 5 teachers of English because it affirms safe and acceptable representations of gender, race, class and religion while encouraging students to think about 'big issue' concepts of conformity and compliant behaviour in the shadow of the Holocaust, a contextual element whose gravity perhaps gives the text greater canonical weight than it might otherwise hold. Indeed, the novel's foreword goes out of its way to heighten the soberness by quoting the original teacher upon whom the character of Ben Ross is based reflecting that 'It was … one of the most frightening events I have ever experienced in the classroom' (Strasser, 1981, n.p.). The hold that America has on global popular culture means that the setting of the novel allows for general transference within a classroom. Harry and Selene could situate the setting of *The Wave* in ways that would be easily recognisable to their students. Selene's students include first-, second- and third-generation young people whose families hold ethnic ancestry and identities and speak Arabic, Maltese and Indian languages. Harry's students, while in an area with a predominantly Anglo-Australian population, also reflect changing demographics, with students of Indian and Filipino descent learning alongside peers with Anglo-Australian identities. The familiarity of American culture and history as general touchstones means that the homogeneous setting of the novel becomes a way for Selene and Harry to traverse the different cultural and social knowledges of their students.

The lexical density and writing style of the novel make it an accessible read. It has a lexical measure of 770L, which places it at a Grade 5 reading level (MetaMetrics, 2018, n.p.) As the following extract shows, it has a rhythm of simple, compound and complex sentences with familiar tropes: jaws drop; characters sigh, they scratch their heads, they scowl. The language is reassuring and familiar to children and young adult readers.

> Laurie felt the plastic tube of the pen crack. Her mother had warned her once that someday she would chew on a pen until it splintered and a long plastic shard would lodge in her throat and she would choke to death on it. Only her mother could have come up with that, Laurie thought with a sigh. (Strasser, 1981, p. 8)

Pragmatically, as the two teachers in the study acknowledge, the text's brevity means that it is well suited to the pedagogical choice of reading aloud to students. Reading aloud to students is often associated with the primary years of schooling, which makes Harry and Selene's choice to include read-alouds as part of their pedagogy worth noting. Such pedagogical choices come from these teachers knowing their students and the aliterate behaviours some of them engage in. Conscious of her mostly male students, many of whom were from non-English speaking backgrounds, Selene cultivated an atmosphere where reading books was modelled and supported through text selections. She deliberately selected *The Wave* because she thought it was thematically challenging, narratively interesting and at an accessible lexical level for her students at that time. It was important for her to observe to the researchers that her school allowed teachers to self-select texts for study in Stages 4 and 5 (Years 7-10), and that she could commit to a read-aloud program with those students. '*We really cater to our class and what needs they have,*' she said. This ownership of the curriculum seemed to increase Selene's sense of confidence that she was making good text selection choices for her students.

Reading to read

The lexical level was an important consideration for the participant teachers because they were trying to get non-reading students – Merga & Moon's (2016) aliterate students – to read. They wanted to support their students in reading a book, enjoy the process of reading and find value in their efforts, knowing, as Harry observed, '*there are kids in there who just will not read on their own*'. This process of modelling reading an accessible text to students in a supportive way was reflected in Selene's pedagogy when she said, '*you read to them and you're modelling how reading should occur and your use of tone and things like that, and that's what I like to do in my class*'. What is commonplace for Harry and Selene's classroom practice is what Patterson (2011) refers to as a 'structured and constructed… naturalness' (p. 325). Selene and Harry demonstrate nuanced awareness of their students and the gap between where they are and where they need to be if they are to traverse the academic space of an increasingly instrumentalist schooling environment.

Harry runs a tightly controlled reading experience because, in the context of aliterate students, he wants all his students to know the studied text. He wants his students to hear the sentence rhythms and the voices of the characters, so he reads aloud to them and keeps the books in his classroom rather than letting them

take them home: '*If I let them read on their own anywhere between 20 to 40–50 percent probably won't read it. Or finish it. …They might read a bit of it*'.

It's not enough for Harry that his students 'stick a toe in' the reading experience. As any swimmer knows, a toe can test the water temperature but the whole body needs immersion in order to swim. Harry's practice of reading aloud reflects his willingness to drag his aliterate students into the waters of reading and prolong their stay long enough that some of them may find some pleasure, some value, in the experience – and if not, he'll make sure they know enough to perform the processes of reading for subject English coursework purposes.

Reading to achieve academic behaviour

By choosing a text like *The Wave*, Harry and Selene are trying to create a bridge that students who demonstrate aliterate behaviour can cross in order to land in the academic space of required behaviours for achievement in the English classroom. Instrumentalist and idealistic values intertwine within such actions. NSW's state schools are under pressure to improve the academic performance of their students, and this pressure has only intensified since the data collection for this study.

Harry was highly aware that his students – as a cohort, as successive cohorts – struggled to compete in the highly competitive and academic NSW schooling culture. '*We're not the HSC*,' he bluntly observes. Yet despite this awareness, which holds within it a knowledge of social class and cultural differences, there are forces that push and prod at Harry to mould his students into becoming 'the HSC' that are reflected in his pedagogical approaches. For example, in order to improve student writing on assigned texts in Stage 6 (the final years of schooling), Harry and Selene used text selections within their pedagogic practices with their Stage 5 (Years 9 and 10) classes to encourage the development of the necessary academic habits for Stage 6 success.

Selene explains that the right text selections can help her students develop the academic habits necessary for schooling achievement. She explains how the right text choice has positive consequences beyond the experience of reading:

Now they're [the students are] like, what are we doing next, which is really good. Every kid, for both tasks, handed something in, which was quite uncommon across the board. Every kid in my class handed something in on the due date.

Inculcating academic habits becomes ritualised alongside the desire for students to independently, one day, *maybe today*, embrace this kind of behaviour – this kind of HSC-oriented academic identity.

Both Harry and Selene spoke about their teaching of *The Wave* as an example of a popular culture text that provided engagement for their students. Due to the constraints of the research investigation, what was not captured in the data was any of their students' responses to their classroom study of the novel. It is acknowledged these would add another interesting dimension to the issues under discussion.

Pushing for conceptual understanding

The novel *The Wave* can be useful for teachers making pedagogical decisions that encourage their students to explore and discuss the nature of compliance versus independent critical thinking. This was something that one of the study participants homed in on, choosing to show YouTube clips of Asch experiments to his students as a way of reminding them how easily people conform to what others are doing. Such an act points to a decision to craft a connection between the novel and its 1981 setting and the contemporary world experienced by teens coming of age in the late 2010s. This tactic, of using a relatively 'safe' text to springboard more challenging classroom conversations, can be one way of navigating censorious tensions and perhaps even teacher hesitancy to engage with 'difficult knowledge' (McLean Davies & Buzacott, 2021) beyond their comfort zone.

Concluding thoughts

This paper has presented a case study of two teachers navigating the many challenges of text selection for students in the middle years of secondary school, and in doing so, it illuminates the complexity of English teachers' pedagogical decision-making with regard to text choices for their classes. The 'affective coalescence' of instrumentalist values intertwines with teachers' desires to develop their aliterate students as people who read for pleasure and for academic purposes. This snapshot offers a glimpse into the internal and external factors that shape an English classroom textual study. In doing so, we make visible some of the elements that influence teachers' professional judgement. The close examination of social and cultural practices informing our English classrooms are ongoing professional issues that require attention.

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&READing VIEWing

with Deb McPherson

A mix of poetry, prose and multimodal texts awaits you, dear reader. You will also find two books that could transform your English practice: George Saunders' *A swim in the pond in the rain* and *Novel ideas* by Erika Boas and Rosie Kerin. Both these books offer teachers brilliant strategies to support students to read and write more deeply and powerfully. But first, a collection of new poetry by First Nations' writer, Evelyn Araluen, which could blow you out of the pond.

Poetry

Drop bear Evelyn Araluen (2021) University of Queensland Press 104 pp.

Evelyn Araluen's dedications are memorable. She tells her Mum and Dad, *it's an honour to honour you* and *For J*:

> every word. Before or after, and no matter what survives us, be it horizons, highways, poems or stars. Every word, and every place it came from.

Reading such acknowledgments gave me an inkling that the poems that awaited would be impressive, but they are much more than that: they are spectacular. A poetic literary resistance stalks through the collection and images tumble and spill onto every page. Some poems are ferocious and confronting like 'Acknowledgement of Cuntery' and 'PYRO', others tender with love, like 'Malay' and many are full of dark humour and lyricism. Araluen uses her three sections, *Gather*, *Spectre* and *Debris* to cross examine past, present and future Australia with First Nations' eyes. She delivers her depth charges in a range of forms from

prose verse to free verse; there are ghost stories, poems with cross outs and UPPER CASE shout outs and lower case meanders, that ripple across the page. She interrogates the poetic form itself and invites readers along for the ride.

In 'Dropbear Poetics' (the dropbear in the title is an urban myth, a ferocious koala that drops from the trees to scare tourists) Araluen uses Dreaming Tiddalik and Bunyip to lance 'potplanting in our sovereignty' and 'postmod blinky bill' misappropriations and their 'pastoral deconstruct' and 'snugglepot kitsch'. She is 'rage and dreaming' and warns:

> *'we aren't here*
> > *To hear you poem*
> *You do wrong   you get wrong*
> *You get*
> *gobbled up'*

'The Last Endeavour' provides, in mesmerising and mythic language, a very different perspective, on Cook's voyage to 'go in search of the great southern land, of the lost eden, of the darkest abyss'. 'The Trope Speaks' is a scathing poem, a list of fears, hopes and experiences. Beauty and sorrow slide from 'Guarded by Birds' like soft smoke. Past poets' participation in 'the logics of our erasure' is called to account in the heartbreaking 'To the Poets'. 'Moving Day' captures slanted light, anxiety, understanding and love amid the minutiae of a relationship. Each of Araluen's poems imparts something unforgettable to the reader, an image, a thought, a description, a recollection, a statement, an emotion. They are destined to make you wake in the dark and replay them in your head.

There is so much intensity in these poems, such vivid imagery such caustic hurt, such clarity about great loss that they drill down into the reader. *Drop bear* is poetry that stays with you, beauty and power, anger and wit, pain and love, long after you have closed its pages. Indigenous students will find affirmations in Evelyn Araluen's poems and other students can tread a path in First Nations' footsteps. This is a collection of poems for senior students that
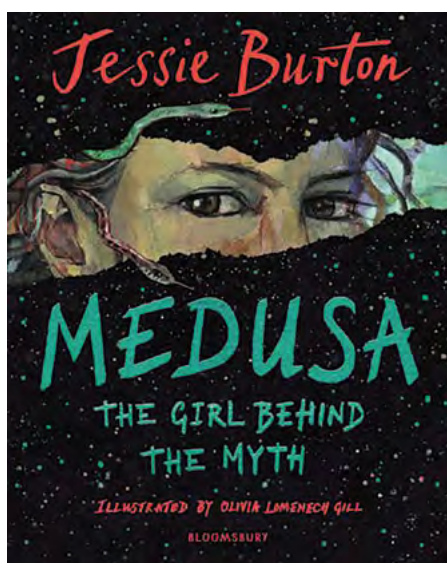
rips apart old attitudes and perspectives and delivers a new classic for an old land.

Evelyn Araluen is a descendant of the Bundjalung Nation. She was born and raised on Dharug country.

Multimodal

Medusa the girl behind the myth **Jessie Burton illustrated by Olivia Lomenech Gill (2021) Bloomsbury 211 pp.**

Medusa is a text that will brighten any classroom and find a special place in the myths and legends unit. For the Medusa we see and hear, in this clever retelling by Jessie Burton, is not the one of legend: even her snakes are different, named as they are and with personalities to match. If you read the Medusa myth in Edith Hamilton's classic bestseller, *Mythology*, you will discover that Medusa's sisters were immortal but only Medusa, of the lethal glare, could be slain

> *'And they are three, the Gorgons, each with wings*
> *And snaky hair, most horrible to mortals.*
> *Whom no man shall behold and draw again*
> *The breath of life'*
> [Hamilton, E., *Mythology* 1942 Grand Central Publishing p. 202

And Perseus, our hero needs to slay Medusa as Polydectes, (who wants him out of the way so he can marry Perseus's beautiful mother), has manipulated Perseus into promising him her head. Perseus is aided by Athena and Hermes and gifted with a sword and bronzed shield, winged sandals, invisible cape and magic wallet so he can remove Medusa's head without being turned to stone. He returns to wreck vengeance on Polydectes.

But this is not Burton's interpretation. Medusa, our teenage narrator, reveals Poseidon raped her and Athena took his side and punished her by changing her glorious hair into snakes and forcing her and her sisters to flee. When young Perseus arrives in his boat in this story, he is lost and hungry; it is Medusa who feeds him and his dog while her sisters are away. She longs for connection with another, but she remains cautious about revealing herself or her identity. The two talk behind an arch and both reveal more about their stories as they rush to a transfixing conclusion.

Medusa cautions us all, 'You should be careful who tells your story', and Burton and Gill have given fresh voice to a mythical creature long dismissed as a horror show. I grew up in Medusa Street and do take extra delight in this version of her story, so appropriate in our #MeToo times.

Burton's lyrical prose brings the wine dark sea and the spice filled wind to life and is matched by the beauty and strength of the illustrations. Gill brings a bright palette, strong textual lines, mural-like qualities and diverting perspectives to the text. Their collaboration delivers a contemporary and compelling text which could be enjoyed by students from Year 7 to Year 12. It could be used to stimulate fresh scrutiny and alternative narratives for many of the myths and legends we take for granted.

Stars in their eyes **Jessica Walton and Aśka (2021) Fremantle Press 215 pp.**

This graphic novel starts with fifteen-year-old Maisie and her mother (a Star Wars fan), heading off to Fancon. Maisie is a queer, disabled teenager who lost her leg to

cancer and still suffers chronic pain and panic attacks. She is desperate to see her hero, Kara Bufano, another amputee, and star of the Midnight Girls on a panel at the convention. Text and image convey just how tired Maisie is of being told she is an inspiration or getting another stare when she goes swimming at the motel pool. The banter between Maisie and her mum is free and fun and reveals that Masie sees herself as a nerd and that her mum is open about anything and a great support to her daughter. At Fancon they meet Ollie, a volunteer wearing a pronoun badge (they/them) and Maisie is horrified when her mother reveals that Maisie has come out as bisexual. But Ollie is fine with that and the two quickly connect, and so do their parents. When Kara cancels due to ill health Maisie is in tears, but Ollie takes her to the quiet room to recover and they share each other's favourites books and a kiss and a cuddle. They get a fan photo with a group of Thor look alikes, and Maisie's amazing mum secretly gets her a t-shirt signed by Kara. Ollie and Maisie part to go home to their separate states, conscious that long range relationships are difficult to sustain.

Stars in their eyes is endearing, funny and caring and represents the lives of a diverse collection of characters and their experiences with humour and panache. It would be an excellent addition to a wide reading book box on diversity for students in Years 8–9. Jessica Walton is a queer disabled writer and teacher and illustrator Aśka is a science communicator and visual storyteller.

Don't look up directed by Adam McKay (2021) Streaming on Netflix from December 2021

This film, reminiscent of *Wag the dog* but on steroids, is just aching to be unleashed in classrooms. *Don't look up* is a savage, hilarious satire illustrating and exemplifying the behaviours, mindsets and tactics of misinformation that cripple, deny and evade facts. If you do look up, you will see a metaphor for action on climate change heading your way like a comet.

The film opens with Kate Dibiasky (Jennifer Lawrence), a PhD astrometry student, discovering a comet the size of a mountain. When she announces her discovery, her mentor, Dr Randell Minter (Leonardo DiCaprio) calculates it is heading straight for earth. These two scientists must tell the US president and the world that it is six months and fourteen days away from complete annihilation. That's when doubt, delay and misinformation step in as mad President Orlean (Meryl Streep) and her incoherent son and Chief of


Staff (Jonah Hill) originally ignore the situation ('I say we sit tight and assess') then decide to milk the political opportunities a planet killing comet can bring. Billionaire tech giant and presidential donor, Peter Isherwell (Mark Rylance), wants to exploit the comet for mineral wealth. Naturally no one is listening to the scientists. Media and influencers, politics and parties, and a bored and scared populace are all skewered as the comet keeps right on coming despite the mining attempts. Dr Minter is seduced by the power and attention and also by Brie, a talk show host, played by an almost unrecognisable Cate Blanchett. Dibiasky's parents lock the door on her ('Your dad and I are for the jobs the comet will provide') and the president and Isherwell steal away on an escape space craft, as the scientists reunite for a meal in a poignant and devastating finale. The cast is stellar, and all appear to be relishing their comic opportunities.

Don't look up has divided critics, with many recommending we look away from what they concluded was a disastrous and sledgehammer misfire of a film. And if you are looking for nuance and subtlety, those critics are right – don't look here. But if you are looking for an unforgettable, jaw dropping, piledriver of a film that bristles with classroom possibilities, (including the use of numerous, polarising reviews), for senior years then this is it. Watch it twice (especially for the scene in the credits) and bring it to your classroom before it's too late.

Fiction for Stages 5 and 6 (Years 9, 10 and 11)

The end of the world is bigger than love **Davina Bell (2020) Text Publishing Company 288 pp.**
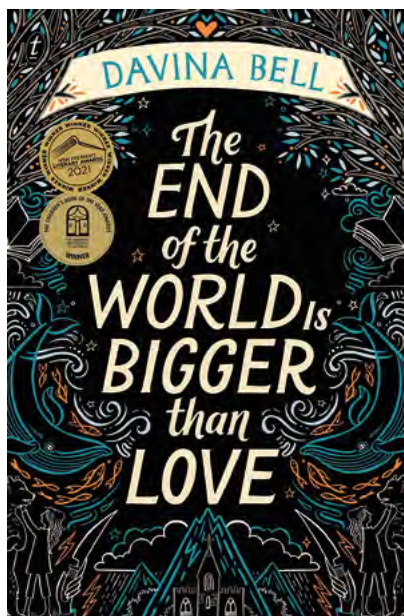
This fascinating novel will enthrall and test readers in equal measure. There are two narrators: the twins, practical Summer and compassionate Winter, who are as different as their names. There is a mysterious intruder called Edward, who is sometimes a boy and sometimes a bear depending on who is describing him. There is a remote island setting and an end of the world backdrop as the Greying, an environmental catastrophe, spreads globally. The girls' mother has died, and their father has been removed by sinister forces from the island, leaving the girls alone with their books and a huge supply of stacked food to survive. The literary references fly off the page as the girls read and reread their favourites. They share a huge responsibility about their father's work and its connection to the climate and human calamity that looms over the novel. Edward, the interloper, changes the dynamic between the twins with disastrous results as Winter and Summer, previously so close nothing could come between them, move apart as their island world shatters and their love cracks.

Bell is a gifted writer and the island, its landscape and its inhabitants (seemingly two girls, a bear/boy and attendant ghosts of family) appear preternaturally sharp and clear. Magic realism has never been so inviting as, senses engaged with 'silky, salty morning swims' and 'lunches in the meadows plush with flowers', the reader moves backwards and forward in the tale. But caution is required as the reader can never be sure of the reliability of either narrator, however unique or credible their voices.

The end of the world is bigger than love is large in scope and tantalising in detail and offers students in Years 10 and 11 much to discuss, especially about the nature of love and identity, about whether there are two girls or one, and about how the ending does change everything. This lyrical and challenging novel will evoke a range of responses and deserves a second read to consider all the complexities, allusions and whispers that are scattered so enticingly along the way.

The end of the world is bigger than love is the winner of the 2021 CBCA Book of the Year for Older Readers. Teaching notes are available from Text Publishing.

An Author Study: Poppy Nwosu
Making friends with Alice Dyson Poppy Nwosu (2019)
　Wakefield Press 272 pp.
Taking down Evelyn Tait Poppy Nwosu (2020)
　Wakefield Press 264 pp.
Road tripping with Pearl Nash Poppy Nwosu (2021)
　Wakefield Press 264 pp.

Poppy Nwosu has made an art form of the teen romance, with realistic characters and dialogue that capture that aching self-consciousness and dramatic up and down of adolescent life. *Making friends with Alice Dyson* (reviewed in *English in Australia* 54.2 (2019) was the first and Alice, its conscientious protagonist, works hard with not much in her life but study. A brief dance with school troublemaker, Teddy Taualai, goes viral and the reader watches with delight as Alice's initial rebuffs slowly morph into a dance as their friendship grows and changes. Reputation and stereotyping are part of the appeal of this entertaining novel with bullying, identity and anxiety hovering in the wings.

Taking down Evelyn Tait is next. In contrast to Alice, 16-year-old Lottie is always in trouble. The story opens with Lottie, a heavy metal fan and fanatic tomato grower causing a huge mess of broken beakers and equipment in the science lab when she discovers best friend, Grace Singh, is dating good girl Evelyn Tait, Lottie's great hate. Lottie's chats with the principal are hilarious but don't prevent a suspension. Jude, the boy next door and good buddy to Lottie, suggests she pursue a revenge strategy in which she outdoes Evelyn in the good girl stakes. What compounds the problem with Evelyn is that the reader discovers Lottie's dad
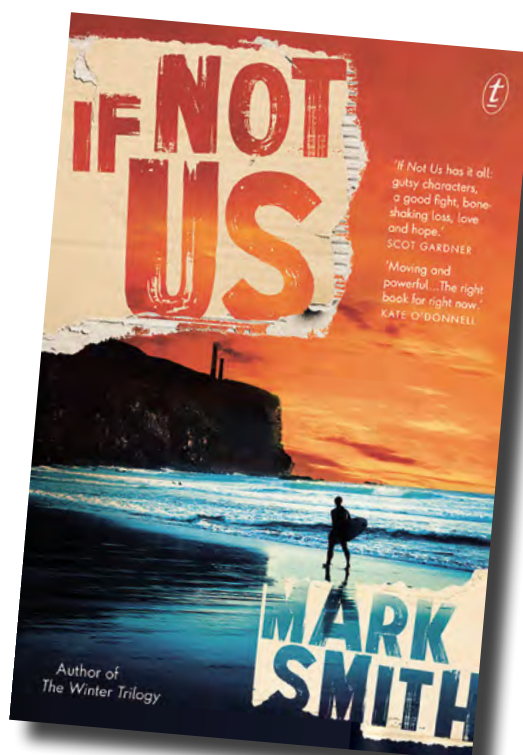
Obi Okocha, a lift. Obi has a wonderful smile, but Pearl thinks he has an irritating attitude. Breakdowns, arguments, a night together in the van, and some passionate kissing move the plot forward, but mutual self-consciousness stalls the budding relationship. As the sexual tension continues to rise and Nanna is found, they finally make it to the end of year party and many relationships are sorted in a most satisfying way.

Girls in Years 8–11 will relish this trio of romantic stories with their vibrant diversity and endearing characters, clever dialogue and realistic settings. Boys should like them too with Teddy, Jude and Obi demonstrating how consent can, and should, operate in life, as well as in these complex and nuanced stories about relationships. Everyone will find something to love in these perfectly plotted novels. Several copies of each in a classroom could end with many students wanting to read all three.

Poppy Nwosu is also the editor of *Hometown Haunts*, a collection of horror stories by a wide selection of Australian authors and published by Wakefield Press.

If not us Mark Smith (2021) Text Publishing Company 260 pp.

Mark Smith's *The Winter* trilogy was an exciting and powerful Australian YA about a dystopian future. His new novel, *If not us*, examines the consequences of taking a stand about climate change in a small town and will have strong appeal for students in Years 9, 10 and 11.

married Celeste, mother of Evelyn one year ago, and they both moved into Lottie's apartment, and Lottie and Evelyn must share a bedroom! Adding to the mix good-looking Sebastian starts to be interested in Lottie and then Jude kisses Lottie and confusion reigns. While Lottie still blazes with energy, as the novel progresses her journey to being a kinder person who finds out more about herself and her friends is joyful and disarming.

Road tripping with Pearl Nash has another engaging character on the move. Pearl Nash has Daisy as one close friend, but Daisy seems distant as her relationship with Lachlan grows more serious. When Daisy backs out of accompanying Pearl to the end of year school party in the bush Pearl takes off in her van on her own road trip to find a missing Nanna and unexpectedly ends up (begrudgingly) giving fellow school member,

Smith chooses J.F. Kennedy's famous question, *If not us, who? If not now, when?* as his epigraph and couples it with an extract from Greta Thunberg's 2019 speech to the UN Climate Change Action Summit, 'You are failing us. But young people are starting to understand your betrayal'. The quotations prepare the reader for a story full of fight and hope.

The protagonist, Hesse, is a keen surfer. This is despite the loss of his dad, who seven years ago, on a bleak afternoon, paddled out to a local danger spot and never came back. His town, Shellbourne, has a coalmine and a power station as well as a beach, and while Hesse's mum is a member of the local environmental group Hesse himself is more interested in Fenna, the exchange student from the Netherlands. But when asked to represent youth at a forum the group runs, a nervous Hesse fronts up and his call for action makes the news and a video of him taken by Fenna goes viral. Hesse gains support but faces backlash from friends and foes alike. People are worried about their jobs at the mine as dangerously high emissions are revealed. Smith does not minimise the conflicting viewpoints. He plots the growing attraction between the two teenagers with Hesse's ache at the loss of his dad and the importance of his new commitment to action on climate change. Fenna's anxiety attacks, a deadly car crash and the opportunity for a big surf with an older mate, at the place where his dad died, are all part of a compelling and beautifully described conclusion.

Teacher Resources

A swim in the pond in the rain is an invitation you shouldn't refuse, as George Saunders, multi award winning author of *Lincoln in the Bardo* and Professor of creative writing at Syracuse University in New York, beckons us to walk with him on a journey through the great Russian short story writers. I am very grateful to Steve Henry, Head Teacher English at Cherrybrook Technology High School in Sydney, for his review of *A swim in the pond in the rain*.

A swim in the pond in the rain George Saunders (2021) Bloomsbury 389 pp.

It's difficult to quantify the charm of this book. Seven short stories from the Russian masters – Chekhov, Gogol, Tolstoy – accompanied by the commentary of George Saunders which is as wise as it is funny and as perceptive as it is practical. Do we learn more from
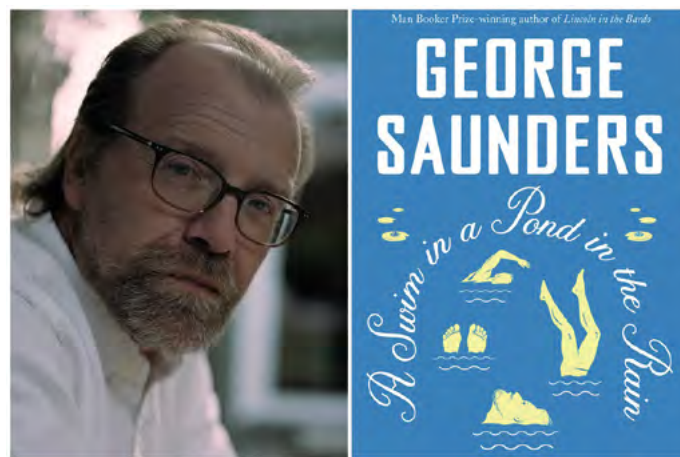
Saunders or from the Russians? Like any good English lesson, it seems like the teacher and the text find the best in one another.

Saunders opens with the observation that 'I sometimes joke that we're reading to see what we can steal.' And surely, we as English teachers are training a new generation of burglars? 'Reading to Write' (A Year 11 module in the NSW Stage 6 English syllabus) is obviously an invitation to a smash and grab raid, sneak in there, flashlight out, 'Get the opening, a motif, and whatever is hiding in the cellar in Chapter 3.' The best lessons are when the students wander through the world of a text, find the loot and stuff their pockets. So, what can we steal from this book? How might it be useful for us and for our classes?

1. His posture in relation to the stories
Saunders brings a delightful inquisitiveness and humility to the stories. He removes his shoes at the door of these worlds, accepts their offer of story and soul-fare and then gently interrogates their motives and values, asking them to explain themselves and listening carefully to their responses. It may well be that he has deliberately chosen stories that are less didactic, but even the moral lessons of Tolstoy are respected as he balances the critic's judgement with the fan's delight and the student's lean-in.

2. His technical expertise
'Saunders the Author' and 'Saunders the Teacher' curl around each other throughout the commentary. The transitions between his consideration of form and purpose, between technical discussion and quirky side-track, between personal voice and academically trained rigour, are all seamless. This is not an academic know-it-all showing off. With the HSC (Higher School

Certificate credential in NSW) move towards hybrid forms and personal voice, this book offers a useful model for student writing, in analytical, discursive and reflective forms.

3. *Different ways for students to move into the stories*

Page by page: Saunders reminds us that 'we have to keep being pulled into a story in order for it to do anything to us' and his first chapter, 'A Page at a Time' co-opts this truth to examine Chekhov's story 'In the Cart'. Take a story, read the first page and get the students to consider what they know so far, what they are curious about and where they think the story might be headed. Then read a bit more and repeat. It would be a simple matter to use this same story and share as much or as little of the commentary of Saunders as is required.

But even if you didn't want to take your class through the whole story this way you could use the opening page and Saunders' reflection as a model for student workshopping. His treatment of setting and character, of the 'particular reasons' for Marya's unhappiness, opens up Chekhov's craft, his writerly choices that evoke a set of expectations and curiosities in the reader. Note that this moves past the workshopping models often adopted by students for their own writing which starts with two questions 'What do you like? What can be improved?' and ends with a whole lot of silence.

The Penn and Teller (tabulation) approach: Saunders appears to gain some satisfaction from tabulating the stories, placing events or characters or stylistic features into a table so that we can notice patterns or undercurrents. In a way he is a literary Penn and Teller, beckoning for us to look behind the curtain to see how the magic box is set up and how the audience is invited to believe that the man has been sawn in two. He is also generous in this regard, as he is just as likely to lift the curtain on the juggling and card tricks of his own writing.

For Chekhov's 'The Darling', the table is used to reveal the recurring plot pattern at the heart of the story. Olenka's life is narrated using the recurring patterns within her various love-relationships to raise tension and create poignancy and depth.

To illustrate the role of patterning in short stories Saunders invites us to imagine 'that for three days in a row, just at noon, there's a trumpet blast, and someone wonks you in the head with a hammer. At 11:59 on the fourth day, you're going to be flinching. If, instead of a trumpet, you hear a flute, you'll think, 'Huh, interesting.'

I'm keen to try this out with a class (the pattern idea, not the wonking on the head thing), asking them to build a story around a series of permutations.

Steve Henry is Head Teacher English at Cherrybrook Technology High School in NSW.

Novel ideas teaching fiction in the middle years
Erika Boas and Rosie Kerin (AATE) 2021 206 pp.
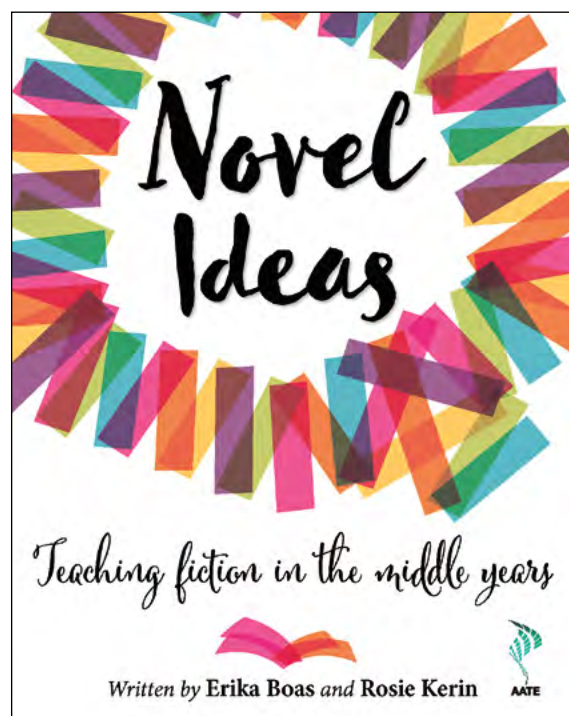
As continuing waves of educational red tape, NAPLAN, accreditation demands and COVID constraints pour down on teachers it is refreshing to read Emeritus Professor Wayne Sawyer's clarion reminder that 'Literature remains central to the experience of English'. His foreword to *Novel Ideas* stresses the importance of wide reading and close reading, of providing challenge in the class work on novels and the importance of choosing worthwhile and generous texts. He recommends *Novel ideas* as a timely and important read. Erika Boas and Rosie Kerin's text is just brimming with practical and positive strategies for teachers teaching fiction in the middle years, based in the best and tested pedagogy.

The narrowing of the way fiction is taught in schools and the urgent need for time and attention to diverse texts, wide reading programs and reading for pleasure are real concerns addressed in this eminently realistic and valuable resource.

Novel ideas is divided into eight chapters with comprehensive appendices full of templates for use

in the faculty and classroom, such as an English survey for students, a text audit grid, vocabulary exploration, independent reading rubrics, literature study and circle tasks and framework for a hero's journey. The text also uses QR code links for instant access to recommended reading resources and the use of interactive book trailers. The chapters include selecting novels for students, launching novels and building contexts and supporting independent and capable readers. Chapter 5 on building a collaborative reading culture at a school is vital. With deep reading in decline, often eroded by skimming and scanning online, the development of a reading culture school will get students and staff reading widely. Other chapters deal with using novel extracts, teaching narrative elements and literary genres. Many chapters have authentic classroom examples of strategies in use such as, reading passports, first read clubs, one-pagers, story scrapbooks, comparison charts, thematic, genre or stylistic lists, character autopsies and contextual analysis and text connections.

The authors call for a re-examination of our personal and professional relationship with novels and how we use them in the classroom. They acknowledge the importance of classics but also recognise the value of using more recent and diverse literature. Boas and Kerin urge us to build relevance and curiosity in our students by interrogating the craft and language of such texts as *A monster calls*, *Tiger daughter*, *Nona and me*, *Being Bindy* and *Flipped.* They quote Helen Sykes on every text being different and the importance of allowing the text to determine the approach, of not approaching all texts in the same way and not attempting too much with each text. They see the programming of continuous independent reading programs side by side with formal novel studies enriching both.

This book is about growing students' love of reading and reading novels and helping 'all students to discover and enjoy diverse adolescent novels and novel experiences (p. 183)'. I can't think of a better aim for an English teacher.

If you take *A swim in the pond in the rain* and *Novel ideas* into your heart, faculty and classroom you will be richly rewarded.

Happy reading and viewing.

A Secondary Teacher Looks at a Primary School

CATHY BEAVIS

Colour! A poem-embossed snake slithered over the glass partition behind which the office staff typed. Behind me, solid walls of brilliantly coloured dinosaurs, in crayon, in paint, of all sizes and shapes. Outside the nearby staffroom, the scene was repeated in three dimensions — cardboard palms and mountains, plaster of paris tyrannosaurus and brontosaurus rex, varnished dark green, black, brown. Later in my stay, an active volcano was added, plaster of paris once more, over an ice-cream bucket and a cone. It would have real incense, real fireworks and a red lamp underneath to give the required glow. Unit A had been working on Dinosaurs, and were moving into Disaster.

Outside the door of Unit A hung a row of coats and bags. Once inside, what space! What quietness and warmth! And despite the apparent emptiness (most of the class was out) evidence everywhere of past and future activity. The school was designed on an "open plan", and this unit, accordingly, was large, warm (ducted heating) and carpeted, broken into perhaps a dozen areas by brightly coloured clusters of divider boards, grouped to create a nest of "corners" in themselves. To my right, as I entered was a "wet area"; to my left, a whole separate room.

On one set of dividers were pinned huge photographs of "disasters" — people fleeing from an earthquake, fighting bushfires, a house devastated after Cyclone Tracey. Around the corner, newspaper clippings to do with disaster had been collected. (Later in the week I asked a boy who was pinning up something on nuclear war why he was doing so. "Because we're doing disasters." "Is it your job to look after this board?" "No, I just thought it looked good when I read it.") A number of strings had been run across overhead, to which had been pegged cardboard poster sheets, with activities in texta outlined on them — a disaster quiz; four possible openings for disaster stories.

On another set of divider boards were pinned pockets with maths activities, answer sheets and so on; lists of volunteers for sports teams for the week, groups for using the microscope. On yet another cluster hung books the students had made, typed up by the mothers, then illustrated: the basis of their "Language Experience" work. On boards and blackboards round the walls were pictures, activities for particular groups, samples of students' work, handwriting displays ("writing of the week"). Shelves, low chairs and tables were clumped around the dividers, or more centrally placed within each area.

* * *

A secondary teacher, I was in this school for a week to learn more about primary schools. The school was unusual, small, "open-plan"; situated in a

Cathy Beavis is a secondary English teacher at present seconded to the Victorian Curriculum Services Unit K-12 Project.

fairly affluent area. It was free of many of the problems associated with size and language difficulties that characterized most schools I was used to. In this respect it was privileged and atypical. Nonetheless, I believed it could teach me a great deal about what happens in primary classrooms.

As part of my work looking at language curricula and transition, I wanted to learn more about the different experiences and teaching methods Year 7 students have had by the time they get to high school. I was curious about how they were used to working, what sort of work they were given, and how their time was organized. I wanted particularly to focus on their development in "Language", and on classroom organization; to get a perspective on the continuity (or lack of it) between primary and post-primary school as the student must experience it.

A second interest was in the primary teacher's world. It had sometimes seemed to me that the daily routine of a primary teacher must be both demanding (the constant change of activity, the patience needed to cope with apparently trivial worries and concerns from the children) and tedious (the monotony of the same class, day in, day out, and the low pitch, academically speaking, of the subject matter). I also knew, however, how great an attachment and respect many Year 7 students have for their old Grade 6 teacher.

This school, of about 250 pupils, was divided into three "units"; Unit A (Grades 5 and 6), Unit B (Grades 3, 4 and 5) and Unit C (P to 2). The majority of my time was spent in Unit A, which was taught by two teachers as a team. There were roughly fifty-five students in the unit. The timetable was fairly structured, and closely followed as far as I could see. The bulk of the teaching time was spent in the unit (although for sport and library periods, of course, the children went elsewhere) and with two main teachers (though specialist teachers such as art or science teachers came in).

Out of my week's experience I've focused on three areas: classroom organization; work in language, and school attitudes and values.

Classroom Organization

The class was divided into four fairly large groups for much of the time. On Tuesday morning before recess, for example, two groups have maths, one "Centres" (work from sheets or set by the teacher to do with maths, language or research work, done independently by the students, while the teacher worked elsewhere). The fourth group had art. Maths groups are streamed. Students know which group they are in and move to their areas at the end of assembly without much fuss. On my first visit, one group worked with a teacher on a "bingo" worksheet; the other had a test, which was followed by correction and discussion of the answers. In each case the students were seated fairly formally at tables, with the teacher "up front" using the board. The "Centres" group had a choice of work, and the art teacher came in to work in the "wet area" with the fourth group.

Within group organization of this kind, formal teaching still played an important part. The "Centres" group had some variety available to them, but

TIMETABLE – UNIT A

9.00	9.30	10.30	10.45	11.30	11.45	12.10 / 1.15	1.40	1.45	2.30	3.00	3.30
ASSEMBLY	Maths – Teaching Groups 2 & 4 / Centres 3; ART 1	HAND-WRITING	Library Group A; Listening & Speaking B	Library Group B; Listening & Speaking A	PHYS. A ED.	SERIAL	PHYS. MUSIC	ED. A / B		PHYS.ED. B / MUSIC A	
ASSEMBLY	Maths – Teaching Groups 1 & 3 / Centres 2; ART 4	Lib.B / Lib.A; Teacher 1; Lang Withdrawal; Comprehension Skills A / B			Lib. W/D; Centres B+	SING.ALONG	RESEARCH			RESEARCH	
ASSEMBLY	Maths – Teaching Groups 2 & 4 / Centres 1; ART 3	HAND-WRITING	Language Experience			SERIAL	C L U B A C T I V I T I E S			GYMNASTIC OPTION	
ASSEMBLY	Maths – Teaching Groups 1 & 3 / Centres 4; ART 2	Lib.B; Teacher 1; Lang W/D; Written Language Skills B / A			PHYS. ED. B; LIB. W/D; Centres A		SCIENCE			PHYS. ED. A / PHYS. ED. B; LIB. B / LIB. A	
ASSEMBLY	Maths – Teaching Groups 3 & 4 / Centres 1 & 2	HAND-WRITING	Language Experience; PHYS.ED. OPTION				RESEARCH; LIB. B / LIB. A			GYMNASTICS / SPORT	

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the exercises and activities offered were short and closely structured. Work done in these sessions was to be in a "Centres Book" which was periodically taken up and marked. When work was finished students could play draughts or one of the other board games stored on open shelves in the "Centres" area. Work here seemed to be geared to reinforcing or revising skills and topics taught more formally at other times. By and large students worked steadily without supervision (there were no real "behaviour problems") but at times to me they seemed over-inclined to "take it easy". The other side of that coin, however, was that they seemed to enjoy and take seriously the tasks they were set.

A second form of grouping occurred on occasions such as the session before lunch on Thursday, where a language withdrawal group operated (formal teaching in one section of the room for perhaps eight students) while another group went to the library and the rest worked with the other teacher on writing. The absence of one group or other — to the library or phys.ed. — or the teaching of that group by a specialist teacher within the unit area meant that the numbers the teachers had to deal with on most occasions were small. Obviously this facilitated individual attention. I found it curious to see grouping of this kind used to allow formal teaching to take place. Groups in secondary school, in my experience, are generally used as an alternative to formal teaching. It was clear, however, that a formal lesson to all fifty-five students at once would present great difficulties.

A third type of grouping, probably that with which secondary teachers are most familiar, was the formation of small groups and pairs on a friendship basis for work in language experience and research sessions. Work here was much as I was used to; groups of students reading and writing, drawing, chatting, making models, telling jokes and so on — working on "projects" of one kind or another over a period of several lessons.

Language

The organisation of "language" in the school was totally different! Students were constantly surrounded by language, and reading, talking, writing and listening all the time. Sessions devoted to specific aspects of language use were spread right through the timetable. There were times for writing, listening, speaking, comprehension skills, for library, for language experience, for withdrawal groups to work intensively on some area of difficulty. "Research" and assembly provided more occasions for comment and discussion, as indeed did almost all the sessions in their own way. This sort of organization seemed to allow for more explicit attention to language throughout the week than is usually possible on secondary timetables. The course of study for the unit, and the curriculum policy broke down the areas into "sub skills" in minute detail.

I sat in on a comprehension skills session, and on a withdrawal group. In each case the groups were run on formal lines. The "comprehension" group read a passage together, then individually wrote answers to literal and inferential questions. The teacher then led them through each question, discussing their answers with them. In the withdrawal group, about eight

students went through a spelling test of words learnt for homework with a common phonic pattern *(ie)*, then played games, collected others, and wrote sentences with them. These words had arisen from recurring difficulties in last week's words, which had been organized around "Making Hamburgers". Despite the formality of the session, the group was very relaxed, with individual students very supportive of each other. Everyone seemed to feel quite comfortable about approaching the teacher for particular help. These sessions were balanced by the less teacher-centred activities provided elsewhere.

The language experience sessions were very exciting. The first one I sat in on was in Unit B (Grades 3, 4 and 5). The idea of these sessions is for the child to write books in draft, and then fair copy. Once this is done they are typed up by volunteer mothers (the students specify type of print, which way the foolscap is to go and so on), bound, and returned for illustration. It is then displayed with the other students' books for general borrowing. The advantages it offers are numerous. It provides the student with an audience to write for, a reason to correct or redraft if necessary, relatively professional presentation, and genuine feedback as to how interesting or enjoyable his work is to his reading public.

In the class in Unit B, quality, quantity, topic and presentation varied enormously. Some students were writing six-sentence stories about themselves, some wrote "alphabet books". One girl had made a cartoon of a fish swimming into a shark's jaws, using texta on cards you could flick to convey movement. Several groups were working on gymnastics books (a month before the Olympics); one boy on the air force, one group on a paper (*The Sun*), a couple on recipe books, and a marvellous, detailed story about a horse with golden wings. I didn't know quite what to make of it. Concern was expressed privately about a girl who was not up to the others in her grade, but she was felt to be working at her own level for all that. The students appeared to feel no pressure in this respect; they worked very much at their own pace. I found it difficult to adjust to what seemed a very slow output, although the students seemed contented enough, and none exhibited the sort of "mental blocks" or antagonism towards writing I've come to expect from students "weak" at English. While the (Grade 5) horse story seemed equal to the best Year 7 ones, I felt uncomfortable about trying to get a perspective on the other work. I had a sense of students not really "pushing" themselves, and only hints here and there of the exhilaration writing can bring. However, this may well have been simply the result of being used to more mature students. The sessions in Unit A made a similar impression, though the level of their stories was closer to that of secondary students. The comfortableness they all seemed to feel about themselves as writers, however, and the pride many took in their work, would seem to provide a valuable base for future activities at more senior levels in the areas of writing and reading.

School Attitudes and Values

I began with an account of how striking I found the display of work in the administrative block. It was striking not only because it was vivid, and out of

the ordinary, but also because of what it suggested about how students' work was received. It provided a public forum, an alternative to simple marking. Making a model in connection with a project is far more reasonable and exciting if it is going to be part of a display, to be seen both by peers and outsiders. It is similarly reasonable to take meticulous care over a drawing, or over such niceties as punctuation and paragraphing, if such work is to function genuinely to interest and entertain in its own right. This concern to provide a wider context for students' activities characterized much of the school's organization. Such provision seemed to be a part of, rather than alternative to, more formal methods of evaluation.

Groups and units presented their work to each other. To some extent this was built in: skits were presented on Friday morning, for example. But perhaps the best instance of the sharing and support the school provided was what happened to Charlie. Charlie was a student in Grade 3 with quite serious language difficulties. He had done a project on electricity that he was terribly proud of. One lunchtime some of the staff were talking about it, and the great reception the other students in the unit had given him when he'd presented it. At the start of the afternoon session in Unit A, in walked Charlie, project in hand. It was at once arranged that he should read it to the group. At the end, they spontaneously applauded, and Charlie left beaming. The teacher and class then discussed both Charlie's achievement, and their response to it. This complex of attitudes, of teachers and students valuing each other's work and behaviour I found impressive. Though extreme, Charlie's wasn't an isolated case. The students were also supportive of weaker members of their own class, and took care to involve them in any games or activities. It would seem that such concern and "solidarity" is in part a result of being together for so long, in part it is the result of conscious efforts on the part of the staff and the school as a whole to foster such an atmosphere.

Obviously the teachers' detailed knowledge of their students has an effect on all the group does. I was less prepared for the effect of extensive parent involvement in the school. Teachers, parents and pupils seemed comfortable in each other's company; the development of the students was treated in the spirit of a joint enterprise. In small numbers, parents seemed constantly present, having morning tea in the staffroom, helping out in the office, covering books in the library – even bringing younger (pre-school) children in to class to chat with a teacher in a free moment. On a broader front, the school policy and organization involved parents socially and in the administration of the school, and in more mundane areas such as running the canteen and caring for the grounds. The sense of mutual respect and compatibility between parents and school, it seemed to me, rubbed off onto students' and teachers' attitudes both to each other, and to what they were doing.

Though much was strange, I left with a new sense of what schools could do, both at primary and secondary levels.

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