



**Summary and submission to the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
(VCAA) concerning the proposed Bridging English as an Additional Language
Study Design**

Submitted by the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English

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Preamble:

The aforementioned draft Study Design was received and discussed by the VATE Curriculum and Assessment committee in August 2014. The committee decided to consult VATE's membership through an online survey, highlighting concerns the committee believed teachers may have in using this Study Design to construct appropriate programs in their work places and with their student cohorts. The survey resulted in eight formal responses that inform the following summary and submission.



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In consulting its membership and preparing this submission VATE is conscious of the following terms of reference that the Study Development Panel was asked to address:

‘The VCE Bridging English as an Additional Language (EAL) Study Development Panel will develop a draft Unit 1 and 2 Study Design proposal in accordance with the VCAA *Principles and Guidelines for the development and review of VCE studies*. The proposal for this new study will be based on the demonstrated learning needs of senior secondary EAL students who have limited first-language and English literacy, whose needs are not being fully met within the existing VCE English/EAL Study Design. The role of the development panel is advisory and its proposed Study Design will be subject to endorsement by the Senior Secondary Curriculum and Assessment Committee (SSCAC) and approval by the Board of VCAA.

The panel will develop the draft Study Design, ensuring the study is benchmarked against similar studies in leading global jurisdictions. The study will be comprised of Units 1 and 2 only.’

VATE members were asked about the extensive glossary of key terms that is attached to the Study Design. This was overwhelmingly seen as either useful or extremely useful by responders, however, it was noted that if the glossary is intended to delineate knowledge to be demonstrated by students, then that should be made more clear in the Study Design. The glossary should ensure that EAL students and teachers have a strong understanding of key terms and concepts across a school’s subject offerings. A suggestion was put forward that key terms for each area of study would be of greater use.

A question concerning the appropriateness of the Study Design’s structure (Core studies, Unit 1; Elective studies, Unit 2) resulted in support from most responders but a minority expressed some concerns. The observation was made that the structure is different to Units 3 and 4 and may cause some confusion. The core studies and units, it was noted, could be the same as the Units 3 and 4 core studies; however, the focus could be as outlined in the Bridging EAL draft. One responder asserted that Units 1 and 2 should mirror Units 3 and 4 as it exposes those students undertaking Units 1 and 2 to an understanding of what will occur in the VCE. The responder added that she/he has Units 3 and 4 students who make connections between what they study in these units, which assists them with an understanding of what is required of them in Units 3 and 4.



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In thinking about the appropriateness of the content in Unit 1, responders, while largely supportive, were divided. Some concern was expressed that key knowledge and skills are the same for both Outcome 1 and Outcome 2, and that there should be varied emphasis to better assist differentiation of task design. A view was expressed that these outcomes should be embedded into units that are similar to Units 3 and 4 outcomes.

Responders agreed that the workload as reflected in Units 1 and Unit 2 is manageable. Requests were made for a few guiding assessment tasks, and even a list of suggested texts, in order to better understand what a unit of work might look like. It was noted that as the structure of this kind of class may well be markedly different to mainstream VCE English/EAL so the initial workload would be significant.

Seventy-five per cent of responders agreed that the draft Study Design is sufficiently clear about vocabulary building and language-in-use needs of students likely to undertake these units of study. Views were expressed that vocabulary use needs comments, with additional support from staff at the point of need.

Responders overwhelmingly agreed that the study is clear about the balance of written and oral skills a student likely to undertake these units should demonstrate, and also that the study's details cater sufficiently well for the range of English profiles of such students. On this latter point, it was noted that additional support should be expected from staff at a point of need. That variation in students' language profiles is certain is made very clear by the Study Design and this leaves open a very wide range of possibilities as to what might be deemed acceptable work. Teachers could be assisted with suggested texts and samples of assessment tasks.

Research (Miller and Windle, 2010) draws our attention to the needs of refugee-background students. While the stated intention for this proposed Study Design is to target 'senior secondary EAL students who have limited first language and English literacy, whose needs are not being fully met within the existing VCE English/EAL Study Design', the practical reality is that an 'EAL year lead-in' kind of Study Design such as the one being proposed may need to cater for refugee-background students and others in schools who offer significant challenges as English language learners.

VATE asks the question whether the panel recognises that recently arrived students who have experienced severely disrupted schooling may enter classrooms making use of the Bridging EAL Study Design. While such students are entitled to spend 12 months in intensive language schools or centres, secondary teachers who eventually are asked to teach such students may have limited familiarity with the teaching of early literacy and



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beginning reading skills. As well as this, the popular literacy frameworks employed in Victorian schools that may be intended to support the Bridging EAL study may struggle to support the literacy work that needs to be done with these learners.

VATE acknowledges that the intention of the proposed study is to assist students as they embark on VCE pathways but, in making the above observations, it wishes to draw attention to possible realities that schools may face when it comes to the variety of student backgrounds that teachers using this Study Design may encounter.

VATE suggests that it should be at this stage of the writing of the Study Design that the panel may seek to offer as much support to teachers as possible through imagining and acknowledging individual differences in the possible student cohorts that will benefit from it, as well as offering rich and varied support resources (including model units) for teachers.

At the same time, VATE supports the argument that courses informed by the proposed Bridging EAL Study Design should, as appropriate, encourage the pedagogy that demonstrates the kind of 'high challenge practice' that will assist EAL students as they move through a VCE English pathway. Senior EAL curriculum needs to be accessible yet also intellectually engaging for EAL learners whose knowledge of the English language may be at a relatively early stage. Teachers who take up the invitation from the kind of properly formulated Bridging EAL Study Design that we would encourage, will demonstrate the sort of high challenge practice that can establish a good learning framework for EAL learners. We note, in conclusion, that many such teachers will need significant professional learning and that the VCAA should play an important role here.

Acknowledgements:

- Miller, Jenny and Windle Joel: 'Second Language Literacy: Putting High Needs ESL Learners in the Frame' in *English in Australia*, Vol 45 Number 3, 2010.
- Alford, Jennifer and Jetnikoff, Anita: 'High Challenge Teaching for Senior English as an Additional Language Learners in Times of Change' in *English in Australia*, Volume 46, Number 1, 2011.