An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Background paper and brief for the review of English in Junior Cycle

October 2012

Contents

Context

English will be the first subject introduced as part of the new junior cycle in 2014. It will be published a year earlier, in September 2013. The work on developing a new curriculum specification is commencing with the development of this background paper and brief for the review of English.

The work of the subject development group for Junior Cycle English will be guided by the brief and will be supported by reference to the existing Junior Certificate English syllabus, the rebalanced syllabus (2008), and the commentary on English contained in *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011 - 2020* (DES, 2011). This background paper draws on current research and developments within the field of English teaching and learning, emerging understanding of literacy, and developments in curriculum specifications for English in other countries, included as Appendix A.

1. Introduction

This document provides a background to the development of a curriculum specification for Junior Cycle English. It presents a brief sketch of some of the major developments in the history of English as a school subject, especially those that were influential in shaping the discourse leading to the development of the 1989 syllabus, currently the subject of review in the context of the Junior Cycle Developments. The document then examines issues arising from the development of curriculum specification for English over the past twenty years and includes related background material in the areas of literacy generally and digital literacy in particular. Finally, the document indicates key areas for development in the curriculum specification.

2. Background

What is the subject we call English?

The subject English can be complex and multifaceted. What counts as English and English teaching is contested and can be a matter of struggle, conflict and compromise, even to the point that when discussing *the nature of English a certain vagueness often comes over those endeavouring to define it* (Marshall, 2000, p 2). English as a school subject did not exist as such before the end of the nineteenth century and in England the students in the exclusive grammar schools received their language training through study of the Classics. It is relevant to the subsequent history of English that those who initially advocated its introduction into schools did so for the benefit of children whom they felt would not to be able for the demands of the study of Latin and Greek. English as a school subject was offered initially to those who would not go on to university.

There is widespread agreement that it was the demand for universal literacy that facilitated the successful inclusion of English in the curriculum in England. This meant that, in competition with the classics, its methodological orientation was strictly pragmatic with the teaching of mechanical skills a priority. Hence its emphasis on grammar and formal skills in composition based upon classical models. In addition, the profound social changes in early nineteenth century Britain had begun to have an effect on people's perceptions of the school curriculum. Adamson's (1930) review of education in the nineteenth century reveals that there was a considerable measure of support for English being introduced into the schools (as a lower form of classical studies) but with an altered emphasis, that of providing through literature the formative experiences which pupils missed in their struggles with Latin and Greek. Thus was introduced into the subject English a duality which has persisted – the separation of attention into the pragmatic training in language skills and the aesthetic and ethical refinement to be afforded by the study of literature.

Mullins (2002) traces the origins of the subject English in Ireland to the decision of the British Government to establish the Intermediate Education Board in 1878.

> [At that time]…*in England itself there was no state provision of secondary education. Nor…did there exist as such a school subject with the title of English. From this it is clear that the introduction of such a subject into Ireland had a definite colonial or imperialist purpose*.

Furthermore, Mullins contends that the patterns of educational practice established during the colonial and post-colonial phases left a legacy of deep structures, which *shaped…perceptions about such matters as examinations, teacher role, and the nature of syllabus provision that were most influential in the subject's development* (pp. 104-105). In many respects, the early development of the subject English in Ireland parallels very closely its development in England. And that development has been significantly impacted upon by key movements in the history of English in education: from the Cultural Heritage model most closely associated with Matthew Arnold with its mission to protect the young against the muck and brass of industrialisation through the refining power of great literature, to the Progressive Movement with its child-centred emphasis on creativity, recognising the value of feeling and imagination, and psychic wholeness, to the Cambridge school of F.R. Leavis and I.A. Richards which established both the high status of English in the universities and the centrality of criticism as the proper mode of engagement with the literary text. The significance of the Cambridge tradition lay in the act of faith it made in the redemptive power of great literature and in the capacity of literary works alone to combat the debasing influences of modern culture. Furthermore, it cast the teacher in the role of exemplary reader whose function it is to correct the misinterpretations of his/her pupils. This conception of the role of the teacher was established largely through *Practical Criticism,* the seminal work by I.A. Richards (1929) and, writing in 1977 (*The Cool Web*), Margaret Meek observed that

> *…its influence on examinations and classroom teaching has been enormous and, in general, disastrous.*

Finally, in this brief review of some of the significant movements in the history of English, from the perspective of the Socio-Linguists we find that the dominant focus is on

communication and on the learner's language development. A key influence on the development of this model of English was the thinking of James Britton who placed language at the heart of all learning. He asserted that all language use could be divided into three categories, which although not separate could be identified as being distinct in their operation and purpose. He characterised them as:

1. Expressive language: the language of home and personal thinking and identity – a language that should not be criticised, a language that is central to all learning
2. Transactional language: the language for doing business in the world, characterised by definition and communicative effectiveness
3. Poetic language: language for its own sake – an artistic medium with its own non-functional ends and purposes.

Although not based entirely upon this view of language, the 1998 syllabus for Junior Certificate English owes much to this threefold characterisation of language advanced by James Britton and to the focus on the centrality of language acquisition through meaningful encounters with language across a wide range of contexts.

The Junior Certificate Syllabus 1989

Introduced in 1989, the Junior Certificate Syllabus describes the central focus of English as the development of *personal proficiency in the arts and skills of language*. This development is brought about organically through *three dynamically interrelated elements: personal literacy, social literacy and cultural literacy*. These elements provide the chief means of organising the course of study to be pursued, and they are supported in this by a focus on the development of the student's listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. The syllabus envisages that through their encounters with a wide range of language experiences and through engagement with a broad and diverse range of literary and non-literary texts over the three years of junior cycle, the students will achieve *personal growth through English*. This personal growth—intellectual, imaginative and emotional—is characterised by an ever-broadening mastery of language used in a variety of contexts and for a wide range of purposes. Building upon the knowledge and

skills developed in primary school, the student's growing mastery includes knowledge of a wide range of spoken and written language conventions, a critical and imaginative engagement with literature, the development of a keen sense of audience and purpose in writing, and the development of *a critical consciousness with respect to all language use*. In setting out the general aim of English in the junior cycle the syllabus attributes importance to the development of the student's oral language and to recognition of the interdependence of the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

> *The development of skills in speaking and listening should play as important a role as reading and writing skills in this English programme. Fostering an awareness in the student of the interrelationship of these skills, and of their central role in the learning and thinking processes is an integral element of personal growth through English.* (English Syllabus, 1989, 1.3)

Teachers have the freedom to choose the texts that their students will study and, in the context of this open course, teachers are encouraged to develop an appropriate programme integrating language and literature by reference to a set of Syllabus Objectives for each of the three literacies. In addition, the student's language development is to occur in the context of *an organic wholeness of experience*.

The syllabus outlines detailed Assessment Objectives including a range of written composition skills, language awareness skills, reading comprehension skills, oral and aural skills, and the capacity to read and respond to texts in discursive, creative and aesthetic contexts. The subject is to be formally examined at Ordinary and Higher levels, and the practice of dividing examination papers into separate sections (language and literature) *will be discontinued*.

Critique of the syllabus

The 1989 syllabus was perceived by many as a positive development offering a welcome move away from narrow prescription of texts to an open course that allowed teachers the freedom to develop imaginative opportunities for students to engage personally with the world of language and literature. While the aspirations were noble

and continue to animate many teachers, it is frequently argued that the experience for many learners has become increasingly hollow due to the range of chosen texts becoming ever narrower in the interests of success in an all-too-predictable examination. A composite report on English by the Inspectorate (2006), containing a synthesis of inspection findings over a two-year period, is particularly critical of what it identifies as a minimalist approach adopted in many schools in this regard.

> *With specific reference to the junior cycle, the texts chosen in all genres were frequently from a very small and predictable pool. In a significant minority of schools, students read only one novel over the three years of the course, and had a very limited exposure to poetry. A further concern was the poor exposure to drama among ordinary-level students, with film completely replacing rather than complementing the study of a play.*
>
> (*Looking at English*, DES, 2006, p23)

An appendix to the Chief Examiner's Report (Higher Level) for the same year provides a table of texts used in answers to the questions on studied texts, arranged by order of popularity, with the following commentary:

> *Work presented for examination is almost certainly a mere sample of what is more widely met in the classroom. Nevertheless, the dominance of two Shakespearian texts,* Romeo and Juliet *and* The Merchant of Venice *(85.4%) and of one modern text,* The Field *(71.7%), combined with similarly narrow – even if less striking – options across Poetry and Fiction, raises the question of whether the inclusive aspirations of the syllabus – as a vehicle for the promotion of broadly grounded personal, social and cultural literacy – are being best met at this level.*
>
> (Chief Examiner's Report, 2006, Appendix 1)

As part of work to address curriculum overload and overlap, in the context of junior cycle review, a Rebalanced Syllabus was completed as a draft syllabus for consultation in 2008. The principal change which this process brought to the syllabus was in the development of sets of detailed learning outcomes for Personal, Social, and Cultural literacy for each of the three years of junior cycle. This work on learning outcomes done through the rebalancing process will prove useful in the preparation of a new outcomes-based specification. The findings from the consultation were published in October 2008

and these findings have helped to identify the emerging issues set out in the next section.

Regarding the Junior Certificate syllabuses for English and Irish, the national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy refers to *a number of challenges…in relation to the implementation of these syllabuses as intended and their potential to develop the full range of literacy skills*. It asserts that *the lack of a bridge between the learner's experiences of English…in sixth class and first year at present means that first-year English…is often a missed opportunity for raising students' literacy levels*. It also questions whether the *open nature* of the syllabus in English is *fully exploited in classrooms due to a focus on teaching to the examination and an overuse of textbooks which largely promote lower-order thinking skills* (*Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*, 2011, p 51). This section of the strategy document concludes that students need to encounter a greater range of literary and non-literary texts than at present, that encounters with a greater range of texts will promote literacy achievement among boys, and that a revised syllabus should give *all students at junior cycle…opportunities to engage with and use a wide range of literary and non-literary texts in a range of media including digital media* (ibid, p 51-52).

Emerging issues in the development of the specification for English

The vision for language and literacy articulated in the 1989 syllabus has stood the test of time quite well, especially in terms of its resonance with the genre-based Leaving Certificate syllabus of 1998 and the broad aims of the national strategy for literacy and numeracy, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and for Life* (2011). While the syllabus has been well received in terms of the level of choice it offers to teachers and students, it has been criticised for its lack of specific learning outcomes and a perceived failure to pay systematic and explicit attention to the teaching and assessment of a range of literacy skills. In calling for its revision, the national strategy for literacy and numeracy notes:

> *…the opportunity provided by the syllabus to engage students with a range of literary and non-literary texts and develop their literacy skills, including their oral language skills, is not fully exploited in classrooms due to a focus on teaching to the examination and an overuse of textbooks which largely promote lower-order thinking skills.*
>
> (*Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and for Life*, p51)

Therefore, in developing a new specification for English a number of fundamental issues suggest themselves.

The definition and scope of literacy

The central aim of the 1989 syllabus is the development of the student's language and literacy; the definition and scope of literacy as understood in the syllabus needs to be broadened to include digital literacy and multimodal texts for example, and to incorporate a focus on 21st century literacy in general.

The open course

While the open course has been welcomed for the level of choice it offers, there is a perception that it has in fact contributed to a narrowing of experience of language and literature for learners. More importantly, it would appear that it has not promoted either **breadth** or **engagement** in young people's reading to a sufficient degree. The PISA 2009 report for Ireland[1] notes quite sharp declines between 2000 and 2009 in the frequency with which Irish students read for enjoyment and in the diversity of what they read. This is particularly significant in view of the importance of both breadth and engagement as factors that contribute significantly to achievement in reading. Consequently, consideration will be given to alternative approaches to outlining expected course content, both in terms of the kinds of texts for study and the manner in which they are chosen or prescribed.

The syllabus unit and an organic wholeness of experience

From a pedagogical perspective, the 1989 syllabus emphasised the teaching of a broad and complex range of language skills in an integrated way, where discrete elments

[1] http://www.erc.ie/documents/pisa2009main_nationalreport.pdf

would *form an organic wholeness of experience*. This aspiration was to be supported by the use of the *syllabus unit*, a planning and pedagogical organiser. But apart from the inclusion of some Sample Units in the teacher guidelines very little in the way of practical illustration of this organic approach to skills development was offered. It is commonly accepted that the *syllabus unit* quickly fell into disuse in schools (partly because it was not supported by the structure of the examinations) and teachers were left simply with the perception that 'everything was to be done together'. This remains as a significant lacuna in the existing syllabus, one that was not addressed fully in the rebalancing process. Recent research on literacy development in primary schools (*Literacy in Early Childhood and Primary Education 3-8 years*, NCCA, 2012) highlights the need for a **balanced literacy framework** in this regard, and this will need to be considered in the revision of junior cycle English.

The syllabus unit and the question of content

Crucially, Section 3 of the 1989 syllabus, dealing with the content of an English programme, referred to the syllabus unit as an important guide in establishing an **appropriate level of content**. While allowing that the duration of a unit was variable, the syllabus offered as a general guideline that *a unit might last a full term or half term*. In Section 3.6 the syllabus suggested that at Ordinary or Higher Level students *might encounter six* substantive units in the course of their three-year programmes. In this way the syllabus indicated that students at Higher Level would encounter *a wide and varied range of literary genres and other material*. The detailed working out of the implications of Section 3.6 was left to the sample units provided in the *Guidelines for Teachers* and their draft status—combined with the rapid demise of the syllabus unit as a course organiser—left the syllabus offering little in the way of specific requirement as to the breadth of the course to be pursued. This approach to indicating both the breadth and content of a course of study over three years has not been successful and **the question of prescription** (particular or suggestive) will be considered in the development of a new specification.

Assessment

Treatment of assessment in the 1989 syllabus was confined to the procedures and objectives for the examinations. The format of the final examination papers and the basis for discrimination between Higher and Ordinary Levels were outlined. In terms of the examination itself a commitment to significant change was heralded:

> *In the past, examination papers at this level were divided into two separate sections, language and literature. This practice will be discontinued, as such a distinction would run directly counter to the principles and philosophy underlying the new course.* (Section 5.3)

This ambition was not realised, and **issues relating to the summative assessment** of English, both in the State examinations and at school level, need to be fully explored in the context of the transition to **a summative test that will comprise 60% of the marks and school-based work that will count for 40%**. In this context samples of student work in support of teacher judgement will be generated. The planned introduction of standardised testing for students in second year will provide teachers of English with useful information on the progress of their students.

In addition, a revised specification for Junior Cycle English will need to pay considerable attention to the role of **assessment in support of learning**.

The importance of oral language

While the syllabus highlights the importance of listening, speaking, reading and writing as key language skills, and while it lays stress on the interdependence of these skills, it falls well short of the kind of explicit treatment of, say, as highlighted in recent research completed to support the development of the language curriculum for primary schools. It will be important that the findings of this research be considered during the revision of the syllabus. Indeed, the development of the specification for Junior Cycle English will need to ensure continuity with curriculum developments in primary education.

Before turning then to the parameters for the development of a new subject specification for junior cycle English it will be helpful to consider some broad perspectives on literacy and literacy theory.

3. Perspectives on Literacy

Historically, approaches to literacy in school settings follow distinct patterns of engagement that focus on particular views of the concept of literacy development. A review of the literature reveals multiple approaches and strands to literacy in schools. The following perspectives emerge as central:

1. Psycho-linguistic perspective

The psycho-linguistic perpsective on literacy development focuses on a whole language approach to literacy acquisition. It is grounded in Goodman's (1967, p. 2) oft-quoted statement that *reading is a psycho-liguistic guessing game*. The focus of this perspective is that literacy develops through authentic engagements with texts. The student uses grapho-phonic, syntactic and semantic cues in their engagement. Literacy learning occurs through increasing confidence in using these three cues to engage with language. This is often referred to as a *top-down* approach to literacy development.

2. Cognitive-psychological perspective

The cognitive–psychological perspective is often set in opposition to the whole-language approach referred to above. The focus is on the micro-processes of language through the teaching of phonics and drilled approaches to literacy acquisition. This approach begins with the smallest phonemes and graphemes of language and builds them up into words and parts of words. This is the *bottom-up* approach to literacy development. Viewing these perpectives as incompatible polar opposites is unhelpful.

3. Critical literacy perspective

Critical literacy is rooted in Freirian critical pedagogy where literacy is an integral element of democratic society. Barbara Comber says *critical literacies involve people using language to exercise power, to enhance everyday life in schools and communities, and to question practices of privilege and injustice* (Comber, 2001, p. 1). Critical literacy is often referred to as *reading the word and the world* (Hall, 2003; Larson & Marsh, 2005). The central aspect of developing literacy as critical practice is the development of the ability to read texts in terms of what they say (or do not say) from the perspective of social class, gender, race, ethnicity and disability. Processes of oppression, domination and subordination can also become infused within literacy issues and therefore educators need to remain vigilant with regard to inequitable practices that may emerge through curriculum and practice.

4. Literacy and new technologies

The digital turn is one of the defining characteristics of contemporary society and it has developed new literacies as well as transforming older literacies in terms of how we comprehend, express and interact with language. Various terms and definitions of such literacies are emergent through the literature. Common terms in current usage are *digital literacy, muti-literacies, techno-literacy, media literacy, new literacies* and other similar terms. **The paper will take a closer look at some of these definitions in the next section**.

5. Literacy as social practice

In this approach to literacy, the focus is on the dynamic and intertwined nature of literacy interactions in the world and the community The view of literacy as social practice sees “knowledge as a mutually constituted social, cultural and historical process” (Larson & Marsh, 2005, p. 101). In this view, the classroom focuses on the literacy practices that the student brings to the table and accepts that such literacy practices are cuturally situated. Literacy education is not about handing on a generic set of skills but rather about the collaborative production of specific cultural, social and personal literacies that stem from the life-world of the students. It is the practice of developing culturally situated

communities of practice and *highlights students' practices as valuable resources for curriculum* (Larson & Marsh, 2005, p. 101).

New Literacy Studies (NLS) is a theoretical positioning that takes the view that literacy is an emergent social practice and that *learning does not simply occur in formal or informal settings, or in or out of school, but also occurs in between, in everyday interaction as tools for building and maintaining social relations* (Larson & Marsh, 2005, p. 18). NLS foregrounds literacy as social practice and extends the concept of literacy, through the work of Brian Street (Street, 2003, 2006; Street & Lefstein, 2007), into ideological and autonomous conceptualisations. An autonomous view of literacy is where a society imposes a seemingly generic set of literacy practices, usually through schooling, that does not recognise cultural and social literacies that may depart from the normative view.

An ideological conceptualisation of literacy *offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another* (Street, 2003, p. 77). The emphasis is on the socially constructed nature of literacy practices. The socially constructed nature of literacy means that we must always consider issues such as cultural and class backgrounds in schooled literacy practices. Of course, these school practices must fuse with out-of-school practices and use them as productive forces rather than exclude them. It is in this context that the digital turn of contemporary society becomes particularly relevant to schooling practices and syllabus construction.

Students bring the digital world, and their experience of it, to the classroom door. It is an important tool of cultural production and literacy practices for each student and therefore it is a relevant contextual tool in the English classroom. **The digital world provides both the tools of engagement and the means to motivating engagement for post-primary students**. PCs, laptops, tablets, smartphones and other multimedia devices are the pen and paper of the future, even of today. Inevitably, these advances prompt us to develop and expand our approaches to literacy in the classroom and beyond.

The various theoretical perspectives outlined above all seem to carry elements of good practice in terms of their approach to literacy development and therefore the amalgamated model of Luke and Freebody (1999) seems practical and applicable in terms of Junior Cycle English. The next section provides a brief outline of this model.

The four resources model

Luke and Freebody's (1999) *four resources model* of literacy development is most useful. In it they describe four central areas for literacy education, four key areas of focus in literacy development and, by implication, literacy pedagogy:

- Code breaker (coding competence, word recognition)
- Meaning maker (semantic competence, focusing on the relationship between ideas in a text)
- Text user (pragmatic competence, focusing on how the reader can use a text, including options and alternatives)
- Text critic (critical competence, focusing on how the reader engages with and evaluates a text)

Viewing literacy development in this paradigmatically hybridised fashion is useful as it protects against the exclusion of particular models of literacy development. There are traces of psycholinguistic, cognitive, sociocultural and critical literacy theories in this model. Luke and Freebody's model provides room for all of the models referred to above and therefore provides an emergent model of literacy development that can be developed for use in school contexts.

As promised earlier, the next section of this document provides some background on digital literacy illustrative of its potential application to English.

4. Digital Literacy

Defining digital literacy

Contemporary Ireland is infused with the world of the digital. Our lives are populated by smartphones, tablets, touchscreens, laptops and desktops. Our modes of communication are shifting towards digital texts in all facets of our lives personally, socially, academically and professionally. The digital world is also the new home of the commercial world where services and products are traded and advertised in a dynamic, vast and ever-changing digital network that stretches across the globe. The internet dominates many of our actions and interactions throughout the various spheres of our lives and therefore it is also moving centre-stage in the sphere of the school. The digital world provides tools for literacy development but it also transforms the nature and context of our engagements with texts in a variety of genres, forms and formats. There is no doubt that the digital world is the new world and our approach to curriculum and assessment needs to be equally adaptive and dynamic in terms of how it accommodates, and contributes to, the digital revolution.

It is important, also, that we refrain from engaging in the dichotomous inter-generational arguments surrounding new technologies. The debate around digital usage often takes on the form of Prensky's (2001) conceptualisation of the *digital native* versus the *digital immigrant*. The native is the student who has been born and raised in the digital culture whilst the immigrant is the adult who is struggling to adapt, with various degrees of success, to the new way of being, interacting, expressing and learning provided by the digital environment. This dichotomous view of youth and adult world encourages unhelpful stereotypes with regard to digital culture and encourages separations that are unhelpful in classroom contexts as they serve to create divides between teachers and students in terms of their relationship to the digital world (Bennett & Maton, 2010; Selwyn, 2009). Younger does not necessarily mean more digitally adept, nor does older mean more digitally inept. Such dichotomies must be dispensed with in order to embrace an educational culture of the present that is forward-looking and engaged with digital

culture. Similarly, it is important that any conceptualisation of digital literacy must be considered within the context of the traditional literacy development perspectives which have developed to date.

Therefore, literacy is more than a set of definable skills or tools; it is a complex, ever-changing concept. There must be an awareness of what Larson and Marsh (2005, p. 43) refer to as the *complexities of contemporary practices in which children and young people are text producers and analysts in both in-school and out-of-school contexts*. The relevance of in-school and out-of-school contexts in constructing approaches to digital literacy is central here as there often tends to be a level of dissonance between these contexts in terms of student engagement with the digital world (Kennedy et al., 2012).

There has been a similar shift towards an awareness of digital reading literacies through PISA assessments where digital literacy has become a feature of comparative international literacy assessment. Irish student performance (15 year-olds) ranks as 8th of the 19 particpating OECD countries in the digital literacy assessment (OECD, 2011). It must be noted here that 65 countries participate in the overall PISA study and therefore the digital reading cohort represent a smaller sample (Cosgrove, 2011). Cosgrove et al. (2011) also highlight the fact that Irish students tend to engage with digital literacies with more frequency for low level tasks rather than for tasks directly related to school work. This is borne out in the study conducted by O'Neill and Dinh (2012, p. 4) where, for example, Irish students of age 11-16 *only 42% say they compare websites to judge the quality of information. This is substantially below the European average of 61%*. Such usage information is very relevant in terms of considering what we mean by digital literacy and how we can or should incorporate it into junior cycle English.

Digital literacy, much like traditional literacy in fact, has come to be defined through a plurality of 'literacies'. There is an acknowledgement that our mode of communication, expression and comprehension are multimodal and highly dependant on cultural and contextual situatedness. It may be useful to consider digital literacies in a similar vein to the 'constrained' and 'unconstrained' skills of literacy outlined in Paris (2005), and

expanded upon in *Literacy in Early Childhood and Primary Education (3-8 years)* (Kennedy et al., 2012). Digital literacies require the development of certain entry-level skills and tool manipulation that are the constrained skills of traditional literacy development (such as early print concepts, letter name knowledge, phonemic awareness and oral reading fluency) as well as keyboard knowledge, touchscreen inputting and all of the multimodal literacies of the digital world that incorporate traditional language-based literacies as well as visual, oral, aural, and movement literacies.

Digital literacies require an awareness of the mutimodal nature of literacies. Multimodality means that our literacies involve a use and understanding of communicative resources in tandem with language. These modes include *visual signs, notation systems, colour, layout, kinaesthetic and other ways of signifying meaning* (Street & Lefstein, 2007, p. 235). It is clear from all definitions of multimodality that the digital world, as it pertains to literacies, often fuses a variety of modes of expression and communication with traditional language-based modes.

Assessment and digital literacy

If, as indicated above, the digital world can be integral part of English in junior cycle then this is true also with regard to assessment. The digital world is part of our social and cultural world rather than just a tool of it. It contributes in terms of how we engage with the world with regard to comprehension, communication and expression.

The idea of the e-portfolio, or digital portfolio, is a useful concept to be considered in relation to junior cycle English. It is envisaged that second year would be a suitable stage in junior cycle to develop portfolio content. Such a digital portfolio, building on the ideas above, could contain digital demonstrations of learning reflective of the learning outcomes in the specification. The portfolio is an established learning and assessment tool that can be, and has been, used in a variety of contexts. Given previous discussions with regard to the centrality of the digital world, the portfolio element of the

junior cycle framework is a natural point of interaction between an English subject syllabus and the digital world. It allows for the development of assessment artefacts through a variety of media. This also facilitates a shift towards student-centred constructivism and the development of personal ownership over student learning whilst simultaneously contributing to the development of collaborative relationships between teachers and students. Digital portfolios could allow for the development of oral language artefacts such as recordings, digital presentations such as PowerPoint, speech performance, interviews, narratives and oral critiques amongst other things.

5. Subject specification in the new junior cycle

While some may have distinct characteristics, arising from the area of learning involved, all junior cycle specifications, for subjects and short courses, will have a number of features in common. They will

- be outcomes-based
- reflect a continuum of learning with a focus on learner progression
- set out clear expectations for learning
- provide examples of those expectations for learners
- include a focus on key skills, literacy and numeracy
- strive for clarity in language and for consistency in terminology.

To improve the connection with learning and teaching in primary school, these features are shared with the Primary Curriculum. In general terms, for each curriculum component involved, the specification is designed to incorporate a clear vision (aim and rationale), a setting out of how progress in learning is to be achieved, and support for planning, learning and teaching.

The specification for each junior cycle subject and short course will include:

1.	Introduction to junior cycle	This will be common to all specifications and will summarise the main features of the Framework.
2.	Aim	A concise aim for the subject or short course will be presented.
3.	Rationale	This will describe the nature and purpose of the subject or short course, as well as the general demands and capacities that it will place on and require of students.

4.	Links with ▪ Statements of learning ▪ Key skills ▪ Literacy and numeracy	How the subject or short course is linked to central features of learning and teaching at junior cycle will be highlighted and explained.
5.	Overview ▪ Strands ▪ Learning Outcomes	An overview of the subject or short course will illustrate how it is organised and set out the learning involved in strands and learning outcomes.
6.	Expectations for learners	These will be linked with groups of learning outcomes of the subject or short course online and will relate to examples of student work. The examples will be annotated, explaining whether the work is in line with, ahead of, or behind expectations for students.
7.	Assessment and certification	This section will refer to both formative and summative assessment. It will outline the assessment component/s through which students will present evidence of learning on an ongoing basis, and for certification purposes. In the case of subjects, this description of assessment will be supplemented by detailed assessment support material and sample tasks and tests for use in schools from second year onwards.

6. Brief for the review of Junior Cycle English

The review of Junior Cycle English will involve developing a specification in line with the template above.

The specification will be at two levels, higher and ordinary.

It will be designed to be taught in approximately 240 hours.

It will be structured or organised around strands and learning outcomes.

The key skills of junior cycle, as appropriate, will be embedded in the learning outcomes of the specification.

The basic skills of literacy and numeracy, as appropriate, will be promoted through specific aspects of the specification.

It will be completed for Council by June 2013.

The review of Junior Cycle English will take account of current research and developments within the field of English teaching and learning, emerging understandings of literacy, and the need for alignment with the ongoing development of an integrated language curriculum at primary level.

The review will address continuity and progression. It will consider whether first year English should have a particular focus on consolidating learning from primary school and will ensure that the outcomes of Junior Cycle English provide an effective preparation and foundation for the study of English in senior cycle.

More specifically, the review will address:

- How the specification, in its presentation and language register, can be strongly learner-centred, having a clear focus on what learners can do to develop and demonstrate their language skills and achievements.

- How the learning outcomes will specify clearly what students will be expected to achieve.

- How the specification for English in junior cycle will connect with the learning outcomes in the revised curriculum for language in the primary school curriculum.

- How the course will be organised; whether it will continue to be structured around the three elements of personal, social and cultural literacy or whether other elements or categories such as Language, Literature and Literacy, or Oral Language, Reading and Writing would be adopted.

- The specific language skills that will be emphasised; whether the existing skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing should be widened to include skills such as viewing, presenting and creating.

- The prescription of texts and whether the new specification should *prescribe* texts, *suggest* texts or continue with the *open choice* of texts.

- The definition of texts, particularly literature, and whether the definition should be broad enough to include multimodal texts and more diverse sources of literature.

- In general terms, how student literacy will be effective in building the receptive and productive skills of language in a wide variety of written and spoken contexts

including spoken language, printed text, viewing, reading, visual text and broadcast media, and digital media

- Assessment of English; specification for the formative ongoing assessment of student learning as well as the two assessment components, examination and school work, linked to the National Certificate at Level 3. The latter task includes describing the assessment methods used to generate and gather the school work/evidence of learning and providing information on how it is to be judged and submitted for the qualification.

- How the specification can include samples of student work and learning that demonstrate achievement/s described in the learning outcomes and that provide support for teacher judgement.

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Appendix A

Curriculum specification for English

Comparative information on the structure and learning outcomes of English curricula in other jurisdictions; New Zealand, Canada (Alberta), South Australia, and Wales

1. Curriculum structure

The principal modes of language use are similar across the jurisdictions, namely oral, reading and writing.

Differences in approach to structuring a curriculum may be seen in the emphasis each gives to overarching descriptions of language learning areas often called *'strands'.* Some emphasise them as functional areas, e.g. *making meaning/creating meaning; s*ome give stronger emphasis to specific categories of language study e.g. l*anguage, literature, literacy;* others give precedence to the essential language skills, *listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and presenting.*

These *'strands'* are further elaborated using varying terminology and different combinations. For example in New Zealand the structure is based on *two Inter-connected strands: making meaning (listening, speaking, viewing)* and *creating meaning (speaking, writing, presenting).*

In Canada (Alberta) the usage is six '*language arts' – listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and presenting.* These language arts are seen as completely interdependent.

South Australia employs '*three interconnected strands*'; *Language (knowing about the English language), Literature (understanding and appreciating, responding to, analysing and creating literature) and Literacy (expanding the repertoire of English usage).*

Content descriptions in each strand are grouped into sub-strands. For example, the strand of 'Language' comprises *Language variation and change, Language for interaction, Text structure and organisation, Expressing and developing ideas.*
In the Welsh curriculum there are *'three elements'; Oracy, Reading and Writing* – a Programme of study is set out for each of the elements comprising *Skills (for use of language) and Range (specifying actual content).*

The 1989 English syllabus in Ireland contains three interdependent elements, *Personal literacy, Social literacy and Cultural literacy* and this characterisation of literacy is retained in the Rebalanced Syllabus (2008). The briefing paper has noted the advantages and disadvantages of this structure particularly with regard to the teaching and assessment of a range of literacy skills.

The definition of 'text' in these jurisdictions is broad (spoken, written, visual or multimodal) and acknowledges children's capacity to create and communicate through a wide variety of texts including the use of technologies. Visual and digital literacy are commonly acknowledged as being key elements of literacy.

Recommendation
This may lead the committee to examine how the new syllabus might broaden the definition of 'text', the relative value of different kinds of 'texts', the importance of the role of ICT in characterising teaching and learning and the space envisaged for the beauty of language.

2. Learner expectation or outcomes

Objectives in language learning are expressed in most jurisdictions as expectations or outcomes, whether general or specific. The practice in some is to set out in detail the desired outcomes for children at the end of each grade or class level, and to do so under the heading of language mode or function. The format of these statements of outcome is to describe the knowledge, skills and attitudes that learners will be able to demonstrate at the relevant class/grade level.

The New Zealand curriculum employs *The Literacy Learning Progressions* which describes the specific literacy knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students draw on in order to meet the reading and writing demands of the curriculum. These are detailed outcomes for each year/grade.

Another practice (e.g. Alberta) is to prescribe five general learning outcomes which are later elaborated with more specific outcomes, e.g.
General Outcome 1
Students will listen, speak, read, write, view and represent to explore thoughts, ideas, feelings and experiences.
1.1 Discover and explore
1.2 Clarify and extend

The practice in South Australia is to specify learning outcomes for a range of engagements with a wide range of texts. The organising principle is the statement of *'key ideas'* followed by 5 or 6 specific learning outcomes for each, e.g.
Key Idea: Students choose and compose a range of written texts which explore different perspectives about local and some global issues. They apply an understanding of context, purpose and audience to their own writing.
Key Idea: Students respond to increasingly complex ideas and information and examine diversity of opinion when listening to a range of texts. They critically and creatively produce a range of spoken texts about topics and issues for a wide range of audiences.

In Wales, '*attainment targets' for oracy, reading and writing* are set out. For example, by fourteen years, the most able pupils are expected to have attained the following in *writing*.

> *Pupils' writing shows the selection of specific features or expressions to convey particular effects and to interest the reader. Flair and originality is evident within their written work. Literary writing shows control of characters, events and settings and shows variety in structure. Non-literary writing is coherent and gives clear points of view. They structure their arguments, offering evidence consistently. The use of vocabulary and grammar*

enables fine distinctions to be made or emphasis achieved. Writing shows a clear grasp of the effective use of punctuation and paragraphing. Work is legible and well presented.