

Junior Cycle English: guidance and early insights from teachers enacting the curriculum

Contents

Introduction	4
Achieving balance: learning outcomes and text guidelines	4
Suggestions from teachers	5
Oral communication and the Collection of Student Texts	7
Experiences and transitions	8
Assessment and Reporting	9
Conclusion	10
Appendix	11
References	

Introduction

The primary source document for teachers of English enacting the curriculum is the *Junior Cycle English specification*. Two additional NCCA supports are available on www.curriculumonline.ie: *Guidelines for the Classroom-Based Assessments and Assessment Task* and examples of student work from across the three years of Junior Cycle English. JCT supports for Junior Cycle English are available at www.jct.ie/english/english.php and include resources in relation to planning, teaching and assessment, writing as a process, oral language strategies and prescribed texts.

In response to requests from teachers, this document has been prepared as an additional support.

In order to compile this document, the NCCA consulted a small number of English teachers during the summer of 2016, regarding their early experience of enacting the curriculum in practice. These early insights offer concrete suggestions to English teachers, from English teachers, on possible approaches to structuring teaching and learning experiences for students. These insights also register some challenges encountered. In autumn 2017, when an entire cycle of the specification has been taught, the NCCA will engage in a more extensive consultation and review with teachers of English.

Achieving balance: learning outcomes and text guidelines

The curriculum specification for Junior Cycle English emphasises how language can promote students' personal growth, social development and participation in society; can empower students to discover information, develop thinking and express feelings and ideas; can enhance and deepen their appreciation for literature; and can help students to further develop their competence, confidence, knowledge and command of language, empowering them to contribute to political, social and cultural life, as thoughtful and active citizens. In pursuit of these aspirations, the specification reaffirms that students should have *a wide and varied experience of texts that stimulate, engage, inspire and challenge them* and that,

the language skills being developed by students in Junior Cycle English are for the most part unconstrained skills that need to be frequently revisited and reinforced. Therefore, care will be needed to find a balance between choosing a sufficiently broad range of texts and providing learners with a variety of language experiences and opportunities to develop the range of skills envisioned in the learning outcomes (Specification, p11)

Achieving this balance between:

- literary and non-literary texts explored;
- the knowledge, understanding and skills developed (as outlined in the learning outcomes) through a variety of language experiences;

And

- the frequency with which these skills are reinforced (in different texts/contexts)

was described as challenging by the teachers surveyed, with variation in how positive / negative their experience of this challenge had been.

Achieving balance: suggestions from teachers

Identifying what the focus of the learning would be in exploring a text was viewed as crucial:

The key thing, I find, is to work with the learning outcomes, concentrate on building knowledge and skills and not necessarily trying to cover every learning outcome with one poem/text. One poem could be used for developing a personal voice, another could be used to engage in meaningful discussion and another for a written task, etc.

Identifying the relevant learning outcomes mitigates against feeling that every text must be exhaustively explored. It also preserves the organic wholeness of the text whilst allowing for treatment in a focused way on specific aspects of the knowledge, understanding and skills central to English, as outlined in the learning outcomes.

The specification for English suggests that ‘*a year’s work might be organised around themes and/or central texts with other texts studied in broad contextual relation to them*’. Some teachers did not see this as particularly ‘new’ to their practice, whilst for others, it was a significant shift:

A huge change in my approach to JC English can be found in the planning. In the past the plans were based on content, for example a novel. Now, we take a thematic approach. The theme could be war and during the weeks allocated I would explore a number of texts associated with war. So I would examine a poem, a drama extract, a short film, diary entry and practise some non-literary texts too.

An ‘anchor text’ or ‘central text’ approach to planning (whether thematic or not) was seen as helpful when it foregrounds decision-making about the focus of the learning; about the estimated time to be spent exploring texts; and about which texts will form the backbone of the unit, whilst other texts

complement that learning and/or *provide opportunities for students to create their own texts in response to those studied (Specification, p10).*

In making decisions about learning, the emphasis was on providing '*a wide range of opportunities for students to have meaningful and stimulating language experiences across a broad range of contexts*'

This wasn't a huge leap for us in terms of two novels [in second and third year] but a second play might be one of the things that's putting teachers under pressure - but there is the option there of an extract [or extracts from one or more plays]... I did the first part of Brian Friel's Lovers (Winners and Losers) with my students - even though we had intended to do the complete text. I felt confident that my students still had a "broad experience of the dramatic form" so I was happy with that decision.

Teachers welcomed clarification that there was no 'fixed' number of weeks in which a novel 'must' be completed, but that this was a matter for teachers' professional judgement. Decisions in this regard depend on the novels chosen, the balance of reading aloud/independent reading envisaged, the other texts explored in broad contextual relation to the novel (and written in response to it), the focus of the learning and, as a result, the time allocated in the yearly plan.

Approaching the learning outcomes as an open-ended starting point and/or as a compass to orientate the learning, was generally viewed as helpful. Whilst the learning outcomes were viewed, in some cases, as quite dense, the overlap and interaction between them offered interesting insights. For example:

I feel that in my efforts to untangle some of the learning outcomes, I have approached old material from a different angle and that's been a really positive experience for me and for the students. For example, I used to teach register without ever calling it register and I would begin with either formal / informal letters or tabloid and broadsheet newspaper articles. My need to teach register in spoken contexts sent me first to spend time on formal and informal conversations, before ever approaching register in writing. I feel like I was missing a really obvious first step.

Through this variety of learning experiences, the teacher felt confident that over time, her students would gradually deepen their knowledge and understanding of register. They would also strengthen their ability to select an appropriate register for their own language uses, though clearly students would come to this learning with variation in their prior knowledge (e.g. the size and breadth of their existing vocabulary).

However, despite the holistic, generic nature of the learning outcomes, some concerns were expressed that the learning outcomes could be '*reduced down to commodities to be ticked off, like a recipe*' and that, were this the case, the experience of Junior Cycle English and the capacity for it to enhance students' personal growth in the subject could be significantly diminished. Teachers thus re-

iterated the importance of taking an integrated approach to oral language, reading and writing, as outlined in the specification (p9).

Conflicting observations emerged in relation to the time allocated for Junior Cycle English. A number of teachers cited the minimum of 240 hours to be allocated to the teaching of JC English over the three years of Junior Cycle as contributing, along with other factors, to their sense of not having enough time. It is important to note that this is a recommended minimum. Flexibility is provided in the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015 for the timetabling of additional classes of English if the school feels that it is in the best interests of its students. Some teachers also lamented the expansive nature of the text guidelines:

There's not enough time to cover everything adequately. We have to do more in the same time. This means that the course encourages surface learning, rather than in depth analysis.

However, this perspective was challenged by other teachers, who felt that every text does not need to be exhaustively explored for students to have rich learning experiences. For example, students could spend three classes exploring dialogue in a short story and gain a deeper understanding of how authors use the rhythms of everyday speech to create convincing characters. Equally, students could spend seven classes reading and discussing a different short story, and then writing a short story of their own, with the emphasis being placed on students' personal growth through encounters with literature and on developing their critical thinking, discussion and creative writing skills. Neither approach necessarily leads to 'superficial' (or indeed in-depth) learning, but rather builds subject knowledge and skill in English, albeit with a slightly different focus to the learning in each case. For these teachers, an attempt to '*do everything in depth with every text*' was ultimately more likely to lead to superficial learning than the time allocation, the text guidelines or the learning outcomes themselves. The teachers who felt the specification was not expecting too much across the three years of Junior Cycle English also emphasised that students' learning and development in English would continue on beyond junior cycle and indeed beyond school. From this perspective, the learning outcomes were a compass but not an absolute end point and the emphasis was on helping students to advance their learning.

Ultimately, it was agreed that it is too soon to know whether the English specification, in its combination of learning outcomes and text guidelines, within a 240-hour timeframe, is too extensive and demanding. In the meantime, it remains important to continue regularly gathering feedback and requests for clarification from teachers, through JCT, the NCCA's structures and other sources of feedback.

Note also that whilst the primary purpose of the examples of student work published on www.curriculumonline.ie is to indicate the national standard in Junior Cycle English, these examples also offer insights into how teachers have taken an integrated approach to combining the learning outcomes with texts to create a variety of rich learning experiences for their students. As such, they continue to be an important source of support for teachers in seeing how other teachers are using the new specification to inform teaching and learning in Junior Cycle English. These examples are being added to on a continuous basis.

Oral communication and the Collection of Student Texts

The potential for classroom talk to deepen students' appreciation of literature and to help them hone and develop their thinking skills, through effective questioning and discussion, has long been recognised by English teachers.

I'm definitely more focused on the world of oral language. The fact that oral communication has been put on an equal footing in the three strands has given me more freedom to go down that avenue, without feeling that students (or parents) will question my priorities. I feel that the value of the oral work I always enjoyed doing with my classes has now been recognised...

Building on existing good practice, English teachers are embedding opportunities for students to express their opinions and develop familiarity with a range of communication formats from first year, thus scaffolding students' oral language development, so that the oral communication Classroom-Based Assessment is a continuation of their learning to date, rather than a stand-alone event. Teachers suggested that integrating the study of language and literature (for example, interview a character in a novel/film, read/perform poetry and drama) was a good way to simultaneously deepen students' textual analysis, thinking and communication skills, and their familiarity with various communication formats.

One concern expressed was the way in which the media were inclined to use the terms 'oral communication' and 'oral presentation' interchangeably. In some cases this had led to a belief that students must make a presentation; must complete it alone; and must stand at the front of the class to do so. The element of choice – speak with or without notes; alone or in a pair or in a group; sitting or standing; in an interview format, or through a performance, presentation or response to stimulus material – was viewed as a positive aspect of the first Classroom-Based Assessment which, if overlooked, could negatively impact on the experience for both students and teachers. Familiarity with the Guidelines for the Classroom-Based Assessments was viewed as key to achieving this clarity.

Whilst the first cohort of students have not yet completed their second Classroom-Based Assessment, the Collection of the Student's Texts, taking a gradual and nuanced approach to building up student confidence and ability as writers / creators of texts was an aspect of existing good practice that teachers emphasised:

Not every piece of work needs to be drafted, re-drafted, edited. Students will be at this age finding their feet and developing their style. Allow students... to develop certain pieces [or] park that piece of work and develop another.

Teachers spoke of modelling the process of writing from first year onwards; consciously building upon students' experiences of writing in various genres in primary school; and experimenting with different text forms / genres so that students had opportunities to respond imaginatively as well as critically to texts. It was noted that approaching writing as a process sometimes requires slowing things down to allow time for reflection, drafting, oral and/or written feedback and, where appropriate, time to re-draft sentences or sections of a piece the student has created. In this context, it was felt that English Departments might plan certain 'anchor genres' or text forms which all students would read and have an opportunity to creatively model, but that it would not be helpful if this became a fixed or prescriptive list, as such a list could constrain teacher agency and limit teachers' capacity to respond to the learning needs of their students.

Assessment and Reporting

The range of student learning in Junior Cycle English now being captured and reported on in the JCPA was broadly welcomed. The more holistic picture of student learning reported to parents in the JCPA was viewed positively, as it was felt the combination of Oral Communication, the Collection of the Student's Texts followed by the Assessment Task and the final exam would provide '*a more meaningful representation of a student's progress*' than was previously the case. However, some concerns were expressed about the number of assessment elements.

The final exam was viewed as presenting both challenges and opportunities. Expecting students to adapt their knowledge and skills to the exam tasks that appear in any given year was viewed as necessary. However, it was acknowledged that, as has always been the case, this could be challenging for students.

I liked the layout. If the learning outcomes were understood [and] fully engaged with then students could perform well.

Some of the elements which freaked me out were just differentiators... and once I realised that and accepted it, I was able to relax more.

I liked the layout of the papers and the fact that they will vary year on year [but] we will be sending our students in hoping they will be able to handle whatever eventuality that occurs.

In the old course, media studies was like the wild west, you never knew what might come up... so there's a temptation to romanticise the old course and say we covered every element or everything that might possibly come up, but that's not true. Nor should we try to do that.

Some reservations were expressed in relation to the number of tasks on the sample papers relative to the two-hour timeframe, and the inclusion of multiple choice questions. However, it was accepted that test items generally encompass a range of question types and seek to assess at a range of difficulty levels. The Collection of the Student's Texts as the 'home' for extended writing tasks in Junior Cycle English was acknowledged as a coherent reason for not including lengthy extended writing tasks in the two-hour exam, though some participants retained reservations in relation to this.

The unfamiliarity of the format caused some anxiety, though it was acknowledged that this is a common experience, irrespective of the subject, whenever a new curriculum is introduced.

There may be a lot more doubt for students going in to exams. I feel as teachers we will be able to give them less direction and less reassurance as we are sending them into an exam without much exam strategy technique. Even though I feel like we will have covered the course, I still feel like it will be difficult for my students to know how to use these skills.

Nonetheless, the fact that student learning was being captured in a variety of ways was viewed in largely positive terms:

Students' ability to apply their learning in different contexts is key. It has happened lots with the old system, where a student has a bad day in the exam and it doesn't reflect how good they are at the subject. But now there's such a record of their learning across three years.

Experiences and transitions

Whilst the transition to a new curriculum inevitably presents challenges, teachers emphasised that there was significant continuity between how they enacted both the 1989 Junior Certificate English syllabus and the new curriculum specification for Junior Cycle English:

I'm still focused on developing my students' literacy skills. I'm still trying to encourage them in their imaginative and technical abilities as writers. I'm helping them to recognise tone and style in others' writing and to inject their own writing

with personality, tone and verve when appropriate. And I'm still asking my students to look at the importance of theme, plot and characterisation.

In articulating their hopes for the new curriculum, English teachers emphasised the intrinsic importance for students of experiencing Junior Cycle as a valued phase of education in and of itself, rather than simply as a preparation for the next phase:

Hopefully students will be more competent readers, writers, speakers and listeners and that they will be confident in taking responsibility for their own learning. They will have a greater sense of ownership of texts and not feel the need to regurgitate notes.

Hearing the students present in class is something that I find tremendously beneficial both to me as a teacher and to him/her as a student. A student gains in confidence (usually) and is encouraged to share something that he/she feels passionately about.

The extent to which Junior Cycle English will give students an appropriate grounding in the subject discipline at Senior Cycle was also discussed:

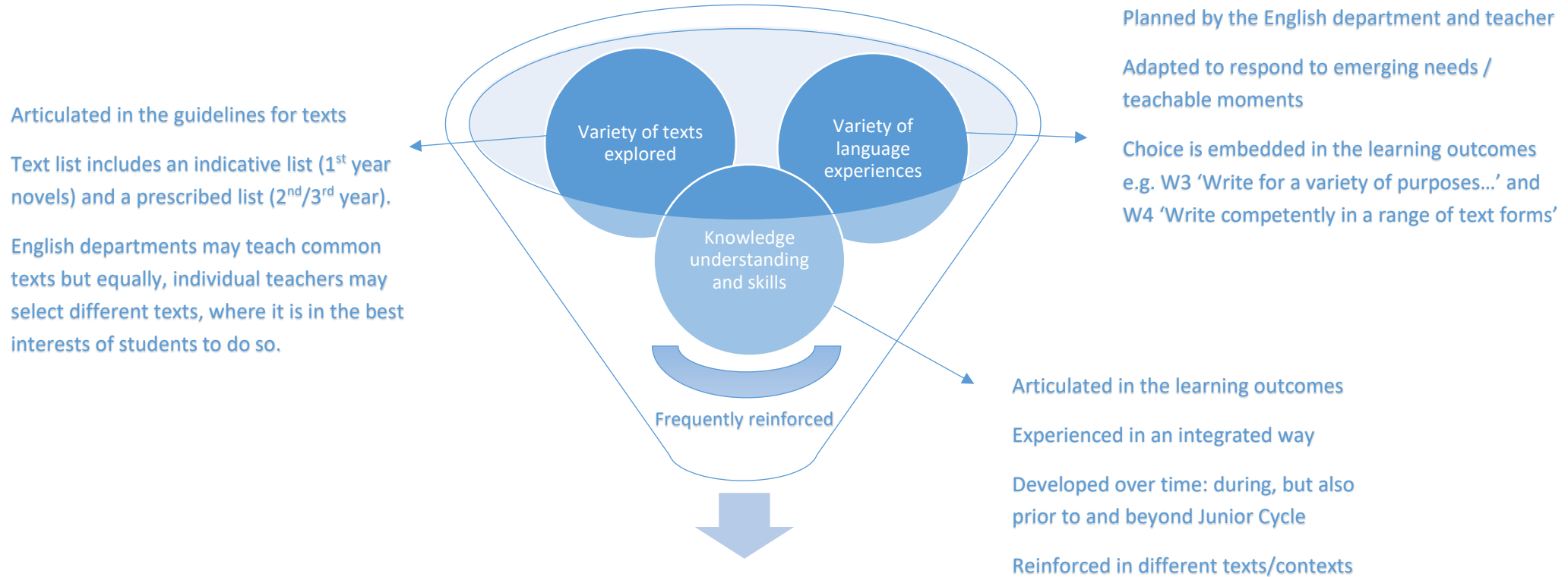
Students of the new Junior Cycle English will cope with the demands of senior cycle English better as they will have had more experience with a greater variety of texts. They will have written in a greater variety of genres too. They will have a better comprehension of those genres and will not be such strangers to studying film. Giving their own opinions and comparing characters/texts won't be such an alien experience if they have been afforded this opportunity already at junior cycle.

Challenges I think might emerge when students transition to a curriculum that depends to a greater extent on a single summative assessment and an exam that is over five hours long [sic].

Conclusion

Whilst the curriculum specification outlines a vision for Junior Cycle English, this vision can only be realised by teachers and students. The early insights in this document offer some suggestions for achieving praxis in the classroom and have been collated for use during the school year 2016/2017. When an entire cycle of the specification has been taught, the NCCA will engage in a more extensive consultation and review with teachers of English. In the interim, feedback in relation to the specification, the Classroom-Based Assessments and the final assessment will continue to be collected and collated on a regular basis by JCT and communicated to the NCCA, the SEC and the Department of Education and Skills. All feedback will be used as part of the normal review processes which follow the introduction of a new specification. The NCCA will also continue to work with English teachers to gather and publish further examples of student work as teachers and students enact the subject specification for Junior Cycle English.

Appendix 1



Achieving balance in Junior Cycle English

References

Curriculum specification for Junior Cycle English. Retrieved October 2016 from <http://www.curriculumonline.ie/Junior-cycle/Junior-Cycle-Subjects/English>

Junior Cycle English Guidelines for the Classroom-Based Assessments and Assessment Task. Retrieved October 2016 from <http://www.curriculumonline.ie/Junior-cycle/Junior-Cycle-Subjects/English>

Framework for Junior Cycle 2015. Accessed October 2016 at: <http://www.curriculumonline.ie/Junior-cycle/Curriculum>

Examples of student work. Accessed October 2016 at: [http://www.curriculumonline.ie/Junior-cycle/Junior-Cycle-Subjects/English-\(1\)/Examples-of-Student-Work](http://www.curriculumonline.ie/Junior-cycle/Junior-Cycle-Subjects/English-(1)/Examples-of-Student-Work)

English section of JCT website. Accessed October 2016 at: <http://www.jct.ie/english/english.php>