

BLOOM'S TAXONOMY APPLIED TO NATIONAL CURRICULUM STRANDS (Content Descriptions) & NSW OUTCOMES IN YEAR 9

(Year 9 was chosen as the mid-point of secondary schooling, avoiding national issues around the year in which secondary schooling begins.)

Table 1: Frequency of verbs (or other words & word combinations) that align with Bloom's taxonomy.

This illustrates certain patterns with regards to what students are expected to know and do. It is important to recognise that, historically speaking, content in English has been understand as what students are expected to know *and* to be able to do (see the following note).

Note: the Language content descriptions contain no verbs, breaking with the historical nexus in English studies between theory and practice (*and related ideas*: process and product *or* responding and composing *or* learning to do and learning about) (see Pope, 2002) and adding extra emphasis to lower order skills in the national curriculum (see Tables 2 and 3).

Cognitive Level	NC Literature	NC Literacy	Totals	NSW Outcomes	Totals
Knowledge	Identify	Identify -2 Retrieve Select	5 (=17%)	Selects -2 Describes -2	4 (=15%)
Comprehension	Explain	Explain – 2 Interpret Build Infer	6 (=20%)	Responds Understanding Interpretation - 2 Explains	5 (=19%)
Application	Explore	Speculate Listen Plan Draft Proofread Use	7 (=23%)	Uses – 4 Transfers	5 (=19%)
Analysis		Analyse	1 (3%)	Critical analysis Thinks critically	2 (=7%)
Synthesis	Create Experiment	Create -2 Synthesise	5 (=17%)	Composes Experiments Investigates relationships Adapts	4 (=15%)
Evaluation	Reflect on Appreciate Evaluate	Conclude Evaluate - 2	6 (=20%)	Critically assesses Questions Challenges Evaluates Reflects on Assesses	6 (=23%)

Table 2: Frequency of verbs (or other words & word combinations) that align with Bloom’s taxonomy as they appear in the content elaborations for the Language strand in Year 9.

Note: it has been necessary to analyse the content elaborations for Language in this manner as the content descriptions for Language do not actually convey the sense that students use language, let alone that they will come to understand themselves and the world *through* language. Instead readers are presented with a mixed list of 12 items that sometimes describes particular features of language; at other times makes assertions about the nature of language and texts; and also suggests particular phenomena influencing the ways language takes on meaning. The CDs for Language read as a primer for teachers, rather than programmable content. This is a significant point, especially given that the elaborations exist only for illustrative purposes, guiding the practice of inexperienced teachers – they do not constitute the curriculum.

Cognitive Level	NC Language Content Elaborations	Totals
Knowledge	Identify – 4 Recognise – 4 Observing how – 3 Knowing - 6	17 (=63%)
Comprehension	Understanding - 2	2 (7%)
Application	Employing Using -3	4 (15%)
Analysis		
Synthesis	Creating patterns	1 (4%)
Evaluation	Reflecting on Appreciating Assessing	3 (11%)

Table 3: Relative tendencies towards lower and higher order skills in the National Curriculum (incorporating Tables 1 and 2) and the NSW Curriculum

Cognitive level	National Curriculum – Yr 9	NSW Curriculum – Yr 9
Knowledge Comprehension	53%	34%
Application Analysis	21%	26%
Synthesis Evaluation	26%	38%

Conclusions

1. The national curriculum, primarily through its Language strand, marks a radical break with historic understandings and conceptualisations of English curriculum.

2. The conceptual vacuum at the heart of the national curriculum, and its consequent incoherence, is highlighted by the obvious differences in the writing of the three strands. The Language strand is imbued with a very different set of understandings (e.g. of English, of students and teachers, of effective teaching and learning, and of the cognitive levels at which an English curriculum should tend to operate) from that evident in the other two strands. This raises serious concerns about how teachers will be able to understand the three strands in a coherent manner, seeing them as inter-related and inter-dependant, as they set about the task of programming the curriculum.

3. The break the national curriculum makes with past understandings and methods of organising the English curriculum has had a deleterious consequence to the extent that the national curriculum tends to operate at a lower cognitive level than the NSW curriculum, primarily because of the content of the language strand. The national curriculum is certainly less evenly balanced in its cognitive emphases.

4. Language is clearly understood within the national curriculum to be something students primarily just 'know about'. Such an emphasis on knowledge and understanding runs counter to past emphasis on studying language in a broadening range of contexts and for real purposes, and would seem to implicitly favour and promote unproductive transmission pedagogies. Certainly, the idea that it is in and through language (i.e. its use) that we come to better understand language, ourselves, social relationships, power structures, and the world around us is absent from the Language strand. So too is the idea that language, as "institution and practice" (Green, 2008, p.38), is open to critical reflection, analysis and reform. An English curriculum that does not foster and promote critical language awareness and understandings is but a pale shadow of past curriculums.

4. To the extent that a "better" curriculum is one that is cognitively challenging, it is not possible to conclude that the national curriculum is "better" than existing state curriculums – the NSW curriculum being a case in point.