

# Report of the review of the early enactment of Junior Cycle English



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# Executive summary

The purpose of this report is to capture feedback from teachers, students and stakeholders on the early enactment of the *Junior Cycle English Specification* (NCCA, 2015). Information for this review was gathered through consultation events, school visits and written submissions. Further information on the scope and purpose of this review is included in the appendix, in the *Brief for the Review of Junior Cycle Subjects*.

The introduction of a new specification for junior cycle English in 2014 occurred at a time of significant change within post-primary education in Ireland and was undertaken during a protracted industrial dispute. The two main consequences of this dispute were delayed engagement with CPD and the addition of the Assessment Task. Both factors impacted significantly on the introduction of the new specification for English.

Feedback was gathered on the specification and related items, including examples of student work; classroom-based assessments; subject learning and assessment review meetings; the final assessment; reporting; and transitions from primary to post-primary and from junior to senior cycle. Teachers, students and stakeholders broadly welcomed the specification. It was frequently remarked that framing the learning through the lens of learning outcomes and taking a broader approach to assessment represents a significant departure from the 1989 junior certificate. This poses challenges, particularly for English, as the first subject to experience these changes at junior cycle. It is also acknowledged that it will take time for the specification to be fully and meaningfully enacted in schools and that it is too early to comment on some aspects of the specification and their impact.

Enhanced awareness of ways to bridge the **transition from primary to post-primary English** is evident. However, many teachers emphasised the difficulty of achieving clarity about students' prior learning and some described primary experiences of English as the 'great unknown'. Students spoke positively about being encouraged to develop their personal voice in first year, to express, defend and justify their opinions in relation to texts and to the world around them.

The **course overview** is broadly welcomed; however, it was frequently suggested that the guidelines for texts should be clearer in relation to film. For the most part, the **text list** is viewed as broad, balanced and varied. It was suggested that in revising the list greater consideration be given to accessibility in the drama options. Students spoke in largely positive terms about the texts they explored, particularly where film was used to enhance their visual literacy. The challenge of engaging students with poetry remains significant. Some concern was expressed that non-literary texts and

listening skills may be receiving less attention than other areas in the enactment of the new specification, though significant variation was evident in students' experiences in this respect.

Feedback in relation to the **learning outcomes** is mixed; with the same set of learning outcomes variously described by teachers as '*clear, specific and comprehensive*' or as '*daunting, burdensome and laborious*'. Whilst some observations were made in relation to overlap, omissions, density and scope in the learning outcomes, for the most part, teachers did not raise significant issues with the content and wording of the learning outcomes and expressed a desire for more time to further develop their familiarity and expertise in working with learning outcomes. **Planning** with learning outcomes remains a significant challenge, particularly planning a three-year course of study, balancing the learning outcomes, guidelines for texts and assessments in the time available. A small number of students lamented a 'rush' to complete the course at the end of third year.

In relation to **inclusion**, the broad open nature of the learning outcomes and access to the same texts are welcomed as promoting greater inclusion. However, it was suggested that in contexts where students do not access the learning across 3 years, the breadth of the course poses challenges. Feedback in relation to the **examples of student work** is very positive. It was suggested that, with the agreement of students and parents, it would be helpful to publish further examples of student work, particularly in the oral communication CBA, to illustrate some possible approaches to inclusion. Further digital/multimodal examples for CBA2 and a wider exemplification of the band *In line with expectations* would also be helpful.

The **Oral Communication** classroom-based assessment has been widely welcomed, despite some initial difficulties of enactment in schools. Teachers and students expressed a desire to see greater variation emerging in the formats; themes and topics; and collaborative possibilities of the oral communication CBA in the years ahead. In relation to the **Collection of the Student's Texts** classroom-based assessment, the opportunities for significant learning and improvement as writers were celebrated by both teachers and students, though some frustration was expressed with the challenges writing as a process presents. **Subject Learning and Assessment Review** meetings are broadly welcomed, with four factors deemed critical to their success: professionalism and mutual respect; a skilled facilitator; the support of management and adequate training. Teachers and students expressed a desire for the learning achieved in the oral communication CBA and in the Collection of the Student's Texts CBA to have parity of esteem with the final assessment. Many teachers expressed the hope that this will occur as parents and students become more aware of classroom-based assessments across multiple subjects and gain an increased understanding of the dual approach to assessment and the JCPA.

In relation to the **Assessment Task**, the purpose of the task is largely unclear to teachers and students. Whilst reflecting on writing as a process is viewed as a valuable learning experience, it was suggested that formally assessing this reflection is unnecessary and ultimately may undermine rather than support the rich learning aspired to in the Collection CBA.

A detailed analysis of data and trends in relation to the 2017 **final assessment** is available in the SEC Chief Examiner's Report. Teachers and students offered mixed views about the transition to revised assessment arrangements. Some students and teachers welcomed the less predictable format and structure; others did not. The lack of an aural component in the final exam was also raised as an issue.

There is some evidence that **reporting** is evolving in schools but teachers suggested that it is too soon to feedback meaningfully on revised on-going reporting practices and the JCPA. Similarly, it was suggested that feedback in relation to **key skills** development will be richer once students are experiencing the new junior cycle across a wider range of subjects and learning experiences. Teachers and students observed that the learning achieved in junior cycle could provide a firm foundation for the **transition to senior cycle** learning but expressed concern about the difference in modes of assessment. Given the timing of this review, it was also suggested that it is too soon to provide meaningful feedback about how students who experience the new specification transition to senior cycle.

## Key recommendations

### Specification for Junior Cycle English

- The 'guidelines for texts' section should be amended to clarify the position of film. The specification and text list circular should then be aligned.
- The meaning of 'non-literary texts' needs to be clarified. This could be included as a short paragraph in the specification or as a definition in a 'glossary of key terms' appendix.
- Minor amendments to the specification should be made, to align it with later junior cycle specifications e.g. insert sub-headings for Transition from Primary School and Transition to Senior Cycle; insert Key Skills graphic; add a glossary of key terms as an appendix.

### Assessment Guidelines

- A second edition of the Assessment Guidelines should be published. This second edition should include a section on reporting; slightly expand the section on oral communication formats; include

the oral communication note-taking template as an appendix; consider advice to schools re: recording and retaining student work in light of GDPR; and update the section relating to inclusion. Other sections should be updated to align with later junior cycle assessment guidelines.

### **Continuing professional development**

Areas where teachers frequently requested further support are listed below.

- Reading comprehension strategies (LO R3) and reading pedagogies (reading aloud, silent reading, independent reading, reading for research) with the aim of achieving a balanced approach in light of students' needs, the learning outcomes and the guidelines for texts
- Film and visual literacy (LO R9)
- Oral language pedagogies which support further development of the inter-connected oral communication skills of listening, spoken production and spoken interaction
- Writing as a process. There may be scope to link in with existing programmes such as Writers in Schools, Arts in Education, Creative Ireland programme, SWIFT programme, Fighting Words etc.
- Planning (both incremental and long-term) and curriculum task design (learning outcomes, learning intentions, success criteria)
- Integration of Level 2 and Level 3 in planning and in practice
- Facilitation training for Subject Learning and Assessment Review meetings.

It was also suggested that JCT collate and publish reviews of 'new' texts on the revised text list for 2018 - 2023 on [www.jct.ie](http://www.jct.ie)

### **Examples of student work**

- Expand the range of examples for the Collection of the Student's Texts (CBA2), with a particular emphasis on publishing the full range of the band of achievement *In line with expectations* and on multimodal/digital texts.
- Expand the range of examples for Oral Communication to demonstrate inclusive approaches and collaborative possibilities, ideally in formats other than presentations.
- Provide further guidance in relation to inclusive practices for on-going teaching and learning and the extension of this support into classroom-based assessments. This may be provided in a variety of ways, including in further examples of student work.



- Create a support video for parents/schools in relation to the purpose and function of examples of student work, their role in supporting teacher judgements and the language of the descriptors.
- Primary Examples of Student Work in English for 3<sup>rd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> class may provide further clarity about student learning in English during primary school and contribute to better transitions from primary to post-primary experiences of English.

### **General observations**

- Where classroom-based assessments do not substitute for other assessments, there is a clear danger of over-assessment taking time away from teaching and learning and having a knock-on impact on the viability of the curriculum specification. However, it is likely that existing practices in relation to term tests and mock exams will change as classroom-based assessments substitute for other assessments in more junior cycle subjects and/or as the time given to and frequency of in-school exam events is reduced, particularly in first and second year.
- The overall purpose of the Assessment Task and its potential contribution to over-assessment of student learning in junior cycle needs to be carefully considered, particularly as students will experience assessment across as well as within subjects as new specifications are introduced.
- Further guidance re: adapting specifications for contexts where students access the learning across a shorter timespan (e.g. adults returning to education) and/or in non-mainstream contexts (e.g. home schooling, hospital schools) may be needed, as each specification is designed with a full experience of junior cycle across three years of teaching and learning in mind.
- To engage and inform parents about changes to junior cycle, sustained local and policy-level efforts will be needed in the years ahead. The support of the National Parents Council Post-Primary and school management bodies will be very important in this respect.
- As adaptations occur in the way that schools communicate with students and parents about student learning, further support in relation to on-going and JCPA reporting will be needed.

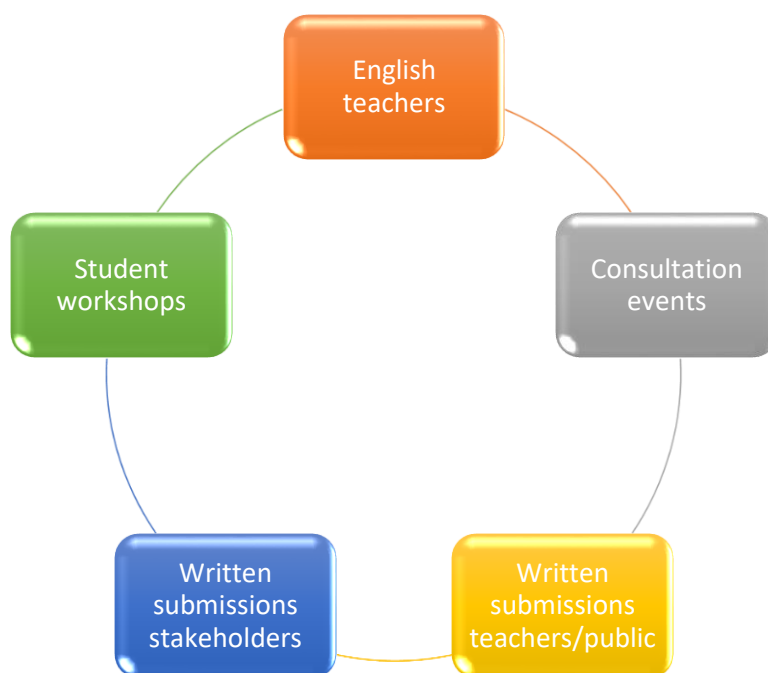
### **Future considerations**

- The question of whether it is possible to give students opportunities to achieve (at a level appropriate to their age and stage of learning) all of the learning outlined in the specification needs careful monitoring in the years ahead. Factors which influence this include the time available for English in junior cycle (a minimum of 240 hours), the learning outcomes, the methodologies used, the guidelines for texts and the dual approach to assessment.

- For the most part, feedback relates to the challenge of making judicious choices when enacting the learning outcomes in practice rather than to the wording and content of the 39 learning outcomes. It is thus proposed that no changes are made to the learning outcomes. However, specific feedback in relation to perceived omissions and the density and scope of the learning outcomes may need to be revisited in a subsequent review to explore to what extent this feedback remains significant once the full range of continuing professional development envisaged to support the enactment of the specification in practice has been experienced by all English teachers.
- Aural receptive skills are not explicitly assessed in junior cycle English. Further consideration of the place of listening skills within the assessment of junior cycle English is needed to ensure greater consistency of approach across languages and to affirm the importance of listening, interaction and mediation of understanding.
- Feedback from teachers and students in relation to final assessment which was gathered during this review will be collated and communicated to the SEC and a discussion of the place of listening skills in the assessment of English will take place.
- It is too soon, as yet, to gather meaningful feedback in relation to the transition to senior cycle for students who complete the new junior cycle. Such feedback may need to be gathered at a future date and considered within the context of the broader review of senior cycle which is now underway.

# Introduction

In line with the Framework for Junior Cycle, a new subject specification for Junior Cycle English was introduced in 2014, with revised assessment arrangements confirmed in 2015. The NCCA conducted an interim review between September 2017 and February 2018.

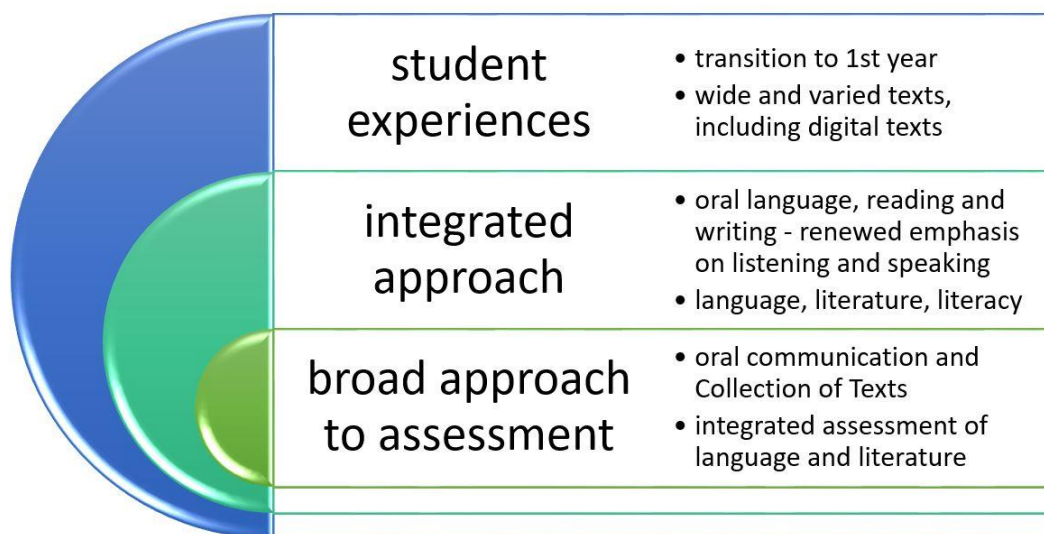


Feedback was gathered in the following ways:

- focus groups of teachers in eight schools, including one special school and one Youthreach centre (39 teachers participated)
- in-school workshops with students from a range of cohorts (64 students participated)
- three consultation events in Cork, Galway and Dublin (79 English teachers and stakeholders participated, including members of the development group)
- written submissions via online consultation (33 submissions from English teachers and seven submissions from English departments - approximately 65 teachers in total)
- written submissions from stakeholders – one submission each was received from INOTE (Irish National Organisation for Teachers of English), Initial Teacher Education (UCC), the JCT English team, DES Inspectors of English and the SEC Chief Examiner for Junior Cycle English.

This report offers insights into experiences in junior cycle English following the introduction of the new specification in 2014 and related assessments in 2016/17. As outlined in the *Background Paper for the Review of Junior Cycle English* (NCCA, 2012), the ‘*organic wholeness of experience*’ envisaged in the 1989 syllabus would inform the development of a new specification for Junior Cycle English, which would place particular emphasis on the following:

- opportunities for continuity and progression in English for students making the transition from 6<sup>th</sup> class in primary school into 1<sup>st</sup> year in post-primary school
- opportunities for students to experience a wide and varied range of literary and non-literary texts, including digital texts
- an integrated approach to students’ social, personal and cultural development across oral language, reading and writing in the areas of language, literature and literacy
- a renewed focus on student opportunities to hone and further develop their listening and speaking skills
- a broad approach to assessment, with classroom-based assessments providing opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills in ways which would not be possible in a formal examination (e.g. individual, pair or group **oral communication** in a variety of formats; approaching writing as a process leading to the creation of a **collection of texts** over time in written and digital formats)
- discontinue the practice of dividing examination papers into two separate sections, language and literature (envisaged in the 1989 syllabus but not realised in practice).



As English was the first subject to introduce a new specification in line with changes to the junior cycle, this review also offers early insights into the impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015 in the following related areas:

- bridging the transition from primary school
- supporting teacher feedback on student learning
- professional collaboration
- a dual approach to assessment and
- reporting a broader picture of student learning.

During the review, many teachers commented that the Junior Cycle English specification makes explicit and affirms long-standing classroom practices such as wide reading, a process approach to writing and classroom talk to extend and deepen student thinking. For these teachers the ‘newness’ of the specification lies in the learning outcomes approach rather than in the knowledge and skills articulated, with the exception, perhaps, of digital literacy. However, many English teachers equally commented that the specification challenges aspects of their existing classroom practice and/or beliefs about the nature and scope of English as a subject domain. In some cases, this has led teachers to revisit, adapt and/or reconceive some of their approaches to teaching and learning in English.

It was clear throughout the review that

*what counts as English and English teaching is contested and can be a matter of struggle, conflict and compromise<sup>1</sup>.*

English teachers differ in the relative emphasis they place on literacy, literature, creativity, criticism and communication and in the extent to which they believe these areas should be taught in isolation or in an integrated way. The Junior Cycle English specification is explicitly designed with a fully integrated experience for students in mind.

It must also be recognised that an industrial relations dispute was ongoing during the introduction of the specification for Junior Cycle English which impacted on teacher participation in the programme of continuing professional development that was available. As a result, a significant cohort of circa 6,000 post-primary teachers of English have not yet participated in the full range of professional development available.

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<sup>1</sup> *Background Paper for the Review of Junior Cycle English* (NCCA, 2012). Suggested further reading: *English Teachers - The Unofficial Guide: Researching the Philosophies of English Teachers* by Bethan Marshall, 2000.

Findings from this review are grouped into the following main areas below:

- Transition from primary and first year experiences of English
  - Course overview
  - Text List
  - Learning outcomes
  - Inclusion
  - Examples of student work
  - Oral communication classroom-based assessment
  - Collection of the Student's Texts classroom-based assessment
  - Assessment Task
  - Subject learning and assessment review
  - Final Exam
  - Reporting
  - Key skills
  - Transition from junior to senior cycle
- 
- The diagram uses blue brackets to group the list items into three main areas:
- Teaching and learning** (includes: Transition from primary and first year experiences of English, Course overview, Text List, Learning outcomes, Inclusion, Examples of student work)
  - Assessment of/for learning and review** (includes: Oral communication classroom-based assessment, Collection of the Student's Texts classroom-based assessment, Assessment Task, Subject learning and assessment review, Final Exam)
  - Reporting and transitions** (includes: Reporting, Key skills, Transition from junior to senior cycle)

Whilst these are dealt with separately, they are experienced in an integrated way by students and teachers and so some overlap across sections will be evident in this report.

## Transition from primary and first year experiences of English

The mirroring of strands (*oral language, reading and writing*) and elements across primary and post-primary specifications was welcomed in feedback from teachers and stakeholders. Teachers spoke positively about using the sub-set of learning outcomes for first year as a springboard to bridge the learning from 6<sup>th</sup> class. Areas where teachers see clear scope for continuity include:

- expanding on ideas through talk
- reading widely and
- writing as a process.

Teachers also spoke of identifying an explicit need to further develop students' reading comprehension skills and of responding to this need in a variety of ways. However, this area was mentioned less often than those listed above.

Nonetheless, teachers frequently commented that they do not have clarity in relation to student learning in English in fifth and sixth class of primary school. Respondents suggested that students experience aspects of English differently in different primary schools and identified this as a challenge when trying to achieve clarity in relation to students' prior learning and attainment. A significant number of teachers described primary experiences of English as '*the great unknown*' and many written submissions skipped this question.

In a small number of written submissions, teachers suggested that they

*have to start from scratch to make sure the foundation is there.*

However, this view was not widely shared, does not reflect the specification and is not sustainable from a teacher workload perspective; nor does it help in providing continuity and progression for all students.

For the most part, students are very positive about their experiences of first year English and cite reading and discussing texts as a particularly clear link between 6<sup>th</sup> class and 1<sup>st</sup> year. Students cite opportunities to think aloud, formulate, express and justify their opinions as the aspect of junior cycle English they most enjoy

*English teachers want to hear your views. We're encouraged to give our opinion and to help others to see our point of view.*

Teachers spoke of threading in opportunities for students to further develop their speaking skills across first year (through, for example, reading aloud, show and tell, walking debates etc.) both as a bridge with students' primary school experience and to build student capacity to engage with more varied and challenging oral communication as they progress through junior cycle.

Several teachers suggested that students' speaking skills often appear to be more fully developed than their listening skills when they enter first year, with one teacher speculating

*It may be to do with a cultural shift in the way we communicate. A side effect of the de-personalisation and digitisation of communication.*

Listening and the ability to listen and respond critically and imaginatively were described by one teacher as a vital '*way to be in the world*'. Some teachers commented that opportunities for students to engage in focused listening and interaction across their three years of junior cycle are crucial to their overall language development. Radio drama and documentaries, listening and responding to

poetry read aloud, speeches and debates, whole class and small group focused discussions and students reading their work aloud to elicit peer and teacher feedback were all discussed as ways to scaffold and further develop students' listening skills. However, in much of the feedback, a focus on listening was not evident, with more emphasis being placed on speaking, particularly spoken production.

Students said that they experience an increase in teacher expectations when they transition to post-primary school. However, students spoke of a limited range of skills as embodying these increased expectations, namely engaging in closer reading and analysis; learning to use specialist language and terminology; and writing at length about their texts.

During consultation events, teachers spoke of their desire to promote wide reading and reading for pleasure in first year

*Reading seems to be the default approach in primary, students always have a book on their desk. Students in primary read extensively. We need to keep that up.*

However, many teachers and students also recognise the challenge to reading for pleasure (both in school and beyond) which comes with increasing cognitive and homework demands

*In primary school where the teacher is reading it you have time to go and get lost in the story but in secondary when the teacher is reading you can't get lost in it because you have to underline and highlight.*

*I had so much homework in third year, I didn't have time to read. I had homework and study until 10pm every night and I had no inclination to read after that.*

Teachers equally expressed a desire for students to 'get lost in the story' and affirmed the value of reading aloud for the collective enjoyment of a text. However, teachers also stressed the importance of close reading and analysis and to a lesser extent independent reading, as part of students' overall development across language and literature and in relation to specific learning outcomes. It was suggested that achieving a balance in relation to learning outcome - Reading 2: *Read for a variety of purposes: learning, pleasure, research, comparison*, is quite achievable in first year but becomes more difficult as students move through their junior cycle.

Students and teachers identified developing expansive written pieces (creative and critical responses to texts) as a significant adjustment in the transition from primary to post-primary English

*Students have higher order skills, can engage with texts, work in groups etc but can lack the basics [and] find it hard to put in writing.*

However, it was further suggested that it is not writing skills generally or indeed the length of texts students have written in primary school which pose the main challenge but rather the variation in knowledge and skills evident within any group of students



*The quality of writing/expression is markedly diverse, as is the ability to read well.*

The challenge posed by differentiation for diverse student groups was a consistent feature in feedback and was not limited to transition points (e.g. from 6<sup>th</sup> class to 1<sup>st</sup> year).

A variety of approaches to achieving clarity about students' prior learning and achievement in primary school were mentioned, including drawing upon the information contained in the Education Passport (though this is rarely subject specific); examining the results of attainment and/or ability tests given to incoming first years; surveying first year students about their learning in sixth class, including asking students from a variety of different primary schools to bring in their 6<sup>th</sup> class English copies (though this only shines a light on students' written work); reading the primary school languages curriculum; inviting sixth class teachers from primary schools to the post-primary school to discuss students' learning in sixth class; and drawing on implicit knowledge of what English is like in primary school from observing their own children/relatives. The methods listed above, individually or in combination, may offer a clearer picture of students' prior learning and attainment in English during their years in primary school.

Feedback also emphasised that establishing a clear view of students' prior learning and achievement can be very challenging in non-mainstream settings such as Youthreach and Special schools, particularly if information about the child does not transfer from their previous school. Teachers across all school types emphasised that this challenge is not limited to obvious transition points from primary to post-primary and from junior to senior cycle but also arises when students switch teachers and/or schools and/or have high rates of absenteeism.

In light of the feedback received, the following points may be relevant as the specification for Junior Cycle English continues to be enacted in practice in the years ahead.

- The alignment of strands and elements across primary and post-primary curriculum specifications is helpful. In line with other junior cycle specifications, it may help to insert a sub-heading 'Transition from Primary School' on page 9 of the junior cycle English specification. Teachers frequently commented that this aspect of the specification can easily be overlooked.
- The sub-set of learning outcomes for first year is helpful. It may need to be revisited to ensure alignment once the Primary Language Curriculum for 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> class is finalised and enacted in schools.
- Examples of Student Work in English for 3<sup>rd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> class may provide further clarity about student learning in English during primary school when they are published on [www.curriculumonline.ie](http://www.curriculumonline.ie).

- In relation to reading comprehension skills (R3), this link to primary experiences of English is less evident in feedback. There is clear scope for further sharing of practice and ideas, perhaps through CPD, to scaffold and support student progress as they gradually become more skilled readers of texts.
- Whilst a greater emphasis on oral language has emerged in the initial enactment of the specification, the emphasis appears to have been primarily on spoken production, particularly amongst students. Achieving equal emphasis on the interconnected oral communication skills of listening, spoken interaction and spoken production will be important in the years ahead to ensure holistic development across these skills.

Comments in relation to the first-year guidelines for texts and suggested text list are included in the relevant sections below. Whilst observations about the transition to post-primary school in this report relate specifically to English, it is likely that all subjects will face similar challenges in due course.

## Course overview

The vision presented in the course overview of the English classroom as an active space of thinking, talking, listening, reading and writing where students develop language, literature and literacy knowledge and skills in an integrated way is broadly welcome. Teachers welcome the definition of texts as *'all products of language use'* (mirroring the Leaving Certificate syllabus) and the aspiration to give students *'a wide and varied experience of texts'* and *'meaningful and stimulating language experiences across a broad range of contexts'* including writing their own texts in response to those they have read. However, some teachers view the specification as aspirational rather than achievable in the time available, particularly in third year. This is explored in further detail below. In two submissions, the view was expressed that literature should be studied in isolation from students' general language and literacy development but this view was not widely shared.

The guidelines for texts in first year are largely welcomed as providing students with a wide and varied experience of texts when combined judiciously with appropriate and varied learning outcomes. Students spoke positively about opportunities to explore both classic and modern texts and to respond creatively and critically to these texts, through listening, speaking and writing. In some cases, teachers were unsure if the list of novels for first year were simply indicative suggestions and sought clarification that teachers retain the freedom to select from outside the first-year list of novels if they wish.

In relation to *'sustained reading of novels throughout the year'*, a number of English departments observed that whilst they promote wide reading (through, for example, reading or library classes; book clubs and book reports; drop everything and read; and/or a lending library in the classroom) much of this independent reading happens outside of the classroom setting. Some teachers suggested that whilst supporting wide reading is part of what English teachers do, 'evidencing' that wide reading is taking place can be challenging and may occasionally prove counter-productive, particularly if students come to see reading as something which is done to satisfy (or placate) the teacher rather than as a valuable and/or enjoyable activity in and of itself. Furthermore, teachers emphasised that where students have very low literacy levels, they may rarely have experienced reading as a 'pleasure', which can make combating an aversion to reading difficult.

A reluctance to assign independent reading to students was evident in some of the feedback. A belief was frequently articulated that students who most need to engage in independent reading are also the least likely to engage with silent reading in class and/or independent reading for homework. This appeared in many cases to translate into a decision not to assign/expect independent reading from any students.

Feedback in relation to the guidelines for texts on p11 of the specification focused almost exclusively on the guidelines for second and third year. The following specific observations were made:

- the exploration of digital and media texts implied under the heading 'non-literary texts' is not explicit enough. In this context, it may be helpful to expand on the meaning of 'non-literary texts'.
- in relation to prescribed texts for second and third year, the phrase indicating that teachers *'may add to these lists if they wish'* is ambiguous and consequently unhelpful, with addition (exploring additional novels, plays and films as well as the minimum required from the text list) sometimes being mistaken for substitution.
- the level of prescription in relation to film is unclear. It was suggested that a simpler formulation (*'a film chosen from the prescribed list of films'*) would be more helpful if combined with the inclusion of a wider selection of films on the text list, including documentaries and biopics.

A number of teachers also commented that any revised wording in the specification and/or the text list circular must mirror each other, for the avoidance of doubt.

Several teachers queried whether prescribing the full text of a prescribed Shakespearean play for one cohort of students (i.e. those intending to sit the final exam at higher level) goes against the universal nature of the specification. It was suggested that this may indirectly promote streaming even though classroom-based assessments are experienced at a common level.

*Teachers have high expectations of their students and know they can access the learning but Shakespeare often shakes their belief in themselves, particularly if studied in second year and used to 'weed out' students from so-called 'higher level' classes.*

It was also argued that the wording in relation to Shakespearean drama in the specification may inadvertently and incorrectly suggest that Shakespeare is only to be studied by some students. Many teachers took issue with this interpretation, stating that they have often taught Shakespeare very successfully to mixed cohorts of students. Some teachers further suggested that the study of Shakespeare is a cultural and educational experience that all students should have equal access to.

*A child who gets to 15 who hasn't studied a Shakespearean play is certainly impoverished.*

Students were largely positive about studying Shakespeare, though one student did observe, to wide agreement from his peers

*Language can distance you from the text even if the themes are good. The teacher had to translate to help our understanding.*

For the most part, the other 'note' in relation to the selection of texts – the option to select an extract or extracts (to 'provide students with a broad experience of the dramatic form') as one of the drama texts studied – was viewed very positively. Teachers commented that it gives scope to link in with local drama groups and/or a play being performed in the locality or the school and provides greater flexibility for planning, particularly where teachers/departments are designing thematic units of learning. Although this results in a combination of openness and prescription in relation to drama, teachers deemed this to be a good compromise. A prescribed list of poems was very occasionally requested, in part out of concern that in a very small number of cases students were studying poetry prescribed for Leaving Certificate, perhaps in an attempt to pre-learn senior cycle material. However, for the most part, teachers deemed it preferable to retain the freedom to exercise their professional judgement in selecting the range of poems to be explored.

In relation to the guidelines for texts, it is noted that teachers and students rarely referenced short stories in their feedback. However, it would be unwise to draw any particular conclusions from this lacuna in feedback, as during this review, students and teachers tended to focus on longer texts in discussions about texts.

Feedback indicates that many schools<sup>2</sup> have reduced the time available for English in Junior Cycle, whilst nonetheless adhering to the 240-hour minimum for the subject. Teachers spoke of a perceived increase<sup>3</sup> in the range and breadth of texts to be explored, alongside the methodologies envisaged in the specification and additional assessments as placing greater demands on available teaching time, particularly in years two and three.

*6 weeks [sic] is taken up with CBA/AT (oral and written tasks plus AT), most schools take 2 weeks out for mock exams and another 2-3 weeks out for term tests – even though the specification [sic] says not to. This leaves little time for course work in two years.*

One teacher observed *“If the purpose is to avoid over-assessment this is going in the opposite direction”*. It is clear from this and similar feedback that for some teachers the classroom-based assessments have not yet become an embedded part of student learning. It is also clear that despite many teachers stating a preference that classroom-based assessments would substitute for other assessments such as term tests and mock exams, as appropriate, this has not yet happened in many schools. In settings where there has been no reduction in the number of house and mock examinations, it is not surprising that concern was expressed about the potential impact of over-assessment on students, teachers and schools. It was in this context that some teachers called for a reduction in the guidelines for texts to be studied in second and third year, as this would mean that time taken away from teaching and learning for term tests, mock exams and other school-wide activities would have less of an impact on ‘completing’ the course. However, some teachers offered a contrary view, emphasising that reducing the wide variety of texts to be explored would be short-sighted and counter to the aspirations of the specification. This issue - the equation of course content over time over assessment moments - animated much of the feedback in the review.

Teachers also spoke about their perception of the risks inherent in making decisions about how to combine texts and learning outcomes. Some reluctance to combine texts (e.g. a poem or short story) or parts of texts (e.g. a chapter from a novel) with learning outcomes beyond R4, R6, R7 and W4, W8 was evident, though this was by no means a universal feature in the feedback. This reluctance appears to stem from a range of sources, with different teachers expressing a variety of viewpoints, such as:

- a belief that students study literature exclusively to study literature, rather than to further develop their language, literature and literacy knowledge and skills in an integrated way.

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<sup>2</sup> Schools which previously timetabled 5 class periods a week of English across the three years of junior cycle but who have changed to 4 x 40-minute classes or 3 x 1-hour classes

<sup>3</sup> The 1989 syllabus also envisaged experiences with a wide range and breadth of texts but did not explicitly offer any guidelines for how many texts should be explored.

- a belief in a wholeness of experience in engaging with a text and a concern that using the text as a springboard for literature and literacy development and for creative, communicative and critical language activities can fragment the experience of longer texts for students. Teachers commented that this is particularly the case where students are writing in a genre other than the genre of the text being read, as, for the purposes of creative modelling, it is more helpful for students to model off the genre they are writing in. However, it was simultaneously acknowledged that this fragmentation of experience of longer texts has always been an issue, given the way school timetables operate, unless students read on independently at home.
- a fear that if teachers and students do not explore every text in sufficient detail to be able to write about all aspects of that text at length, students will be disadvantaged. Some teachers described feeling under pressure to ensure that students had pre-prepared written answers in their collection of texts for all conceivable questions that could be asked in final examinations about texts they had read/viewed. However, many teachers expressed a different view, commenting that over-preparation often hinders engagement with questions asked which in turn mitigates against student achievement. It was also suggested that were the *Collection of the Student's Texts* to include mostly critical analysis essays, it would be out of step with the vision for learning articulated in the specification and would severely hamper students' overall development as writers across a range of genres.
- concern that students emerging from Junior Cycle would be ill-prepared for the demands of the Leaving Certificate English examination (rather than the coursework), where the division between language and literature currently remains in place and where writing creatively and writing at length about many different literary texts under exam conditions is a pre-requisite for achievement in Leaving Certificate English. However, it was also frequently emphasised that the *Collection of the Student's Texts* gives students opportunities to develop both their creative writing and their critical analysis skills and that students who develop knowledge and skills in both areas should have enhanced ability as writers at their disposal when they commence senior cycle.

In light of the feedback received, the following points may be relevant as the specification for Junior Cycle English is enacted in practice in the years ahead:

- the wording in the guidelines for texts needs to be revised to remove ambiguities and/or offer further clarity in relation to film and non-literary texts.
- further discussion at CPD events in relation to reading pedagogies - reading aloud, silent reading, independent reading and the various ways texts can be combined with learning outcomes – may

help to further tease out questions in relation to the guidelines for texts and whether there are too many texts to explore in second and third year.

- the question of whether it is possible to give students opportunities to achieve (at a level appropriate to their age and stage of learning) all of the learning outlined in the specification needs careful monitoring in the years ahead. Factors which influence this include the time available for English in junior cycle (a minimum of 240 hours), the learning outcomes, the methodologies and guidelines for texts and the dual approach to assessment.
- where classroom-based assessments do not substitute for other assessments, there is a clear danger of over-assessment taking time away from teaching and learning and having a knock-on impact on the viability of the curriculum specification. However, it is likely that existing practices in relation to term tests and mock exams will change as classroom-based assessments substitute for other assessments in more junior cycle subjects.

## Text list

The question of the prescription of texts and whether the new specification should prescribe texts, suggest texts or continue with the open choice of texts from the 1989 syllabus was a central concern of the development group as the specification for Junior Cycle English was being developed. Given the narrow range of texts explored whilst an 'open' course was in place, it was decided to offer some prescription of texts for junior cycle English. A compromise was reached, where some genres are completely or partially prescribed (novels, drama and film) and others remain open (poetry, short stories, non-literary texts).

The text list is broadly, though not universally welcomed and for the most part is seen as rich and varied, achieving a good balance between classic and modern texts. Some comments were made in relation to achieving better gender balance (both authorship and female central characters) and ensuring that Irish writers and Irish literary heritage are adequately represented. More modern (e.g. graphic novels) and more accessible texts (particularly drama texts) and a wider range of films were frequently suggested as important considerations for the working group revising the text list. Some teachers suggested that longer novels, whilst included on the list, are being avoided for a variety of reasons. One teacher expressed disappointment that there isn't more tonal variation in the texts on the current list

*I seek light, hope and brightness for myself and for them. I do not want to peddle more doom and gloom to them in the texts they must study for Junior Cycle. I think*

*the current reading list underestimates our students' abilities to read lyrical and challenging texts.*

A submission from Initial Teacher Education (UCC) highlighted the important role language and literature play in helping students to better understand injustice and inequality and to interrogate the world around them from critical social justice perspectives

*Text lists at junior and senior cycle contain many examples of how diverse social issues are addressed through literature. It is important that [we] remain cognisant of how texts can be used to explore critical issues such as race, class, (dis)ability, religion, sexuality and wider concerns of social justice and inequality.*

A minority of teachers expressed a strong preference for no prescribed text list in junior cycle

*One of the principles within the Framework for Junior Cycle is choice and freedom. To limit the choice of novels to a specific list does not give teachers either choice or freedom to work to the strengths of their class groups.... Decisions are based on a teacher's understanding of his/her class group and not on a book list*

Teachers further suggested that within a school, selecting the same texts for all class groups is not necessarily a good thing, as different groups respond to different texts and one text rarely fits all class groups. The specification does not require English departments/teachers to all teach the same texts to different class groups. It is unclear from the feedback what the source of this misconception is and/or how widespread it is. It may be linked to book rental schemes and a desire to facilitate movement across class groups and/or to provide continuity where students change English teacher during their junior cycle.

It was suggested that the combination of openness and prescription in the guidelines for texts and the text list may create some ambiguity about the purpose of the list. The aim of the guidelines for texts and the text list, as outlined in the specification, is to assist teachers in finding

*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<sup>4</sup>.*

It is worth reiterating that the purpose of the guidelines for texts and the text list is to support teachers in ensuring breadth, balance and variety in students' language learning across their junior cycle and in relation to the learning outcomes, as well as indicating some of what students might be asked to draw upon in the final assessment. However, during consultations and in written submissions, the guidelines for texts in second and third year were often (though not universally) interpreted narrowly as a checklist for what must be covered for examination purposes. This interpretation is perhaps unsurprising given the nature of the prescribed text list for Leaving Certificate English, the structure

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<sup>4</sup> Junior Cycle English specification, 2015, p11.



of the old Junior Certificate exam and to a lesser extent the wording on the Junior Cycle English text list in relation to Shakespearean drama.

One concern raised was that genres which have a prescribed body of texts and/or number attached (2 novels, a Shakespearean drama, a film, 16 poems) might overshadow genres which have neither a prescribed number or list of texts attached to them (*'a variety of non-literary texts including texts in oral format', 'a number of short stories'*). Non-literary texts and short stories were mentioned less often in feedback from teachers and students. Students frequently mentioned creating short stories and adding these to their collection of texts but it is unclear to what extent students were modelling their writing in this genre on short stories they had read. Students also expressed a desire to explore and better understand non-literary texts, particularly digital texts. Some interesting examples were given, with one group of students outlining what they learnt from watching advertisements from the same era as the play they were reading. Another group described studying speeches and scenes from their drama texts as models of quality oral communication/performance. However, a small number of students expressed disappointment that in their experience, visual and digital texts were not given the same status as the novels, plays and poems they studied

*We didn't really use them [digital and visual texts] as texts more as a filler or treat at the end of the year.*

It is neither possible nor desirable to draw any conclusions about how widespread this experience is currently. Nonetheless, a common theme in feedback from teachers was a request for more CPD in relation to teaching visual and digital genres, including film. Given the rapidly evolving digital world we inhabit, exploring the relationship between English and digital media generally will undoubtedly be an important consideration for teachers and policy-makers alike in the years ahead.

Students mostly welcomed the variety of novels, plays and films they explored, though one student expressed disappointment with *'spoilers from other classes'* impacting on his enjoyment of the novel. Students were particularly enthusiastic about opportunities to explore and discuss the techniques film-makers use to achieve specific effects and the increased capacity it gave them to engage critically with visual texts. With a few exceptions, students were markedly less positive about poetry describing it variously as *complex, difficult* and *pointless*. Whilst a less positive response to poetry is not a new development and cannot be generalised to all students, it undoubtedly presents challenges for teachers as they explore this vital aspect of the subject domain with students. Some concern about students' engagement with poetry was also reflected in the submission from the SEC.

Teachers observed that students often read some of the novels on the suggested list for first year during sixth class. Many teachers said they are now delaying the selection of a class novel until after

they have spoken to students about what novels they've already read. The text list working group in revising the list might do well to avoid, as far as possible, suggesting texts which appear to be frequently read in primary school. However, there is no set list of texts in primary schools for the text list working group to consult, nor can student reading in primary school or indeed outside of school be constrained by a list.

Student exposure to a wide variety of texts, whilst an aspiration of the specification, is not always evident in practice. The submission from the SEC indicated that some students explored one text in two mediums (e.g. written text and film of *Of Mice and Men*). Concern was expressed that this potentially defeats the aim of the Junior Cycle English specification to ensure students experience a broad range of spoken, written, multimodal and literary texts. However, this perceived widening of the text base is itself contested, with a number of teachers expressing a preference to explore fewer texts with students over the course of second and third year than is currently outlined in the guidelines for texts on page 9 of the specification.

Resources which promote familiarity and engagement with the full range of texts on the list (such as the JCT's guide to the prescribed novels and drama texts on the list) were welcomed. Teachers reported that finding time to read multiple texts from junior cycle and senior cycle text lists for English, as well as one's own personal reading choices, can be quite challenging. In terms of how often the list changes, one submission suggested that it would be wonderful to have a 'live' frequently updated Junior Cycle text list, so that just published novels, drama texts and films could be immediately explored in the classroom. Another submission echoed that enthusiasm for change, stating '*I'm looking forward to the list being updated, providing variety and modern suggestions*'. On the other hand, one English department spoke positively about exploring the possibilities of the new specification through the lens of more familiar texts

*To work with the Learning Outcomes confidently, it was very beneficial for teachers to know the texts very well.*

Teachers also mentioned investment in class sets of novels and book rental schemes as a rationale for not creating a completely new text list each time it is re-issued.

In light of the feedback received, the following points may be relevant as the specification for Junior Cycle English is enacted in practice in the years ahead.

- Given the tension between requests for the list to be 'live' and/or frequently updated and competing requests for it to stay the same for a significant amount of time and to retain familiar texts, it might be advisable (as previously indicated) that the list would evolve gradually, with each list serving three cohorts of students, spanning five years and retaining approximately 60% of the

previous list. It is proposed that the revised text list, for example, will apply to students completing sixth class in 2018, and will span from 2018-2021, 2019-2022 and 2020-2023.

- The only area which will be significantly expanded will be the list of films, as teachers frequently reiterated that they find a list of only ten films to select from too restrictive.
- Specific comments in relation to the texts on the list are being taken into consideration by the text list working group in revising the junior cycle text list.

## Learning outcomes

*I really like the learning outcomes. It's helping me to be clear on what we're trying to achieve in the learning.*

Response to the learning outcomes is mixed. The 39 learning outcomes for Junior Cycle English are variously described by teachers as 'clear, specific and comprehensive' or as 'daunting, burdensome and laborious'. Oral language 3 (*engage in extended and constructive discussion of their own and other students' work*) whilst challenging, is the learning outcome teachers most frequently welcomed during the review and many teachers explicitly linked it to their use of success criteria to scaffold students' feedback to each other. Some comments were made in relation to perceived omissions (critical literacy from a social justice perspective, stagecraft, theme); overlap (register and grammar); density (number of verbs in O1 and W3); and scope (R9 relating to digital and visual genres and sub-genres) in the learning outcomes. Learning outcome R9 and particularly film is frequently mentioned as an area future CPD might focus on.

The emphasis in learning outcomes O11, R5, W9 on the potential for listening, speaking, reading and writing to be a private and pleasurable experience, rather than something you 'have to do' at school, is welcome. However, teachers also emphasised that whilst a positive disposition towards English may enhance the student's experience and/or achievement in the subject, for some students, experiencing reading and writing as a 'pleasurable' activity can be difficult, particularly if such positive dispositions towards reading and writing are not embedded in the home from an early age. Nonetheless, many teachers expressed firm belief that students who struggle with reading and writing can develop more positive dispositions towards them.

A small number of submissions expressed reservations about a learning outcomes approach to curricula generally

*Learning outcomes suffer from being skills-based rather than knowledge-based. It encourages a tick-boxing mentality.*

However, many teachers equally said that they find a tick-box approach to the learning outcomes does not work but that thinking about the process of learning and using learning outcomes to plan for activities with an appropriate balance of knowledge and skills is helpful. A desire to delve deeper into the implications of the learning outcomes approach for teaching and learning was evident in some of the feedback

*Making choices about pedagogy in light of the learning outcomes is challenging.  
There is a need for professional support and for discussion about this during CPD.*

Many teachers stated that the extent to which students should learn to draw comparisons between texts is not clear in the specification. Comparison is explicitly referenced in a number of learning outcomes: reading 2 (*read for a variety of purposes: learning, pleasure, research, comparison*), oral language 8 (*listen actively in order to interpret meaning, compare, evaluate effectiveness of, and respond to drama, poetry, media broadcasts, digital media noting key ideas, style, tone, content and overall impact in a systematic way*) and oral language 10 (*collaborate with others in order to explore and discuss understandings of spoken texts by recording, analysing, interpreting and comparing their opinions*). The specification also 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.*

Many teachers described providing students with opportunities to read, discuss and compare across texts and on occasion, to create written texts (of varying length) comparing texts to each other, with the aim of helping students to further develop their capacity to become critical consumers of both literary and non-literary texts. However, some teachers appear to be devoting significant class time to getting students to prepare written comparisons across many of their longer texts. This in turn may be contributing to perceptions that there is not enough time for teaching and learning in second and third year. It is possible that this is due to a backwash effect from a single question on a sample paper from 2015 (*"Compare the settings of your two chosen novels using the three following headings to guide your response: physical location; mood or atmosphere; social values"*). A number of teachers appear to be basing decisions about teaching and learning arising from their reading of a set of indicative sample papers. However, as time goes on and teachers become more familiar with the specification, this backwash effect may lessen. Many teachers also acknowledged in feedback that trying to prepare students for every possible permutation of questions that could be asked in a final examination in relation to texts is neither possible nor desirable in a learning outcomes grounded specification.

## Planning

Planning is the area identified as the most challenging aspect of the new course. Planning with learning outcomes and collaboratively as an English department are variously described as *a rich experience*, *as a learning curve*, and *as a disaster*.

The main challenge identified by teachers lies in striking a 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 need to be reinforced (in different texts/contexts).

Uncertainty was expressed about how often to revisit the learning outcomes and how to judge when what has been learnt is 'enough' in the context of the age and stage of learning, the needs and various abilities of the cohort of students being taught and the time available.

*It can be difficult to stop identifying learning outcomes that are relevant to particular aspects of planning – at times, too many of them seem relevant and this is a challenge.*

Feedback from teachers is that JCT screencasts and supports in relation to planning are helpful. Professional time, including time to meet as a department, is viewed as critical, though it was also observed that it can be challenging for bigger English departments to schedule time to meet, both for planning and for subject learning and assessment review meetings. A reliance on plans provided in textbooks was frequently mentioned in feedback though some departments indicated that whilst they use textbooks as a repository of texts, they nonetheless plan the learning collaboratively as a department and decide on the pace of learning and the range of text types to be explored independently of the textbook. Some frustration was expressed that plans which 'work' on paper can become challenging in practice as unforeseen time constraints arise. A number of English departments spoke of the importance of opportunities to meet regularly for incremental planning and/or to adapt and modify plans so that they are a living and evolving document which is responsive to changing needs and circumstances, rather than a static document which does not support learning. Some teachers also spoke of how much their plans have evolved since 2014 as they have become more comfortable with the specification.

A clear understanding of the relationship between learning outcomes and learning intentions is not yet widely evident and recognising learning outcomes as processes rather than products of learning remains a challenge. However, a number of teachers commented that when they consider what it is

they would like a student to show as evidence of learning in relation to learning outcomes, that this helps in formulating more focused learning intentions. It was suggested that where learning outcomes list multiple verbs (e.g. O1, W3) this is somewhat more challenging.

Teachers frequently mentioned success criteria in positive terms

*Success criteria are hugely helpful in directing students and framing effective formative feedback.*

but it is too soon to know how widely and/or effectively they are being used to scaffold student learning. Feedback from teachers and stakeholders attests to the challenge inherent in creating nuanced success criteria which support feedback conversations about student work without being reductive or overly prescriptive about what 'quality' work might look like.

In light of the feedback received, the following points may be relevant as the specification for Junior Cycle English is enacted in practice in the years ahead.

- For the most part, feedback relates to the challenge of making judicious choices when enacting the learning outcomes in practice rather than to the wording and content of the 39 learning outcomes. It is thus proposed that no changes are made to the learning outcomes. However, specific feedback in relation to perceived omissions and the density and scope of the learning outcomes may need to be revisited in a subsequent review to explore to what extent this feedback remains significant.
- Planning is an area which remains challenging. One English department suggested that opportunities for English departments to come together, to share and discuss their plans and identify opportunities and challenges in planning might be helpful.
- Further support is needed in the area of curriculum task design, particularly the relationship between learning outcomes and learning intentions. It was also suggested that it might be helpful to include a glossary of key terms appendix in the specification.

## Inclusion

Respondents suggested that the broad open nature of the learning outcomes is helpful to ensure that all students have opportunities to achieve the same kinds of learning, albeit at differing levels of achievement

*There can be a temptation to say 'this LO isn't for this student or this group of students'. It helps to know that the LOs can be accessed and achieved at different levels of difficulty – some LOs can be achieved at a basic level, at an intermediate*

*level or at a very advanced level. It helps to know that they were created with universal design principles in mind.*

Nonetheless, teachers did identify certain learning outcomes as particularly challenging for students who may struggle with English for a variety of reasons. O1 (spoken interaction), O5 (deliver a short oral text), R8 (language enrichment), R11 (terminology) and W1 (plan, draft, re-draft and edit) were most frequently mentioned in this respect. Some teachers commented that the new specification makes it easier to teach mixed ability classes. A number of teachers also commented that access to the same texts and to a wide variety of texts for all students is positive and promotes social inclusion. Other teachers cited the number of texts to be studied as particularly challenging for students with significant literacy and learning difficulties.

It was suggested that teachers in specific contexts need greater flexibility than the guidelines for texts and assessments in Junior Cycle currently provide. For example, where students access the learning in Junior Cycle at a mix of Level 2 and Level 3, with English at Level 3, the guidelines for texts, learning outcomes and multiple assessments can be overwhelming. This can also be the case in contexts such as Adult Education and Youthreach centres where students often engage in learning over a shorter time period than the three year course of study envisaged in the specification.

The JCSP is deemed to integrate well but it was suggested that CPD may be needed to further tease out alignment of the JCSP approach with the new specification. L2LPs were broadly welcomed by teachers who indicated that they have experience in this area thus far

*The Level Two programme is a testament to inclusivity. I love the simple layout, the examples given and the fact that it runs in tandem with the [Level 3] Junior Cycle. I have used it in my classroom and also in an ASD unit and have found it most helpful but more than that it is practical both in content and pedagogically.*

Co-operative or team teaching is deemed to work well in planning for students to access the learning at Level 2 in a Level 3 context. However, whilst L2LPs integrate well with the Level 3 specification for English, the challenges of planning at 2 levels are significant and it was suggested that teachers will need further support in this area in the years ahead.

Access to CPD for primary trained teachers in special schools is a specific challenge which was identified in the review. Opportunities for collaboration between Youthreach teachers can be limited but in at least one region, a local cluster formed to meet this need, both for subject learning and assessment review meetings and for planning and sharing of practice generally. The Youthreach teachers who formed this cluster spoke very positively of the support provided by management to facilitate and support this group and colleagues in other Youthreach centres expressed interest in forming similar support networks in their regions.

Students with significant learning challenges spoke of English as equal parts challenging and rewarding

*I feel I can change the way I feel about a subject by talking with others.*

*It's easy and hard in different ways. I like discussion and listening to others. I like the play we're doing, it's funny.*

*It's stressful. I learn everything but don't know what to do, don't remember.*

Students also spoke of feeling *relieved*, *proud* and *surprised* at what they could learn and achieve in their Oral Communication classroom-based assessment and to a lesser extent in the Collection of the Student's Texts and this sentiment was echoed for the most part by their teachers.

In light of the feedback received, the following points may be relevant as the specification for Junior Cycle English is enacted in practice in the years ahead.

- Teachers who have not yet taught Level 2 indicated that they would like to explore what the integration of Level 3 and Level 2 learning might look like in planning and in practice.
- Further guidance may need to be provided for contexts where students access the learning across a shorter timespan (e.g. adults returning to education) and/or in non-mainstream contexts (e.g. home schooling).

Further feedback in relation to inclusion in assessment and reporting will be explored in the relevant sections below.

## Oral communication classroom-based assessment

The emphasis on oral communication in the specification and in the related classroom-based assessment has been widely welcomed by both teachers and students

*I love the oral aspect and the better awareness of the process of writing... they have been a joy and worked incredibly well.*

*It's memorable when the students surprise you. There's a sense of pride, seeing growth and progress, seeing students collaborating and learning independently.*

*It offers experiences and learning outside of the oral sphere – writing and research and social skills.*

*I like the oral presentation because it encourages independent thinking (student)*

A number of teachers spoke about gradually trying to move students away from the perceived safety net of presenting alone, clicking through a power point at the top of the class, particularly now that classroom-based assessments involving presentations are being introduced in other subjects. English teachers frequently spoke of wanting students to present in formats more intrinsic to the subject



domain than a generic digital presentation, such as a debate between two teams, a radio talk, an interview, a comedic and/or dramatic sketch or commentating on a sporting or charity event. Respondents also commented that in order to meaningfully choose one of these formats, students need opportunities to explore some of them as part of on-going teaching and learning before they get to the point where they are choosing one of these formats for their oral communication classroom-based assessment. Teachers further suggested that the more variation in the formats, topics and decisions to work individually, in pairs or groups evident within the class group, the more engaging and enjoyable the experience was for the teacher and for the class, as it avoids the monotony of everyone doing the same thing. Teachers also expressed confidence (some following initial scepticism) that having applied the features of quality to student work, the features support students taking a variety of approaches, including work in pairs or groups, without compromising robust assessment of achievement.

The 'guidance for students' section of the assessment guidelines was welcomed, as was the note-taking template, though it was suggested by both JCT and DES inspectors that this might more usefully be included as an appendix rather than as a hyperlink within the document. Some queries were raised in relation to new data protection legislation and the implications of this for schools in recording and retaining student work and it was suggested that the assessment guidelines, in line with DES guidelines for child protection, explicitly state that teachers must use school and not personal devices to audio/video record students. Some questions also arose about the implications of new data protection legislation for schools collecting and retaining a bank of examples of student work to share with parents and students as appropriate.

Teachers requested further clarification in relation to inclusion, specifically to what extent oral communication can be adapted to the needs of students without compromising the nature or purpose of the assessment. Whilst it is explicitly stated in the assessment guidelines that whatever adaptations to the learning (ways of displaying learning and/or the learning environment) are made across students' three years of junior cycle carry seamlessly into classroom-based assessments, nonetheless this is an area where teachers continue to have questions. For example, where students struggle to make eye contact (many students on the ASD spectrum, for example), it was queried whether it would be acceptable for them to display their learning through a radio talk, where eye contact is irrelevant and where engagement with the audience/listener is displayed in other ways. Where students cannot speak for a variety of reasons, it was queried whether text-to-speech software, used in day-to-day teaching and learning, could also be used in the oral communication classroom-based assessment. English teachers and JCT suggested that this clarification could be provided by publishing a further

range of examples, with more diversity in ways of displaying learning, such that student abilities are supported both in on-going teaching and learning and at moments of assessment.

English teachers frequently observed that a culture shift is needed if society is going to widen what it values in terms of educational achievement. Support from parents was frequently mentioned as crucial to the success of new approaches to assessment

*The journey through education is happening in the classroom and the home. If parents understand and are included in these changes, the transitions can be smoother.*

Some English teachers observed that English is a subject which has heretofore summatively assessed student achievement exclusively through terminal written examinations and this may be one reason why there is so much concern that learning displayed outside of terminal examinations will not be valued by students and parents.

Students spoke in largely positive terms about the oral communication classroom-based assessment, with one group of students speaking about the '*total freedom and support*' teachers in their school had given them in engaging with the task. However, a large number of students said that they weren't aware of the choices that were available to them and expressed some frustration about this

*I didn't think about the option of working with others*

*We were not aware of the performance option and might have chosen that. We were just told to do a speech or presentation. No other options were given.*

Several students also said that they viewed working with others as risky and that given the choice again, they would still present alone with a power point or other digital presentation software. It was clear in conversations with students that they perceive this to be a 'default norm', a safe option that will not take them too far out of their comfort zone. Teachers spoke of encouraging students to take more creative approaches but not always succeeding as students at this stage in their social and emotional development can sometimes be inclined to mimic their peers to fit in. Teachers also emphasised that the use of the term 'presentation' in the media as a synonym for 'communication' in articles about changes to junior cycle generally had been misleading for teachers, students and parents and had contributed in no small part to initially narrow interpretations of this classroom-based assessment. However, teachers equally recognised the importance of getting information from primary (specification and assessment guidelines) rather than secondary sources (media reports, textbooks etc).

One significant concern raised was that, where students opt for spoken production, alone, they do not need to listen or interact to demonstrate their learning as communicators. Given the interdependent

nature of these skills, there may be scope to look in future at how receptive skills might be included in the assessment of junior cycle English.

In light of the feedback received, the following points may be relevant as the specification for Junior Cycle English is enacted in practice in the years ahead.

- To facilitate broad interpretation of formats and topics for oral communication, it may help to add a few sentences to the Assessment Guidelines along the following lines *‘these formats are open to interpretation by students and teachers. For example, a debate as a form of **presentation**, a radio **interview**, a commentary on a sporting or cultural event as a **response to a stimulus**, a comedy sketch, recitation, mock **interview** or parody as a form of **performance**. Note that this list of examples is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to suggest that student approaches to the oral communication classroom-based assessment may vary and/or overlap’*.
- Further communication with parents at school level and through the National Parents Council may help to deepen parents understanding of and engagement with changes at junior cycle.
- Further guidance in relation to inclusive practices for on-going teaching and learning and the extension of this support into classroom-based assessments is needed. This may be provided in a variety of ways, including in further examples of student work.

## Collection of the Student’s Texts classroom-based assessment

There was general agreement that the *Collection of the Student’s Texts* presents opportunities for significant learning for students

*The collection of texts is one of the most exciting aspects - students take ownership of their writing.*

*It allows students to critically evaluate their work, to look at it more closely and to reflect on their learning.*

*They take more notice of feedback now, once they are used to it.*

*Student responsibility for their folders is preparing them for real life and making them more critical. But there are always some students who struggle with organisation and you do help them a bit more.*

Students were also largely positive about the process of compiling a collection of their texts over time

*We had freedom to write. Creative freedom.*

*It’s nice seeing value in your own work. Not marking but tweaking to make it better.*

*It was good to reflect on something you had to do a while back and then you could compare it with the way we write now.*

*I had a lot of work to choose from, a big folder with different genres of texts to choose from.*

However, a number of students said they found this aspect of the course particularly challenging

*I get annoyed with corrections, I don't believe in myself.*

*I love creating but I don't like writing*

Students spoke about writing in a wide variety of genres, including poems, short stories, interviews, blogs, personal essays, dialogues, scripts, reviews, speeches, articles, diaries, letters, descriptive pieces and a variety of different types of critical analysis essays.

Similar to the oral communication classroom-based assessment, both students and teachers said they value the learning achieved in the *Collection of the Student's Texts* and are concerned that it will not have parity of esteem with final assessment

*Students say they don't feel it holds the same weight as the state exams, even though they're quite proud of their Collection.*

Teachers also identified some specific challenges relating to the *Collection of the Student's Texts*. A significant amount of feedback related to the challenge of building student capacity in relation to learning outcome W1: *Demonstrate their understanding that there is a clear purpose for all writing activities and be able to plan, draft, re-draft and edit their own writing as appropriate*. Teachers spoke of a gap in some students' understanding which can be difficult to address

*Some students struggle with the Collection of Texts but they do get a sense of achievement with a finished piece. The idea of drafting became a stumbling block for reluctant writers – 'why would I have to do it again? I've done it already'. They didn't fully understand that it was about trying to improve word choices, sequencing, they thought it just meant they had to rewrite the piece without spelling mistakes and fix up the punctuation.*

Whilst classroom modelling of drafting and editing was deemed to go some way towards addressing this misunderstanding, embedding a nuanced understanding of writing as a process was nonetheless deemed a complex challenge, particularly where it intersects with high rates of absenteeism, literacy difficulties, low motivation and/or lack of student ownership of their writing. However, a number of teachers also spoke of how increased ownership of their writing impacted positively on student motivation and in some cases enhanced student willingness to persevere in improving their work.

Teachers also spoke of the delicate balance that needs to be struck between sometimes getting students to write spontaneously, then moving on and other times getting students to rework or rethink a written piece. A question which frequently arose during consultation events and school visits was

*How far do you go, how often does a student revisit a piece of work? You don't want it to become a hybrid, it has to reflect their ability.*

Teachers spoke of exercising their professional judgement in relation to this issue. On the one hand, many teachers suggested that it is sensible to offer peer/teacher feedback using success criteria, rework the piece once and then move on. On the other hand, others felt strongly that revisiting a piece a few times could deepen student learning and their understanding of the craft that goes into a 'finished' piece. Most teachers appear to be leaving the door open for students to revisit a piece as they prepare to select their best pieces for assessment, as student learning in the interim might help them to see where there is scope for further improvement in a text they created previously before they submit it for assessment.

Feedback suggests that teachers are not aware and/or do not accept that students develop their extended writing skills in Junior Cycle English primarily through the process of creating the *Collection of the Students' Texts*. The Assessment Task appears to be a contributory factor, as it requires students to transcribe a small section from a longer text they have written into their booklet. However, it is student reflections on their writing rather than this transcribed section which is assessed in the task, whilst creative and critical writing is assessed through the *Collection of the Students' Texts*.

A number of teachers want to see the phrase 'extended writing' explicitly embedded in the assessment guidelines. Others suggest that this would be inappropriate, as it is to be expected that a student's collection would contain short pieces as well as longer texts and the focus should be on quality over quantity and on the appropriate length demands of the genre. (For example, a student might display greater skill and creativity as a writer in a short poem or piece of flash fiction than in a 5-page personal or critical analysis essay). Many teachers suggested that the opportunity to write in a variety of genres at a length appropriate to that genre and to that moment in the student's learning is more critical than labelling all writing under an umbrella of 'extended' writing.

Many teachers said that whilst they used portfolio workbooks which accompanied textbooks initially, that they quickly grew frustrated with them, for a variety of reasons. This concern about the potentially negative impact of one-size-fits-all portfolio workbooks on student ownership of the collection of texts was mirrored in feedback from DES English inspectors.

Teachers' feedback in relation to the assessment guidelines for the *Collection of the Student's Texts* was largely positive. They are deemed to provide clarity about the purpose of the collection and the Features of Quality are deemed appropriate for assessing a wide range of student work in a variety of genres. However, teachers did suggest that they would like to explore how applicable these features would be to visual and/or digital genres, which use mixed modes of presentation (written, visual,

audio). This is an area where further exemplification may be helpful and this is discussed further in the section on examples of student work below. One further query which arose in relation to assessing texts from the collection, was the extent to which errors in spelling and grammar should be taken into account for students with dyslexia, both in on-going teaching and learning and in assessing pieces from the *Collection of the Student's Texts*.

In light of the feedback received, the following points may be relevant as the specification for Junior Cycle English is enacted in practice in the years ahead

- Further guidance in relation to inclusive practices for on-going teaching and learning and the extension of this support into classroom-based assessments is needed. This may be provided in a variety of ways, including in further examples of student work.
- Further support in the area of writing as a process may be helpful. There is scope to highlight and connect with existing expertise and initiatives in this area (for example, the Writers in Schools scheme, Arts in Education, Creative Ireland programme, SWIFT programme, Fighting Words etc.) as well as offering further support through CPD.

## Examples of student work

The examples of student work published on [www.curriculumonline.ie](http://www.curriculumonline.ie) were described as *critical, well annotated* and

*invaluable for benchmarking teacher professional judgements against a national standard.*

At present, the classroom-based assessment examples are being more widely used than teacher designed tasks and examples of ongoing student learning in first, second and third year. Teachers who had not yet participated in subject learning and assessment review meetings at the time of this review appeared to be somewhat less aware of the examples and of their function in establishing a national standard.

In relation to oral communication, it was suggested that, subject to time, staff and resources, more examples might be added over time. A focus on more diverse and imaginative examples would be welcome, including pair and group performances, though it was acknowledged that this needs to come from students in classrooms in order to be exemplified.

Some teachers report a decreasing reliance on the examples over time

*The first year you went through them with a fine toothcomb. I think I have a good sense of it now.*

However, other teachers emphasised the importance of checking in on the examples year on year, as these benchmarks of standard may evolve over time. In the absence of checking-in with the examples as part of the SLAR process, it was suggested that a gap may emerge between teachers' internalised sense of the standard and the published standard online, particularly if that standard evolves. It was further suggested that using the examples of student work published on [www.curriculumonline.ie](http://www.curriculumonline.ie) to support discussions during subject learning and assessment review meetings is and will remain pivotal. English teachers re-iterated that access to facilitation training for all teachers is extremely important. This is explored in further detail in the section on review meetings below.

It was suggested that the suite of oral communication examples currently published on curriculum online do not fully demonstrate the opportunities for inclusion embedded in the task. For example, whilst the features of quality do not demand eye contact, all of the examples currently published online comment on this aspect of communication. It was pointed out that in assessing the level of engagement with the audience/listener, targeted use of rhetorical questions or humour, for example, are equally effective ways of engaging an audience. A communication could be auditory in nature and still achieve to the highest level yet, so far, no audio-only examples have been published. This nuance is considered particularly important where insisting on eye contact may present a barrier to success (for example, for a student on the autistic spectrum).

In relation to the oral communication examples it is clearly stated online that their purpose is to support teachers' professional judgements and that they are not to be used for any other purpose. However, teachers nonetheless expressed a desire to show the examples to students. The potential benefit of using examples to explain the features of quality to students is clear. However, it was also argued that students sometimes adopt a 'copy and paste' approach to what they view rather than considering all of the possibilities available to them in terms of format, topic and pair/group or individual communication and that this can sometimes, though not always, negatively impact on both their engagement with and achievement in this CBA. Several schools said that they are currently building up a bank of in-school examples. One school spoke of using the examples to explain classroom-based assessment to parents at a parents evening; another teacher described getting TY students who are involved in debating to mentor second years. However, it was suggested that the full value of a school bank of examples will only be fully realised once students embrace more varied approaches to the CBA, including working together in pairs and/or groups.

In relation to the *Collection of the Student's Texts*, the examples published on curriculum online are considered helpful. Some more experienced English teachers suggested that assessing student written work in a variety of genres is an area where English teachers have significant expertise already. By

contrast, assessing oral work may currently be a comfort zone for a smaller cohort of English teachers, such as those who are involved in debating, poetry aloud, directing school plays and/or teachers who debate/act/direct/perform as part of their life outside of school.

Further examples of student texts in genres not yet represented would be welcome, particularly multimodal and/or digital texts. It is also suggested that a wider range of written examples matching the features for *In Line With Expectations* should be published so that the band is fully exemplified, as there is a perception that currently many of the published examples sit comfortably in the mid-range of this band of achievement. A number of teachers also asked if it would be possible to set up a mechanism to submit examples from their school for publication. This may be complicated from a data protection perspective but it is nonetheless an idea which deserves due consideration. Whilst a small minority asked for the band 'yet to meet' to be exemplified, most teachers view this as unnecessary, to ask a student to have their work, which has not reached the standard, published online, as an example of how not to meet the standard.

In light of the feedback received, the following points may be relevant as the specification for Junior Cycle English is enacted in practice in the years ahead

- As previously indicated, a support video for parents/schools in relation to the purpose and function of examples of student work, their role in supporting teacher judgements and the language of the descriptors may be helpful.
- Further and more diverse examples of student work should be gathered from classrooms, quality assured and published in the years ahead.

## Subject learning and assessment review meetings

Subject learning and assessment review meetings are viewed positively, for the most part, by teachers who participated in them.

*Everybody had a voice. If there was some disagreement, we worked our way up through the features of quality.*

*We're learning from each other, we're not operating in a vacuum, stuck in our classrooms.*

*Time to sit together and discuss critical features [of student work] was really worthwhile, being able to bounce ideas off each other and engage in professional dialogue.*

The opportunity for subject learning as well as assessment review led many participants to describe the review meetings as a significant and valuable opportunity for in-house professional development



alongside colleagues. However, big departments did report that organising and running these meetings is challenging and some very large departments conducted two meetings simultaneously to meet that challenge and maximise the use of the two hours available.

English teachers with experience of review meetings suggest that four factors are critical to their success: professionalism and mutual respect; a skilled facilitator; the support of management in providing a space with adequate ICT facilities where teachers won't be disturbed for two hours; and adequate training

*JCT's facilitator training was excellent and is vital in order to have confidence in the process.*

Where the experience was less successful three factors contributed: lack of facilitator training; lack of clarity about the purpose of the meeting; and interpersonal difficulties. It was also pointed out that school culture plays a significant role in attitudes towards and experiences of teacher collaboration, including planning and subject learning and review meetings. Where schools interpreted planning as a process to ensure that every teacher is doing the same thing at the same time in the same way in their classrooms, English teachers viewed this not as true collaboration but rather as forced consensus which can restrict individual professional judgements about where the learning needs to go next, in light of feedback from students. However, where planning is truly collaborative in nature and open enough to allow for teacher professional judgement and where review meetings are conducted in an atmosphere of collegiality and respect for diverse views, closer collaboration has been welcomed as an affirming experience which nonetheless supports professional growth for all involved. An emphasis on subject learning in review meetings was welcomed, as it embeds opportunities to discuss and exchange ideas about pedagogical approaches and task design, where applicable, rather than exclusively focusing on assessment of student achievement.

For the most part, parents appear happy to accept teachers' professional judgements about the quality of student work in second and third year.

*When communicating with parents, it helps to say this [alignment of standards] is a department wide decision.*

In one case a teacher spoke of showing a parent some of the examples from curriculum online to explain how their child's work is benchmarked against a national standard. However, some questions did arise about how schools might deal with queries from parents about results in CBAs, should they arise and it was suggested that this has not yet been fully teased out in the system.

Some teachers are uncomfortable awarding the descriptor *Yet to Meet Expectations*, particularly where the student makes significant effort and good progress against their previous achievements but

nonetheless does not achieve in line with the expectations outlined in the features of quality. A strong instinct towards ipsative assessment (judging the work against the student's previous performance) rather than criterion-based assessment (the work against the features of quality and a national benchmark) is a recurring feature in the feedback. However, equally, the move towards criteria-based rather than norm-based referencing is viewed positively

*We had very rigorous conversation around the awarding of descriptors. What emerged was not a bell curve but actually contextualised to the individual classroom.*

Nonetheless, some of the feedback pointed to hesitation in terms of continuing to benchmark against the national standard following the first experience of CBAs

*We were too rigorous in the first year in terms of applying the standard.*

However, this suggestion that the application of the standard might become 'less' rigorous over time appeared only occasionally during the review. The role of the facilitator and genuine engagement with the process by all involved appears key in ensuring that all judgements are - and continue to be - aligned with a national rather than a local or classroom standard.

It was also suggested on a few occasions that the top band of achievement, *Exceptional*, sets a standard which is extremely high, one which teachers occasionally suggested is perhaps more suited to adults. However, it was equally acknowledged that clearly there are students who are capable of particularly skilful and imaginative oral communication, and that their age, as such, is irrelevant.

A recurring feature in feedback is some discomfort around the descriptors of achievement, including the question of 'whose expectations' the standard represents and concern that the language of the widest band of achievement *In line with expectations* is not positive enough. It was also suggested that the descriptor *Yet to meet expectations* might be taken to imply opportunities to 'try again' when students' communication skills have improved. Whilst opportunities may be there in senior cycle TY, LCA, LCVP and indeed in life beyond school, it was frequently pointed out that such opportunities do not currently exist in English in the Leaving Certificate for assessment purposes.

In light of the feedback received, the following points may be relevant as the specification for Junior Cycle English is enacted in practice in the years ahead

- As previously indicated, a support video for parents/schools in relation to the purpose and function of examples of student work, their role in supporting teacher judgements and the language of the descriptors may be helpful.

- Facilitation training for teachers will remain an important element of CPD in supporting meaningful and constructive subject learning and assessment review meetings.

## Assessment Task

Whilst teachers expressed confidence that the classroom-based assessments (*Oral Communication* and the *Collection of the Student's Texts*) capture fundamental aspects of what it means to be good at English, teachers largely described the purpose of the Assessment Task within the wider context of Junior Cycle English as unclear. Asking students to reflect on their learning as they write and create is viewed positively but turning this into a formal reflective task which is externally assessed was considered unnecessary and unhelpful, just creating

*one more hoop that teachers and students have to jump through.*

Many teachers commented that it takes further time away from teaching and learning, asking students to repeat reflections and transcribe parts of texts already completed in their learning as part of the *Collection of the Student's Texts* classroom-based assessment.

In terms of feedback on the task itself rather than the rationale for its existence, the stimulus materials are welcome, as are the inclusive nature of the accompanying transcripts and close captioning of videos but the link between the stimulus and the task, including the prompts, is unclear. This feedback was taken on board in the most recent iterations of the Assessment Task (December and April 2017) and a paragraph was inserted which further clarifies the role and purpose of the stimulus materials. Nonetheless, the time lag for students between reflecting on individual pieces of their writing over the course of second and third year and then engaging with the task prompted a number of students to ask why they cannot simply send their reflection note(s) off to the SEC in an envelope.

It was also queried whether the task is accessible enough to be considered a common level task. Many teachers linked this to the question of whether it is age appropriate to formally assess reflective skills, which are meta-cognitively challenging and personal rather than performative in nature. Another question posed by teachers was to what extent the task assesses the quality of the thinking and reflection the student has done or the articulation of that thinking and reflection i.e. how well written the reflections are.

A number of teachers report feeling conflicted by the task. On the one hand they expressed a desire to scaffold students as they develop the capacity for deeper and more nuanced thinking about their writing and the critical features of various genres. On the other hand, when it comes to the Assessment Task, several teachers reported being tempted to tell students what to think rather than

allowing them to think for themselves because the assessment task is 'worth 10%'. It was felt that this undermines the very learning aspired to within junior cycle, that students learn to think critically, to think for themselves and avoid simply repeating the views of others, though clearly hearing others' views has the potential to deepen students' thinking and understanding.

Concern about the reliability of some responses to the Assessment Task was echoed in the SEC submission

*At times the candidates' responses to the AT appeared rehearsed.*

Teachers also expressed concern that the Assessment Task may undermine the rich learning intrinsic to the process of compiling the *Collection of the Student's Texts*.

*Anxiety about the Assessment Task has overshadowed the value of the writing process students are asked to demonstrate in their collection.*

A conflation of the Assessment Task with the *Collection of the Student's Texts* was evident in feedback, with schools frequently referring to the 'Collection booklet' or the 'CBA booklet' and students expressing irritation that the thing which 'gets 10%' is what they can say about their learning rather than the texts they have created. Whilst the *Collection of the Student's Texts* is reported on separately in the JCPA, for many students and teachers, there was concern that the Assessment Task may ultimately become more valued and of higher status than the Collection CBA with which it is associated. Teachers viewed this as problematic and entirely counter-intuitive given the central role of creative and critical writing to the subject domain.

However, the SEC submission also stated that

*At times, the AT allowed candidates to showcase and reflect upon the work that they had done during the junior cycle course*

and a more positive take on the Assessment Task was reflected to a very limited extent in feedback.

Teachers also commented on the frequency with which dates for Classroom-Based Assessments and the Assessment Task changed. Whilst they acknowledged that the changing dates were the result of an industrial dispute, they stressed that this causes a lot of confusion and is not respectful of teachers' and school planning.

The hybrid nature of the Assessment Task, whereby it is part and parcel of student learning in the classroom to reflect on their writing, but is then sent away for correction, led to some discussions about ensuring that the task is accessible for all. The provision of a digital copy of the booklet for students who type rather than handwrite work on an on-going basis; the provision of time during the first class period to clarify words, phrases and ideas; the open book nature of the task where students

have their texts and reflection notes with them during the task; and the application of a spelling and grammar waiver at the point of correction for students who have this waiver for exams were all welcomed as positive inclusive practices. However, as discussed above, the challenging nature of meta-cognition and reflection on learning and the process-based and personal rather than performative nature of reflection were nonetheless highlighted in the feedback as reasons to question the suitability and necessity of this additional assessment for junior cycle students.

In light of the feedback received, the following point may be relevant as the specification for Junior Cycle English is enacted in practice in the years ahead

- The overall purpose of the Assessment Task and its potential contribution to over-assessment of student learning in junior cycle needs to be considered carefully, particularly as students will experience assessment across as well as within subjects as new specifications are introduced.

## Final Exam

Reaction to the final exam is mixed. Many teachers welcomed it and spoke positively of how it mitigates against rote learning, lessens predictability and encourages critical thinking. Several examination questions were praised for taking a fresh and creative approach to assessing achievement in English and the design of the paper, along with the thematic approach, was broadly welcomed. Examiners, in feeding back to the SEC in relation to the 2017 junior cycle English exam paper, stated that the questions were pitched appropriately for ordinary level students, in this age group. However, some teachers queried a sentence in the specification relating to final assessment which states that

*The content and format of the examination papers may vary from year to year.*

Some concerns were expressed that students may end up spending time during the exam trying to figure out how many marks each discrete question was worth and consequently how much time should be spent on each individual question and sub-question rather than approaching each one globally, as suggested in the instructions on the inside cover of the final examination paper. Whilst students also expressed some frustration that the exam now has no predictable pattern, all said they just read the instructions on the exam paper on the day of the exam and then completed whatever they were faced with to the best of their knowledge and ability.

The scaffolding evident in the ordinary level paper is welcome. However, it was suggested that further attention be paid to applying the principles of universal design in writing and formatting the instructions to make it easier for students (particularly students with SEN) to navigate. The lack of an aural component in the exam was raised as a concern. It was suggested that providing a transcript of

a spoken text (as happened in sample papers and the exam) rather than listening to the text aurally is not ideal. It is noted, as outlined above, that the lack of an aural component in the assessment of junior cycle English lessens the integration of the strands which is such a vital part of the specification.

Some concern was expressed about students with serious literacy difficulties who might previously have accessed the exam at foundation level. However, a number of teachers challenged this view

*We initially felt that the move away from foundation level was exclusionary, further marginalising our school and students but this is not the case. The exam has broadened to include the old foundation level [sic] student.*

They described the previous foundation exam as '*paint by numbers*' and welcomed giving students access to a more challenging exam yet were simultaneously concerned about the format changing every year, as they felt this presents particular challenges to students who find regularity, patterns and predictability reassuring.

A selection of learning outcomes is assessed in the exam. Students may be asked to draw upon some but not all of the prescribed texts (novels, plays, film, poetry, short stories, non-literary texts) they have explored. Some teachers expressed the view that all studied texts/genres should be examined in the exam, despite the fact that students' critical and creative responses to texts are also assessed through the *Collection of the Student's Texts*. However, it was acknowledged that the old Junior Certificate examination did not assess all genres students studied (e.g. film, short stories) but that rather a predictable pattern of studied fiction, poetry and drama had become embedded in the exam paper. For some teachers, this change is positive as the focus is on studying the text for its own sake, to further students' language, literacy and literary knowledge and skills, rather than because it might appear on an exam. This tension was evident in much of the feedback in relation to final assessment from both students and teachers.

In relation to student results in the final assessment, a concern that the number of distinctions attained in 2017 was low was clear in the feedback. However, many teachers acknowledged that this band cannot be compared to the old 'A' grade and many students indicated that they felt their grade reflected their achievement on the day. The SEC submission also points to a low level of appeals in Junior Cycle English in 2017 and this is explored in more detail in the Chief Examiner's report. The width of the merit band generated some discussion, with many teachers querying why it is so wide. Teachers and students welcomed the booklet format for the most part and view it as helpful in the context of knowing approximately how much to write for each section. However, the provision of additional paper for students who may wish to expand on answers further and/or who may have large handwriting was also deemed important.

Whilst online marking and ribbon marking section by section was an SEC decision linked to an SEC online marking pilot scheme that does not fall within the remit of this review, this decision was nonetheless frequently referred to in feedback from teachers. Some teachers expressed concern about a perceived move away from a judgement of a candidate's entire script, though it was clarified that no such instruction was given to examiners in the past, irrespective of the type of marking employed. Further details in relation to marking are included in the Chief Examiner's Report.

Some teachers suggest that there is a contradiction between the spirit of the specification and the nature of the final exam. A number of teachers commented that even though a rough work box is provided, it serves little purpose, as there is little time for students to think or to edit their work. However, given the nature of terminal assessment, which is always undertaken under time constraints, the capacity to 'use editing skills continuously' (Learning outcome Writing 6) is as important as the ability to 'plan, draft ...and edit' (Learning outcome Writing 1). Some teachers suggested that students didn't have the opportunity to display the full extent of their learning in the exam as in their view it contained '*too many tasks*' and '*did not assess extended writing*'. However, it would appear that many teachers are not taking the *Collection of the Student's Texts* into account and/or posit that writing at length under exam conditions is very different to crafting a fully developed piece of writing over time. It was also unclear from the feedback how long a junior cycle final assessment task/response would need to be, to qualify for the label 'extended writing'.

Students commented at length about how traumatic their experience of mock exams had been and spoke of mocks as being the impetus behind the online student petition to increase the time available for the exam.

In relation to sample papers and to a lesser extent the 2017 final assessment, the issue of the number of tasks students need to complete in the time available arose frequently in teacher feedback. Teachers expressed a strong preference for students to be asked to complete fewer tasks in the final assessment, as they felt this would give students more time to think and expand on their answers. However, there was no consensus as to how many tasks would be appropriate in the time available. Many teachers and students also commented that it is a significant adjustment to accept that a selection of the texts students explore during their junior cycle are assessed in the final examination, as the tradition heretofore was to assess a predictable pattern of texts in the final examination. Despite some concern that there were too many tasks, students for the most part said they did complete the exam in June 2017 in the time available and this finding was echoed in the SEC submission.

*Analysis by the SEC of a significant amount of data at Higher Level indicates that completion was not an issue.*

However, some students pointed out that completing the exam and completing it to the best of their ability is not the same thing. The main concern expressed by students was that they did not have time to apply the re-drafting and reflection skills they had learnt through their collection of texts

*I found that there is not enough time to think or use your writing skills during exams.*

Many students commented that they felt not having such an emphasis on pre-learnt content was challenging but ultimately positive

*English is the one subject where it isn't a memory test, you get a chance to talk about your opinions and what you think. You learn off quotes but it's not defined by that.*

In light of the feedback received, the following points may be relevant as the specification for Junior Cycle English is enacted in practice in the years ahead

- Further consideration of the place of listening skills within the assessment of junior cycle English is needed to ensure greater consistency of approach across languages.
- A more in-depth analysis of the final assessment of Junior Cycle English in 2017 is available in the Chief Examiners report for Junior Cycle English, published by the State Examinations Commission<sup>5</sup>.
- Feedback from teachers and students in relation to final assessment which was gathered during this review will be collated and communicated to the SEC and a discussion of the place of listening skills in the assessment of English will take place.

## Reporting

Many English departments said that in ongoing reporting they now communicate information about a broader range of learning in English and that many parents are expressing particular interest in their child's learning and achievement in oral communication. However, it was suggested that in some cases school software solutions have not yet adapted to changes in reporting. Some teachers said they were unclear about when to report the results of classroom-based assessments and welcomed clarification that they can be reported to students and parents as soon as final descriptors have been decided upon, following the outcomes of the subject learning and assessment review meeting. The NCCA

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<sup>5</sup> The Chief Examiners Report is available on the SEC 's website at the following link <https://www.examinations.ie/misc-doc/BI-EN-51536473.pdf>



reporting guidelines and booklet for schools should assist schools in achieving greater clarity as approaches to reporting evolve in the coming years<sup>6</sup>.

The existence of two sets of language to report on achievement, one for Classroom-Based Assessments and another for terminal exams is viewed as somewhat problematic, particularly for parents, who do not yet understand the new language of the junior cycle. It was suggested that further work needs to be done to engage parents and build their confidence in the new Junior Cycle. Some reluctance was expressed by teachers about reporting where the student's work is deemed *Yet to meet expectations*.

It is also widely felt that the impact of the JCPA will only emerge when more subjects are reporting on achievement in classroom-based assessments, as English has been somewhat isolated by the phased and delayed introduction of other subjects. The time lag between the issuing of provisional results by the SEC and the issuing of the JCPA is a source of some frustration for English teachers. Many teachers suggested that a provisional JCPA be issued at the same time as the provisional SEC results to provide parity of esteem to classroom-based assessments and the final exam.

In light of the feedback received, the following point may be relevant as the specification for Junior Cycle English is enacted in practice in the years ahead.

- On-going support for evolving approaches to on-going and JCPA reporting will be needed in the years ahead.
- As previously indicated, sustained local and policy-level efforts, with the support of the National Parents Council Post-Primary, to engage and inform parents about changes to junior cycle are needed.

## Key skills

Opportunities for students to develop the key skills are largely viewed as an embedded part of the experience of English, particularly being creative, being literate, communicating and working with others. The *Collection of the Student's Texts* is cited as pivotal to students learning to 'manage myself' and 'be creative'. Students frequently cite opportunities to formulate, develop and justify their own opinions ('managing information and thinking') as an aspect of English they particularly value. Reading, journaling and building confidence in speaking were cited as explicit considerations in contributing to students 'staying well'. It was suggested in feedback that 'being numerate' is somewhat less relevant

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<sup>6</sup> The NCCA reporting guidelines and booklet for schools are available at <https://www.ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/assessment-and-reporting/reporting>

to English as a subject domain, though ‘predicting’ and ‘seeing trends and patterns’ across texts are cited as elements of this key skill with particular applicability to English.

It was suggested on a number of occasions that in the initial phase of the new course, the focus has been on getting to grips with learning outcomes, planning, classroom-based assessments and subject learning and assessment review and that key skills have not explicitly been in focus. There does not seem to be widespread awareness that the key skills are embedded in the learning outcomes and that in planning with the learning outcomes a department is implicitly embedding opportunities to develop the key skills. In schools where the number of English classes in Junior Cycle has been reduced, it was suggested that this erodes teachers’ capacity to address knowledge and skills development within the subject domain in an integrated way. However, there is a corresponding awareness that students develop these key skills across the curriculum not just in English. Teachers and students expressed some frustration in contexts where opportunities to realise the digital possibilities of the new Junior Cycle have been hampered by lack of regular access to technology in the classroom. However, several teachers expressed hope that the Digital Strategy ICT Infrastructure Grant for 2016/2017 might go some way towards addressing this issue, depending on local needs.

In light of the feedback received, the following points may be relevant as the specification for Junior Cycle English is enacted in practice in the years ahead

- In line with other junior cycle subjects, the key skills graphic should be included in the specification
- Further examples of student work which exploit the digital possibilities of the new specification in supporting learning would be welcomed.

## Transition from Junior Cycle to Senior Cycle English

Clear scope for continuity is cited in students’

- creative writing, critical expression, analysis of and personal response to texts
- evolving genre awareness and growing understanding of audience and purpose.

The *Collection of the Student’s Texts* is viewed as pivotal in this respect, as it gradually builds students’ capacity for extended writing, both critical and creative, as appropriate. Exposure to a wide variety of texts across their three years of junior cycle is variously viewed as a help (in relation to comparative studies and poetry) and as a hindrance (in relation to the single text) in equipping students to transition to the challenges of senior cycle. However, where teachers are consciously selecting anchor texts and deciding to spend more time/go into more detail with some texts rather than others in junior

cycle, concerns about student readiness to engage with a single text in senior cycle are not as frequently expressed.

Planning thematically or planning using central anchor texts, with others studied in broad contextual relation to them, is viewed as a good way to increase students' capacity to draw connections between texts, a skill they need during senior cycle. However, as previously discussed, participants reported a lack of clarity as to how formalised students' development of written comparative skills should be in Junior Cycle.

The mis-match of assessment modes between the two stages of education is viewed by teachers as problematic. Whilst students' process-based learning in *Oral Communication* and the *Collection of the Student's Texts* is recognised in their JCPA, students who take the traditional Leaving Certificate route will ultimately be asked to display their learning in English exclusively through two extended terminal written examinations. Some teachers and students thus called for senior cycle to change, to align more closely with the approach in junior cycle. Others suggested that the junior cycle should focus on a narrower range of texts/knowledge/skills and further suggested that greater focus on examining extended writing in the final Junior Cycle exam as well as in the Collection of Texts would help to bridge the gap which exists currently in the way junior cycle and leaving certificate English are assessed. This would run counter to core principles in the Framework for Junior Cycle, in terms of broadening the range of learning that is assessed for the JCPA and ensuring minimal duplication of assessment in classroom-based assessments and final assessment.

Students currently in Transition Year suggest that they are better communicators and writers as a result of their experiences in junior cycle, whilst students currently in 5<sup>th</sup> year most frequently commented on the volume of poetry they engage with in senior cycle. Some report that they are finding this transition challenging. There is general consensus that

*The step up from junior cycle to senior cycle is tough – it's always been tough.*

However, there is no consensus yet as to whether this 'step up' is more or less or equally as difficult as before the introduction of the new course and it is perhaps too soon to make an adequately informed statement in relation to this.

In light of the feedback received, the following points may be relevant as the specification for Junior Cycle English is enacted in practice in the years ahead

- Consideration of the transition to senior cycle will be further considered during the upcoming review of senior cycle.

## Conclusion

This review gathered feedback and insights from teachers, students and stakeholders about the Junior Cycle English specification within the context of wider ongoing changes to junior cycle education. Thus far, feedback suggests that many students are experiencing a good link with their experiences of English in primary school, with scope for increased emphasis on exploring reading comprehension strategies. Exposure to a wide and varied range of texts is embedded in the specification and in practice. However, achieving a balance across literary and non-literary texts and the range of experiences envisaged in the learning outcomes remains challenging, particularly when it comes to planning. Achieving a clearer understanding of the relationship between learning outcomes and learning intentions would likely help to make planning with learning outcomes both more manageable and more meaningful. An integrated approach to oral language, reading and writing across language, literature and literacy development is a key feature of the specification which has been broadly welcomed. However, teachers commented on the implications of this integration for pedagogy and expressed a desire to further tease this out through CPD and other opportunities for professional dialogue. The renewed emphasis on oral language aspired to during the development of the specification is clear in on-going teaching and learning and has been supported by the introduction of the oral communication classroom-based assessment. However, currently there appears to be more emphasis on spoken production than on the related skills of spoken interaction and listening. Teachers and students suggest that the second classroom-based assessment, the *Collection of the Student's Texts* is enhancing students' capacity to take on feedback as writers and creators of texts and in turn provides a good springboard for their learning in senior cycle. However, full understanding of the role and purpose of the Collection of the Student's Texts is not yet evident. In relation to *Subject Learning and Assessment Review*, facilitation training for teachers engaging in/leading these meetings is considered very worthwhile and important.

Whilst a broader approach to assessment has been welcomed in the form of the classroom-based assessments, reservations were expressed about the necessity for the Assessment Task. Adjusting to a single two-hour examination has been somewhat challenging, with a variety of perspectives emerging in feedback about the dual approach to assessment and achieving parity of esteem for classroom-based and final assessment. Some concerns were expressed about over-assessment taking time away from on-going teaching and learning but it appears that these arise from settings where traditional house and mock exams are being retained. There is consequent unease about the viability of the specification in terms of the expectations for learners in the time available.

The introduction of the specification for Junior Cycle English in 2014 occurred at a time of significant change within post-primary education in Ireland and was undertaken during a protracted industrial relations dispute. In this context, it is suggested that only minor changes be made to the specification in the short term. However, the recommendations listed above identify significant and important areas for further clarification, consideration and/or support. It is also acknowledged that a further review may be necessary in due course, once the full range of continuing professional development envisaged to support the enactment of the specification in practice has been experienced by all English teachers.

The NCCA wishes to thank INOTE, JCT, the Board for Junior Cycle and all of the education partners who highlighted the review and shared the invitation to participate at CPD events and via online platforms, including mailing lists and social media.

# Appendix 1 Brief for monitoring and review of Junior

## Cycle Subjects

### Introduction

In line with the Framework for Junior Cycle, new specifications for all subjects are being introduced on a phased basis between 2014 and 2019. Once each subject specification has been experienced by a cohort of students across the three-year span of their Junior Cycle, the NCCA will conduct an interim review to monitor enactment of the specification in schools. This scoping exercise will analyse, evaluate and explore:

- how well the specification gets to the heart of the learning aspired to within that subject and more broadly within the Framework for Junior Cycle
- the assessment elements within each subject, as experienced by students and teachers
- the myriad ways teachers are exercising their professional judgement to mediate the new specification in their schools and classrooms

The results of each review will be published in report form and presented to the Board for Junior Cycle for consideration. Where minor tweaks and/or amendments to the specification are recommended in the report, this work will be carried out by the relevant NCCA Education Officer and the amended specification re-published on curriculum online. If it arises that more significant amendments to the specification are deemed necessary at this early stage in enactment, the development group for the subject may be re-convened to oversee this work. The amended specification will then be presented to Council for approval before being re-published on curriculum online. Schools will be notified that changes have been made to the specification.

Similarly, amendments or changes to the Assessment Guidelines, should they arise, will be made by the relevant NCCA Education Officer and re-published on curriculum online.

## Scope and nature of the review

### **Monitoring and review of each subject will be informed by the following documents:**

- Background paper and brief for the review of the subject in question
- Specification for the subject
- Assessment Guidelines for the Classroom-Based Assessments and, where applicable, the Assessment Task
- NCCA sample assessment questions; the Assessment Task; SEC sample papers; SEC final exam papers and/or Practical Examination brief.

### **The following areas will be the focus of discussions:**

- Student experiences of Junior Cycle English, including the transition from primary to post-primary
- Linking the student experience to the ‘big picture’ ideas in the Framework for Junior Cycle
- Key skills in the Junior Cycle classroom
- Course overview and, where relevant, text lists (English, Gaeilge), exponents (MFL) etc.
- Learning outcomes
- Planning and task design for teaching, learning and on-going assessment
- NCCA published *Examples of Student Work* and their role in supporting teachers
- Classroom-Based Assessments and using Features of Quality to decide on the level of achievement
- Teacher collaboration (including subject learning and assessment review meetings)
- The final exam and, as applicable, the Assessment Task or practical examination
- Reporting on student achievement
- Perspectives on the transition from Junior to Senior cycle for this and future cohorts<sup>7</sup>
- Inclusion in teaching, learning and assessment
- Experiences of the specification in some non-mainstream / non-school based settings

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<sup>7</sup> The first cohort to experience the new specification will be in Transition Year or in the very early stages of their Senior Cycle when the review is conducted and so it may be too early to gather reliable data in this area.

## Proposed methodology for gathering data

A mixed-methods approach to gathering data will be used. Data will be gathered as follows<sup>8</sup>:

- **Focus groups of teachers in a number of schools** will participate in workshops to share their experiences of enacting the specification, including new modes of assessment
- **Student voice** will be captured during workshops with students across a range of cohorts
- **Three consultation events** will take place. Teachers and others from the education sector will be invited to share their experiences and perspectives on enacting the specification
- **Written submissions** to the evaluation will be invited from all who wish to contribute. To facilitate analysis of the data, a template will be provided.
- **JCT will compile a feedback document** highlighting common themes, concerns, queries and observations from teachers during CPD events, in-school visits, online webinars and through queries to info@jct.ie.
- **Inspectorate report:** a submission from DES inspectors will capture observations about the impact of the specification thus far on teaching and learning in schools
- **SEC report** will explore teacher responses to the sample papers and student responses to and achievement in the Assessment Task, and the final exam.

## Analysing the data

Each review, broadly speaking, will:

- briefly re-iterate what the new subject specification set out to achieve, as it was being developed
- analyse the early impact of the specification on teaching, learning, assessment and reporting
- explore teacher-reported and student-reported experiences of and attitudes towards their classroom experience of the specification
- examine opportunities and challenges arising from Classroom-Based Assessments
- identify areas where further support and/or clarity is needed

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<sup>8</sup> Note that the approach to gathering data may vary from subject to subject and/or may evolve over time



- offer some interim recommendations as the specification continues to be enacted and experienced by various student cohorts over the coming decade and beyond.

Key findings and recommendations will be shared with all of the relevant education stakeholders to inform future directions for the subject and, where relevant, for junior cycle more broadly.