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Cold case: Differentiating subject English in the South African school curriculum

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 **OPTIMA**

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“There is simply no coherent, time-honoured tradition of a ‘true’ or ‘pure’ form of English that could be invoked ... Efforts should rather be concentrated on making English a worthwhile and relevant subject in the emerging new social order. Rationale, not rationalisation, is needed” (Harley, 1992, p.13)

Introduction

Subject English is a complex and vexed part of the school curriculum. One of the reasons for this is that English enters into the learning process in three related but distinct ways: learning the language, learning *through* language and learning *about* language’ (Halliday, 1981/2009, p. 216). In South Africa, English is the language most school students must learn as a subject in school from Grade 1. It is also the language through which they learn most other school subjects and in which they are assessed (mostly from Grade 4 and increasingly in the higher grades)¹. English is also the object of study throughout schooling in the two subjects English Home Language (EHL) and English First Additional Language (EFAL). The relationship, between learning to speak, read and write English, learning about English (its literature and grammar) and learning through English (English itself and other subjects) is particularly complex in the South African context where the majority of students speak English as an additional language to their mother tongue. The distinction between an EHL and EFAL curriculum suggests an attempt to cater to a diverse range of learners, with different language capabilities and needs, and one would expect to find different emphases within these curricula in relation to learning the language, learning *through* language and learning *about* language. Rather, what we find are remarkably similar curricula.

The similarity in the structuring and purpose of the curricula of the EHL and EFAL curricula in part derives from the early democratic stance of the ANC to avoid a "deficit view of language competence" (ANC, 1992, p. 12, cited in Barkhuizen & Gough, 462), with the aim of achieving a fully bilingual education system and a single level of language proficiency by

¹ This is shifting with a recent Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education (MtBBE) strategy that emphasises expanding mother tongue instruction til later and the use of bilingual practices and translanguaging.

the end of compulsory schooling (ibid.). These goals were particularly important following the way in which divisive language policies under apartheid disadvantaged black learners in the system, enforcing mother tongue instruction until the end of primary school and a sudden switch to English or Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in high school (de Klerk, 2002).

Whereas there has been considerable focus on the English curriculum in the past, with earlier proposals for rethinking the curriculum distinction between EFAL and EHL, the case for differentiation within subject English appears recently to have gone cold.

This paper revisits questions about the appropriacy of current English curriculum policy, taking as its starting point analyses of learners' English language skills at the end of their schooling careers in the National Senior Certificate (or 'Matric') examinations. Through a review of the curriculum documents, official reports and existing research, I argue for reopening the case of English curriculum revision, especially given its centrality in learning and opportunities within and beyond schooling.

The problem

In 2024, 724156 full-time candidates sat for the final Matric school leaving examination. The examinations for all subjects are set in English or Afrikaans. The number of learners writing different Home Language examinations is a rough indication of the spread of mother tongue languages spoken by learners in Grade 12. 129772 (18%) of learners wrote the EHL Matric examination. 47765 (7%) wrote the Afrikaans Home Language examination. The remaining 75% of learners wrote one of the nine African Home Language papers, the largest numbers being 181448 (25%) for IsiZulu and 114660 (16%) for isiXhosa. 583624 (81%) of the total candidates wrote English First Additional Language. What these figures indicate is that most learners are learning in a language (English) that is not their mother tongue, and apart from Afrikaans-speaking learners, it is through English that assessment for their other school subjects takes place.

Each year since 2011 the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has published a National Senior Certificate 'diagnostic report' that provides an analysis of the Matric examinations from the previous year. Based on a random sample of 100 scripts per question paper selected

from each province and including samples of low, medium and high achievement scores, the analyses look at strengths and weaknesses in responses to each examination question, as well as common errors and misconceptions. A consistent report across the years concerns students' proficiency in the language of the assessment (English). The 2013 report concluded: "A lack of linguistic skills required to express themselves in simple and proper paragraphs were evident in the responses of candidates across all subjects. Candidates displayed inadequacies regarding the skills of reading, comprehension, and analysing, evaluating and applying information to either make decisions or solve problems" (2013, p. 15). The 2021 report noted that "a large number of candidates did not understand the vocabulary used in questions, extracts and comprehension texts" (p.14). The report suggested that schools initiate 'reading projects/reading periods/vocabulary/dictionary exercises' to expand learners' vocabulary and improve their comprehension skills.

In the most recent, 2024 diagnostic report, linguistic skills in the language of the assessments (English) were raised in almost every single subject, shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Extracts from the 2024 Diagnostic Report regarding language proficiency (DBE, 2024)

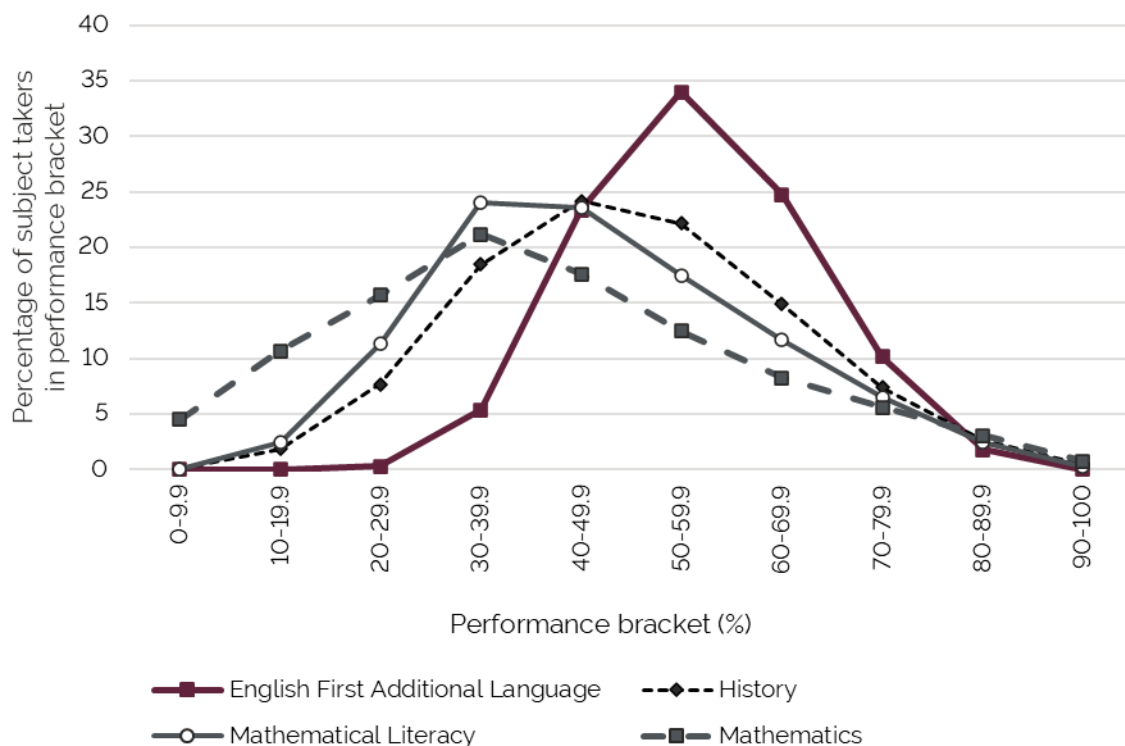
General	<i>Many learners demonstrated a lack of understanding of the meaning of instructional verbs in questions, such as "explain," "analyse," or "compare."</i>
General	<i>candidates were unable to express their ideas clearly and concisely, leading to poorly structured responses.</i>
General	<i>many candidates lacked the skill to read with meaning, making it difficult for them to comprehend and respond to questions accurately.</i>
Economics	<i>Poor language skills made it difficult for candidates to understand the requirements of questions and to express themselves clearly, especially in paragraph-type questions which formed a large part of the question paper.</i>
History	<i>Candidates copied information directly from the sources. They were, however, unable to use the information in the sources to write a comprehensive paragraph.</i>
History	<i>English seemed to be a language barrier to most second language speakers. Most candidates failed to respond to interpretation questions because of misunderstanding or misinterpreting the questions posed. Many of them lost a lot of marks in the process.</i>
Physics	<i>They merely stated the principle, instead of applying it. They could not deduce from the graph that the forward reaction was favoured. The language usage in this question was poor.</i>

Accounting	<i>that language terminology remains a problem for below-average candidates. This is evident based on their answers specifically on comments and explanations of open-ended questions.</i>
Accounting	<i>Below-average candidates incorrectly considered qualified report as a clean report, which is evident that language is still a problem in some centres. These questions were intended as confidence-boosting easy questions that had been asked in past examination papers.</i>
Agriculture	<i>have trouble understanding the requirements of questions. They tended to provide incomplete or unclear responses to questions requiring explanations or comments, often relying on the commonly used responses from previous marking guidelines and using them inappropriately in different contexts. Some candidates even gave responses using concepts unrelated to the content topics in a specific paper.</i>
Agriculture	<i>The language of learning and teaching remains a challenge for most candidates. They were not able to respond appropriately to the instructional verbs used in questions. They also had trouble with the spelling of terms or concepts.</i>
	<i>Many learners struggle with reading, understanding, and interpreting questions. Such learners also find it challenging to express their responses correctly.</i>
Business studies	<i>candidates displayed language barriers in response to questions; they struggled to express themselves clearly. Their lack of clarity had a negative impact on the marks awarded as only part-marks were scored.</i>

Janks (2011) points to the ‘great injustice’ that underpins all these comments - that African language speakers write the same examinations as native speakers of English for all of their content area subjects. The specific question posed in this paper is in what ways EFAL, the subject with the highest enrolment of all subjects in the curriculum (81% of Matric candidates writing this subject), addresses the problems raised by the diagnostic reports by providing support to these learners to develop their linguistic skills across the curriculum.

The problem is made more complex by the fact that both EFAL and EHL have a very high pass rate in the Matric exams and both have much higher aggregates than other subjects in the curriculum. In the 2024 Matric, the EFAL pass rate was 99,7% and 94,3% of learners passed with 40% or above. This was largely similar to EHL – where 96,9% of learners who sat the examination passed at the 40% level (ibid., p. 60). Recent research (Hoadley et al, 2026) has identified the very different performance distribution curve in both EHL and EFAL relative to other subjects. This is shown in relation to EFAL below, where the rate and level of passing is higher than other subjects despite the reports of language proficiency issues highlighted above.

Figure 1: Performance distribution in four 2024 NSC examinations: English First Additional Language, History, Mathematical Literacy and Mathematics (Hoadley et al, 2026).



While this same research identified specific strategies being used to facilitate passing in English, the very different performance distribution curve in EFAL relative to other subjects is puzzling and worthy of further research. In relation to the focus in this paper, however, the point is that the assessment system is masking the language proficiency issues that appear in other subjects.

The English Home Language and English First Additional Language curriculum policies are explored below in the context of these assessment dynamics.

Research methodology

The research is located within the Mixed Methods Investigation of Learner Assessment Progress and Support (MILAPS) project, that considered processes of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in key subjects at the high school level in diverse schooling contexts. The

specific interest in this paper arose in the course of research into English classrooms, where the research found very linguistically diverse classrooms guided by similar intended and assessed curricula (Galant et al, forthcoming). This paper combines analysis of primary data (curriculum and assessment policy) with that of secondary analyses, in particular studies of curriculum and assessment policy for English at the secondary school level. Here I drew on published research and Ministerial and examining authority reports. Primary sources were the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement documents for EFAL and EHL as well as their attendant Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) that specify on a weekly or bi-weekly basis the content to be covered per term. Curriculum documents at the Grade 8, Grade 10 (the focal levels of the MILAPS project) and Grade 12 levels were reviewed, as well as the assessment structure at these levels.

Theorising subject English

Subject English, with an “unstable epistemological mix” (Macken-Horarik, 2011, p. 199), has always been difficult to define. Definitional debates often circle around what the focus of the subject should be (Doecke & Mead, 2017). Freebody (2013) in attempting to define the disciplinary basis of subject English distinguishes between three core elements (similar to Halliday’s distinction introduced earlier): literature, which is about the appreciation and enjoyment of texts; literacy, that is about understanding and producing English accurately and fluently, creatively and critically, in different modes (including digital); and language, which is knowledge about the language and how the language works (which would include grammar and the study of language structure). This idea of English as disciplinary content (in the three strands of language, literature and literacy) has been disputed by those who argue that the emphasis should be on the dispositions and experiences of those who teach and learn the language, and thus on *processes* of learning - reading, writing, viewing, speaking, listening and presenting.

Macken-Horarik’s (2011; 2014; 2024) contribution to the debate is that both English as a body of knowledge, and use of the language in processes of reading, writing, viewing, listening and speaking constitute the subject. Both *content* and *process* are important, but feature in different ways depending on the ‘model’ of English on which curriculum and instruction are based. Christie and Macken-Horarik (2007) identify four central models of

English: a basic skills model, a cultural heritage model entailing engagement with ‘great’ works of literature, a personal growth model where the students’ life-worlds and subjective response to text is key, and a cultural analysis model in which a critical approach to a wide range of texts is privileged. These models bear some resemblance to the description of different ‘resources’ (Freebody & Luke, 1990) and ‘textual approaches’ (Howie, 2005) that are argued to have held sway in English curricula at different times.

In addition to different models or conceptions of subject English, various approaches to studying the subject have been identified: linguistic, communicative, genre-based, text-based, process and language integrated learning approaches, to name a few. In relation to teaching English as an additional language specifically, Graves and Garton (2016) identify the Communicative Language Teaching approach, the genre-based approach and the content and language integrated learning approach.

What is apparent from this selective account of conceptualising subject English is the bewildering array of categories, models and approaches. Each conceptualisation contains not just an idea of subject English, but also assumptions about language and how it is learned, what teachers are expected to do and the kind of ‘gaze’ to be acquired by the student (Bernstein, 1999, p. 165). Curricula may entail a mix of approaches suggesting that teaching entails the blending of different models and approaches depending on contextual features such as level, purpose, proficiency amongst others. Arguments are made for bringing different approaches together, developing frameworks to show how teachers could explore texts using a subjective, structural, cultural and critical frame (Howie, 2005). There is a danger, however, in the productivity of the mix of approaches in English, and a lack of coherence among different models can undermine clear educational goals and effective pedagogy. An eclectic mix can benefit teachers and students or create confusion (Green & Beavis, 1996).

The interest in this paper is in the structuring of the South African secondary school English curricula. What are the organising principles of EHL and EFAL curricula and what are the implications in relation to the central problematic highlighted above?

Comparing the EHL and EFAL CAPS curricula

In comparing the two curricula the research considered whether different purposes, approaches, knowledge (content and skills) or different levels were specified across EHL and EFAL. The primary analysis of the curriculum documentation is presented below along with existing analyses.

Purposes

The four CAPS EHL and EFAL curricula state the same broad aims and objectives, described as “text-based, communicative, integrated and process orientated” (DOE, 2011a, p. 9; DOE, 2011b, p. 9; DOE, 2011c, p. 11; DOE, 2011d, p. 16). A critical approach to texts is articulated “The purpose of a text-based approach is to enable learners to become competent, confident and critical readers, writers, viewers and designers of texts” (ibid.). The central curriculum organiser of the two curricula – EFAL and EHL – consists of four strands. Three refer to language processes: Listening and Speaking; Reading and Viewing; Writing and presenting. Content is the focus in the fourth strand: Language structure and Use. Despite the emphasis on the integration of Language structure and Use, it is presented as a separate strand in the curricula. Literature is integrated into the strands Reading and Viewing and Writing and presenting.

Both curricula incorporate both content and process-oriented models. Processes are foregrounded in the specification of the central skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Literature and Language (essentially grammar) are demarcated as a discrete content area. Unlike English offerings in many other countries, especially in Africa, that differentiate between English as literary study and English as the study of the grammar and use of the language, EFAL and EHL combine these. Seen through the lens of Christie and Macken-Horarick’s (2007) four models of English (cultural heritage, cultural analysis, basic skills and personal growth), all four appear across both curricula. There are also a range of approaches referenced, including communicative, text-based and process-oriented although these are not always clearly defined. Specific detail on the different strands of the curriculum are discussed below.

Language structure and use

In both EFAL and EHL curricula Language structure and Use is specified in the form of five and a half pages grammar and language topics and examples in the Grade 8 curricula, and two and a half pages of lists of grammar and language topics and a short list of ‘critical language awareness’ concepts (such as ‘bias, prejudice and stereotyping’ (DOE, 2011c, p. 31; DOE, 2011d, p. 47) in the Grade 10 curricula. The instruction for the teaching of this part of the curriculum reads: “The following language structures and conventions will be taught in the context of reading and writing, and also as part of a systematic grammar programme” (DOE, 2011c, p.45; DOE, 2011d, p.49). At Grade 8 level the lists are identical. At Grade 10 level, the EFAL list is slightly simplified from the EHL one. Across all levels in both subjects in the ATPs grammar is specified as discrete content with no reference to the process skills. The work of integration is thus left to the teacher. An example is given in Table 2 below, for Term 1, Grade 8, Weeks 3-4, which is identical for EFAL and EHL, showing the grammar listed in the final column with no linkages made to the processes in the first three columns.

Table 2: ATP for Grade 8 EHL (DBE, 2025a, p.2) & EFAL) (DBE, 2025b, p.2)

TERM 1			
LISTENING AND SPEAKING	READING AND VIEWING	WRITING AND PRESENTING	LANGUAGE STRUCTURES AND CONVENTIONS
Listening and speaking strategies Listen to/ view and have a conversation on a visual, audio-visual/ multimedia text, e.g. video/ pre-recording on how to write an email or create an email account • Activate background knowledge • Determine purpose of the text • Listen for meaning • Understand text • Take notes • Understand message • Tone and register • Targeted audience Listening comprehension (Sound only) • Record main and supporting ideas by making notes, checklists, summaries, paraphrasing and retelling	Reading/ viewing of written/ visual text for comprehension, e.g. an email • Skimming • Scanning • Intensive reading • Purpose and target group • Impact of use of font types and sizes, headings and caption on meaning AND Literary text: Folklore Key features of literature text such as character, characterisation, plot, conflict, background, setting, narrator, theme Reading process • Pre-reading (Introduce text) • During reading (Features of text) • Post-reading (Answer questions, compare, contrast, evaluate)	Transactional texts Write an email • Requirements for format, style and point of view • Target audience, purpose and context • Features of the text • Language use and word choice (critical language awareness) • Introduction and conclusion Focus on process writing • Planning • Drafting • Revision • Editing • Proofreading • Presenting Write an email based on visual stimuli	Reinforcement of language structures and conventions covered in previous weeks Word level work Adverbs of manner and time, definite and indefinite articles, infinite verbs, gerunds, adjectives: comparative and superlative Sentence level work Sentence structure, adjectival and adverbial clauses and phrases, negation, statements Word meaning Synonyms, antonyms, literal and figurative meaning Punctuation Full stop, comma Vocabulary in context Remedial of grammar from learners' writing

Van der Walt (2018), in her detailed analysis of the Language Structure and Use strand of the curriculum, argues that there is no clear theoretical framework underpinning this part of the curriculum. Despite commitments to a ‘communicative’ and text-based approach in the description of what should be taught, she argues that the focus on accuracy suggests a

traditional, prescriptive grammar approach, while the list of language functions is reminiscent of the ‘functional-notional’ approach to language teaching. There is little to no evidence of a text-based (or genre-based) approach being drawn through the curriculum, in particular in understanding grammar as functional for the realisation of the social purposes of texts (Schleppegrell, 2017).

The principles for the text-based and communicative approaches are not made available, especially for the use of texts for teaching contextualised grammar. The complex work of integrating vocabulary, grammar and texts is left to the teacher with no guidance for teaching learners how “to recognize the form and function [of grammar] in extended texts and to use them with increasing accuracy and fluency in focused writing above sentence level” (van der Walt, 2018, p.194). Van der Walt suggests that what is needed is specification of minimum levels of knowledge required at particular levels through demonstrated integration of texts, language structures and vocabulary. PIRLS provides a good example of how it operationalises a 4-level hierarchy by giving examples of questions on particular texts which illustrate the different ‘comprehension processes’.

The multiple purposes and approaches specified for teaching language structure and use suggests the need for clarity on what specific approaches are intended in the two subjects. The way grammar is currently set out in the curricula is likely to promote rote learning of definitions and superficial understanding of parts of speech rather than a deeper grasp of language structure and its use (borne out in classroom-based research, for example, Montle et al, 2025).

Literature

The stated approach to literature is exactly the same across both EFAL and EHL curricula. It incorporates a text-based orientation: “taking a close look at how text is being created, manipulated, and re-arranged to clarify and emphasise what is being expressed” (DOE, 2011a, p.12). The underpinning model comprises a combination of Christie and Macken-Horarick’s (2007) personal growth and cultural analysis models, or in Howie’s (2008) terms, subjective and critical approaches, with a directive to: “allow as much learner participation as is reasonable. Interpretation is not about right or wrong. It is about searching for what is

meaningful to the reader” (DOE, 2011d, p.16). There is an emphasis on connection and engagement with student’s life-worlds and their personal interpretations of texts. There are also elements of a structural or cultural heritage model – in statements like “The main reason for reading literature in the classroom is to develop in learners a sensitivity to a special use of language that is more refined, literary, figurative, symbolic, and deeply meaningful than much of what else they may read” (EFAL, 16; HL, 12). The kind of understanding demanded for different texts at different levels is the same across the two different subjects and no guidance is given regarding the nature and complexity of the texts to be selected (Umalusi, 2014) although there are Department lists of prescribed texts. Romylos and Balfour (2018) critique the fragmentary nature of the literature component of the curriculum where discrete and vague statements provide minimal guidance for teachers in approaching teaching literary texts.

It is clear from the CAPS documentation that the EFAL specifications for Literature are a copy and paste from HL – on page 16 of the EFAL document it states “the whole purpose of teaching literary texts is to show learners how their *Home Language* can be used with subtlety, intelligence, imagination and flair” (my emphasis) (DOE, 2011, p.16). This is perhaps indicative of a lack of careful consideration around the specificity of literature study in learning an additional language as well as the language skills of students for whom the curriculum is intended.

There are two differences in the curricula for the Literature section, however. The first is in the number of texts students study - EFAL students select two out of four genres (novel, short story, drama or poetry) while EHL students study three genres (novel, drama and poetry are all compulsory). Another difference is that at the Grade 10 level only EHL students are required to learn to write a literary essay; EFAL students answer contextual questions on networks. Essay writing is what develops the ability to develop an argument and support it with evidence from the text. The lack of opportunity for EFAL students to do this likely contributes to the negative comments in Table 1.

Table 2 provides an example of how literature is incorporated into the Reading and Viewing strand at the Grade 8 level for HL and EFAL. At Grade 10, literature is specified in similar ways across the two subjects, with the main difference being the omission of the literary essay for EFAL.

Reading and viewing

All curricula emphasise a three-phase process approach to reading (pre-reading, reading and post-reading). They indicate that the reading/viewing content is arranged in relation to three reading purposes: reading for comprehension; reading for formal study (setworks); and extended independent reading. Detail is provided on different literary genres and a range of aspects for teachers to consider, including critical language awareness and attention to language features.

In the EFAL Grade 8 and Grade 10, and the EHL Grade 8 curricula emphasis is placed on the ‘intensive reading’ approach, a common second language learning strategy that involves a detailed, close examination of short text to focus on linguistic elements like vocabulary, grammar and author's intent. It emphasises analysis in contrast with the focus in ‘extensive reading’ on fluency and pleasure. Detailed descriptions and frequent mention of the intensive reading strategy appear in the three aforementioned CAPS documents, while the Grade 10 EHL document focuses on extensive reading.

The wide range of approaches (process, intensive, genre-based, text-based) is again evident in the reading and viewing strand. Although a lot of information is provided in the curriculum documents, how the different approaches cohere or what they might entail in practice is not made available in the CAPS nor in the ATPs.

Writing

In relation to the writing strand of the curriculum the specifications are the same across all four curriculum documents and ATPs, incorporating different types of essays (*Narrative, descriptive, argumentative*) and a range of transactional writing. The curricula differ only in the number of words that are required to be written. The approaches to writing are multiple and the same across the grade levels and subjects: centrally process- and genre-based.

Dornbrack and Dixon (2014) argue that there are conceptual tensions in the curriculum documents with respect to writing specifications, with problems in the conflation of process and genre-based approaches to writing. It is left to the teacher to parse the different

theoretical and practical entailments of each, especially given Akinyeye & Pluddeman's (2015) argument that the policy is "incomplete, patchy, with insufficient explanation of the social purpose, organisational structure, and linguistic features of the different genres" (p.7).

Learning through English (across the curriculum)

The four curriculum documents (for Grade 8 and Grade 10 levels) contain several statements in the introductory sections highlighting the importance of language development for learning across the curriculum. For the Grade 8 level, the documents suggest that learners' English will be sufficiently developed by the end of Grade 9 to support their learning across the curriculum:

The curriculum provides strong support for those learners who will use their first additional language as a language of learning and teaching. By the end of Grade 9, these learners should be able to use their home language and first additional language effectively and with confidence for a variety of purposes, including learning (p.8)

In the Grade 10 EFAL curriculum, however, the introductory section acknowledges that by Grade 10 "the reality is that many learners still cannot communicate well in their Additional Language" (p.8). It commits to providing "the language skills required for academic learning across the curriculum; use language to access and manage information for learning across the curriculum and in a wide range of other contexts" (ibid.).

The EHL Grade 10 curriculum also emphasises the need for the development of language across the curriculum: "Analyse the structure/organisation of texts that are used across the curriculum and related transitional words / signal words: chronological/sequential order, explanation, cause and effect" (FET HL, p. 25).

All these commitments, however, remain at the level of principle. There is nothing in the specification of content to be learnt in the curriculum or the ATP that offers specific guidance on how this should be achieved. Further, there is no assessment of different text genres, linguistic structures relevant to different subjects, nor vocabulary that students might be expected to work with across the curriculum.

Curriculum structure of EHL and EFAL

The foregoing discussion of the CAPS strands shows that the EFAL and EHL curricula at both Grade 8 and Grade 10 levels lack coherence, or an explicit governing logic (Muller, 2022). This was also the conclusion of an international benchmarking activity for the quality assurance council. UMALUSI in 2014 that argued the curricula lacked a central design principle (McCusker et al, 2014, p. 58). Teachers are provided with conflicting and vague specifications of a range of practices, activities and content that are meant to develop a wide range of literacy repertoires, including cross-curriculum literacy and literary appreciation amongst others.

The Umalusi study also found that the curriculum offered almost no specification as to the expected depth of topics to be covered in each successive grade, and no indication of progression across the grades. It also raised issue with the internal consistency of the documents, where the ATPs did not match the curriculum content overviews, with gaps and ‘failures of logic’. They found that the curricula were “too broad to both induct learners into the discipline of English as well as developing strong written and spoken skills that will support English as the LoLT” (McCusker et al, 2014, p. 86).

Although there is a section in the introductory part of the EFAL CAPS that discusses teaching an additional language in general terms (referencing exposure, opportunities to use the language, etcetera) there is little indication from the detailed specifications in the curriculum and ATPs that learning an additional language differs from learning a home language. There is no acknowledgement that English is learned within a multilingual context in South Africa. Although asserting that language skills are required to study other subjects, no guidance in English for specific purposes or academic purposes is provided in the curriculum.

The DBE attempted to address the issue of teaching English across the curriculum in a strategy launched in 2014, consisting largely of manuals with content-specific suggestions on how it could be implemented (DBE, 2014). In 2017, they reported poor implementation, issuing a set of scripted lesson plans to further support the strategy (DBE, 2017). Various researchers showed an on-going lack of implementation, partly stemming from teachers’ lack of preparation during initial teacher education to integrate language development and content learning across the curriculum (Mpofu & Maphalala, 2021).

Both the EHL and EFAL curricula can be described as segmental (Bernstein, 2000), combining aspects of a range of models and theoretical approaches that don't build on each other nor explicitly connect. The two curricula rely on knowledgeable and highly skilled teachers to create coherence and craft an integrated programme of learning that meets the complex demands of a range of language teaching purposes with an array of preferred approaches. Where this capacity is lacking, assessment (the content and standards it expresses) drives teaching and learning. The assessment, however, does not directly test students' facility in using English in different genres, relevant to different subjects. This perhaps accounts for why the linguistic structures relevant to different subjects, and the vocabulary that students might be expected to work with across the curriculum, are not taught.

Assessment

In the context of an unclear curriculum, assessment becomes significant as a driver of what happens in classrooms and past papers become the curriculum-in-use (MTT, 2014). There is much similarity in the structure and weighting of assessments for EHL and EFAL, shown for Grade 8 in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Grade 8 EFAL and EHL assessment requirements and weighting (DOE, 2011a, p. 125; DOE, 2011b, p. 125)

Examination	Weighting
Paper 1: Oral: Listening and Speaking (15) Reading aloud (15)	30%
Paper 2: Written Reading comprehension (15) Language in context (15) Response to literature (10)	40%
Paper 3: Written Writing - Essay (20) and transactional texts (10)	30%

Similarly at the Grade 10 level (that is the same as the Matric examination in structure) differences are slight, with more weighting to literature in EHL (but only a 2,5% difference) and differences in the word length and complexity of texts. The primary differences between

EFAL and EHL at the Grade 10 level (aside from word counts and text level) are literature tasks – where EFAL students don't write literary essays but are required only to answer contextual questions and where two of three genres are tested (EFAL) as opposed to three compulsory genres (EHL).

Table 4: Grade 10 to 12 Assessment requirements EFAL and EHL (DOE, 2011c, p. 78; DOE, 2011d, p. 78)

	Paper 1 (Language in Context)	Paper 2 (Literature)	Paper 3 (Writing)
EHL	<u>Section A: Comprehension</u> Text: 500-600 words <u>Section B: Summary</u> approximately 280 words; summary should be 80-90 words long. <u>Section C: Language Structures & Conventions</u> Vocab and lang use; sentence structures; critical lang awareness.	<u>Section A: Poetry</u> (answer 2 of 4 seen poems) Literary essay of 150-200 words; <u>Section B: Novel</u> (essay or contextual question) <u>Section C: Drama</u> (one essay and one contextual from B or C) Literary essay of 300-350 words;	<u>Section A: Essay</u> Narrative/descriptive/argumentative/reflective/ discursive essay of 300-350 <u>Section B: Transactional Texts</u> Two texts; 180-200 content words only;
EFAL	<u>Section A: Comprehension</u> Text: 400-500 words; <u>Section B: Summary</u> 200 words; summary should be 60-70 words long. <u>Section C: Language Structures & Conventions</u> Vocab and lang use; sentence structures; critical lang awareness.	<u>Section A: Poetry</u> (2 seen poems) <u>Section B: Novel/Drama/Short Story/Poetry</u> (essay or contextual question)	<u>Section A: Essay</u> Narrative/descriptive/argumentative/reflective/ discursive essay of 150-200 words; <u>Section B: longer Transactional Text</u> 120-150 content words only; <u>Section C: Shorter Text</u> Transactional/referential and information of 80-100 words;

The NSC examination, which is set centrally, has a powerful influence on grades lower down, so that most tests in lower grades follow the format of the exit examination. This places limits on the extent to which teachers can recontextualise the curriculum in relation to their specific learners' needs and competencies (van der Walt, 2018). Despite the relative openness of the curriculum, rooted partly in its vagueness, the assessment regime in English closes the space for variation across context.

At Grade 10 level, the difference in assessment lies mainly in the complexity of text. Sibeko (2021) analysed a combined total of 24 Grade 12 final examination texts for EHL and EFAL

from 2008 to 2019 for linguistic complexity. Considering five indices, relating to the word level, sentence, readability, lexical diversity and referential cohesion, he found that the linguistic complexities of the texts used for reading comprehension and summary writing in the two subjects differed significantly. EHL used more linguistically complex texts than EFAL, with higher word counts per text; higher letters per words in the texts; and longer sentences. In addition, on the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level measure, EFAL was found to be two grades below the overall grade for EHL texts.

One of the problems that the differences in text length raises is that these do not match the text length demands in other subjects. For example, the length of texts in History examinations surpass those in both EHL and EFAL (DBE, 2014). This is especially significant for EFAL which offers a potentially crucial preparation for engaging with extended texts in other subjects.

In terms of cognitive demand, in the curriculum the distribution of assessment questions across five cognitive levels is stipulated to be the same across the two subjects, as shown below.

Table 5: Cognitive levels requirements in assessments for EHL and EFAL Grades 10 – 12 (DOE, 2011c, p. 76; DOE, 2011d, p. 79).

Level 1	<i>Literal</i>	<i>Questions that deal with information explicitly stated in the text.</i>	40%
Level 2	<i>Reorganisation</i>	<i>Questions that require analysis, synthesis or organisation of information explicitly stated in the text.</i>	
Level 3	<i>Inference</i>	<i>Questions that require learners to interpret messages that are not explicitly stated by linking information from different parts of the text or relating clues in the text to their prior knowledge or experience and drawing conclusions.</i>	20%
Level 4	<i>Evaluation</i>	<i>These questions deal with judgements concerning value and worth. These include judgements regarding reality, credibility, facts and opinions, validity, logic and reasoning, and issues such as the desirability and acceptability of decisions and actions in terms of moral values.</i>	40%
Level 5	<i>Appreciation</i>	<i>These questions are intended to assess the psychological and aesthetic impact of the text on the candidate. They focus on emotional responses to the content, identification with characters or incidents, and reactions to the writer's use of language (such as word choice and imagery).</i>	

Despite these allocations, evaluations of the NSC matric papers commissioned by the DBE argue that in the EFAL papers there is an over-reliance on testing memorisation and recall, rather than critical thinking and analytical and evaluation skills” (from a Cambridge International Examinations evaluation) and that “The cognitive levels assessed in the examination questions are heavily weighted towards lower-order skills” (an evaluation of the Board of Studies, New South Wales) (both evaluations cited in DBE, 2014. P.78). Most questions require short answers with little opportunity for students to write extended text (and no literary essay).

A further international benchmarking exercise (Umalusi, 2022) confirmed that EFAL was examined at a very low level but also with high levels of leniency in the marking processes. Confirming the lack of any changes in the assessment mode over time, Taylor (2026) argues that in EFAL examinations learners are not given the opportunity to analyse and explain the purpose, content and audience of texts reflecting the absence of critical literacy and language analysis skills (p.14).

While the examinations can usefully signal to teachers what they should be teaching and at what level, it is a fragmented representation of the subject. It cannot provide teachers with access to an understanding of the structuring principles of the subject. Further, if what is tested is what is taught then an important omission would be deliberate and explicit testing of the use of language in different subject genres.

On-going investigation

There was significant activity around subject English from 2010 to 2015. The case for the exceptionalism of EFAL was made from three different quarters, research, the national examining body, Umalusi, and a Ministerial Task Team on the National Senior Certificate (MTT, 2014).

Kaiser et al. (2010) were among the first to argue for reorienting EFAL to focus on the use of English across the curriculum, in subject specific areas. English reconstituted as academic literacy would then focus on the requisite semantic, syntactic and pragmatic knowledge in different subjects. To this end they argued for a combination of the Content Based Instruction

(CBI) model used in English language teaching curriculum design in America and the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Their argument for CLIL in particular was in contrast to what they argued were the characteristics of an immersion programme in the CAPS that resulted in ‘subtractive bilingualism’ (p.59) and a devaluing of mother tongue in second language acquisition.

A second proposal emerged from extensive research, especially in writing curriculum and pedagogy, by Pluddeman (2015), who argued to “reconceptualise English (first additional language) as a service subject designed to support the content subjects at primary school level. It could do so by drawing its material from across the curriculum, and by providing epistemological access to the key schooling genres in each discipline” (2015, p. 196).

A third contribution by Janks (2019) points to the details, arguing for the EFAL curriculum to focus on the vocabulary, language, texts, and genres of different content area subjects to assist learners with the demands of the LoLT. She further highlighted the need to define the required level of competence in English required by the LOLT in different subjects. This would mean careful analysis of what different text types, linguistic structures, and vocabulary were needed in different content subjects that students were expected to work with.

The 2014 Umalusi study (McCusker et al, 2014) argued for separating EFAL into two subjects. The first, which they argued should be compulsory, would focus on supporting learners’ study across the curriculum, to “become a competent user of English for academic and social purposes, both orally and in written form” (p.91). The other English would focus on literature and prepare learners for further study, in a way that the existing EFAL curriculum fails to do given the absence of certain genres in the curriculum, and the lack of depth of study, especially in the omission of the literary essay.

The Ministerial Task Team (MTT) on the National Senior Certificate in 2014 argued that EFAL could not fulfil the same purpose in the curriculum as the other ten First Additional languages given its unique role as the language of learning and teaching for 80% of learners (MTT, 2014, p.68). Rather than arguing for a differentiated subject, however, their remedy was to raise the level of the EFAL NSC examination paper, especially by using longer texts for comprehension and more inferential type questions. They argued that raising the level of expectations in assessments would have a *backwash effect through the system*, leading to

learners being better prepared to tackle “language-rich” subjects like History, Economics, and Life Sciences (ibid).

More recently, a different challenge has arisen in relation to differentiating the English curricula, one that questions the subject boundaries. Makalele (2023) argues for the distinction between EHL and EFAL to be done away with altogether on the grounds that the target students for these two subjects are not as different as some would argue. Others argue for a non-siloed approach to languages which recognises the heteroglossic context of education in South Africa (McKinney, 2020). The implications of this for curriculum policy specifically are complex given the diversity of languages, usages and contexts of use. While the importance of recognising multilingualism, and encouraging translanguaging practices in classrooms, including English classrooms, is borne out in recent policy changes under the banner of the Mother Tongue to Bilingual Education programme of the DBE (Probyn, 2024), this is largely a pedagogical issue. The *curriculum* problem of differentiation, and the lack of coherence and clarity of purpose in *both* English curricula remains urgent.

Conclusion

The approach to differentiation in subject English has focused on setting different levels of cognitive demand for EFAL and EHL – in text complexity and length in the curriculum and in level of cognitive demand in assessments. There has been no differentiation in terms of purpose, with the same process skills and content prescribed for both subjects. To return to Halliday’s initiating distinction, currently both curricula emphasise learning *about* the language. For years now, research, official reports and the DBE diagnostic reports have shown the need for EFAL to support learning the language and learning *through* the language. We need to re-open the case of English to consider what we want to achieve with EFAL and EHL, at different levels, as distinct subjects. From that should emerge coherent models and appropriate content to support all students’ access to English.

Why has the case of EFAL / EHL curriculum policy revision gone cold despite the DBE’s own diagnostic reports as well as the on-going critique from various quarters? One reason for this could be the political (and very public) focus on Matric pass rates as a measure of system functioning. Figure 1 showed how high pass rates for EFAL at relatively high levels mask the

problem. Assessing learners at very low levels and exercising leniency in marking leads to most EFAL learners passing at relatively high thresholds despite serious language proficiency issues showing up in other subjects. As long as the politics of high pass rates trumps a genuine attempt to improve learning quality, this practice will continue.

The other reason for delays in addressing the differentiation issue may lie in hopes for more multilingual opportunities and structures within education where learners can draw on their full linguistic repertoires, with assessment that accommodates this richness. However, the current realities of schooling, higher education, and the workplace mean that English remains the dominant medium through which success is mediated. This places an ethical and practical obligation on the education system to ensure that EFAL learners are explicitly and systematically supported to use English as a language of learning across subjects. Delaying this shift in the hope of broader systemic change risks perpetuating existing inequities. A more deliberate, differentiated EFAL curriculum is therefore not a concession to linguistic hierarchy, but a necessary intervention to improve access, participation, and achievement within the system as it presently operates.

A final reason for inactivity might be the complexity of the case, where it is difficult to negotiate between the many contending models of English and make choices that will work across a wide range of linguistic contexts. Also, teaching English across the curriculum in History, Mathematics and in Biology, for example, do not entail the same forms of reasoning and language strategies, adding further complexity. Language is not an homogenous, generic set of competences. The difficulty of the task, however, strengthens the case for differentiation: without a clearer account of what EHL and EFAL are each for, the system will continue to obscure learners' unequal access to the forms of English required for academic participation and success.

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