



Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers
l'Association provinciale des enseignantes et enseignants du Québec

The English Language Arts Program
At the Secondary Level
QPAT Evaluation and Recommendations

**Position Paper Developed by the Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers for
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Introduction

The Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers (QPAT), on behalf of the teachers it represents in the English sector, has examined the Secondary English Language Arts (ELA) program as well as the recent supporting documentation prepared by the *ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport* (MELS). This document is the report of QPAT's evaluation of the program that has been progressively implemented since 2005-2006 and contains QPAT's recommendations to correct certain elements of the program.

At the time of writing, the secondary ELA program is in its second year of implementation across all five years of high school. In conjunction with the new documents tabled by MELS in the late summer and fall of 2010 (i.e. Progression of Learning and Frameworks for the Evaluation of Learning), it is an opportune moment to assess the effectiveness and relevance of the program and its evaluation of students.

A working group of teachers was established to conduct the review. The committee represents a broad cross-section of the teachers in our schools at both the cycle I and cycle II levels. The teachers come from schools on the island of Montreal, from the surrounding suburbs and from outside the Montreal area. Their schools range in size from 400 to over 1700 students and they have taught anywhere from 8 to 34 years. In broad terms, the committee examined a range of questions concerning the program. Does the program reflect the content, learning and outcomes that are appropriate for ELA students? Do the new documents help clarify the program and help teachers? Does the evaluation of students fit with the program and does it also reflect the learning the students should have? In other words, the committee members brought their varied experiences to bear on an examination of the program to determine whether it meets the needs of our students and leads them to an appropriate level of learning over the course of their secondary schooling.

The program

The program is comprised of four competencies at cycle I and three competencies at cycle II. The competency in media that is separate in cycle I is integrated into the remaining competencies in cycle II. This integration will happen in fact, if not in theory, for the 2011-2012 school year in cycle I given the method by which marks will be reported as of then. Consequently, the analysis and discussion was held from the perspective of there being three competencies across both cycles with an examination of the place and content for each.

In general terms, the competencies of the program reflect different elements that are appropriate to a mother tongue program. Any language is learned by the development of a variety of interconnected skills. The ability to speak for the purpose of effective interaction (Talk to Learn), to read for meaning (Reading of Literary and Media Texts) and to produce and communicate ideas effectively (Production of Literary and Media Texts) are broad areas of language development that interact with one another in an organic way. As such, each of these elements has a place in the program and in evaluation. There are, however, specific issues with each of these competencies that need to be addressed. These issues arise out of the fact that the program is very broad and all-encompassing, which has led to a highly variable understanding of what the program is and its application. The analysis and recommendations that follow are intended to highlight the areas of difficulty and find ways to provide a common understanding of the program in the interest of ensuring that students learn what is appropriate and necessary.

Talk to Learn (Talk)

The Talk competency elicited a strong response from the members of the committee. There is an important place for this competency in the program as it offers another way for students to be engaged actively in their learning. However, there is very serious concern about its extent and implications of its implementation. The main challenge coming from the Talk competency is its weight in the evaluation process and the difficulty in evaluating it. The competency places a greater stress on the oral interaction component of the program than existed before, which leads to a reduced emphasis on reading and production. The weighting of the competency at 33% of the mark skews the focus of the program; this has the consequence of giving opportunity for a student to pass the course on the basis of oral skills, even if written and reading skills are clearly below those needed to be able to function at an age appropriate level. This short-changes students in the long term.

The evaluation of the competency exacerbates the difficulty outlined above. Unless students are presenting a more traditional oral, it is very difficult to evaluate the competency, particularly during group discussions. Students are more aware of what they are saying when a teacher is nearby and may be able to express an idea briefly in a way that suggests that they are actively thinking and discussing with their group partners. However, three clear issues arise: a) the student's response may be superficial and the teacher does not have much time to probe more deeply to see what the student is developing at that level; b) the teacher is missing out on what other groups are saying at the same time c) the student who is not by nature an extrovert may be drowned out by those who are, whether or not their thinking and less obvious interventions are more profound or not. This last point underscores another weakness: the lack of attention given to the importance of listening in learning. The capacity to understand and process an oral message has been given short shrift, yet it should be an important part of the Talk competency since dialogue is not only the ability to emit a message but to receive one also.

The foregoing is not to suggest that group discussions should not be used; on the contrary, there is an obvious place for learning by sharing and exchanging with one's classmates. Further, the ability to interact and present ideas and argue for them during the course of a discussion is a useful skill for someone who is going to be an engaged citizen or effective in certain workplaces. The competency,

clearly, is relevant to students. However, the weight of the competency, given the difficulties in evaluating it beyond a superficial level, distorts the true level of overall language development of a student.

Consistency across comparable programs is also an issue. The current weight of 33% is out of line with the equivalent oral component in the *Français langue d'instruction* program, which is 20% (10% at secondary V). Further, the enriched French second language program has the same percentage (33%) for the oral component for the 2011-2012 school year. In other words, the oral component of ELA, which is a course in language of instruction, is weighted as if it were a second language course.

Finally, the nature of the Talk competency is such that it is used to generate ideas that will be reflected to some extent in the Reading competency and the Production competency. In other words, the effective weight of Talk is even greater than the 33% currently allocated. This places even greater importance on this competency as compared to the others.

In light of the foregoing, QPAT makes the following recommendation to MELS:

The weighting of the Talk competency must be reduced to 20% of the grade, with the Reading and Production competencies to be weighted at 40 % each.

Reading of Literary and Media Texts (Reading)

Developing a certain ability to read various media texts is important and a useful skill for an individual who needs to be able to think critically about the messages he or she is receiving in everyday life. However, it remains important, relevant and imperative to have students read and use traditional texts, particularly given that they may not have this exposure outside of school. The issue is to find the right balance that best serves students.

In implementing the program, the question of what distinguishes media from language arts is becoming increasingly unclear for many. Trying to include large amounts of media in a language arts program inevitably leaves less time for the other elements of the language arts program. The messages that have been put forth at various points in time either by MELS or school board representatives have led to confusion about what are appropriate media texts that will develop the student's ability to read media but that still can be considered genuine language arts. These messages have also eroded the place and importance of traditional texts. In order to provide both balance and clarification, media must be viewed as something that has to be connected to language. Also, media elements used in the program must be clearly rooted in what is being read in class. Viewing reading in this way would show the relative importance of reading traditional texts as opposed to media texts.

In the interest of clarifying the place of each, QPAT recommends the following:

The Reading competency must emphasize traditional forms of text, while retaining a Media component.

Media texts that are produced, promoted or distributed by MELS must clearly be connected to language arts.

Production of Written and Media Texts (Production)

Discussion around the production competency raised the key issue of the place and role of media production. While there is recognition of the fact that media production can engage certain students and speaks to the side of their daily reality that is highly connected electronically, there are many difficulties regarding the media component. At a practical level, uneven access to facilities and equipment places the students across the province in an inequitable position relative to one another as they will not all have the same opportunities to produce media texts. Another practical issue is one of time: media production can take up a great deal of time to the detriment of other forms of production, particularly writing. Finally, the variety of media elements required compels teachers who are language specialists to become more knowledgeable about other arts than they can possibly fully learn.

The media elements can complement the program in an effective manner, and they should be used as a tool for learning. However, they could take up too much place within the formal program and its evaluation, particularly at the expense of written production. Traditional genres of written production must remain the emphasis of this competency as writing provides skills and learning that will be the most broadly relevant and necessary to students.

In the interest of providing a program that provides better balance to students in their production of work with greater equity, QPAT recommends the following:

The Production competency must emphasize traditional forms of writing, while retaining a Media component.

The program content regarding media production must be streamlined to allow teachers the flexibility needed to focus on media production that is realistic to their situation.

The Progression of Learning

The progression of learning document will be of use to teachers, but this usefulness will be limited. It will allow teachers to see what they have covered and what they have not. It also will offer some sense as to what basic content requirements there are and some essential knowledge. However, the structure makes for a document that is not user friendly and does not focus enough on what is essential for students. It also does not recognize the organic nature of language.

The progression of learning document would be substantially improved and more useful to teachers if it were reorganized. In its current format, each item is listed in a way that does not group together concepts that are in fact closely connected. The document should bring clearer attention to the necessity of using the beginning of high school as a time where basic skills are developed to provide solid building blocks for later high school years. Students enter high school with a fairly wide range of experiences in elementary school. Frequently, at the beginning of high school they have to either learn or re-learn certain writing skills. The objective is to have them use writing as a thinking process by the time they finish high school. The progression of learning document needs to better reflect that overall continuum.

The document needs to be re-organized so that there would be two sections for each grade level: the list of skills and knowledge they should have at the beginning of the year and the list of skills and knowledge they should have by the end of the year, expressed in clear language to make it more user friendly for teachers and students. A revised progression document also would be more effective if exemplars on form and language for each cycle were provided that clearly reflected the criteria of the program. Such concrete and well-organized tools would be of far greater assistance to teachers, particularly those who are new to teaching or who are not ELA specialists.

In order to make the progression of learning document more meaningful to teachers, QPAT recommends the following:

The progression of learning document must be revised

- **to reflect a clear progression of skills, particularly in writing, for each grade level;**
- **to present connected concepts more logically;**
- **to provide exemplars that match the criteria of the program.**

Evaluation

It is evident that there is a dramatic disconnect between the program and the evaluation of students. A program that is broad is reduced to a narrow set of options and expectations on the high school leaving exam. Coupled with information that arrives too late in the year, this examination reality leads teachers to spend the last term of the year narrowly teaching to an exam. This will have a particularly distorting effect as of the 2011-2012 school-year, when the last term will be worth 60% of the school mark. In effect, 80% of the year's mark (term three plus exam) will be based on an exam that will home in on but a few very specific elements of the program. This is intellectually inconsistent and ill-serves students.

The recommendations made below deal with the final exams that have been implemented by MELS and target any exams that MELS will develop in the future. This is also significant at the school board level as many boards develop exams at earlier grades based on MELS' model.

As has been outlined previously, evaluation of the Talk competency is problematic. The problems outlined are particularly relevant in an examination context. Evaluation of Talk is best left as a school mark where there is greater opportunity for teachers to assess it fairly and allow it to develop over time.

The Media production component that has been included as an optional element in the past, after a failed attempt to make it compulsory, should be dropped altogether. Since it is not possible to have the same conditions to complete the production across the province, maintaining an optional component only confuses matters. If MELS wishes to produce suggested media assignments or LES it should do so independently of the examination process.

The structure of the examinations also leads to outcomes that can favour students who may not have effective writing skills but have understood the process required of them and can pass the exam because they figured out the right steps to follow. Other students who have effective writing skills and can communicate clearly and accurately may be penalized because they missed or misunderstood some element of the process. An examination in written production should reflect the student's ability to write effectively, not their ability to understand the "tricks" in the process. In fact, the current format of the exam is so limiting, narrow and abstrusely precise that it actually contradicts the program, which is very broad, and artificially limits the way in which a student can write. An examination with a broader range of writing topics would allow better for a student to demonstrate his or her skills and better represent the program.

It needs to be noted that the rubrics published by MELS are also highly problematic. Part of their purpose is to be used as a tool with students, but they are written in a fashion that is nearly impossible for students to understand. It is also very difficult for teachers to agree on the interpretation of these rubrics. This means that they cannot be used easily and that teachers spend far too much time simply explaining what the rubrics actually mean.

In order to simplify final exams and make them more representative of student skills, QPAT recommends the following:

MELS examinations in ELA must

- **reflect the program;**
- **eliminate evaluation of Talk;**
- **eliminate evaluation of Media Production;**
- **provide a choice of genres for Written Production;**
- **take less time to administer and evaluate.**

MELS must review and simplify the rubrics for ELA to make them understandable to students and emphasize outcomes more and process less.

MELS must provide information about the exams at the beginning of the school year so that it can be used for effective planning.

Conclusion

QPAT has carefully examined the various elements of the secondary ELA program and its evaluation. It is clear that the program attempts to incorporate learning that was deemed essential by the program developers for students in the 21st century. It is important, however, that these skills not supplant traditional skills that remain essential to students. A certain rebalancing needs to take place to ensure that students are best served by the program. It is in this spirit that QPAT makes its recommendations, which are reiterated here:

- 1. The weighting of the Talk competency must be reduced to 20% of the grade, with the Reading and Production competencies to be weighted at 40 % each.**
- 2. The Reading competency must emphasize traditional forms of text, while retaining a Media component.**
- 3. Media texts that are produced, promoted or distributed by MELS must clearly be connected to language arts.**
- 4. The Production competency must emphasize traditional forms of writing, while retaining a Media component.**
- 5. The program content regarding media production must be streamlined to allow teachers the flexibility needed to focus on media production that is realistic to their situation.**
- 6. The progression of learning document must be revised**
 - to reflect a clear progression of skills, particularly in writing, for each grade level;**
 - to present connected concepts more logically;**
 - to provide exemplars that match the criteria of the program.**
- 7. MELS examinations in ELA must**
 - reflect the program;**
 - eliminate evaluation of Talk;**
 - eliminate evaluation of Media Production;**
 - provide a choice of genres for written production;**
 - take less time to administer and evaluate.**
- 8. MELS must review and simplify the rubrics for ELA to make them understandable to students and emphasize outcomes more and process less.**
- 9. MELS must provide information about the exams at the beginning of the school year so that it can be used for effective planning.**

There is one final action that MELS must undertake in a systematic manner: QPAT must be included at the development phase of any new program or evaluation elements, or any other significant document or policy orientation regarding ELA. It is the program that distinguishes the English sector from the French sector, and QPAT, on behalf of the teachers it represents, has a vested interest in providing timely input to MELS.