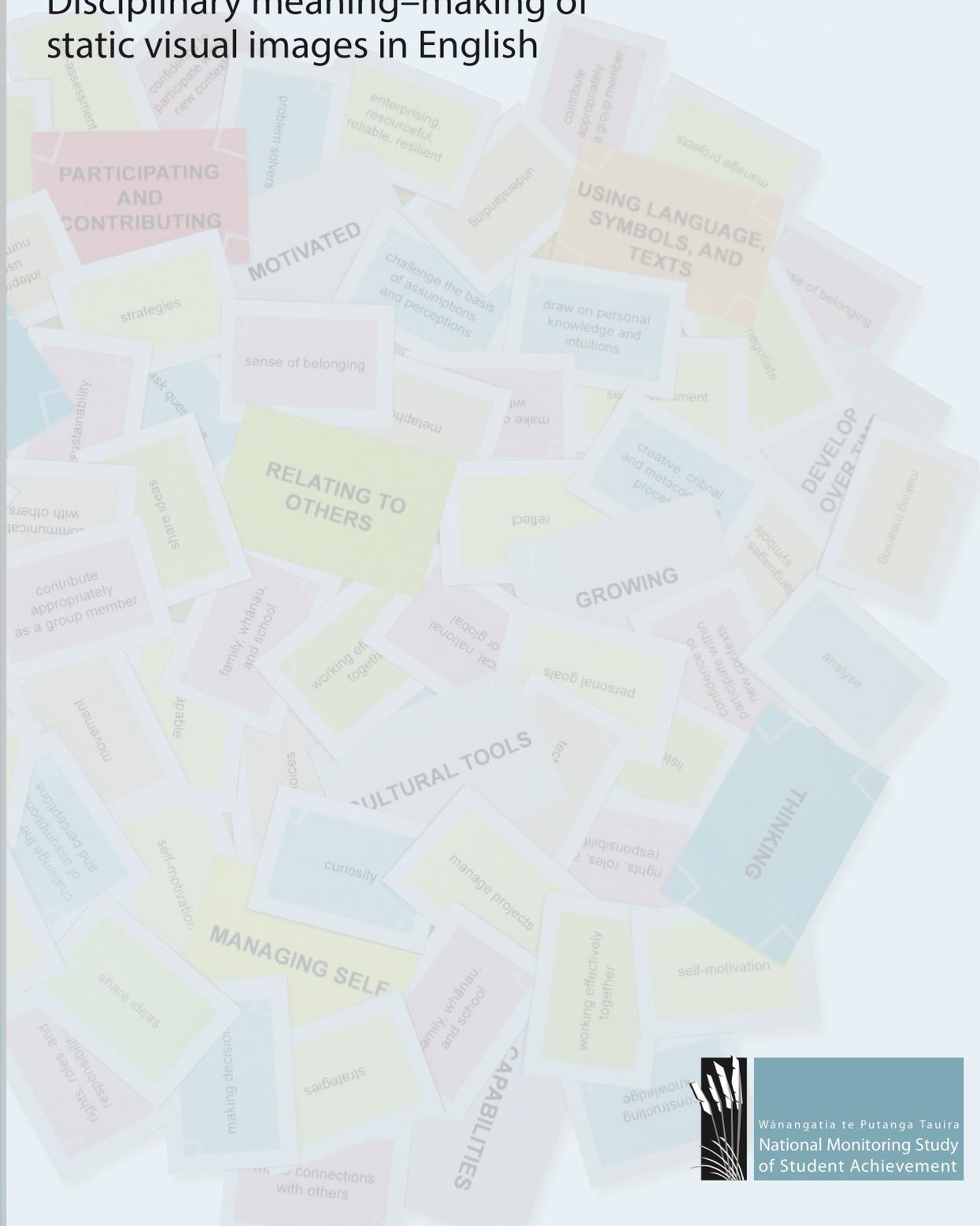


Wānangatia te Putanga Taurira National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement

Key Competencies 2017

REPORT 3:

Disciplinary meaning-making of static visual images in English



NMSSA Key Competencies 2017 – Report Series

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Key Competencies 2017: Report 3 – Disciplinary meaning making of static visual images in English

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REPORT 3:

Disciplinary meaning–making of static visual images in English

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1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of an analysis of the results of NMSSA English: Viewing, 2015 in relation to students' progression in the capability of meaning-making in the English learning area. It is one of a series of three investigations carried out by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) for the Ministry of Education focussing on student progression in the capability of meaning-making in different learning areas. The other two reports look at meaning-making in mathematics and science. These reports are part of a wider investigation on what can be learnt about students' development of capabilities such as meaning-making, critical thinking, and perspective taking from the first round of National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement (NMSSA).

NMSSA assessments of meaning-making in English

To date four NMSSA assessments have been developed for the English learning area. These include assessments of reading, listening, viewing, and writing. For the purposes of this report we have chosen to focus on just one of these—*Knowledge and application of viewing in English (KAVE)*—as a means of illustrating progression in meaning-making in the English learning area. Our reason for choosing to focus on viewing is that this is a less familiar area for New Zealand primary school teachers. Support materials, PLD provision, and assessment tools produced over the last decade or so have tended to focus on reading and writing.

Overview of the report

We begin this report with a brief discussion of how the capability of meaning-making is represented in *The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC)*. Next we describe the meaning-making challenges faced by students in standardised assessments of English, such as those used for NMSSA. We explain how we analysed the 2015 English assessment KAVE to look for evidence of how Year 4 and Year 8 students demonstrated meaning-making capabilities as they responded to the assessment items. We end the report with a discussion of how meaning-making capabilities in English might contribute to the NZC vision of preparing our young people to be active and informed citizens of the future.

2. Meaning-making in the NZC

There are two main places in the NZC that specifically address the capability of meaning-making in the different learning areas. One is the description of the key competency *Using language, symbols, and texts*. This description tells us that using language, symbols, and texts is about “working with and making meaning of the codes in which language is expressed” (Ministry of Education, 2007, 12). The other area is the description of learning areas and language, which tells us that:

Each learning area has its own language or languages. As students discover how to use them, they find they are able to think in different ways, access new areas of knowledge, and see their world from new perspectives. For each area, students need specific help from their teachers as they learn:

- *The specialist vocabulary associated with that area;*
- *How to read and understand its texts;*
- *How to communicate knowledge and ideas in appropriate ways;*
- *How to listen and read critically, assessing the value of what they hear and read.* (Ministry of Education, 2007, 16).

In other words, meaning-making is discipline specific, or particular to different learning areas.

Meaning-making and English in *The New Zealand Curriculum*

In the NZC the English learning area is structured around two strands. One of these strands focuses on the interpretation of text through listening, reading, and viewing. The other focuses on the production of text through speaking, writing, and presenting. In relation to meaning-making in English the NZC highlights the importance of: text purposes and audiences; ideas; language features; and structure.

3. Knowledge and Application of Viewing in English (KAVE)

What does *KAVE* assess?

Knowledge and Application of Viewing in English (KAVE) is a group-administered assessment focusing on the capacity to locate and recall, integrate and interpret, and critique and evaluate ideas and information from a range of visual texts. The texts used in the KAVE assessment come from picture books and graphic novels, that is, from fictional—or literary—texts. Such texts are considered central to the discipline of English. A nationally representative sample of students at Year 4 and 8 completed the assessment.

Many of the same tasks were provided to both the Year 4 and 8 students. Performance on the KAVE assessment was reported on a single scale covering both year levels. The 2015 statistical analysis of the KAVE assessment generated the scale shown at the left-hand side of Figures 1–5. Each individual item in the assessment was located on this scale based on the analysis of students' answers. An item's location indicates its relative difficulty compared with the difficulty of all other items in either the Year 4 or the Year 8 assessment. The higher up the scale an item is located, the more difficult it was for students to answer the item correctly.

Each student can also be allocated an overall place on the scale, depending on how many questions they answered correctly, and how easy or difficult the overall mix of those questions was. We don't show the individual students in the figures in this report because our focus is on the items. However we can say that students located at the same place as an item (in Figures 2–5) will have a 70 percent chance of meeting the demands of that question.

Relating the scale to levels in *The New Zealand Curriculum*

While the scale generated by the analysis of the test items shows their comparative difficulty, it cannot, per se, make links to the different curriculum levels of the NZC. The scale was aligned to levels of the NZC through a curriculum alignment process carried out by a group of experts in the English learning area. The process involved defining minimum scale scores (cut scores) associated with achieving, on balance, the achievement objectives outlined at curriculum levels 2, 3, and 4.

In figure 1 the colour grading shows the change between curriculum levels. The pale orange lower on each figure represents a developed level 2 display of meaning-making. The darker orange at the top shows what developed meaning-making looks like at level 4. The yellow in the middle is emergent meaning-making at level 3.

This graph compares the relative achievement of the two cohorts, as assessed by the English experts. Notice that there are no hard and fast distinctions between the levels.

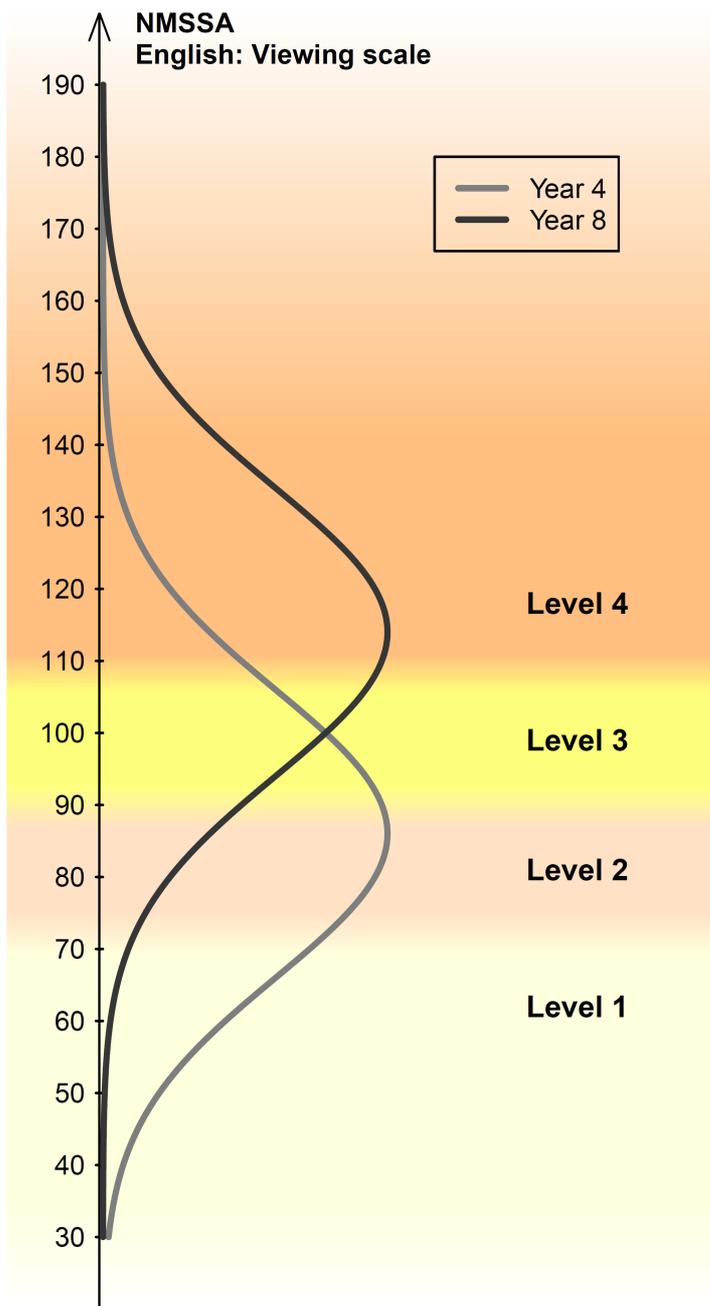


Figure 1. NMSSA English: Viewing scale

How did we analyse the results of *KAVE*?

We chose four contexts or areas of meaning-making that are important when engaging with literary texts and for which there were many opportunities in the assessment for students to demonstrate their capabilities. These included making meaning of:

- character;
- the feelings of characters;
- setting; and
- the use and effects of visual techniques.

We selected a sample of tasks, for each of these four areas, representing a range of positions on the scale. We then looked at the marking schedules and some examples of student responses to understand how meaning-making impacted on the way achievements were scored. We compared the demands of these various tasks and students' responses to them, to help us work out what contributed to the progression of task difficulty.

From this analysis we developed brief descriptions of the meaning-making demands of the selected items. Finally we collated the descriptions as shown in figures 1–4, and described the associated findings.

The figures provided on the following pages show progression in making meaning of: character, the feelings of characters; setting; and the use of visual techniques and their effects. It is important to remember that, while each of these aspects is presented on a separate table, they work together. For example, the setting, often provides information about characters and their feelings or state of mind (think of King Lear on the heath in the storm), as do the visual techniques employed, such as use of perspective, colour, and so forth.

4. Findings

How have we presented the findings?

In figures 2-5a we describe a range of tasks that require students to use their meaning making capabilities for a particular purpose, such as interpreting character.

In figures 2–5b we locate these tasks on the scale. The brown tab to the left of each task box is positioned to show the difficulty of that task. For dichotomous tasks (questions to which responses are either right or wrong) the tab is positioned on the scale where students would typically be meeting the demands of the question and there is no number in the tab. Polytomous tasks (those marked on a partial credit scale) have two brown tabs showing the comparative difficulty of achieving a partial score versus a full score. These tabs are numbered 1 and 2 respectively. Within each task box we describe the type of response students provided, along with illustrative examples.

When reading the figures it is important to notice that the scale in each figure starts at different points.

Interpreting character

In English, working with fictional—or literary—texts often involves the interpretation of character. When working in the linguistic mode a student who knows how to apply meaning-making capabilities in English knows, for example, that a character may be interpreted through: their thoughts, words, and actions; through the way in which other characters think, talk about, and act towards them; and through more indirect means, such as descriptions of the setting, or the character’s possessions. In visual texts other sources of information come into play, such as the use of colour, perspective, and proximity to other characters or objects.

Figure 2a describes a series of tasks involving the interpretation of character portrayed in images used in the NMSSA Viewing assessment. Figure 2b describes and provides examples of how students used meaning-making capabilities to interpret character.

What did we learn about capacity to interpret character?

It was easier for students to provide one element of evidence from the image to support their interpretation, than more than one. For example, in V202, those who identified more than one piece of evidence that the young woman was a maid scored nearly thirty points higher on the scale than those who identified only one.

Questions that require students to identify the *role* of a character tended to be easier than those that require them to identify the *personality* of a character. For example, it was easier for students to provide evidence that the young woman carrying the tray is a maid for question V0202 than it was for them to describe her character for question V0204.

Questions that require students to synthesise information from more than one aspect of an image (for example the setting, the objects in the setting, the other characters and their positions in relation to each other) in order to interpret a particular character tended to be more difficult than those in which a character could be interpreted by focussing on this person alone, and without needing to refer to the rest of the image. For example, in V0206, it is possible to identify and describe the character of the person with the sore head by looking only at her and her objects. V0207 is more difficult because it is necessary to interpret what is happening *around* the man reading the newspaper, as well as looking at him and his objects to interpret him as emotionally unaware, emotionally unavailable, and self-absorbed rather than, say, simply interested in current affairs.

Responses to questions higher on the scale included those which made reference to visual techniques, such as the use of line exemplified in responses to V0207 and V0204.

Q1

Image: A young woman wearing a black dress and white apron carries a tea tray to a table of well-dressed characters.

Question: The woman bringing in the tray is a maid. What do you see that shows you this?

Q2

Image: A woman in an evening dress sits slumped at a table with a glass of water and pills, and holding an icepack to her head.

Question: What kind of person is the woman with green eyes and a sore head? What do you see that shows you this?

Q3

Image: A young woman wearing a black dress and white apron carries a tea tray to a table of well-dressed characters. [The same character as in **Q1** above]

Question: What kind of character is the woman bringing in the tea tray? What do you see that makes you think this?

Q4

Image: A middle aged man reads the paper, oblivious to the others sitting with him at the breakfast table.

Question: What kind of character is the man reading the newspaper? What do you see that makes you think this?

Figure 2a. Tasks on interpreting character

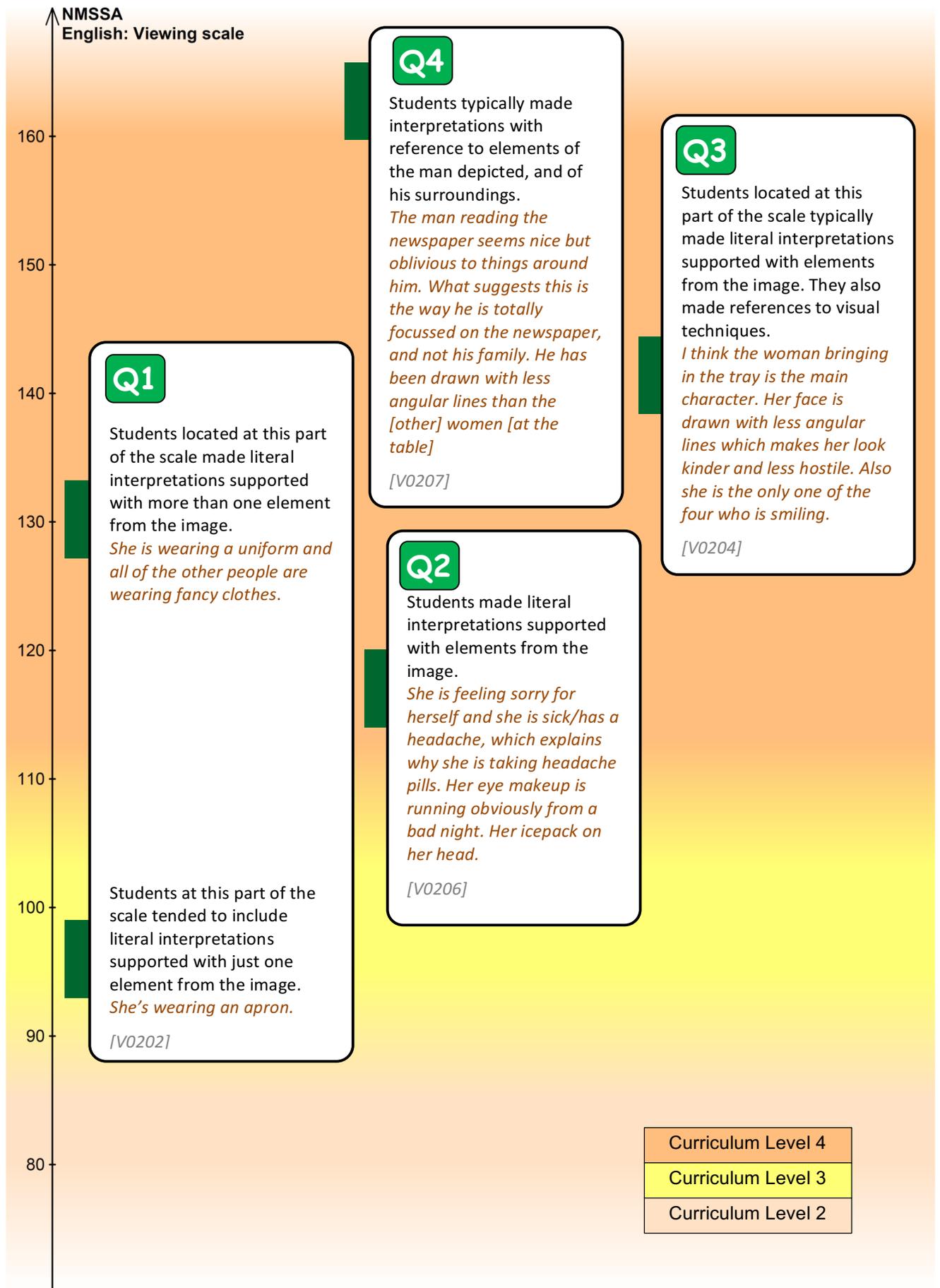


Figure 2b Use of meaning-making capabilities to interpret character

Interpreting the feelings of characters

In English, working with fictional—or literary—texts involves not only the interpretation of character, but the interpretation of the feelings of characters and the possible causes of those feelings. The same sorts of evidence drawn on to interpret what sort of person a particular character is can also be used to interpret their feelings.

Figure 3a describes a series of tasks involving the interpretation of the feelings of characters portrayed in images used in the NMSSA Viewing assessment. Figure 3b describes and provides examples of how students used meaning-making capabilities to interpret the feelings of characters.

What did we learn about capacity to interpret characters' feelings?

Questions that require students to recognise and identify simple or straightforward feelings (e.g., happy, sad, angry) were easier than those which required students to identify more complex, subtle, or nuanced feelings (e.g., perplexed, embarrassed, guilty, contemptuous, nostalgic, adoring, envious, ashamed, compassionate). This is likely to reflect, at least in part, students' emotional awareness, and students' vocabulary. Students with less awareness of their own and others' emotions may be able to recognise and describe straightforward feelings such as sad and happy but not more complex feelings such as contempt and envy. Students with less developed vocabularies may know and be able to write words such as sad and happy but not words such as contemptuous or perplexed.

The feelings of characters tended to be easier to identify and describe when depicted in stereotypical, obvious, or exaggerated ways than when depicted in more subtle, nuanced, or abstract ways. Images depicting the feelings of characters through visual techniques (such as the use of colour or perspective) or through the use of symbolism/representation tended to be more difficult for students to interpret. For example question V2603 shows a character with a downturned mouth, explicitly signalling sadness, and was relatively easy. However question V2605 provides much less explicit information and was much harder. In this image the two characters have their backs to us (so we cannot see their facial expressions) and are so small that we can discern little of their body language. Their negative feelings about moving to a new town, signalled in the text, must be inferred from the muted sepia of the setting, the emptiness of the street, the small size of the characters in relation to the large houses and expanse of sky, and the low angle from which we view the street.

Q1

Image: A stylised primate, surrounded by a halo of light cuddles its baby and looks lovingly down at it.

Question: The illustrator wants you to know how the mother feels about her baby. What do you see that shows you this?

Q2

Image: [The animal] looks sadly at the viewer from behind the bars of a cage.

Question: How is [the animal] feeling? What do you see that shows you this?

Q3

Image: One female character prances away with her nose in the air and another male character, follows her sheepishly, while looking the other way and pretending not to be following.

Question: How does [the female character] feel about [the male character] heading [the same way she is]? What do you see that shows you this?

Q4

Image: Five panels from a graphic novel depict a family getting ready to leave the house on a trip. In the first panel a middle aged man scratches his head, furrows his brow, lifts his eyebrow, lifts one side of his mouth, as if biting his lip, and asks in a speech bubble, “Anyone seen my car keys?”

Question: In panel one, Dad is unsure about something. What do you see and read that shows you this?

Q5

Image: In the second panel from the graphic novel excerpt described above, a boy pulls on his jacket, tilts his eyebrows, opens his mouth wide as if shouting, and says words in the speech bubble indicating that he thinks the family needs to hurry up because they are running late.

Question: In panel two, the older son wants to leave. What do you see and read that shows you this?

Q6

Image: Four panels from a graphic novel depict two young people in a new town. The viewer looks up at the first panel—a streetscape—from a distance and from below the level of the road to see two small figures looking up at a house with a high fence, behind which are dark trees and a large expanse of grey sky. The figures are viewed from behind and are so small that even their body language is difficult to decipher. The sepia tone makes the neighbourhood look uninviting. The text explains that the children did not want to move to a new town but had no choice, as their mother got a new job.

Question: In panel one, how do [the children] feel about moving to a new town? What do you see and read that shows you this?

Figure 3a Tasks on interpreting characters’ feelings

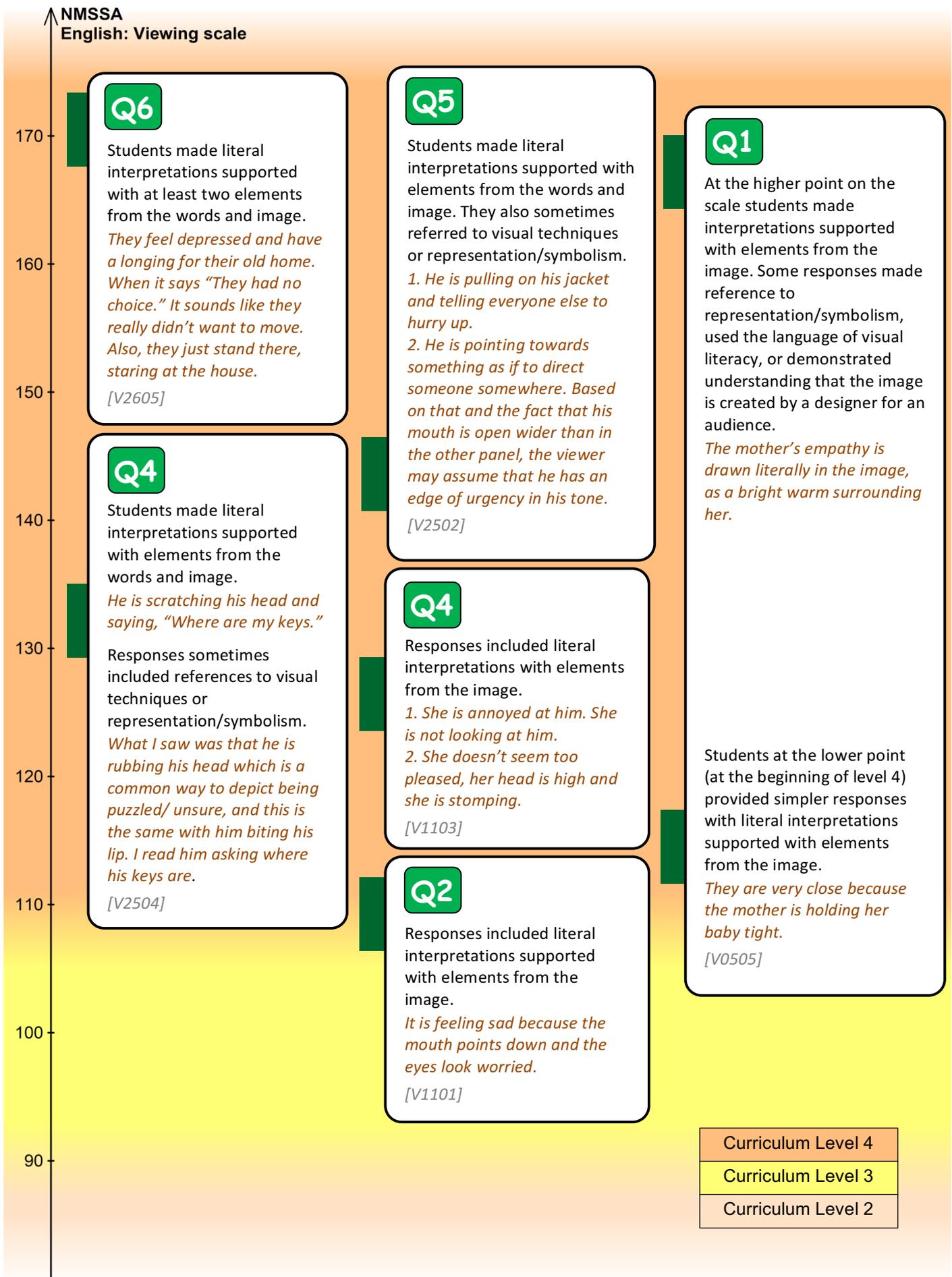


Figure 3b Use of meaning-making capabilities to interpret the feelings of characters

Interpreting setting

In English, working with fictional—or literary—texts involves the interpretation of setting and what the setting tells us. Figure 4 provides a description of the images, questions, and examples of student responses for items at different levels of difficulty that require the interpretation of setting.

Figure 4a describes a series of tasks involving the interpretation of setting portrayed in images used in the NMSSA Viewing assessment. Figure 4b describes and provides examples of how students used meaning-making capabilities to interpret setting.

What did we learn about capacity to interpret setting?

The items about setting tended to be slightly more difficult than the items about character, or character's feelings. The easiest items about setting were those which required students to use information literally depicted in an image about place or time (such as V1106 or V0203). For example it was relatively easy for the students to work out that V0203 was set in the olden days because the image contained objects that were obviously of an earlier time.

Some items involved more than one image (for example, several panels from a graphic novel, or several pages from a picture book), and questions that focused on changes in the setting over time. An example is V0101, in which students are asked to infer what might have happened to explain changes in the setting across the two images. Not surprisingly students tended to find it easier to make inferences about setting from just one image than from more than one image.

It was more difficult for students to answer questions about time and place when aspects of the setting were depicted in a more figurative or stylistic manner. For example, the sea and the storm in V1201 are depicted figuratively through the use of line, shape, and colour. Responses which demonstrate an understanding that the yellow shapes in this image represent lightning (even though they were not depicted in the traditional shape of lightning), were situated over thirty points higher on the scale than those that simply observed that the background looked stormy.

Higher on the scale still were responses that included reference to abstract concepts in relation to the figurative expression of these concepts through representation/symbolism. An example is the understanding that the darkening sky in V0903 represents a portent of evil or that the muted colours in V2604 create a sense of foreboding.

Q1

Image: Two animals look out from behind bars.

Question: Where are the two animals? What do you see that shows you this?

Q2

Image: A group sit around a table being served tea by a maid.

Question: Do the people live now or in the olden days? What do you see that shows you this?

Q3

Image: Three pages from a picture book depict in a stylised fashion, the main character travelling by sea during different weather conditions. On the first page the sky and sea are depicted as stormy.

Question: In the first part, the writing says there is stormy weather with thunder and lightning. What do you see that shows you this?

Q4

Image: Two illustrations from a picture book each show a couple of characters sitting side by side. In the first image the sky is bright and sunny and the vegetation is green. In the second image the sky is a brownish grey, the vegetation has disappeared, the ground looks burnt and smokey, and the characters' clothes are ripped.

Question: What happened between the first and second image. What do you see that shows you this?

Q5

Image: Soldiers disembark from a large vehicle. The sky behind the vehicle is dark and cloudy while the sky in front of it is black.

Question: The sky to the right of the [vehicle] is getting darker. What is the effect of this?

Q6

Image: Four panels from a graphic novel depict two young people having moved to a new town. The viewer looks up at the first panel—a streetscape—from a distance and from below the level of the road to see two small figures looking up at a house with a high fence behind which are dark trees and a large expanse of grey sky. The sepia tone makes the neighbourhood look uninviting. The text explains that the children did not want to move to a new town but had no choice, as their mother got a new job.

Question: In panel one, the new neighbourhood looks unfriendly. What do you see that shows you this?

Figure 4a Tasks on interpreting setting

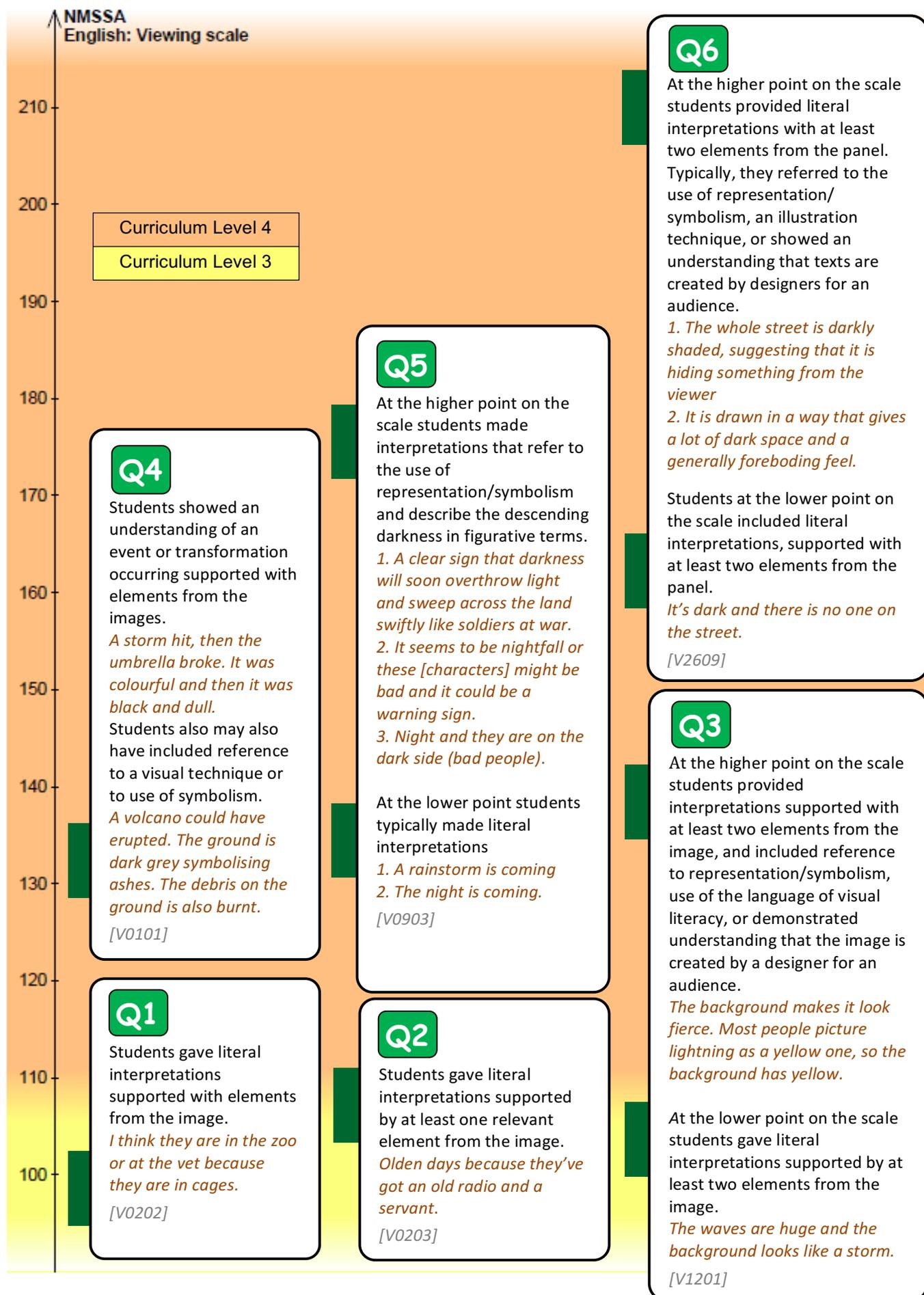


Figure 4b Use of meaning-making capabilities to interpret setting

Identifying the effect of visual techniques

In English, working with fictional—or literary—texts involves analysing how visual techniques and conventions are used to create particular effects. Figure 5a describes a series of tasks involving the analysis of the visual techniques and their effects used in the NMSSA Viewing assessment. Figure 5b describes and provides examples of how students used meaning-making capabilities analyse visual techniques and their effects.

It is important to remember that all of the questions in KAVE involve the interpretation visual techniques and their effects. The items focused on here are those in which the question specifically asks the student to describe the effects of stated visual techniques.

What did we learn about capacity to interpret visual techniques?

Items that asked directly about the effect of stated visual techniques provided the greatest challenge of all items in KAVE. These items were situated at (or even above) the part of the scale that was judged to be at Level 4.

Responses to these items included: reference to visual techniques and their effects; reference to representation/symbolism; reference to the relationship between the image and words (in texts that contained both); use of the language of visual literacy; and evidence of an understanding that texts are created by designers for an audience.

The responses on the effect of visual techniques that scored highest on the scale were those that identified the use of representation/symbolism to portray abstract concepts, such as the use of size to represent power and dominance in V1004, or the use of gold to represent victory in V909.

Q1

Image: Two animals look out from behind the bars of their cages.

Question: The animals look directly at the viewer. What is the effect of this?

Q2

Image: A female character prances into the distance and a male sheepishly follows, although acts like he is not. The text states: “[The female] headed south and [the male] headed...south!”

Question: How does the written text add to the meaning of the image?

Q3

Image: A large vehicle dominates the land and figures in front of it.

Question: The [vehicle] takes up a lot of space on the page. What is the effect of this?

Q4

Image: A gold coloured [structure] towers above a group of characters.

Question: The [structure] is a gold colour. What is the effect of this?

Q5

Image: On a flat white background a stylised primate, surrounded by a halo of light cuddles its baby and looks lovingly down at it.

Question: The background is white. What is the effect of this?

Figure 5a Tasks on analysing visual techniques and their effects

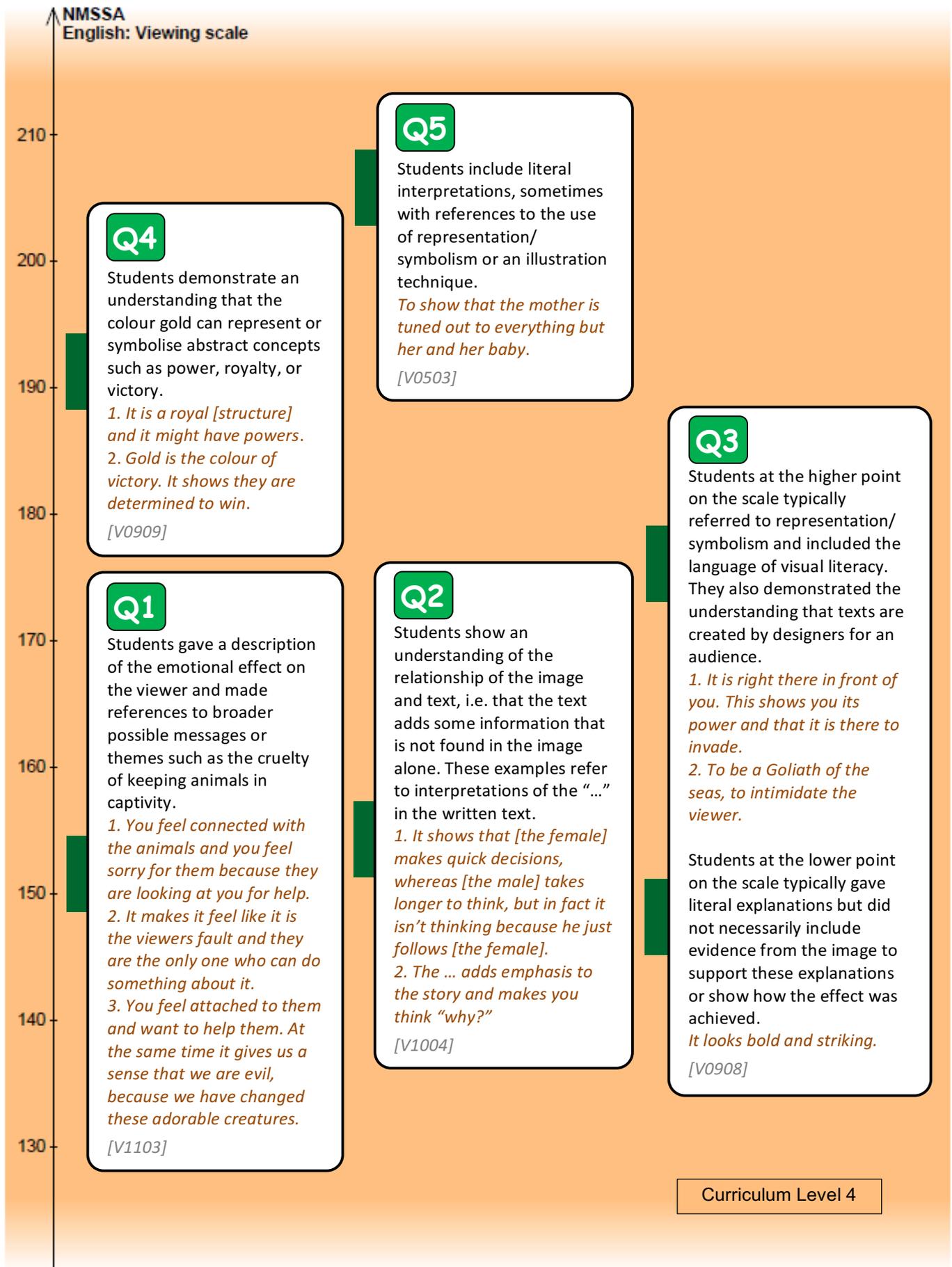


Figure 5b Use of meaning-making capabilities to analyse visual techniques and their effects

5. Making meaning in English

Progress in making meaning of visual texts in English

As we move up the scale, we find tasks that require students to interpret increasingly abstract texts with increasingly sophisticated use of representation/symbolism. Students are increasingly required to draw on and make connections between (sometimes competing) evidence from more than one aspect of, or place in, the image. Students are required to draw on an increasingly broad and deep pool of prior knowledge (including knowledge of other texts, and language more generally) and apply this to the text in question.

These findings are consistent with findings from other standardised tests of achievement that assess meaning-making of fictional—or literary—texts in other modes, such as writing. (For example, as shown in *Progressive Achievement Test: Reading* (Darr, McDowall, Ferral, Twist, and Watson, 2008).

A comment on level 2 and level 5

There were relatively few responses at the part of the scale that was judged to align with Level 2 of the NZC. Findings from the pilot studies show that the items we had developed were not eliciting responses at this part of the scale. We had some success at altering existing items and writing new ones at the trial and pilot phases to elicit more responses at this part of the scale. However, we still have relatively few responses at the part of the scale judged to align with Level 2 of NZC. From our experiences trialling the items face-to-face in classrooms we think the most likely reason for this finding is that ‘viewing’ is hard to assess using a group pen and paper format at Year 4. We found that in general, the Year 4 students were highly engaged with the illustrations and enjoyed the experience of the assessment, but found it hard to interpret what the questions were asking them. Some also struggled with the more open-ended nature of some of the questions and to grasp the concept that there could be more than one viable answer to them, found it difficult to express their ideas in writing, or lacked the knowledge of visual texts needed to get themselves into a reasonable scoring range on the rubrics.

The very top of the scale is well above Level 4 and even in to Level 5, although we cannot say at which point on the scale Level 5 might begin.

Where does the meaning-making challenge reside?

In standardised assessments of English, such as those used for NMSSA, the meaning-making challenge resides in the question being asked *and* in the complexity of the text it is being asked of (as well of course in the social context). In general, questions that ask about how the text has been constructed, the devices used to do so, and the effect of these, along with questions about representation, how the reader is positioned by a text, and what is implied by or can be inferred from the text are generally more challenging than questions about denotation – what is shown literally, and in concrete (rather than abstract terms) in the text.

In general texts in which the structures are complex and the ideas are more abstract than concrete, and implied rather than explicit, are more difficult to make meaning of than texts in which concrete ideas are expressed explicitly using simple structures. The difficulty of questions, such as, “How is the character feeling?” or “What is the character doing?” will vary depending on the complexity of the text they refer to.

The finding that item complexity is dependent on the relationship between text and task is consistent with findings from other assessment tasks for English, such as *PAT: Reading* (Darr, et al., 2008).

What do we know about meaning-making in English?

This report has outlined a retrospective analysis of how students demonstrated their meaning-making capabilities when completing the NMSSA English: Viewing assessment in 2015. The assessment provided students with opportunities to make meaning of illustrations with and without supporting written text taken from picture books and graphic novels. We have reported on students' capacity to interpret, or make meaning of: character; the feelings of characters; and setting. We have also reported on students' capacity to describe the effect of visual techniques used by the illustrators, and conversely, the visual techniques used to create particular effects.

The clear message from the patterns that emerged is that students' capacity to make meaning of visual texts is related to their capacity to analyse the form as well as the function of an image, and the *relationship* between function and form. Knowledge of the text requires an understanding of the relationship between function and form. The function of a text is its social purpose and thus includes a consideration of audience. The form of a text includes its mode and elements such as structure, language devices, language features, and punctuation.

Relatively few students demonstrated a metaknowledge of meaning-making in English or the capacity to use the metalanguage needed to make meaning of visual images or to critically analyse the function and form of such images. This lack of a metaknowledge and metalanguage is also likely to inhibit students' capacity to make meaning of visual text.

One interpretation of these findings is that such skills and knowledge cannot be easily mastered by younger children. However this interpretation is not consistent with international and New Zealand based research which suggests that even young children can master such skills if given age appropriate opportunities to do so (See, for example the work of: Carr et al., 2014; Clarkin-Phillips et al., 2012; McDowall et al., 2010; Sandretto et al., 2006).

Another interpretation is that such skills are hard for younger children to demonstrate in a pen and paper test situation. As discussed above, this interpretation is consistent with our experiences when piloting items for *KAVE*. This interpretation is also consistent with previous experiences we have had when designing, and trialling other assessment resources with students in Year 4, such as items for the Assessment Resource Banks in English.

A final possibility is that these skills are not as often taught in New Zealand primary and intermediate schools. This third interpretation is consistent with the findings of a number of research projects in relation to making meaning of linguistic, visual, or multimodal texts carried out in New Zealand over the last ten years or so. For example, in a small study on literature in the multicultural classroom Locke, Cawkwell, & Sila'ilala'i (2009) found that reading activities tended to be "content-focused and lacking an emphasis on the way meaning is form dependent" (Locke et al., 2009, 185). In a small study focused largely on the teaching of English and the arts in e-learning contexts McDowall (2010) found that students needed to learn about the relationship between function and form when producing multimodal texts. And in a much larger study McNaughton, MacDonald, Amituanai-Tolosa, Lai, & Farry (2006) hypothesized from their findings that further gains in reading comprehension assessments depend on "the teacher's...capabilities to extend the amount and range of advanced levels of text reading for students, where guidance is increasingly focused on literature and language study as primary purposes."

Why are meaning-making capabilities in English important?

Globalisation and rapid technological change are affecting the ways in which meaning is created and exchanged. In today's world new types of text are emerging at an increasingly rapid rate. These include visual, audio, spatial, gestural, linguistic, and multimodal texts. Today's young people, more than ever before, need to be literate in different forms of the English language¹ (some would argue in different languages²), and in different modes of meaning-making³.

Young people need not only to be able to make meaning of the purposes of texts (their function), *what* these texts say (their 'content'), but also *how* these text say (their form). They need to know how texts (and language more generally) work so they can critically analyse how texts position them as readers and so they can re-design texts for their own purposes. They need a metaknowledge and a metalanguage of meaning-making to enable them to do these things and to apply to new text forms as they emerge in the future.

It is for these reasons that learning how to make meaning in the English learning area is so important. English provides students with opportunities to explore how language works, including language in all modalities – whether visual, linguistic, audio, spatial, gestural, or multimodal. English provides students with opportunities to, read and create texts in different modes and forms of language and also to explore the ways in which different modal and linguistic structures work. They need opportunities to explore and apply the tools of semiotics and literary criticism.⁴ English provides students with a metaknowledge and metalanguage of meaning-making.

In summary

In English students explore not just the 'content' or function of texts but the way in which that content is constructed, that is, their form. In fact in English the form or way in which the content is constructed is considered to be an integral part of the text's meaning. In English there is an interest in the *relationship* between function and form for meaning-making.

English equips students with the tools needed to explore the textual choices available when making meaning for different social purposes, and the relationship between textual choices and social purposes, (i.e., how texts are constructed to elicit emotional, physical, and aesthetic experiences, as well as cognitive responses, in readers).

English provides students with the tools needed to critique and second-guess texts, rather than take them at face value. It provides students with the tools to redesign or transform texts for their own purposes. Opportunities to build meaning-making capabilities through the discipline of English are therefore more important than ever before. They are a necessary part of a future-oriented education system.

¹ An understanding of the different ways of using language is important because globalisation and increasing cultural and linguistic diversity mean exposure to a wider range of cultures and languages, in different cultural, social, and professional contexts.

² Some critics draw on sociolinguistics to argue for reconceptualising English as a multilingual subject in response to increasing linguistic diversity in local communities. See, for example Brutt-Griffler & Collins (2008). See also Horner & Lu (2008) and Brutt-Griffler & Collins (2008) on the 'new multilingualism' and the implications for subject English.

³ See Street (2008) and Kress (2003) on how the shift in dominance from print-based text to screen-based text has radically changed the ways in which meaning is made.

⁴ Literary criticism provides the tools needed to consider how language in fiction is used to create emotion. See Locke (2010) who argues that literary criticism is important because it provides a metaknowledge and metalanguage for analysing and discussing the literary in ways different from but complementary to Systemic Functional Linguistics

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