

## «Studierfähigkeit und Hochschulreife» –

### Treffpunkte an der Schnittstelle

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# EMPFEHLUNGEN DER KERNGRUPPE ENGLISCH

VERNEHMLASSUNGSENTWURF VOM 8. FEBRUAR 2008

#### Mitglieder der Kerngruppe

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#### I. Introduction: Analysis of the Current Situation

In Phase I of the HSGYM Schnittstelle project the English Kerngruppe collected empirical data on the strengths and weaknesses of Matura graduates and entering students at the University of Zurich and ETH (ZH). The Kerngruppe focused on competences in speaking, listening, reading and writing. After a lengthy review process, the findings of this research were written up in a detailed report and discussed with the English Fachkonferenz (of Kt. ZH) in June 2007.

In the Report Phase I the following general conclusions were drawn:

1. MaturandInnen and entering students possess good speaking competences in English. The emphasis on verbal communication in modern course books and teaching styles has clearly had a positive effect on pupils.
2. MaturandInnen and entering students also possess good listening competences. In standard everyday situations and most academic situations students do not seem to have much difficulty understanding.

The mastering of these competences seems to have come at the cost of other competences. Thus, we found that:

3. Many MaturandInnen and entering students do not possess adequate reading competences. They struggle with the amount of reading assignments in the first year and often do not know how to identify key literary elements, concepts or the structure of arguments.
4. Many MaturandInnen and entering students do not possess adequate writing competences in English. When writing academic papers, they have difficulty structuring individual paragraphs and the paper as a whole.

While the deficits of the entering students have not yet led to a measurable decline in the quality of UZH or ETH graduates, they have led to changes in the courses required for entering students. Various departments at the UZH and ETH have begun to offer courses in 'remedial academic skills'. At the Englisches Seminar in Zürich entering students are now required to spend more of their time in courses practicing writing skills than was the case a few years ago. In addition, roughly 50% of first-year English students are required to take extra courses to bring their language skills up to the required levels. Members of the Kerngruppe believe that certain changes in the teaching of English at Gymnasiums are needed to improve the situation. Furthermore, there is one very important change at Swiss universities and especially the ETH which makes improvements in the teaching of English at Gymnasiums necessary: English has become the *lingua franca* for most scientists and academics. Present-day students in almost all fields are expected to have advanced skills in English. There is a high probability that at the UZH or ETH students will listen to some lectures in English, some will even have several lectures or seminars in English, and at some point in their studies most students will do and present their work in English. For this reason UZH Rektor Hans Weder said at the HSGYM Symposium (17.1.08) that "advanced English skills are absolutely essential" for students. English teachers at Gymnasiums must become aware of the newly emerging dominance of English at the tertiary level and the English curriculum must reflect the new expectations. It is time for English to be taught at Gymnasiums as a *Bildungs- und Wissenschaftssprache*, second only to German.

Before presenting the twenty-one individual recommendations, the English Kerngruppe would like to explain the conditions that are critical for the successful implementation of them. Firstly, since the recommendations are largely oriented toward future academic work, they are meant to be applied in the last three to four semesters of Gymnasium and most crucially in the last 2 semesters. The recommendations say little about the first years of learning English at Gymnasium. Secondly, the number of hours of English taught per week varies at different schools and in different classes, depending on the *Studentafel* and *Schwerpunktfach*. These conditions have consequences for the type of work done with a class in any given

semester. If a class in its final two semesters only has 3 hours per week of English, we concede that it would be difficult to implement, for example, our recommendations regarding writing. However, the Kerngruppe believes that when English departments at Gymnasiums in the next few years make adjustments to the curriculum to incorporate the improvements in English levels due to *Early English* at primary schools and the changes required with the expected introduction in Kt. Zürich of the *Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)* in the next few years, then it will be possible to give a more academic character to English in the final semesters and this for all Matura Profiles. The Kerngruppe also believes that the success of our recommendations requires the cooperation at schools between modern language departments. They should regularly meet, discuss and coordinate expectations in key academic areas. Lastly, the English Kerngruppe is well aware that its recommendations are non-binding. However, we strongly believe that if they are implemented, MaturandInnen will be better prepared for their university studies and that their chances of success will be improved.

## **II. Recommendations for Competences at Gymnasiums**

### **A. Writing**

#### **Recommendation 1: Essay Writing**

Pupils should be instructed and trained in the structuring of argumentative, expository and critical essays. The Anglo-Saxon 'five-paragraph essay' - with an Introduction, Main Section and Conclusion - should be taken as the model.

Justification: Pupils are typically given a wide variety of writing tasks, ranging from descriptions and letters to free compositions, thematic essays and literary analyses. However, when they arrive at university, they frequently seem unaware that there are well-defined expectations and conventions concerning the structure and organization of academic writing. The 180-250 word essays required in standard course books are not long enough to practice this. Because Anglo-Saxon writing styles have gained currency at universities, becoming familiar with this tradition in writing is indispensable.

Implementation: English Departments at Kantonsschulen should develop in cooperation with other modern language departments clear expectations regarding suitably academic essay topics and the organization of es-

says. All pupils should be required to write three to four longer essays (approx. 500 words) in English with this structure before graduation.

### **Recommendation 2: Persuasive Argumentation**

Pupils should be required to write about abstract ideas and to master different ways of structuring arguments. This includes formulating a 'thesis', using examples and counter-examples, weighting arguments and using appropriate rhetorical devices.

**Justification:** Writing for academic and scientific purposes requires more than specialized or technical vocabulary: it also requires discourse strategies and techniques of persuasion.

**Implementation:** Pupils should be given the opportunity to read and practice different ways of developing arguments. Materials for this can be drawn from advanced writing practice books, 'model essays', and from texts on literary, scientific, historical and sociological topics.

### **Recommendation 3: Organizing Paragraphs**

Pupils must be taught how to structure paragraphs in English. They should be expected to formulate a 'topic sentence' and learn how to use 'coherence and cohesion' devices to create unity and clarity. They should also learn how to make 'transitions' between paragraphs.

**Justification:** It is evident at the university level that far too few entering students have been trained in writing clear and well-organized paragraphs. Given their knowledge of Anglo-Saxon writing conventions, English teachers are particularly well suited to teach this valuable skill.

**Implementation:** Pupils should be given ample practice in the writing of paragraphs. However, it is not enough to rely only on the writing exercises found in common English course books. These exercises are typically so 'pre-structured' that the pupils do not learn how to organize their ideas on their own. Good practice books for 'academic writing' can be used.

## **B. Reading**

### **Recommendation 4: Reading for Gist vs. Close Reading**

Pupils should learn how to identify, in addition to the gist and broad themes, key details in difficult texts. They should also practice 'critical' and 'analytical' reading.

**Justification:** Matura graduates display great facility when they must identify the general meaning of texts, but many of them have difficulty when asked to explain details and how the meaning is generated. The reading exercises in most modern English course books are not designed for university-track students, so advanced reading skills must be consciously practiced.

Implementation: Pupils should be given several opportunities to read and analyze texts that have an academic or scientific character. These can be taken from magazines or popular scientific magazines and include topics from the natural, cognitive and social sciences. Given the difficulty these texts may present, practice with reading them in the classroom is necessary. Similarly, students should be given some practice reading literary texts in the classroom. Independent study projects involving literature can supplement - but not replace - the close reading done with an experienced teacher.

### **Recommendation 5: Interpretation and Basic Literary Terms**

Pupils doing the Matura in all Profiles should practice literary analysis and interpretation. In addition to learning to use basic literary terms, they should learn to move beyond merely personal responses to literature.

Justification: The study of literature is and must remain a defining feature of a Gymnasium education. Literature provides a window onto other cultures and societies, and it allows readers to reflect on other worlds and perspectives. Learning to think about and discuss literature enables students to understand a variety of texts in all subjects and increases their ability to think abstractly and creatively.

Implementation: Teachers and English departments should develop graduated exercises that allow pupils to practice literary interpretation. English departments at individual schools should also have clear expectations regarding the number and type of books required in the last two years before the Matura. Most school classes typically read in the last two years one novel and several shorter literary works each semester.

## **C. Listening**

### **Recommendation 6: Authentic Texts**

Pupils should be given several opportunities to listen to real and natural speech with academic content. While native speakers should be given priority, non-native speakers should also be used.

Justification: While listening competences of entering students are good, many struggle with the academic English they hear with increasing frequency at the UZH and the ETH in particular. Many of the instructors are non-native speakers and this can create problems for entering students. The listening exercises in standard course books are often good, but they are done by professional readers. The passages are typically 'scripted' and the exercises clearly structured. To avoid a false sense of mastery, these course book exercises must be supplemented.

Implementation: Modern digital technology offers a mine of sources for 'live' speech. Both the BBC and American NPR Websites offer excellent Podcast material. Documentary films are also suitable for this. With relative ease teachers can design exercises to check comprehension.

#### **Recommendation 7: Note Taking**

Pupils should be given several opportunities to practice note taking during listening exercises. They should learn how to select key or relevant information. This competence should also be practiced in other languages and subjects, e.g. history and geography.

Justification: Many entering students complain that they are unaccustomed to taking notes and are often unsure of what they should write down.

Implementation: This can easily be combined with most listening exercises. Factual documentary programs are well suited for this. While pupils can cross-check each other's work, the notes must also be checked by the teacher for accuracy and relevance.

### **D. Speaking**

#### **Recommendation 8: Thinking and Speaking on One's Feet**

Pupils should learn to express themselves on complex or abstract topics in a spontaneous fashion. Exchanging and debating ideas must be regularly and systematically practiced.

Justification: University instructors frequently note how difficult it is for most of their students to debate and exchange ideas. Because of the strong Anglo-Saxon tradition in this area, English teachers are particularly well suited to develop and practice this skill.

Implementation: Pupils can be given 'spontaneous' speaking tasks, e.g. mini-presentations with little preparation time. Organized debates in the classroom on a range of current societal or ethical issues can be used.

#### **Recommendation 9: Mastering Register Differences**

Pupils must learn to distinguish informal, formal and academic registers in both speech and writing.

Justification: Many entering students display a lack of awareness of register differences when they communicate in English.

Implementation: Teachers need to supplement the standard course book exercises on register with a few more demonstrations of different registers, and academic English in particular.

### **E. Matura Exams**

#### **Recommendation 10: Matura Standards**

English departments at individual schools should have well-formulated expectations regarding 'Matura-level'. Ideally, these expectations should be discussed and coordinated with other English departments. While 'standardized' tests developed by a central authority must be avoided, 'target levels' based on the *Common European Framework* (CEFR) can be formulated.

**Justification:** There is a wide variety of levels and expectations regarding Matura-level within schools and between schools in Kt. Zürich. This situation is unsatisfactory because it weakens the value of the Matura as the qualifying 'ticket' to university studies. The disparity of levels may even force the UZH or ETH to introduce entrance exams in the future. It is also unfair to the students because widely varying standards do not ensure that all MaturandInnen are equally prepared for their studies.

**Implementation:** English departments at individual schools and the English Fachkonferenz in Kt. Zürich should begin formulating clearer expectations for the Matura.

## **F. English Didactics**

### **Recommendation 11: The New Expectations for English**

Didactics instructors should inform their students about the new expectations for English at the tertiary level. All future teachers of English should learn how to teach the structure of the Anglo-Saxon 'five-paragraph essay' and learn how to teach academic reading skills.

**Justification:** The rise of English as a dominant scientific and academic language has been so rapid that its consequences for the content of English lessons has not been fully recognized. The advanced competences required at the tertiary level are typically not practiced in standard course books and for this reason require the development of new classroom materials and approaches.

### **III. General Academic Competences**

This area has been examined and treated by many other researchers and they even overlap with the recommendations specific competences above. For this reason, we would like to present here only those recommendations that we think - for the sake of completeness - should not be overlooked by Gymnasium teachers. While their *implementation* is included, an individual *justification* for each one has been left out because they all serve the same purpose of improving students' general academic and study competences. A final point must be made here. Because English is used in so many academic disciplines, English itself should be viewed as an *überfachliche Kompetenz*.

**Recommendation 12: Pupils should learn to speak freely in front of a class**

Implementation: Pupils can do a variety of presentations. Longer ones are not necessarily more useful than shorter ones: too much preparation diminishes the level of spontaneous communication skills.

**Recommendation 13: Pupils should learn to work and do research independently. This includes learning how to choose and evaluate their sources.**

Implementation: Pupils have the opportunity to do this when preparing, e.g., their Matura books or presentations. The Matura Thesis (*Maturitätsarbeit*) is well suited for this, particularly when pupils do research papers for this.

**Recommendation 14: Pupils should learn to read and think critically**

Implementation: This is most easily practiced whenever a class has a reading assignment, whether reading literature or non-fiction texts. Pupils do not learn to think and read critically unless they are shown how to do it.

**Recommendation 15: Pupils should learn to think in an interdisciplinary fashion**

Implementation: When reading articles and suitable works of literature, it is recommended that teachers refer to the social, cultural and historical context. Comparisons with French and German literary works can be made where possible. More interdisciplinary team-teaching is also desirable.

**IV. Recommendations for University Instructors who teach in English**

**Recommendation 16: Writing**

a) Entering students should be given the opportunity to practice writing with graduated and task-based exercises. They should be given clear feedback from instructors.

b) University departments should use written guidelines to make the writing conventions of their field clear. It should also be binding for all instructors.

Justification: Students often report that they are unsure of what is expected of them and often say that they are not given enough guidance.

Implementation: Each department should produce a handbook that details the expectations at all the different levels (modules) and which shows



examples for the students. Instructors should give more explicit feedback and advice on how to improve the writing.

### **Recommendation 17: Reading**

- a) Instructors should introduce reading to entering students in a graduated manner and with 'guiding questions' at the beginning.
- b) Instructors should explicitly teach the specialized terminology required by their subject.

**Justification:** Entering students are coming from a wide variety of backgrounds, having done different kinds of Matura Profiles and having had different experiences with reading with many different language teachers. Furthermore, learning specialized or technical terminology is not part of a Gymnasium education.

**Implementation:** This can be done by giving the students explicit analytical tools for reading and interpreting texts. These tools can come in the form of definitions of terms needed or by using 'model' reading exercises in the beginning. Tutorials supplementing lectures and introductory courses are an excellent way to practice these skills and they are often highly valued by students.

### **Recommendation 18: Listening**

- a) Instructors who teach in English should be given guidelines by the UZH or ETH. These guidelines should include the essential conditions needed to improve the listening comprehension of the students.
- b) Entering students can be given 'skeleton sheets' by instructors to facilitate note-taking.
- c) Students should be able to give official feedback on the English skills of their instructors.

**Justification:** Many students complain that many instructors who teach in English are not sensitive to their language abilities and needs as non-native speakers of English. The UZH and ETH are insufficiently aware of the problems that arise when both the instructor and the students work in a non-native language.

**Implementation:** The UZH /ETH Hochschuldidaktik should develop guidelines to improve listening comprehension and develop a questionnaire for students which allow instructors to receive feedback on their performance. 'Language skills of instructors' must be included on all course evaluations.

## **V. Recommendations for School Principals, Politicians and Policy-Makers**

### **Recommendation 19: The Weight of English in the Weekly Schedule**

The number of English hours in the weekly schedules of pupils should not be reduced at Gymnasiums because of an expected gain from *Early English* at primary schools.

**Justification:** While the introduction of English at primary schools will raise English levels to some degree, the gains in the early stages will not reduce the need for a substantial number of hours in the last semesters when the most difficult areas are being taught. Learning advanced reading and writing skills requires time in the classroom and guidance by teachers.

**Implementation:** While it does not seem politically possible to increase the numbers of hours per week for English, other improvements can be made. For example, the number of half-class lessons - particularly in the last year - can be expanded. Schools can organize 2-3 week stays abroad with intensive language study.

### **Recommendation 20: English as a Maturprüfungsfach**

The number of Maturas done with English as the Schwerpunkt concentration should be increased.

**Justification:** In 2006 less than 50% of all MaturandInnen in Kt. Zürich chose English as the Schwerpunktfach. In some schools the number of pupils doing a written English Matura is as low as 10%. These low percentages do not reflect the importance of English at the UZH and ETH. For purposes of comparison, one should try to imagine the consequences for German levels at the tertiary level if only 50% of all MaturandInnen 'chose' to do a written Matura in German.

**Implementation:** The political authorities should make English an obligatory Matura subject, with both written and oral final exams.

### **Recommendation 21: The Value of a Humanistic Education**

When allocating resources and setting educational goals, politicians and education policy-makers must retain a broad, humanistic definition of language. The teaching of literature must be reaffirmed as an essential part of a Gymnasium education.

**Justification:** While it is possible to understand language use in a narrow and strictly instrumental sense (the acquisition of specific vocabulary and grammar which serve specific functions, e.g. business letter writing), this approach ignores how learning a language and its literature contributes to improving thinking skills and to expanding knowledge of culture and society. Language use defined as a 'Handlungskompetenz' does not adequately describe the intellectual and cognitive skills needed to do academic work in English.

Discussion: Educational policy-makers and politicians should be realistic when making decisions about new instruments for language learning and new forms of assessment. The *European Language Portfolio (ELP)* will offer language teachers and learners new opportunities, but by itself it does not ensure that pupils receive the intellectual training that they need for their future studies. The *CEFR* will allow teachers to use common assessment standards, but it inherently contains the risk that humanistic and literary elements in language learning will become less important. Introducing the so-called 'integrated language didactics' may offer some efficiency and cost-savings in language education, but it will not automatically raise the language levels of pupils. While it may be politically necessary to adopt these new instruments, it is also equally necessary to make sure that Gymnasiums and teachers have the time and resources to teach advanced competences in reading and writing.

## **VI. Conclusion: Implementing the Recommendations**

The recommendations for Gymnasium teachers of English should begin to be implemented in August 2008. There is no need to wait for more studies (*EVAMAR II*) or the *ELP* and *CEFR* to begin teaching more academic reading and writing competences to pupils. However, it is clear that, with the arrival of pupils with *Early English* at Gymnasiums in 2011 and with the expected introduction of the *CEFR* and the *ELP* at Gymnasiums in Kt. Zürich in 2012, some changes will have to be made to the curricula at the various schools. The English Kerngruppe proposes that the English Fachkonferenz in Kt. Zürich (and beyond, if interest exists) meet once or twice a year to discuss the implementation of the recommendations. The results of these discussions can play an important role in future curriculum changes.

Many of the recommendations for university instructors are already being implemented. As mentioned at the beginning, many departments at the UZH have introduced new courses to ensure that entering students are informed more quickly about the expectations and conventions in a given field. Departments that offer courses in English or conduct work in English should cooperate with the Englischches Seminar (UZH) and Hochschuldidaktik to ensure adequate English standards. This cooperation must be initiated by the UZH's and ETH's leadership.

