Connecting Nineteen Eighty-Four to Today

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“Orwell feared that the future would be controlled by an all-powerful totalitarian states in a perpetual state of war. This terror was the genesis of Nineteen Eighty-Four, a novel that projected the ghastly post-war age of austerity into the near future” (Rossi, 175).

Overview

The theme of the 12th grade English curriculum in Philadelphia centers on the role of the individual in society and mainly incorporates British and World Literature. A required reading for this curriculum is George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four, a piece that both reflects the concerns of the society in which it was written and the concerns for future societies should the same path be followed.

When teaching Nineteen Eighty-Four in the past, I found that students often had difficulty relating to and comprehending many of the main ideas and societal critiques in the book. On the other hand, I find that many of my students are relatively political, especially when it comes to racism, equality and being treated fairly, but often do not know enough about history, politics and current events to back up their assertions and beliefs. While aspects of Nineteen Eighty-Four are dated, I believe it is still relevant to the world today. This unit would help students make connections between their own lives and personal knowledge, current events and political issues, and the themes of equal human rights, freedom of thought and the individual vs. the state in Nineteen Eighty-Four.

In addition, I found that students also lost interest quickly in the book because of its dense language and lengthy descriptions. Orwell spends the first third of the book setting the stage, describing the totalitarian world in which Winston lives. This lack of action and difficult language causes students to give up on reading early in the novel, instead of continuing to read until the plot picks up. To maintain student interest, the
*Nineteen Eighty-Four* unit will place a heavy emphasis on students’ own thoughts and beliefs, their reactions to Winston’s world and their opinions of what an ideal society should be like. If students are able to create, explain and support their opinions of the world in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, their engagement and investment in the novel will increase.

The School District of Philadelphia places *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in a unit under the theme “When and how is literature political?” In order to help students compare and contrast the issues, themes and ideas in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with today, students will examine different political and current issues throughout the unit. Reading and analyzing the novel through a political lens will also serve to reinforce and support the School District of Philadelphia’s Senior Social Science curriculum, allowing students to make connections across curriculum. In addition, allowing students to analyze and debate issues and ideas in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, compare them to current events and policies, and debate them with classmates will reinforce their study of social science, engage them in the reading, and help them to become involved citizens.

**Rationale**

Throughout the 20th century, the protection of human rights surfaced as a predominant issue, worldwide and in America. The century included some of the worst human rights violations in history, as well as some large steps in protecting and promoting civil rights, such as the women’s right to vote, the Civil Rights Movement and Affirmative Action. The historical events reflected the importance to protect and preserve equal rights for all.

Orwell was not the only author in the twentieth century to bring attention to individual and human rights through fiction: Aldous Huxley, Kurt Vonnegut, and Ray Bradbury also created fictional dystopian accounts of human rights, freedom of thought and equality in the future. Literature with a political message grew more and more common. George Orwell began writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1948 in response to the monumental events and changes that occurred throughout the first half of the twentieth century, such as the World Wars and the rise and spread of communism and other totalitarian governments. It was common for Orwell to address political issues and social injustices in his writing. In many of his shorter pieces and essays, Orwell criticizes the social injustices caused by social classes and governmental control; Orwell famously condemned communism in the allegorical novel *Animal Farm* in 1944. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell’s horrific vision of the future under totalitarian regimes is both a social critique of politics throughout the world and a warning of what could happen if human rights are not protected (Price 7).

Unfortunately, the title and the political theories critiqued in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* now appear somewhat dated and irrelevant to present day readers, especially my students. However, many of the themes, such as personal rights and governmental
control, still ring true today. It is the goal of the unit to help students read past the date and the title and focus on the personal opinions, beliefs and ideas in the novel that relate to their lives. Allowing opportunities for students to share and support their own opinions, whether through writing or class discussion, will help to engage them in the novel. By focusing on students’ ideas and beliefs, this unit will help students to see past the dated references and make connections to today’s world.

“Orwell’s political writings especially his exposure to Communism, Fascism and Imperialism may seem dated now when those isms… are dead…He was concerned not only about the disastrous effect of totalitarianism but also about the way it corrupted the language and thus made seeking the truth more difficult. He feared the growing power of the centralized state, seeing in it a threat to individual liberty. For these reasons Orwell’s appeal crosses the political spectrum” (Rossi, 172).

As a unit, I would like to focus on essential questions involving the individual and society; examining the concerns we have about our present day society and future society alongside of Nineteen Eighty-Four. While students will explore the political issues that inspired Orwell to write Nineteen Eighty-Four, they will also have the opportunity to explore political issues of today that will affect their futures, such as The Patriot Act and its effects on individual rights and freedoms, and President Eisenhower’s military industrial complex theory. My overarching goal for the unit is to help my students make connections between their own lives, current events and personal knowledge bases with the issues of individualism and personal rights in Nineteen Eighty-Four in order to help them to develop and support their own opinions.

Essential Questions for Study:
1. What is free thought? Is free thought different from free speech?
2. What are equal rights? Do we all have to be the same in order to be equal?
3. How can we ensure equal rights while protecting the individual?
4. What role does an individual have in society? How much of a difference can one person make?
5. What do we think an “ideal” society would be? What kind of future society are we creating through our actions, policies and ideologies of today?
6. How is propaganda used in society throughout history? In current events?

Objectives

There are several objectives that the students will reach through studying Nineteen Eighty-Four.

Students will be able to…
1. Identify and evaluate different types of governments (terms and definitions): I include this objective because I have found students’ background knowledge of World War II, politics and social science to be lacking. Students will keep track of these terms and definitions in a word bank for the novel. The words will also be posted around the room as part of a Nineteen Eighty-Four World Wall.

Some terms to be included are as follows: propaganda, totalitarianism, oligarchy, dictator, collectivism, socialism, communism, human rights, civil rights, capitalism and democracy.

2. Gain a broader understanding of the historical context behind Nineteen Eighty-Four: Much of Orwell’s influence in writing Nineteen Eighty-Four came from the different political systems and conflicts throughout Europe around World War I and World War II. In order to gain a broader understanding of these influences, students will learn about and research different leaders, types of governments and political states. Understanding these events will help students to identify and understand Orwell’s perspective and point of view while reading the novel. It may also help students to identify influential current events today when they adapt Nineteen Eighty-Four to today’s society. While doing so, they will practice and refine research skills and cover the background information of the novel independently. Students will then present their research to their classmates and practice oral presentation and public speaking skills.

The research topics will include the Russian Revolution, Stalin, Lenin and Communism; causes and outcomes of World War I; Hitler and the rise and control of Nazism; the Holocaust and anti-Semitism; the physical and political effects of the Atomic Bomb; Karl Marx, political theories and class struggles; George Orwell biographical information; Winston Churchill, Causes and Outcomes of World War II; Role of the United States in WWII; “The Iron Curtain” and the beginning of the Cold War; Adam Smith and theories of capitalism.

3. Examine and evaluate literature with a political intent: Students will examine Kurt Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron” and Nineteen Eighty-Four for political intent, specifically the views of an ideal society and equal rights. Students will learn definition of dystopian literature and apply it to the two pieces. Students will also be asked to provide and support their own opinions of the ideas and societies presented in both pieces.

4. Analyze, evaluate and interpret literature: Students will read Nineteen Eighty-Four independently and work with in-class groups and the class as a whole to interpret and analyze literary elements of novel, meaning, and purpose. Students will work with one another to complete Study Guide and to create questions and
topics for whole class discussions. Students will compare the novel with background information, political terms, and current events.

5. Make meaningful connections between themes, ideas and events in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with current events: In class, students will be exposed to different current events, laws, politics, beliefs and theories that relate to the realities of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Students will be able to compare and contrast Winston’s world to their own, to recognize similarities and differences between the present day world and that of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Students will also examine current news articles that directly mention *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, considering the value and meaning of the novel and why we still read it, even in 2007.

Current events to be discussed will include US involvement in Iraq before and during the Iraq War, the rights and restrictions of US Patriot Act, the effects of the Patriot Act on American citizens, and the theory of Eisenhower’s military industrial complex throughout the last fifty years. These issues will be compared to the invasion of privacy in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the “War is Peace” slogan.

6. Write in response to literature: Students will be required to complete five Reader’s Logs in response to their reading. Students will also be answering journal questions relating to the essential questions of study and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Students will be continuously revising and responding to their journal entries in response to class discussions, readings, etc.

7. Adapt *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to today’s world: Students will have a variety of project options to choose from, all of which will lead students to make connections between the novel and today’s society.

**Strategies**

Students will be involved in a variety of different activities, including literature discussion groups, written response logs to essential questions, texts and class discussions, working in groups to create their version of a utopian society and writing responses to reading that state and support their opinions. By incorporating various texts and current events, and a range of student-centered learning activities, students will be able to appreciate *Nineteen Eighty-Four* not just as an important novel for its time, but one that is equally as thought-provoking and relative to their lives today.

1. Group Research: Students will work in small groups to conduct research on the different historical contexts of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, taking on the role of the leader and his/her vision of what an ideal society would look like and presenting to class. The goal with this assignment would be to help students learn more
about different types of government and society and to gain an understanding of the ideas and events that influenced Orwell to write *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, while teaching research and presentation skills.

- Adam Smith and capitalist theory
- Karl Marx and socialist theory
- Totalitarian Government
- The Russian Revolution, Lenin and rise of Communism
- Stalin, Trotsky and communist Soviet Union
- Causes and outcomes of World War I
- Hitler and the rise of Nazism
- The Holocaust
- The Atomic Bomb
- Causes and outcomes of World War II
- Winston Churchill, political beliefs and role of England in WWII
- Role of the United States in World War II
- “The Iron Curtain” and the beginning of the Cold War

2. Reader’s Response Logs: Students would be required to write five logs and responses to the reading and supplemental studies in the course. Prompts will be provided, but students are free to invent their own ideas and questions. This would help students to sort out their ideas and questions about the novel.

In addition, students will begin class periods responding to journal. These journal questions would help students make connections between the essential questions of study and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Students will also have the opportunity to review their responses in order to modify or reinforce their opinions after class discussions and readings. Students will turn in journals and reader’s logs at the end of the unit.

3. Evaluate propaganda techniques: Students identify different types and methods of propaganda in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (posters, telescreens, government issued books and newspapers, education of youth) with different types of propaganda throughout history and today (Nazi propaganda vs. US propaganda, US propaganda in Iraq and at home, political propaganda against Bush).

4. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Study Guide: Students will complete a study guide of comprehensive questions and graphic organizers to assist and guide them through reading the book. Graphic organizers will reinforce similarities and differences between Oceania and the modern United States, track symbolism and motifs throughout novel, etc. Students will review answers and complete graphic organizers together in groups and create open-ended questions for whole class discussions.
5. Whole Class Discussion Sessions: In order to ensure that students are engaging in the text and making connections to the issues, themes and ideas, whole class discussion sessions will be used to discuss, analyze, interpret and debate ideas.

6. Adapt *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to 2007. Students will work with partners to update and adapt aspects of the novel to today’s world through creative projects. Through a variety of ways, students will respond to the questions: *If Orwell were to write Nineteen Eighty-Four today, what would he warn us against? How can his ideas be adapted to fit our present world?*

To respond to these questions, students will be challenged to create political platforms that align with the goals of the party and political issues today, or to create propaganda posters on behalf of the Party that include current security threats faced today, such as terrorism and biological warfare. Students may also choose to adapt the telescreen and spy technology in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with the many technological advances occurring today. Students will be modifying and reworking different aspects of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to make the novel more readily assessable to today’s readers.

To help students identify ways in which *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has been adapted to different times and events, students will watch the 1984 Apple Computer Commercial and the Apple Computer/Pepsi Commercial. Students will identify how the concepts and ideas in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were adapted in the commercials to fit the time period and the commercial’s purpose.

**Classroom Activities and Lesson Plans**

**General Overview**

Lesson One: “Harrison Bergeron” and Introduction to Dystopian Literature

**Essential Questions for Study:**

What are equal rights?
Do we all have to be the same in order to be equal?
How can we ensure equal rights while protecting the individual?
What do we think an “ideal” society would be?
What kind of future society are we creating through our actions, policies and ideologies of today?

**Objectives:**
Students will respond to journal prompt before reading “Harrison Bergeron”. While reading, students will discuss and analyze events and ideas in story, discuss and work with classmates, and then return to their original journal entries to modify or support their original responses. Students will learn and be able to describe dystopian literature.

*Materials:*

Journals, copies of “Harrison Bergeron”

*Procedures:*

This lesson will take two days to complete.

Begin with journal prompt on board connecting to essential questions: *What does it mean to be truly equal? Do you think there will ever be true equality in today’s society? Why or why not?* Students are given ten minutes to write and then asked to share their opinions with the class. They may read exactly what they have written down or paraphrase it for the class, but I try to ensure that all students have written down some sort of response to the questions.

After distribution “Harrison Bergeron” short stories, begin reading story together as a class. Stop to check for comprehension and to ask analytical questions about content.

Questions for Discussion (or homework assignment):

1. What do you think it means for “everyone to be finally equal”?
2. What are the functions of “the United States Handicapper General”?
3. How are George and Hazel Bergeron described? What sort of life do they lead?
4. Why is Harrison Bergeron such a threat to society? How old is he? What is his “handicap”?
5. What is Harrison trying to accomplish?
6. What is the meaning between Harrison’s and the ballerina’s dance? How does Vonnegut use imagery to describe their dance?
7. Why does Hazel Bergeron forget what she is crying about?
8. What do you think this story is warning against? Is it an effective message?
9. Is “Harrison Bergeron” a satire? What elements of satire do you find in the piece?
10. Have the people in “Harrison Bergeron” really become truly equal? Why or why not?

Provide students with the definitions of utopian and dystopian literature. If students know the definition of utopia, they will be able to determine the definition of dystopia
literature on their own. Identify the different characteristics and aspects of dystopian literature that can be found in “Harrison Bergeron”.

Students will work in groups to create their own vision of what a utopian society of the future would be like. Students may draw pictures, symbols or concept maps that represent the characteristics of their societies. Students will share their visions with the rest of the class.

Revisit journal question: After reading “Harrison Bergeron,” does your opinion of equality change? What do you think a world where everyone is equal will look like? Allow time for students to share their responses and explain why their opinion has either changed or remained the same.

Lesson Two: Nineteen Eighty-Four Anticipation Guide

**Essential Questions for study:**

What role does an individual have in society? How much of a difference can one person make? What do we think an “ideal” society would be? What kind of future society are we creating through our actions, policies and ideologies of today?

**Objectives:**

Students will begin to form and articulate their own opinions and ideas about the issues and ideas that will be examined while reading Nineteen Eighty-Four. Students will support their ideas through writing and through discussion with classmates.

**Materials:**

Nineteen Eighty-Four Anticipation Guide

**Procedure:**

This lesson is intended for one 50-minute period. It may be necessary to review any class rules about whole class discussions, debates, or Socratic seminars before this lesson.

Begin with journal prompt on board: *Do you think it is right to use torture to punish criminals? Why or why not?* (This question relates to the essential questions and ideas in the novel, but does not appear on the Anticipation Guide). Students are given ten minutes to write and then asked to share their opinions with the class. They may read exactly what they have written down or paraphrase their entries.
Draw a continuum line on the chalkboard, similar to the lines on the *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Anticipation guide (see Appendix A). Ask for three student volunteers, explain how the continuum works and then ask the students to draw an ‘x’ on their line where their opinion falls. Students then explain their opinion to the class.

Distribute *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Anticipation Guides. Review directions with students, referring to the model done on the board. Students will need ten to fifteen minutes to complete worksheet.

Review and discuss the different statements with students, allowing them time to debate and analyze each statement. Monitor and guide discussion to relate to the novel’s themes and to allow for all students to voice opinions and ideas.

Students should keep handout throughout the unit. At the end of reading novel, it may be interesting to return to the worksheet to see how students’ ideas and opinions have changed, or to directly apply each statement to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Lesson Three: Connection to Today: Privacy, Surveillance and the Patriot Act

*Essential Questions for study:*

What is free thought? Is free thought different from free speech?
How can we ensure equal rights while protecting the individual?
How does the society described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Oceania) relate to the United States today?

*Objectives:*

Students will analyze and evaluate accuracy of information, checking for biases and objectivity. Students will make connections between issues of privacy and governmental control between *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and The Patriot Act.

*Materials:*

The Patriot Act handouts
CNN article handouts
TIME article handouts

*Procedure:*

This lesson is planned for one 50-minute period.
To help engage students, print out and post several of the signs and flyers from the Students for an Orwellian Society website. The signs will help the students to ask questions, make connections and come up with more ideas and similarities throughout the class.

This lesson is very important to helping students make connections between Nineteen Eight-Four and today; however, some of the material presented has strong biases. I preface this lesson and all the material presented telling the students that some of the ideas are controversial and that I am not promoting any sort of political agenda, but trying to provide them with material to analyze, evaluate and debate.

Begin with journal prompt: Do you think what Winston’s world could really occur today? Students will have ten minutes to respond in journals. Discuss and share answers with the class.

Ask students if they have heard of The Patriot Act. If they have not, ask them what they think such a law would include with that name. Distribute an objective description of The Patriot Act to students to read together as a class. Discuss why the act was passed, why politicians believed it was necessary, and the positive and negative aspects of the law.

Distribute the ACLU flyer on The Patriot Act and allow students a few minutes to read it independently. Students should jot down anything that seems surprising to them. Ask students to share what they wrote and discuss with them the information presented by the ACLU.

Is the ACLU for or against The Patriot Act? How can you tell?
Can this be considered propaganda against The Patriot Act?
Which description are you most likely to believe? etc.

Distribute CNN article and TIME magazine article to read with students. Read together, stopping to check for comprehension and to make connections between the article and Orwell’s world. Connect readings to students’ personal lives, as well.

What connections can you make between this lawyer’s experience and Winston’s experience?
Are their times when you think you were profiled unfairly?
Or when you felt your privacy was invaded? etc.

For homework, have students find more information about The Patriot Act, good or bad, to share with the class the next day.

Annotated Bibliography/Resources


"iTunes-Pepsi ad remixed." 1 Feb 2004. 15 April 2007

A Quicktime video on a personal blog that mixes the Apple Macintosh commercial with a Pepsi commercial featuring kids caught illegally downloading music on the internet. The commercial compares the rhetoric and control of large agencies to control civilians. The video is one-sided, but provides an interesting example of how Nineteen Eighty-Four has been adapted to different current events and time periods.


An article about a lawyer who claims he was profiled by the US government because he disagreed with the administration and was Muslim. He describes the invasion of privacy and directly compares his experience to Nineteen Eighty-Four.


A film adaptation of the novel. The film is accurate, but uses more flashbacks than the novel. The film presents interesting depictions of the Two-Minutes Hate, life in Oceania and the Ministry of Love.


An article explaining different, lesser-known parts of The Patriot Act and how they affect citizens’ lives.


A study guide with author and novel background information, historical connections worksheets for students, study questions for students, glossary and other information.


A short article on Orwell’s writings and influences, his political intentions and the relevance of his essays and novels in today’s world.

Students for An Orwellian Society. 7 May 2007. Students for an Orwellian Society
An interesting website comparing many of the ideas, policies and phrases from Nineteen Eighty-Four to current events and political policies. The website is heavily biased against the current Bush administration and support a liberal agenda, so it is important to double check resources and ideas found here.

"USA Patriot Act." American Civil Liberties Union: Safe and Free. 14 Nov 2003. American Civil Liberties Union. 14 Jun 2007 <http://www.aclu.org/safefree/resources/17343res20031114.html>. This website provides a wealth of information about the Patriot Act, how it works, and examples of how it has violated citizens’ rights. When using this website, it is important to remember that it is heavily biased; the ACLU does not support the Patriot Act. I presented a more objective description of the Patriot Act to the students before using any material from this website.

Vonnegut, Kurt. “Harrison Bergeron”. A short story that helps students warm up to some of the ideas and issues presented in Nineteen Eighty-Four. The story focuses on the idea of “equality,” playing off the modern goal of making everyone equal. The story helps to initiate some classroom debate about equal rights and how to ensure them for everyone, and also gives students a taste of what will be discussed in Nineteen Eighty-Four.

Why We Fight. Dir. Eugene Jarecki. Sony, 2005. A documentary starting with President Eisenhower’s Farewell Address in which he coins the term “military industrial complex.” The effects of the military industrial complex are applied to United States’ domestic and international policies throughout the later half of the 20th century.

Appendices-Standards

Appendix A: Anticipation Guide Handout

**Nineteen Eighty-Four Anticipation Guide**

Directions: The following statements relate to many of the themes we’ll discuss while reading Nineteen Eighty-Four. On the continuum in front of each of the numbers, place an “x” that indicates where you stand in regard to the statement that follows. Use the reverse side of the page to help defend and support your opinions by explaining your thoughts about the statements with specific examples.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. It is the duty of the government to train and educate its youth to be productive, loyal and useful adult citizens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. It is impossible to change history. You cannot change the past.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. The world would be a much simpler place if everyone spoke the exact same language.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Different people sometimes deserve different rights; however, everyone should have the right to freedom of speech, thought and religion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. The government should use technological advances (such as spying methods, surveillance technology and communications) in order to ensure stability, peace and order throughout the country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. It is impossible to have a stable society without an upper, middle and lower class. A society without these class levels cannot exist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. A government should only go to war if the country and its citizens are in danger, or the country can benefit from the war.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8. A good citizen is patriotic, loyal and never questions the government’s authority.

Directions: Choose 5 of the statements from the previous page and support your opinion on each statement by giving specific reasons and examples of why you hold that opinion.

Statement #: _____ Explanation of your opinion:
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Statement #: _____ Explanation of your opinion:
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Statement #: _____ Explanation of your opinion:
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Appendix B: Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

1.1 Learning to Read Independently

1.1 B Analyze the structure of informational materials explaining how authors used these to achieve their purposes
1.1 C Identify, describe, evaluate and synthesize the essential ideas in a text
1.1 G Demonstrate after reading understanding and interpretation of both fiction and nonfiction text, including public documents
1.1 H Demonstrate fluency and comprehension in reading

1.2 Reading Critically in All Content Areas

1.2 A Read and understand essential content of informational texts and documents in all academic areas
1.2 B Use and understand a variety of media and evaluate the quality of material produced

1.3 Reading, Analyzing and Interpreting Literature

1.3 A Read and understand works of literature
1.3 B Analyze the relationships, uses and effectiveness of literary elements used by one or more authors in similar genres including characterization, setting, plot, theme, point of view, tone and style
1.3 C Analyze effectiveness, in terms of literary quality, of the author’s use of literary devices
1.3 F Read and respond to nonfiction and fiction including poetry

1.6 Speaking and Listening

1.6 A Listen to others
1.6 B Listen to selections of literature
1.6 D Contribute to class discussions
1.6 E Participate in small and large group discussions and presentations
1.6 F Use media for learning purposes

1.7 Characteristics and Functions of the English Language

1.7 C Explain and evaluate the role and influence of the English language within and across countries