Providing access to academic-literate discourses for indigenous learners

by David Rose, Brian Gray & Wendy Cowey

David Rose, Brian Gray and Wendy Cowey look at some of the underlying reasons for literacy difficulties and provide a detailed discussion of an approach to teaching literacy that is working.

Introduction

The goal of this brief article is to present an approach to teaching reading and writing with indigenous students that is currently being trialled in schools in SA. We begin by framing the approach within the literacy needs of indigenous communities, and the cultural contexts in which literacy learning takes place, and then present a summary of the approach.

Over the last twenty five years the teaching profession in Australia has struggled to develop more appropriate and effective language pedagogies for indigenous students, trying out new approaches and taking students' cultural differences into account. However improvements in outcomes remain disappointingly slow, as both indigenous and non-indigenous leaders in the profession acknowledge. For example, a recent NT report found that the average literacy levels of indigenous secondary age school children in remote communities was six years behind their non-indigenous peers (Public Accounts Committee, NT, 1996), while the recent National Literacy Benchmarks assessments found that indigenous learners were generally four years behind their average age levels in reading and writing (DEETYA, 1997).

While there are many notable exceptions to these figures, for the overwhelming majority of indigenous learners these kinds of outcomes virtually rule out success in secondary or further education. The long term effects of these educational outcomes are having dreadful implications for indigenous communities, in terms of long term unemployment, poverty, and associated personal and social problems, which only threaten to become worse for the next generation. The overwhelming educational need in indigenous communities today is in the academic-literate discourses that provide access to vocational and professional training (Japangardi Poulson 1988, Lester1993, Nakata 1996, Rose 1996). We believe that there is no more urgent task for indigenous communities today than to meet this need for success in school and adult education. To begin to do so, we believe that is essential to turn the focus of ethnographic study in indigenous education away from so-called 'Aboriginal learning styles' or 'communication styles', and other presumed characteristics of indigenous learners, and onto the cultural contexts of education itself, in which literacy and literacy learning have evolved.

Cultural contexts of literacy learning

Formal education provides access to vocational and professional training by means of a set of discursive practices that are specialised to itself. These academic-literate discourses are realised in types of written texts and classroom interactions that become progressively more complex and abstract in a sequence from early primary school to senior secondary school (Rose 1997). The sequence ensures that those learners who do not acquire them in primary years will not have access to their more complex, abstract forms in later years, and so not be able to go on to higher education. Academic discourses, from early primary on, have evolved to apprentice learners into decontextualised ways of meaning (e.g. Olson 1994), enabling them to develop orientations to meanings that are abstracted from familiar local contexts, as described by Bernstein (1996). Formal education is in other words, a discourse about other discourses whose contexts lie beyond the walls of the classroom (Christie 1993). It involves learning to do more than interact discursively with elders and peers, but to interact with them around the construction of texts.

Indigenous learners, amongst many others, tend to fall behind the educational sequence by upper primary school, so that by the time they reach middle secondary school it is no longer possible to engage successfully with this stage in the sequence. For this reason, very few indigenous learners ever complete high school, and only a small minority go on to further or adult education. To understand why this is so we need to go back to the beginning of the sequence to look at the differences between the acculturation of the more successful students and other groups in cultures of literacy. We know that children from literate middle class families are generally already prepared to engage in discourse around written texts before they arrive at school, and as they progress through the sequence their discursive experiences of home and school tend to be mutually reinforced. This preparation for academic-literate discourse pervades the home experience of middle class children from their earliest years, in forms of spoken interactions and joint book readings with parents (Painter 1986).

The kinds of literacy teaching practices that most of us are trained in only pick up where the home experience of reading in literate families leaves off. These practices include

writing activities in which learners write texts from their own experience or from oral discussions, and reading activities in which the teacher may read to the class and learners select books that they read to themselves or to a teacher. These kinds of practices assume that literate forms of language are already a part of learners' experience - that they know how to recognise and interpret features of written texts in their reading, and how to use them in their own writing. This orientation towards features of written texts is precisely what parents provide to children as they read with them, discussing the events of stories, the roles of pictures that accompany them, the features of char-acters, their reactions to events, descriptions of things and places, and so on. Stories are typically read over and over again, with the child learning to identify more and more of their features on each reading. This process of the parent/teacher initially providing maximum support, and the learner gradually taking over responsibility for a task has been referred to as 'scaffolding' by Bruner (1986).

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So by the time they get to school these children are already thoroughly familiar, not only with the language features of written texts at their age level, but also with the ways that teachers talk about written texts. The early years of schooling then provide explicit information about the graphophonic features of writing - letter-sound relations, spelling and punctuation. What is rarely made explicit in schooling is the knowledge about higher level literate language features, and the metacognitive skills for recognising and employing them. As a result students who do not have this kind of home experience are immediately at a disadvantage, and gradually fall further and further behind. However these kinds of knowledge can be made explicit very easily. Parents do so when they read with young children, so there is no reason why teachers in school and adult education can't do so too. The fact that this is not a part of teacher training suggests that there may be an underlying socio-economic function in keeping these practices 'secret'; perhaps it is an unspoken component of the cultural capital that has evolved within the western middle class and the education systems it controls, from which other groups are implicitly excluded.

Reversing the literacy learning sequence

Making these kinds of knowledge explicit means reversing the typical literacy teaching sequence; instead of beginning with writing from personal experience, and trying to advance students from there, we need to begin with reading to provide a literate context to develop writing. In teaching reading, reversing the typical sequence means we should not begin with lower level texts limited to a few phrases or one or two sentences per page in the belief that these will be easier to read and then trying to advance learners in little steps. Instead, we need to begin with and support learners to read higher level texts which are capable of providing access to important literate language features. Once a learner can read such a text fluently, it then becomes a powerful resource to develop the academic-literate writing skills they need in order to progress. A literacy teaching approach that does this, known as 'concentrated language encounters', was developed with indigenous children at Traeger Park school in Alice Springs during the 1980s (Gray 1986, 1990). This 'scaffolding' approach to reading and writing has subsequently been further developed with students from many backgrounds with literacy difficulties, at the Schools and Community Centre at Canberra University (Gray, Cowey & Graetz 1995, forthcoming, Rose in press). It is grounded in Vgotsky's (1978) model of proximal development - that a learner can achieve far more with the support of a teacher than they can do independently, and that this 'zone of proximal development' is where learning takes place.

How then can we teach learners with limited literacy skills to read a higher level text fluently? The answer to this question lies in the complex cognitive task of reading itself. Competent readers bring two sets of high order cognitive skills to reading: they automatically process the visual patterns of written words, without needing to translate them into spoken sounds, and they predict how a text is likely to unfold as a sequence of literate meanings. This differs from the low order reading skills that poorer readers bring to the task: they frequently attempt to decode words by sounding them out letter-by-letter, and the meaning prediction skills they bring to the task come from their commonsense experience of oral discourse. It is simply not possible to attend to sequences of literate meanings in written texts while attempting to sound out each word, which is one reason why they remain inaccessible to poorer readers. The key to enabling learners to read higher level texts is to prepare them adequately for predicting the unfolding of literate meanings, so that they are not overloaded using their limited graphophonic skills.

Currently teachers often do prepare their students for reading a text, by discussing the field or subject matter associated with it. They may even read the text to the class before expecting students to engage with it independently. However, for poorer readers this preparation is rarely sufficient. Teachers need to spend a lot more time than we currently do working on key texts. We need to identify and discuss not only the general concepts that the text is about, but also the language features of the text that express these concepts, particularly those that will present difficulties for our students. These include not only unfamiliar words, but also unfamiliar patterns of wording. For inexperienced readers, these unfamiliar patterns may include everything except the simple sequence of events in a story - including descriptions, reactions, dialogue, how and why things happen, qualities of things and events, metaphors, abstract relationships of cause and effect, and so on (see Martin

1990 for a fuller discussion of literate language features in the context of indigenous education).

Scaffolding literacy learning

It is essential that texts are selected for reading that contain more language features than the learner can currently read without support, but not so many new features as to cause overload. A literacy program can then be constructed that advances students towards academic goals, in steps based on the complexity of the language features in reading texts.

The first stage in the program involves learners in thorough discussion of language features in their context in the text, and careful questioning to focus learners' attention on the wordings that express them. This prepares learners to read a text fluently - a high level text that is typically beyond anything they have been able to read before. They are able to do so by using their limited graphophonic skills to identify words in sequence, without needing to fully decode every word, because they can accurately predict the unfolding of the familiar meanings in the text.

The second stage in the program is to focus attention on exploring high level graphophonic relationships in words drawn from the text. Once learners can read a text fluently, they can practice recognising its difficult words in and out of context, and then learn to spell them by identifying important letter patterns and using these letter patterns to remember the words. Because these words are familiar and meaningful, learning to spell them is stress free, and not simply dependent on memorising strings of letters in lists of decontextualised words or attempting to build words out of limited sound symbol correspondences gained from initial phonics teaching. Breaking up words into their patterns of morphemes, syllables, and letter patterns facilitates the move from 'sounding-out' towards automatic visual processing.

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The third stage of the program draws upon the developed spelling competence and familiarity with patterns of literate language to move into writing activity. Familiarity with the patterns of literate wording in the reading text becomes a basis for reconstructing it from a writing plan. The purpose of the plan is to remind learners of the overall structure of the text, and the sequence of significant meanings, so that they can focus on using the language features they have learnt to reconstruct it. This step provides maximum support for learning how to use written language features in writing. It gives an extra level of support to those provided in current genre approaches using model texts (e.g. Christie et al 1990-92), and infinitely more support than other mainstream 'retelling' and 'text modelling' approaches in which teachers' intervention in the writing activity using such models is virtually non-existent.

The fourth stage of the program takes place when teachers support learners to use the features of texts they have read and already reconstructed in stage three to construct new texts (which all effective writers do of course). This scaffolded engagement in writing provides a base of literate resources from which learners can move on to plan and write different texts, initially with similar overall structures, but perhaps different events, characters or other subject matter. This 'text patterning' can be done jointly in a class or group, and then individually, as further supportive steps on the road to writing original high level texts independently.

Each of these stages in reading preparation, fluent reading, spelling and writing facilitates the development of the kinds of meta-cognitive skills that learners need to engage successfully with academic-literate discourses. They are not exclusively non-indigenous ways of learning, any more than literacy is an inherently non-indigenous cultural practice. They are designed to explicitly teach the kinds of skills that successful students acquire tacitly, in the home and in the classroom, but which are not typically made explicit in normal teaching practice. As such this 'scaffolded writing' sequence is ideally suited to the needs of indigenous learners, since unlike most mainstream teaching practices it does not depend on the learner acquiring an orientation to written text outside of the classroom, in their family or community.

Conclusion

Currently, the scaffolded writing approach outlined above is under trial in primary and secondary school programs in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara communities in SA, and in an annexe program for indigenous students in an Adelaide high school. To date the success of these trials has been remarkable, with secondary age students advancing from junior primary level writing skills (National Benchmark level 2) to upper primary (Benchmark level 4-5), in less than a school term. These results are all the more remarkable because these students had generally been attending school for at least eight years, and most had achieved only junior primary literacy skills in all this time. However, they have already shown us that, using the scaffolded writing approach, they have the potential to rapidly master the skills they need to reach their educational goals.

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David, Brian and Wendy are currently collaborating on a project with indigenous schools in SA and the Schools & Community Centre of Canberra University to develop and implement effective English literacy strategies for indigenous students.

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