Planning the Learning Environment for Refugee Background Students

PAM LUZZI & JANET SAKER

Many people are not aware of the very different needs that students from refugee and disrupted schooling backgrounds have as a result of their difficult experiences. This PEN provides teachers with some background knowledge in planning a literacy program for these students. Experience in schools with this cohort is showing that learning English, particularly English literacy, is likely to take longer than for ESL students with intact schooling. This PEN is targeted mainly at students beyond the initial stages of English language learning, working predominantly in mainstream primary classrooms. Such students may be receiving additional targeted ESL support, but their teachers in the mainstream classroom need to both understand students’ needs and the kinds of strategies and approaches that best assist their learning. Details on classroom strategies and activities are listed in a comprehensive glossary.

The refugee experience and its impacts on settlement and education

The refugee experience

For most students and their families, the experience of being a refugee will impact on their settlement in Australia. This impact will vary from family to family, and some will have experienced highly traumatic and distressing circumstances.

These experiences can include war, persecution, hunger, loss of family members, imprisonment, torture, lack of essential medical care, and loss of certainty and control over their lives. Many will have spent years living in refugee camps, or as refugees in countries where the chance of settling is remote. The physical and psychological effects of these experiences on families can be profound and long-term, and will affect even very young children. For most refugee students, some degree of trauma and disruption will have occurred. This will vary depending on the countries from which students have come, and the experiences they have had. For example, one recently arrived student from Iraq whose father had been left behind commented that often his mind just ‘went blank’ and he simply could not concentrate on his school work.

Even when in safety in Australia, families’ capacities to rebuild their lives and to support their children will vary. Many families will have long-term settlement needs, and these will impact on their children’s success at school. Some students and their families may need professional assistance to overcome the effects of traumatic experiences, and schools need to be aware of how the effects of trauma can impact on a child’s learning. Each State and Territory of Australia has a specialist agency for assisting survivors of torture and trauma, their families and communities. Information about these agencies can be found at: www.fasstt.org.au. Publications for teachers about refugee students and their settlement into school in Australia can be found on these sites. For example the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture has many downloadable publications available on its School Page.

It is also important to recognise the strengths that refugee students and their families bring, such as resilience in the face of adversity, empathy, strong family values, sense of justice, a desire to give back to their own communities and to their new country, and hope for the future. These strengths will help them to succeed in their lives and in education.

The role of the school

Schools often provide one of the first connections that refugees have to services in Australia. Schools can provide a safe and welcoming base for families to learn about Australia, and about education here. Teachers can play an important role in the settlement and recovery of families by developing a trustful and ongoing relationship with them, thus restoring hope, trust and dignity to families.

Schools may need to develop a consistent policy around assisting and working with refugee families. By working...
with other settlement agencies, schools can help provide the support and advice that students and their families need to make the best decisions about their future.

The impact of a low literacy background

Most students from a refugee background will have had disrupted schooling, and many will have had little or no formal prior schooling. Some families have come from previously stable rural communities, and will have passed on to their children the skills appropriate for living in that community, which may not have included the need for reading and writing. Some families have not had access to formal education for a range of reasons, including poverty, lack of schools, or active discrimination.

These prior experiences will have an impact on how students and their families understand how education works in Australia. Families will need specific explanations and a chance to discuss their expectations about the place of education in their children’s lives. For example, schools in Australia see education as a partnership between families and teachers, but this belief may not be shared or understood by all families.

Schools operate through a set of shared values and understandings that are often not articulated as the expectations tend to be ‘taken for granted’. These values and understandings will need to be explained to families and students coming from other cultures and lives, particularly:

- the purposes of schooling
- how schools operate
- the values and principles they operate under
- the purposes of literacy and the need for English literacy in day-to-day life in Australia.

The culture of schooling can take a long time to learn. Where students and their families have had experiences of education that are close to the Australian model, students are more likely to settle into schooling in Australia more quickly. For many families and their communities this can take quite some time.

Building student language and learning profiles

It is important to gather as much information as possible about refugee learners as this will help to inform the teaching program they need. This will include information on:

- date of arrival in Australia
- time spent in transit countries and/or refugee camps
- the student’s schooling both prior to and in Australia, including information about the kind of schooling experienced, subjects studied, time spent in intensive English language programs
- family educational experiences and literacy practices, and their educational aspirations
- where and when students use English in out-of-class contexts
- stages of English language development, in listening, speaking, reading and writing
- student’s and family’s first language(s).

Collecting and handling personal and sensitive information

Students or their families may be reluctant to divulge personal information, as their experiences may not have given them reason to trust those who seem to be in authority. Building up detailed information may depend on trustful relationships developing. It may take some time before families disclose information about traumatic past experiences. As experiencing trauma can impact on a student’s settlement, wellbeing and learning it is important that schools explain:

- why it is important to know the kinds of experiences students have been through
- how this information will be handled, and that it will only be divulged to others, such as welfare workers, when it is in the student’s best interests to do so.

For example, you may need interpreters when conducting interviews with parents. Be aware of some of the issues that can arise, such as choosing an interpreter that the family feels comfortable with, considering issues such as dialect, personal preference, political sensitivities or ethnic affiliations.

Creating a positive learning environment

Refugee background learners who have experienced disrupted lives and insecurity about their futures need an open, accepting, welcoming learning environment.

Think about the unspoken rules and expectations which operate in your classroom and school, as these may need to be made explicit to students who are unfamiliar with the way schools work and the way students and teachers relate to each other. They may not understand Australian attitudes to:

- The degree of familiarity that operates between students and staff, and between students and other students, eg appropriate personal space, how to develop friendships, how to resolve conflicts, how to ask for help.
- The rules by which classrooms and schools operate, how these may vary between classrooms and
teachers, and how expectations of behaviour can differ between school and home.

- The roles and responsibilities of staff and students.
- Attitudes to completion of work, use of time, and the ways that knowledge is acquired (for example, when and where copying is appropriate).

Teachers may, for example, teach students the full sentence structures for certain contexts, such as the language in which requests are made. Students may be unaware that in English, the language used will influence the responses of others: 'Please can I borrow your pencil' may elicit a different response to 'Give me pencil'. Australian English uses quite 'polite' forms for requests, such as could and can. Students may come from cultures where more direct requests are used and may need to be explicitly taught these forms.

Every contact that happens in a classroom has its own rules of interaction, behaviour and expectations that may not be clear to students who have never before experienced the dynamics of a school. Even something as seemingly simple as entering a new classroom (and not knowing how to behave), meeting a new teacher or being late for class can be very difficult to negotiate. Students may simply not know how to react in culturally appropriate ways. Feeling uncomfortable in school can distract students from their learning and can often be a key reason for older students to disengage from school.

Teachers can empathise with their students by reflecting on their own culture, attitudes, values, beliefs and experiences and how these affect the way their classroom works. Teachers can also reflect on how their own ways of handling situations can become real opportunities for students to learn how to fit in. These opportunities to explicitly assess and reassess the values by which schools and classrooms operate can be of benefit to all students.

Suggestions for creating a positive learning environment for all students include:

- make your expectations open, consistent, clear, positive and explicit
- model inclusive, positive and respectful behaviour
- encourage and reward students’ efforts and attempts in clear ways, eg record positive behaviour (such as use of polite forms, answering questions in class) over a day or a week, and give formal recognition to their efforts
- get to know students’ and families’ learning and settlement needs, their aspirations and interests.

Teaching strategies:

- model and role-play after reflecting on classroom or playground incidents (both positive and negative) to give students the opportunity to practise the appropriate language
- use a language experience approach to help students build up their own books, charts or posters about school and classroom rules and satisfactory conduct.

Learning English and learning through English

English language learning

It is important to monitor the English language learning of students through an ESL learning framework, such as state-based ESL scales or profiles. Developmental scales, frameworks or profiles developed for English-speaking students have limited value for ESL students, particularly those from a low literacy background. ESL frameworks recognise that students have little or no oracy in English, and that their reading and writing development will be different to students who have a strong oral English base.

Learning content across subject areas

Curriculum frameworks for the various subject areas can be useful starting points for assessing a student’s knowledge base, and to identify gaps in their learning. It is important to establish what students might need to learn next and what additional learning they need before they can effectively join in with mainstream class topics, for example, related vocabulary or concepts.

When introducing new topics it is important to make the purpose of learning explicit to students and not to introduce too many concepts at a time. Tell students explicitly:

- what they are going to learn and for what purpose
- what activities they are going to do
- whether they are expected to produce a final product, such as a poster or a report, and the criteria that it will be assessed by
- a timeframe for the topic.

Filling the content learning gaps

Many students may not have learnt certain concepts and vocabulary sets even in their first language because they have not been to school before. Examples include the concepts and language of maths, science, social studies, health and topics about Australia.

It is important that teachers:

- understand how knowledge and concepts build on one another in different subject areas, and the level their students are at
- understand that students may have gaps in their
learning, and may need to learn basic concepts
• do not make assumptions about what students know
• check on whether it is the English or the content which is unfamiliar to students
• build on students’ understandings about the way the world works.

Find out what students do know through strategies such as:
• brainstorming
• encouraging students to discuss topics in their first language with their peers or at home, and then reporting back in English what they have learnt
• working with bilingual aides to ascertain students’ understanding
• asking students to visually represent their knowledge.

Learning English as a second language for refugee students

Speaking and listening

Like all ESL students, students from refugee backgrounds are faced with the challenging task of learning English, learning about English and learning through English.

Many students develop beginning oral English language skills quickly. These skills are likely to be in basic, interpersonal English, including language around classroom routines and the language needed to form and maintain friendships and relationships. The language for literacy and subject-based learning may take them longer to learn if they are not able to relate the English to concepts in their first language.

Oral English language skills are the basis for reading and writing in English, and it is important that strong oral and written skills develop side by side. Because low literacy background students do not have reading and writing skills in their first language, their developing English resource is crucial to their literacy development. It is for this reason that their reading and writing skills often seem to ‘lag behind’ their oral skills. As students develop their oral English skills, they will be more able to see relationships between meaning in English, sound-symbol patterns, sentence and text type structures and features.

Students are likely to need additional focus on:
• practising in a range of contexts
• finding patterns orally and in writing, eg identifying rhyming words, or words with the same sounds; building up word lists, to see the links between the oral and the written
• building personal dictionaries and class dictionaries based around classroom and personal topics
• using strategies such as aural cloze.

Reading and writing

For all students with a low literacy background in their first language, a specific and extensive focus on learning the sound-symbol relationships of English and concepts of print will be necessary. This is particularly so when students are older and early literacy development activities are no longer done as part of regular mainstream activities. The development of these early concepts and skills will take time, particularly if students and their families have high settlement needs. General ESL teaching strategies can be used, continually emphasising:
• modelling reading and writing and their purposes
• shared reading and writing
• focus on the sound-symbol relationships of English.

Use strategies and approaches that emphasise this explicit learning, such as:
• language experience approaches
• recycling, deconstructing texts and revisiting texts for different teaching purposes
• using visuals and going from the concrete to the abstract.

Students need to learn the ‘mechanics’ of reading and writing, but they simultaneously need to learn about the purposes and uses of literacy in their new country. Teachers need to explicitly teach the mechanics of reading and writing and concepts of how print works, that is, how the letters, sound, words and sentences work, as well as text organisation at the paragraph and whole text level. At the same time there needs to be an explicit teaching focus on the purposes of reading and writing, and how texts change according to purpose and audience.

The following strategies are particularly useful.

BEFORE-READING ACTIVITIES

• Find out prior knowledge and fill in key gaps in understanding, eg historical orientation of a text, which country it may be from or about.
• Encourage students to predict content from the title, illustration, cover, contents page and diagrams.
• Encourage students to discuss in their first language.
• Provide additional visuals to help understanding of a new topic.
• Use activities such as reader questions and minimal cues.
**DURING-READING ACTIVITIES**

Students may need extra support to read texts on their own in the first and subsequent readings, even when texts have been selected to be within their reading capabilities. Provide this support by:

- **Reading aloud:** reading the text aloud to students, modelling intonation, rhythm and stress, and explaining new or difficult words. Model reading strategies such as reading on, re-reading, using dictionaries or asking other students for the meaning of a word. Introducing texts by reading them aloud can give students confidence to attempt to read them themselves. If pausing to talk about the glossing of the text, make clear the difference between what is written and what is not.
- **Practice:** ensuring students have had plenty of opportunities to try to read a text before they are expected to find specific information from it, read aloud to others, answer questions, paraphrase or predict. Using talking books to help students to become familiar with the text.
- **Directed reading:** using directed reading and thinking activities to help students to be more methodical in their reading, and to work out text structure.

**AFTER-READING ACTIVITIES**

Choose activities depending on the student’s age and stage, emphasising comprehension, the text’s purpose and audience (even at a simple level), and the student’s personal responses. For example:

- **Talk about the purpose and audience:** talk about the purpose and audience of the text with the students, who the author wrote it for and why.
- **Prompts:** use prompted retellings for fictional texts.
- **Ask questions:** ask students what they have learnt, and how the information might be useful.
- **Activities:** use sentence and picture matching activities.
- **Reconstruction:** use text reconstruction: words, sentences, or paragraphs.
- **Cloze:** use cloze, focusing on grammar or meaning.
- **‘True/False’ questions:** ask ‘true/false’ questions.
- **‘Fact or opinion’ questions:** ask ‘fact or opinion’ questions.
- **Concept maps:** construct shared concept maps.
- **Level guides:** use three level guides or questions: literal, inferential and applied questions.
- **Word lists:** make word lists from the text.
- **Questions:** question students’ personal responses. Ask them what other texts are like the one they have just read, or give the same kind of information.
- **Fluency practice:** use fluency practice—have students re-read well known texts many times to develop fluency, pronunciation (stress, intonation and rhythm) in paired and shared reading with a small group or a buddy.

**Text selection**

When selecting texts to use with students it is important to consider whether they fit:

- the students’ ages and interests
- the topics being studied at school
- the students’ English and reading levels.

Do the students have the cultural knowledge or prior experiences to access texts? For example, how much prior knowledge about political systems is required to understand a text on parliament in Australia, and have they had an opportunity to learn this? If not, think about how this background knowledge can be taught.

Consider how the text will be used and how much support will be given to make it accessible to the students. Consider whether it will be read to students, read with the students, or whether the students are going to read it by themselves (or any combination of these three).

Look for texts that reflect cultural diversity in a balanced and positive way.

Choose texts that are reader-friendly with clear layout, print and visuals, particularly those with:

- chapter overviews
- summaries
- pre-reading questions
- highlighting of key ideas and terms
- glossaries.

When students are selecting their own materials, you may need to guide them by providing a small selection of texts to choose from.

**Writing**

Capturing thoughts in writing is a difficult process for most students, but particularly for students who are using a new language and have little experience of writing in their first language. Students need to learn the purposes, structures and language features of English in order to be successful writers. As low literacy students are unable to transfer these skills from their first language, learning to write has additional challenges for them. They will need to understand that:

- there are differences between speaking and writing, in particular because written texts need to ‘stand alone,’ while in many spoken texts meaning is negotiated between the speakers.
- writing can be a process, where texts can be planned, written, edited, and then presented.
- there are a range of writing types, such as labels, letters, cards, lists, book reports, comic strips, poems, which all have their own particular purposes and therefore educationally and socially acceptable forms.
- texts for different purposes (such as persuading, informing, instructing) have their own structures and features.
Because of the complexity of what students need to learn, they will need:
- opportunities to write for a range of real purposes
- to know what is expected of them in writing tasks
- initial support to plan and organise their writing
- support and assistance that may need to continue throughout the writing process.

Strategies to support writing

Low literacy background learners will benefit from before, during and after writing activities that focus in particular on the structures, purposes and audiences of texts.

Restrict the number of focuses to be demonstrated and discussed for each writing topic and session. Students are likely to benefit from the following activities.

BEFORE-WRITING ACTIVITIES

- Read about the topic and learn vocabulary around the topic, eg matching words and pictures of subject-specific vocabulary.
- Look at examples of the text type used:
  - Model one or more examples, showing how the text is structured, how to choose appropriate words and punctuation. Give students the opportunity to observe, discuss, question, respond, reflect and make connections.
  - Edit the model for meaning, purpose and effectiveness. Help students to understand the process of writing, that texts will not be ‘correct’ from their first draft, that ideas and information can be incorporated later, and that texts can be refined.
  - Jointly reconstruct samples or models of the text type.
  - Use activities such as dictogloss, cloze or running dictation with the models.
- Use techniques to assist students to plan and organise their ideas, eg graphic outlines, concept or mind maps, notes.
- Brainstorm possible words, sentences and sentence starters.
- Rehearse orally before writing.

DURING-WRITING ACTIVITIES

Students are likely to need active support in the ‘during writing’ phase, including opportunities to:
- use writing frameworks, such as sentence beginnings, and possible sentences, writing frames, structured overviews and graphic outlines
- talk about their writing, and edit and redraft, for example to focus on meaning and appropriateness
- jointly write texts through activities such as bundling
- receive support and feedback, for example through reading their texts to the teacher to assist them in finding and correcting language structures in context.

AFTER-WRITING ACTIVITIES

- Provide feedback, including what the student has done well; areas for improvement and how this can be done, eg sentence expansion.
- Encourage students to share their writing with others and celebrate their achievements.
- Use the student’s writing for reading activities, such as through a language experience approach (eg cloze; text and sentence reconstruction activities).

Handwriting

Learning handwriting can be a laborious and time-consuming task for students who have never written before. They will need much practice to become proficient. However, it is important that the development of their handwriting does not impede the development of their understandings about writing in English or their opportunities to create written texts. They can still create texts by:
- dictating to others, perhaps after drawing
- writing introductory texts which are then expanded with the teacher or other students
- using computer word-processing.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRATEGY</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aural cloze</td>
<td>A cloze or fill-the-gap exercise with a focus on listening. It involves reading a text aloud but leaving out some words for the student to provide.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brainstorming</td>
<td>Is used with a group to generate as many ideas as possible and encourage creative thinking. It can also be used to gauge students' prior knowledge. All suggestions are accepted.</td>
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<td>Buddy reading (or pair reading)</td>
<td>A student reading to another student.</td>
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<td>Bundling</td>
<td>Students write statements about a topic on paper strips and then group all the related statements together. These groups of statements are expanded to form paragraphs with an emphasis on using language which links ideas into a cohesive piece of writing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cloze</td>
<td>A written text where some words are deleted. For example, a teacher can cover some words in a text and students fill in the gap (eg ‘The dog _________ to the park’).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concept map</td>
<td>A group of words clustered around a central topic which shows the relationships between ideas or concepts. It represents a student's understanding of the topic and can be used to organise information.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dictogloss</td>
<td>An activity where the teacher reads a short text twice. During the first reading the students listen. During the second reading they take notes, focusing on key words. In groups, they then reconstruct the text. It is best done after brainstorming the topic, preferably from a picture stimulus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directed reading and thinking activity (DRTA)</td>
<td>An activity where the teacher asks the student to predict what the text will be about, then directs the student to read a section of the text to check his/her predictions. This process of pausing, predicting and checking continues until the entire text has been read.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fact and opinion</td>
<td>A student reads a number of statements and identifies whether they are facts or opinions. The statements can then be grouped accordingly.</td>
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<td>Flow charts</td>
<td>Can be used to sequence ideas, procedures or events. They can be used to plan or they can represent a timeline or final action plan.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graphic outlines</td>
<td>Help students to see how texts are organised and to understand how layout features can help them to access information and record it by filling in the outline.</td>
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<tr>
<td>KWL</td>
<td>Is a framework to find out what students Know (K), Want to know (W) and then at the end, what they have Learnt (L).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language experience</td>
<td>A teaching approach which is based on providing an experience, eg an excursion or an activity, and using this as the basis for preliminary and follow-up language activities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Listen and identify key words</td>
<td>This is an important skill and is the first part of Dictogloss.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Listen and retell</td>
<td>A particularly useful way of checking student understanding.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mind maps</td>
<td>These are diagrams that visually record students' thinking and understanding of a topic. Information can be recorded as words or images. The central image on a mind map depicts its topic or issue. From the centre, coloured stems emerge which reflect the components of the topic. Beginning with a stem, students draw a series of branches that show the interrelationship and connections between the ideas.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minimal cues</td>
<td>An activity which provides students with practice in the important skill of predicting. The teacher writes a message which is relevant and predictable to the student. For example: 'Today is _________ _______ . At sport w_ p_______ s_______.’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reader questions</td>
<td>Students are presented with a title or a picture relating to a text. They are then encouraged to form questions which they would like to be answered. They look for the answers to these questions when they read the text.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Repeated readings</td>
<td>By re-reading familiar texts, students have the opportunity to develop confidence and fluency.</td>
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1. This table has been adapted from, Luizzi, P. *I wish it was everyday… OSHLSP Tutor Training Resource*, CMYI (unpublished draft, 2007)
| **Running dictation** | A team activity where the teacher puts a copy of a text up on the wall. The first team member runs over to the text, reads the first sentence and dictates it to the team to write down. When everyone has finished writing, the second team member does the same. This is repeated until the complete text has been dictated. |
| **Sentence expansion** | An activity to make sentences more interesting that requires modelling and practice. For example, the sentence *The dog barked* can be expanded to *The small white dog barked loudly at the car.* |
| **Sentence reconstruction** | After cutting up a sentence into words, the student reconstructs the sentence. The student may initially need to match the words to a model of the sentence. |
| **Structured overviews** | Frameworks which show the relationship between ideas within a topic. These are usually arranged hierarchically. They can be used to help students understand a text or build up a piece of writing. |
| **Talking books** | Are available from libraries on tapes and CDs. They can be used to support students who can listen to the text before or as they read it. |
| **Text reconstruction** | After cutting up a text into sentences or paragraphs, the student reconstructs the text by putting it into the correct order. |
| **Three level guides or questions** | After reading a text, the teacher prepares a number of statements or questions to help students locate information, interpret what the author means, and apply the information. The statements are divided into three levels:  
  - level one (literal): the student reads the lines to work out what the writer says  
  - level two (interpretative): the student ‘reads between the lines’ and infers what the writer means  
  - level three (applied): the student reads beyond the lines and relates the knowledge to other contexts. |
| **Timelines** | Can be used to represent events and personal histories as well as characters’ lives and events in texts. |
| **Who/what am I?** | Students need to guess who or what the person is, using only yes/no questions. |
| **Word banks** | Used to store or display word cards, word banks can be used for reading or writing activities or games. |
| **Word lists** | Examples include vocabulary lists, consonant or phonic (sound-symbol) groups. These can be displayed or stored and added to as students learn new words. |
| **Writing frames** | Contain some structure words appropriate to the text types. They provide a framework in which students can record their thoughts so they can concentrate on what they want to say. It is important to model how to use a writing frame, and then do a shared writing activity using it, before using it for an independent writing activity. |

### About the authors

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