

TEACHING *WITH* INTENT 2

Literature-based literacy
teaching and learning



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Theory and purpose

Narrative is a key genre to explore in building students' literacy. The approach we present in this book is literature-based, with teaching and learning activities centred on one example of quality literature for a period of time, from a few weeks to a term. While it is necessary to look at many other text genres throughout schooling, working with quality narratives is an important first step and a bridge to other kinds of writing – particularly for marginalised students, who need explicit instruction in how texts work, and for students with little confidence in composing written text.

Quality children's stories engage the reader at an interpersonal, emotional and sensory level. They invite the reader to make personal connections with people and events: with characters, settings and plots. It can be much easier to get emotional buy-in from students through a good story than it would be through, say, a text about geography or about the structure of the Australian government. Even when students are not able to decode text independently, they can identify with the universal human emotions represented through text and illustrations, which helps them access meanings more easily. The emotional response is a hook to reading in general and an important entry point into future academic reading.

We can also draw on our awareness of readers' emotional responses as we build writing skills. Learning the technical tricks that writers use to pull their readers into the narrative helps students to gain interest in the writer's skill. Reluctant writers can enjoy and develop confidence in writing creatively for effect, for example by creating suspense, describing nasty (or likeable) characters, or by building settings that evoke particular feelings in the reader. Learning about how writers choose words to create these effects gives students access to the satisfying meanings that are available to literate people when they engage with literature.

Certainly, as students move through their schooling, the various curriculum areas require students to use more analytic and expository genres. These need to be taught independently of narrative. But the rich language of quality narrative texts provides a bridge to more academic English, offering resources for studying complex grammatical patterns, expanded vocabulary and stylistic resources. The language in good narrative texts tends to sit somewhere between everyday spoken language and abstract scientific or academic language. Although the grammars in literature are not identical to the grammars of scientific and other factual texts, they serve to help students build the repertoire they will need for purposeful written communication across the academic disciplines.

The literature-based literacy teaching and learning sequence (or teaching sequence) presented in this book is a version, and a continuation, of the text-based scaffolding approaches to teaching language and literacy that have been developed over the past 40 to 50 years, largely in Australian settings (Derewianka & Jones, 2016; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Rose, 2016; Rose & Martin, 2012). Our version is developed from the Accelerated Literacy program, formerly known as Scaffolding Literacy, which was developed by Brian Gray and Wendy Cowey at the Schools and Community Centre at the University of Canberra (Gray, Cowey, & Axford, 2003).

The Accelerated Literacy program is a literature-based approach that began as an initiative to support literacy education for marginalised learners. Initially the program focused on developing the literacy skills of Aboriginal students in remote schools, and it was later implemented in low socio-economic schools with

disadvantaged students in most Australian states (Cowey, 2005; Gray, 2007). Since then it has been used widely and effectively in mainstream schools, and is appropriate for students at all levels of ability.

One of the strengths of this program, over its many iterations, has been the ongoing reflexive and respectful collaboration between practitioners and researchers. As teachers and authors, we see ourselves straddling both these roles. This book builds on a version of the Accelerated Literacy approach that's a product of our own practice, experience and research.

THE ELEMENTS OF OUR APPROACH

We are teaching literate language

The teaching sequence requires us to think carefully about the language resources in the text we are studying. And the knowledge about language that we draw on comes from systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1975; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). It is the same linguistic framework that informs the Australian Curriculum: English.

One of the key insights we take from systemic functional linguistics is that the language of written texts differs significantly from everyday spoken language. Through the teaching sequence we can work systematically to build new language for students, drawing on the literate language of text and working from familiar oral language to the less familiar written forms. We want all students to be able to tune into the particular ways of thinking about experience and representing experience that are inherent in written texts.

Ultimately our goal is to help students read, comprehend and write using this literate language. We need to make knowledge about language explicit, including knowledge about the purposes of writing stories (for example, to entertain the reader), and knowledge about grammar and vocabulary that is different from ways of speaking (Gibbons, 2015; Gray, 2007; Martin, 2013; M. J. Schleppegrell, 2004).

The teaching sequence creates a macro-scaffold

Developing students' academic language proficiency means helping them build knowledge about language and text cumulatively, over time (R. Alexander, 2017; Martin & Maton, 2013; Schleppegrell & O'Hallaron, 2011). Throughout this process the teaching sequence is an overarching structure of support. This support or 'scaffolding' operates, first, at the macro level of planning for the intentional, purposeful sequencing of tasks and lessons (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Parkin & Harper, 2018).

The teaching sequence, or macro-scaffold, is a 'designed-in' format that supports teachers and students to track where they've been and where they're going (Derewianka & Jones, 2016; Hammond, 2001). The predictable format is like a map of the learning: beginning with a text orientation (that is an invitation to all to engage with the story), reading the text together, examining the structures and intentions of the author's language choices, and then applying that knowledge to writing.

Learning is a shared responsibility

The teaching sequence is built on the assumption that learning is a shared responsibility between teacher and students. This idea derives from the thinking of Lev Vygotsky and sociocultural theorists, that in order to learn children need the support of a 'culturally informed other' (Rogoff & Wertsch, 1984; Vygotsky, 1986; Wertsch, 1985b; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). In this view, thinking doesn't belong to the individual, but is shared among members of a community.

In our case, as teachers of language and literacy, we share the thinking of people who are experienced at reading literature. It is our responsibility as the ‘knowledgeable other’ to ‘lend’ our cognition, thinking out loud. In doing so we develop ‘common knowledge’ in the classroom (Edwards & Mercer, 1987). We make visible how we think about the text with students, so that they too can begin to see the text through the eyes of an experienced reader.

Further support for explicit teaching comes from the work of Basil Bernstein (2000), who argues that the ‘invisible’ pedagogy so popular in western education over recent decades – in which the goals of learning are assumed rather than clearly stated – severely disadvantages already-marginalised students, leaving them to guess and discover the rules and expectations of their schooling.

Meaning precedes decoding

From a functional linguistic perspective, the purpose of language is for communicating, for understanding and conveying social meanings (Halliday, 1975). Students first need to engage with others in reading and writing texts, so that they learn the social purpose and goal of reading and writing particular texts. This positive emotional engagement provides a motivation and context for the explicit teaching and learning of the English writing system (Wertsch, 1985a).

Negotiation through dialogue creates a micro-scaffold

Within the teaching sequence, at a micro level, we scaffold learning through our talk. By carefully structuring our classroom interactions during challenging tasks we can provide moment-to-moment support (Wood & Wood, 1996). We create possibilities for students to make sense of new language through purposeful classroom dialogue, and the quality of that talk will determine how well students can then appropriate the language for their own purposes (Gray, 1998, 2007; Hammond, 2001; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Jones, Simpson, & Thwaite, 2018).

Handover and contingency are essential

The teaching sequence is a process that allows for the gradual handover of literate language from teacher to students. Early in any topic, when common understandings and language are absent, the teacher has control and a lot to say. As understanding grows and students develop a common language with which to negotiate learning, the teacher can begin to step back and allow more independence, trusting that the students understand where the learning is heading and have acquired the language they need to continue negotiating learning.

This shift of power is known as the gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). We can also refer to it as ‘handover’, short for handover of knowledge, language and responsibility. Handover means that students take up the learning for themselves.

Teacher talk has to change over time to support handover, and the language choices we make in classroom dialogue need to be nuanced and dynamic (R. J. Alexander, 2004; Harper, Lotherington, & Parkin, 2018; Mercer, 2008b; Mercer & Howe, 2012). We acknowledge that it can be uncomfortable and exhausting to pay close attention to what we’re saying moment by moment, to lead and respond to students. Nevertheless this is what we need to do for effective teaching.

Effective dialogue is contingent on our ability to judge the right level of support needed to keep students learning: not so little support that they don’t understand what they’re supposed to do or why they’re doing it, but not too much support either, because that leads to dependency.

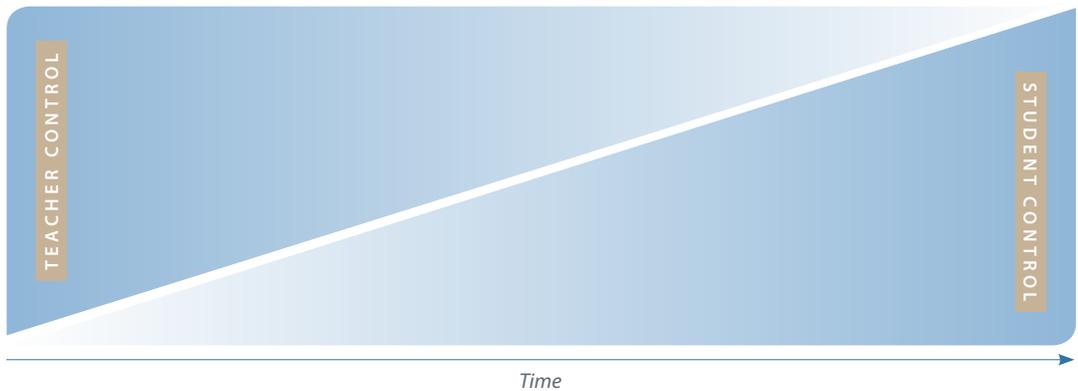


Figure 1.1 Gradual release model of teaching and learning

We monitor uptake lesson by lesson and moment by moment. The pacing will vary according to our moment-by-moment considerations of handover, or what students have so far taken up. The teacher decides what needs repeating, or rephrasing, and when students are ready to move to the next step.

When students show signs of success, the teacher hands over more control. If they begin to fail, the teacher provides more help, taking back some control. Consistently finding the appropriate level of support is difficult to reach, even with one adult and one child. It is even more difficult in a class of 30 students. Nevertheless this is central to our work as teachers.

In reality handover is not a clear straight line, but more like a pedagogic shuffle. Contingency requires that we are always prepared to shift the balance of responsibility, taking it back or handing it over whenever the student needs it.

Imitation is learning

We have learned from sociocultural theory not to be afraid of students imitating new language. Vygotsky's model of child development identifies goal-oriented imitation as the first sign of learning (1986, page 188):

In learning to speak, as in school subjects, imitation is indispensable. What the child can do in cooperation today he can do alone tomorrow.

Children's initial appropriation of language has been recognised as 'mouthing' (Wertsch, 1998). They are trying on new clothes. If they don't move past that stage, we need to look at our teaching.

Students develop skills in decoding and meaning-making

The teaching sequence creates a context for teaching about alphabets and the other components that are needed in a literacy program. Research has demonstrated a number of components that are critical to the development of independent reading, which need to be included in an effective literacy program. Sometimes referred to as the Big Six (Konza, 2014), they are oral language, phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

Our model takes a simpler view by configuring the Big Six as two more general components: those that are necessary for decoding (phonological awareness, phonics, spelling) and those that are necessary for creating meaning (oral language, vocabulary, comprehension). Fluency is the component that may help to bring both components together (Paris, Carpenter, Paris, & Hamilton, 2005).

To help conceptualise the two components of our literacy program, we draw on a model of literacy that's based on the 'simple view of reading', initially proposed by Hoover and Gough (1990), and subsequently built on by Gray (1997).

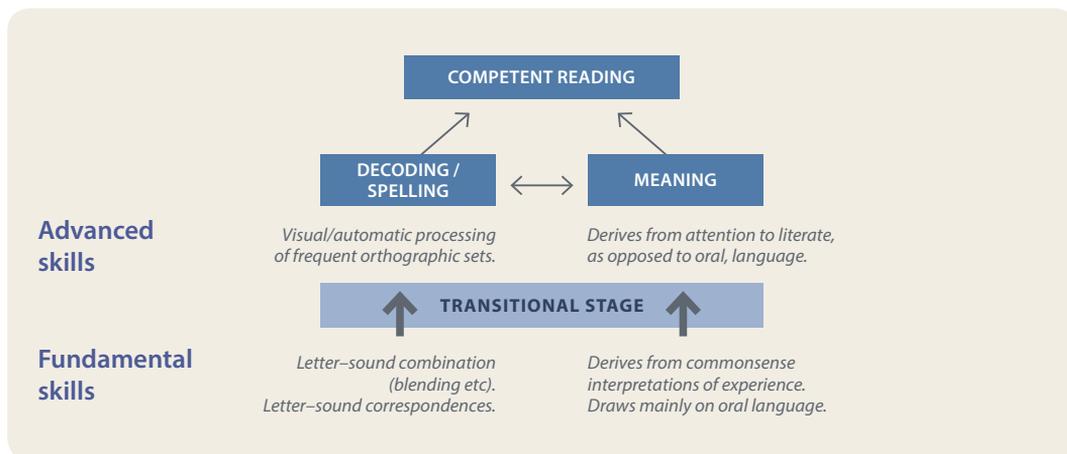


Figure 1.2 A simple model of reading (Gray, 1997, after Hoover & Gough, 1990)

The model represents the task of becoming a competent reader (and writer) by developing two skill components: decoding and meaning-making (comprehension). The decoding component is represented on the left of Figure 1.2. Learners begin by building the 'fundamental' skills of alphabets, but must transition to 'visual automatic processing of frequent orthographic sets' to become competent decoders. In other words, they transition to recognising by sight frequently occurring English letter patterns.

The second component is meaning-making. This involves helping students build their commonsense, everyday interpretations of experience and their oral language, in order to learn to make meaning from the content, grammar and vocabulary of valued written texts. Paris (2005) called these 'unconstrained skills', because the process of developing and consolidating meaning never ends.

This simple model underpins our whole teaching sequence, providing the way we bring meaning to decoding. To help students become independent meaning-makers, we also help them become competent and automatic decoders, at the same time immersing them in meaning through joint engagement with written text (Gough, Juel, & Griffith, 1992). As well as helping us think about what it takes to become a reader, the model also serves to help us think about what's involved in becoming a writer.

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM: ENGLISH

It is a requirement of the Australian Curriculum: English that a large part of our language and literacy instruction is driven by the study of literature, and that we use narrative texts to enrich students' understanding of human experiences (ACARA, 2016).

The teaching sequence supports us to address systematically the intention of the curriculum, which requires each strand to interact with, enrich and strengthen the fabric of the other strands in creative and flexible ways. In particular, the study of literary texts supports students to develop their knowledge about literacy and language.

First, the teaching sequence creates space for contextualising and responding to literature through supported and purposeful conversations about texts. And it gives us a format within which we can

examine literature, particularly through analysing how authors have used language and structured stories for effect. In turn, this forms the basis of the knowledge students need to use those language resources to produce their own effective texts.

Study of literature is also the vehicle for learning about the English language, including patterns and purposes of English usage at many levels. We can extend that knowledge to become literate: in other words, to analyse and decide under which circumstances (for which purposes) we make language choices.

WHAT THE REST OF THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

Teaching with intent 2 takes teachers through a systematic and principled sequence of pedagogic activities to support reading and writing. As teachers, we accept that we are accountable for providing effective pedagogic support to all learners. As writers and consultants, we want to support teachers in making intentional choices about pedagogic strategies in a way that supports all learners in the class.

The book is not written to encourage unquestioning, ritualistic obedience to a sequence of tried and true pedagogic steps. We can't anticipate every eventuality in every teacher's class. In the end, we make the best-informed decisions with the welfare and educational outcomes of our students in mind, ready to change tack if the outcomes are not what we wanted.

Our focus is on reading and writing printed texts, notably picture books, short stories and novels. We acknowledge the potential of working with many other kinds of text – oral, visual and multimodal – but in this book we focus on written texts as stable representations of academic literate language.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What about enquiry learning? Isn't that best practice in teaching and learning?

From a Vygotskian and Hallidayan perspective, language and thinking are neither generalist nor individual, instead belonging to particular discourses or communities of practice. In education, these communities of practice are the learning areas. For students to successfully inquire, we must have taught them the language and thinking that gives them the tools they need to succeed, rather than expecting them to rely on whatever they happen to pick up along the way.

Aren't you silencing the student's voice?

On the contrary, the work we do in this teaching sequence supports many students in expanding their language repertoire and controlling their linguistic choices, so that they have many more resources at hand to express their worlds in rich and satisfying ways.

IN SUMMARY

The teaching sequence offered in this book comes from a solid theoretical foundation derived from the work of Vygotsky, Halliday and Bernstein, with language and scaffolded pedagogy at the centre of teaching and learning. It builds on decades of educators and academics working to realise these intersecting and complementary theories in the real world of the classroom. We don't want teachers to think this is some final pedagogic answer. Rather, this teaching sequence offers a way of turning theory into practice in a principled and intentional way.