

A brief description of the National Accelerated Literacy Program

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Abstract

This article discusses the theoretical underpinnings and teaching sequences and strategies of the National Accelerated Literacy Program, which is being introduced into Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training schools and is already in place in some schools in other states. The Program is based on the understanding that learning to be a literate member of a society requires a student to learn the discourse or tacit ground-rules that apply to literacy lessons in schools. The implications for teaching that come out of this understanding include using texts that provide literate models for teaching how literate discourse works, and using supportive teaching or scaffolding around these literate texts.

Introduction

‘You won’t be able to teach me to read, Miss; nobody can.’

This bleak comment, made by a secondary student when she was told about a literacy program that was about to be introduced at her school, reflects the feeling of inadequacy and acceptance of inevitable failure experienced by students with literacy difficulties. The National Accelerated Literacy Program (NALP) is a teaching program designed to accelerate the progress of students who have fallen behind with their literacy education. The program aims to improve literacy outcomes for these students to an age-appropriate level. At a practical level the program makes it possible for teachers to teach a whole class on a reading text that has been written for their age group.

Because of consistently successful results in pilot programs the NALP is being introduced into Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training (NT DEET) schools with the aim of improving the literacy outcomes for at least 10,000 students in those schools by 2008. With support from a team from Charles Darwin University, the NALP is already in place in Western Australian Aboriginal Independent Community Schools, at Shalom Christian College in Queensland and in most Anangu Education Schools in the far north of South Australia. The NALP will continue in these sites while being introduced more widely in the Northern Territory and other sites in Australia.

This article first outlines some of the theory that underpins the Accelerated Literacy approach on which the NALP is based and then describes how the actual teaching is carried out. It is intended as a starting point for furthering understanding about the NALP and its core purpose¹ rather than an attempt to detail everything that could be said about the program.

Overview of the program

The approach is implemented through the Accelerated Literacy teaching sequence (Figure 1), which is made up of a series of integrated activities that have as their focus an age-appropriate reading text, or a text at least close to age-appropriate in some instances. For example, where whole classes of older students have low literacy levels their progress to age-appropriate levels may be staged. The reading texts used in the approach are selected from well-written children’s books, predominantly narrative, purchased at ordinary book-stores and readily available in libraries. In secondary schools, the books used are often books already in the school as set texts for the English curriculum. Schools participating in the program undertake to teach the program for an hour to an hour and a half a day although some schools allow up to two hours.

To date, the published results of the program have focused primarily on reading gains and achievement, but the Accelerated Literacy approach advocated by the NALP in fact seeks to have students achieve much more than the ability to recognise words and read passages of text. The approach has been designed to teach students to be fully participating members of a literate society: “full members, not just with access, but also with a zest for participating and an instinct to exercise

¹ Information on the history of the development of the NALP and the results it has achieved is available on the Internet at <http://www.nalp.cdu.edu.au/> and will not be repeated here.

agency” (Freebody, 2004, p. 4). This high level of access to literate society requires highly focused teaching based on sound theoretical principles.

Some theoretical principles

The most fundamental principle underpinning the approach highlights the unique nature of school classrooms and the interactions that occur between students and teacher in those contexts.

- **To be successful in literacy lessons students require an understanding of the tacit discourse and educational ‘ground-rules’ that apply to such lessons.**

Every teacher of students with literacy difficulties wonders why this particular student or group of students seem to find learning to read so difficult, why reading and comprehending above a Year 2 or 3 level is so challenging, or why the writing of certain students is so stereotyped. As teachers, we often search for reasons why such students consistently make slow progress and hope to be able to design appropriate interventions to help them. While issues such as hearing difficulties, poor attendance and English as the students’ second or third language, for example, offer themselves as obvious answers for Indigenous students’ literacy difficulties, as educators we also need to allow for the “general set of unwritten rules of interpretation which underlie successful participation in educational discourse” (Edwards & Mercer, 1987, p. 47). Students who seem to ‘miss the point’ in lessons, sit at the back of the group, copy from other students, appear to be inattentive or behave disruptively may do so because they do not understand how to learn in the way that their teachers expect. Edwards and Mercer (1987, p. 158) emphasise that

[p]art of the problem for pupils is that much of the process remains mysterious to them. In however friendly and informal a manner, they are frequently asked to do things, learn things, and understand things, for no apparent reason other than that it is what the teacher wants them to do. The goals and purposes of the lesson are not revealed.

From a student’s point of view a classroom can often seem a confusing and unfathomable place. Even something as seemingly simple as talking about the pictures on the cover of a book can present problems and meet with puzzling responses from the teacher. Where reading books with parents has not been a part of everyday domestic routine for students, a teacher’s discussion about a book can seem quite incomprehensible. For example, when a teacher shows a Year 2/3 class the illustration on the cover of a book and asks students, ‘what do you think this book is about’ she does not expect a student to pick out the publisher’s Puffin symbol and say that the book is about a little bird (meaning the Puffin). In that actual example, the student’s answer received a negative response, not unkind but negative nonetheless for indicating exactly what she thought. How was the student to know that the Puffin symbol had nothing to do with the story inside the book? How does the student know what is significant in the illustration on the cover of the book if the Puffin is not? Implicit in the teacher’s question was that students should make judgements about significant elements in the illustration and what they implied about the story. Students who do not understand the implicit purpose of a question quickly identify themselves as outsiders in a class.

The following short transcript comes from a lesson that started with a discussion of the illustration for the amusing parody of a fable, ‘The Hippopotamus at Dinner’ from *Fables* by Arnold Lobel (1980). The fable is about a rude and greedy hippopotamus that makes a fuss over the size of his portions of food at a restaurant. As a result, the waiters bring him so much food that, when he has eaten it all, he finds he cannot get up from the table. Because of his earlier rudeness, no one takes the slightest notice of the hippopotamus stuck at the table by his enormously enlarged stomach and he is left there alone to ponder on his dilemma. The illustration is of a hippopotamus sitting at a broken table in the restaurant. Through the windows of the restaurant the sky is black and the moon is evident. The twist to this fable is that the hippopotamus blames his predicament on the fact that he might have eaten too many Brussels sprouts. He does not connect his situation to all the other food he ate or his rudeness in obtaining it.

Readers of this fable have to draw many inferences from both the wording of the text and its link to the illustration. For example, no reader making a compliant reading of the text would feel sorry for the hippopotamus that was stuck and ignored because of his own actions. In the transcript below, the teacher draws the students’ attention to the time of day the illustrator had portrayed: night-time. The literate implication here, the link that the teacher presumed the students would make, was that the

hippopotamus had been sitting at the table for a very long time and that it was probably what he deserved. The darkness, the moon high in the sky, the broken table, and the forlorn expression on the face of the hippopotamus all added to this implication.

In the following discussion, the teacher was aiming to have the students work this implication out for themselves through the questions she asked. The transcript starts with an apparently straightforward question about the time: 'How do we know it is night time?' The answer the students gave, 'stars', actually answered the question if it was just a question about night-time in general. However, their correct answer was not what the teacher expected in this context. The teacher had expected that students would look at the illustration that accompanied the text, observe the moon shining through the window of the restaurant and answer that it was night-time because the moon was in the sky. The teacher kept asking the question, finally pointing at the moon and calling on her most attentive students until she obtained the answer that she wanted.

Teacher: How do we know it's night-time, Trixie?

Student: Stars

Teacher: How do we know it's night-time...?

Students: Stars (various others unintelligible)

Teacher: How do we know it's night-time in this picture...? Girls, how do we know that it's night-time...? (pointing at moon)

Student: There's a moon.

Teacher: OK. Where is the hippopotamus sitting?

Student: At the table

In this interaction, the students failed to 'get the point' of the activity and the teacher failed to understand why the students did not attend to the illustration to find the answer to her question. The participants did not share a common orientation to the educational task. Even when a student finally answered to the teacher's satisfaction, it was not made clear why the moon mattered more than the stars or why it mattered that it was night-time in the story. Had the teacher answered, 'Yes, we do know it is night-time when we see stars in the sky, and if we look at this illustration, we can see the moon through the window too. Because it is night-time we know that the hippopotamus has been sitting at the table for a long time,' she could have both validated the students' prior knowledge and alerted them another possible interpretation of the illustration.

At one level, the understanding that these Indigenous students did not share with the teacher was related to experience with literature generally. Despite being secondary age students, they could not read and had little or no experience with either fables in an educational context or how a parody on a fable would work. Written texts and how they work to construct experience were not part of their lives. James Gee (1996) explains the difficulty students and teacher experience in these classroom interactions as being difficulties with Discourse. He uses the word Discourse with an upper case 'D' as distinct from discourse as "stretches of language that makes sense". He notes that it is not just the necessity to speak and understand English that was the problem experienced by students with orientations to lessons similar to those described above. Their problem was that they did not recognise the implicit educational purpose of the question and thus did not know how to answer correctly. Gee (1990, p. 128) explains that

[a] Discourse, then, is composed of ways of talking, listening (often, too, reading and writing), acting, interacting, believing, valuing, and using tools and objects, in particular social setting at specific times, so as to display and recognise a particular social identity.

To interpret a fable and to make inferences about it students need to understand the purpose of such stories, how illustrators choose the details of the story they portray, why anyone would write or read a fable, what interest there is in it and other such taken for granted knowledge about the purpose of story telling. In the lesson about 'The Hippopotamus at Dinner' the students were unable to interact with the teacher in a way that demonstrated their control of the Discourse of this literacy lesson. In relation to this text, they needed to know how to "act, think, value, and interact in ways that together with language render who we are and what we are doing recognisable to others (and ourselves)" (Gee, 1996, p.128).

At another level, the understanding the students did not share with the teacher was classroom based. They did not understand how they had to answer in that educational setting to be successful. Mercer and Edwards (1987, p. 47) call “the implicit rules of education talk and practice *educational ground-rules*”. They describe the potential failure students face when they fail to recognise the different ‘ground-rules’ that apply to the different subjects they encounter at school. This is the situation for Indigenous students when participating in literacy classes. The educational ground-rules are quite invisible to such students and their attempts to participate in lessons are often not recognised as legitimate attempts but are simply ignored or contextualised as incorrect answers. An answer to a question that comes out of students’ everyday experience may occasionally be correct but students have to learn that their answer must use features of the actual illustration or wording of the text before they can participate successfully in literacy lessons.

Teachers of the Accelerated Literacy approach, therefore, make the tacit ‘ground-rules’ of a literacy lesson explicit. The Accelerated Literacy teaching strategies are designed to teach students both how to enjoy and interpret books, particularly narrative in an educational context, as well as how a literate person thinks and acts to be successful in school. The NALP aims to give each student access to the literate discourse that identifies a student as a successful member of a literate society. In the Accelerated Literacy approach we have dropped the capital ‘D’ as used by Gee for ease of use, following Gray (1998), but when we use the word discourse we intend the wider meaning Gee describes. Out of this fundamental principle of the Accelerated Literacy teaching approach come some associated issues that provide the resources for structuring the program to teach about literate discourse and educational ground-rules.

- **To teach students to think and act as literate people (to give them access to ‘literate discourse’) the texts they study must be literate.**

Every Accelerated Literacy lesson is based on a study of text from a book and so it follows that choice of books is extremely important to the success of the program. The most important quality of books selected in the program is that they have literate language features, that is, the author uses written language, the language of books, not oral language, or the language used when speaking. Also important is that the books are enjoyable, interesting, exciting or have other qualities that capture the imagination of students in each age group and so inspire them to want to be readers.

Early evaluation of the literacy levels in at least 20 remote Indigenous schools by the Accelerated Literacy research team showed that few students from Year One to Year Ten could read a simple text at even Year One level. The reading texts available in remote Indigenous schools classrooms from the first year of school to Year Ten were invariably texts suitable for early childhood students. While these books were not ‘bad’ books, they had many features that made them unsuitable for teaching students to read past the early stages of a student’s first year at school. An example of a typical early childhood text found in almost all Indigenous schools was *Yuk Soup* (Cowley, 1986) shown below:

In go some snails.
In go some feathers.
In go some thistles.
In go some toothbrushes.
In go some socks.
In go some shoes.
Yuk!

Yuk Soup and similar books are sometimes called ‘sentence readers’ because they typically consist of one sentence per page accompanied by an illustration related to the sentence. In *Yuk Soup*, the illustrations were of green ‘people’ tipping ingredients into a large cauldron sitting on a fire. The implication was that the green creatures were making a disgusting tasting soup by using strange ingredients, e.g. snails on the page that read ‘In go some snails.’ The purpose of this book and others like it is to reduce the cognitive load of learning to read for early childhood students as they learn to cope with the demands of decoding or analysing words. The books use simple predictable wording supported by clear illustrations. Except for the final page, only one word changes on each page and that is the last word in the sentence. The text is written to be amusing and to motivate young children to want to read it (Cutting, n. d.).

An unintended feature of these early reading books, however, is that when they are used as reading material beyond the first few months of school, the students who read them sometimes come to the conclusion that reading depends on memorising the words of a text. If there is a word the student cannot read then the illustrations, not the printed word, provide the solution. The initial letter of the unknown word sometimes provides a cue in combination with the illustration. For example, in the *Yuk Soup* text shown above, students typically read 'shells' for 'snails' and 'trees' for 'thistles' because the first letter combined with their interpretation of the illustrations makes this a reasonable and meaningful attempt. Despite the fact that students often know the names of letters and their sounds their decoding ability is such that this level of knowledge does not help them. These students develop a ritualised reading routine where they sit with an adult listener, 'read' their book with the help of the prompts from the listener and the illustrations, memorise the words, then move onto the next book in the series only to repeat the routine. Their strategy is one of enduring a reading episode rather than learning skills that will help them progress with reading. Because there are so many of these early reading texts available in classrooms, students are able to progress through school without ever 'reading' anything else.

To break out of the unproductive routine of dependency on the prompting of a listener or reliance on picture clues that leads to memorising text, a different approach is necessary. Teachers using the Accelerated Literacy approach have found that students can only be taught to be full members of a literate society through reading literate texts and through teaching practices that make their meaning salient for students.

'Literate texts' in this context refers to texts that are more like written texts or 'book language' than oral or spoken texts (Hammond, 1990). The *Yuk Soup* text above is an example of an oral text in that it consists of a series of comments about a set of illustrations. This text does not have a narrative structure (orientation, complication, resolution) or tell readers anything about the characters or the setting for the events that take place. It is not a model with resources for teaching students to either read or write beyond its intended target group: students, 5 years old from literate backgrounds. In fact, asking older students to read from texts like *Yuk Soup* is humiliating and demeaning for them.

In the Accelerated Literacy program the texts used as teaching material are always literate and close to age-appropriate for the students involved. However, the dilemma here is that students with ineffective reading strategies simply cannot read age-appropriate or even close to age-appropriate texts just because the teacher expects them to. Instead, if teachers are to achieve the goal of appropriate literacy levels for marginalised students, they need to share with students a common understanding about they are trying to do.

- **Implications for working on literate, age-appropriate texts for students with low literacy: teaching in the zone of proximal development and 'scaffolding'**

Where students have experienced difficulty learning to read and have developed dysfunctional strategies for enduring reading sessions and literacy lessons in general, there is no quick fix or easy solution to the problem. It is not a simple matter of taking an additive approach (Freebody, 2004) where it may be obvious that a student has difficulty decoding so we add some phonic work or add a strategy from one program and try something else from another. Certainly, knowledge about phonics and decoding is crucial, as is being able to comprehend a text rather than just working out what words say. However, a different approach is needed to break out of the constraints imposed by finding a student's reading 'level', then working on from there, or 'starting again with the basics' when a student is found to be falling behind. The approach that has been successful for Accelerated Literacy teachers has been to disregard the early 'sentence' readers and work with literate texts as near as possible to age-appropriate for students at each year level. While it may not be possible to start on secondary school books immediately with secondary students who cannot read at Year 1 level, they certainly do not need to be held on Year 1 books, learn to read them and then move to Year 2 and so on.

To break away from simple, easily memorised reading texts requires teachers to take a somewhat counterintuitive step and work with students in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky explains the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (1978, p. 86). The ZPD allows teachers to move away from a developmental

model to a new model where “the only ‘good learning’ is that which is in advance of development” (1978, p. 89). Assessment in the Accelerated Literacy program regularly takes place at two levels in accord with this understanding. First students are assessed on reading texts they have not seen before to determine what they can read **without support**. This assessment determines their Individual Reading Level (IRL). Secondly they are assessed on the text that has been the focus of an Accelerated Literacy teaching sequence in the classroom: what they can read **with the support of classroom teaching**. This assessment determines their Independent Working Level (IWL) (Gray et al., 2003). Students are considered to be reading successfully on a passage of text when they can read it at 90% - 94% accuracy; the range referred to as Instructional Level (Clay, 1979).

By monitoring these two reading levels, the level at which a student can read with support (IWL) and without support (IRL), it is possible to follow, to some extent, students’ potential for learning in the social context of their classroom with explicit teaching as distinct from their individual learning when thrown completely on their own resources. However, we must not take the IWL as a fixed upper limit. Wells (1999, p. 330) also makes the point that

[r]ather than being a ‘fixed attribute of the learner, the zpd constitutes a potential for learning that is created in the interaction between participants as they engage in a particular activity together; furthermore, although there is, in principle, an upper bound with respect to what participants are able to take from their task-related interaction at any moment, this upper bound is, in practice, unknown and indeterminate; it depends as much on the manner in which the interaction unfolds as on any independent estimate of the participants’ current potential. In this sense, the zpd emerges in the activity, and, as participants jointly resolve problems and construct solutions, the potential for further learning is expanded, as new possibilities open up that were initially unforeseen.

It is difficult to imagine why we would not take advantage of the notion of a ZPD. It allows a teacher to work quickly towards teaching at an age-appropriate level for a whole class as opposed to working at the range of different individual levels found across a class. Since students in any one class may show evidence of as many as seven years difference between the lowest and highest achieving students it is a poor option to try to move slowly up through levels of difficulty one at a time.

Working on a text that constitutes a ZPD for each student within a whole class requires a teacher to provide a particular type of support for students. This support starts with the teacher negotiating common understandings about the author’s language choices with the students in the class. Over time, the students take up the role of expert on the text and their expertise on this contributes to their understanding of the next text they study. The term often used for this type of support is scaffolding and indeed this program was called ‘Scaffolding Literacy for Indigenous Children in School’ earlier in its development. (Gray et al., 1998)

Scaffolding is a term used by Wood et al. (1976) to describe the way parents support their children in learning new skills. Parents are particularly accomplished at providing apt support for their children. When a child cannot complete a task alone parents help, not by taking over the task entirely but by sharing it so the child does some of the task and feels a sense of accomplishment at its successful completion. Parents pace activities carefully to allow their child to take over the activity as soon as possible. They encourage, motivate and believe in their child’s ability to learn.

Teachers of the Accelerated Literacy approach use the teaching sequence to provide temporary support that assists students to read literate texts well in advance of their IRL. Bruner’s description of the ‘loan of consciousness’ (1986, p. 76), describes how teachers begin the scaffolding support that is part of Accelerated Literacy. The consciousness teachers ‘loan’ is in the form of their understanding of the discourse implicit in the text. They loan a literate interpretation of the meaning a text. They loan their experience with reading as well as their understanding of the educational ground rules for operating with such texts in the social context of the classroom. Teachers do not expect students to merely accept the information they offer; this information rather becomes the site for negotiation of common knowledge. Wertsch (1987, p. 161) describes this negotiation of shared understanding between teacher and students in the following way:

Thus when interlocutors enter into a communicative context, they may have different perspectives or only a vague interpretation of what is taken for granted and what the

utterances are intended to convey. Through semiotically mediated 'negotiation', however, they create a temporarily shared social world, a state of intersubjectivity.

By working on one text or passage of text over time, teachers and students, whatever the differences in their initial understanding about it, come to share similar understandings and positions on their interpretations of the author's wording. Rather than allowing students to 'guess what's in the teacher's head' by questions that invite a wide range of possible answers with some interpretations being quite wrong, teachers work out of common knowledge with their students over negotiated interpretations and can ask questions that students can answer correctly. That is not to say that the teacher keeps telling students facts about the text until they can tell them back in a kind of transmission model. Rather, teacher and students negotiate shared understanding or 'shared situation definition (that is intersubjectivity)' (Wertsch, 1987) about the author's language choices. For example, a short transcript from a second lesson about the story of 'The Lion and the Mouse' retold by Patricia Scott (1993) shows the teacher and students in a Year 4/5 class of Indigenous students, none of whom could read the text independently, working from common knowledge brought forward from the previous day's lesson.

Teacher: So first of all who can remember what the story is called? Students:

The Lion and the Mouse (a few children respond)

Teacher: That's right, the Lion and the Mouse. I'll open it up. Oh, this is the name of the person who wrote it. It's been retold by Patricia Scott and it's a very old story, this story. People have been telling it for hundreds of years. Because it teaches us a lesson, doesn't it? About even the small and weak being able to help the strong and mighty.

Teacher: So who is the strong and mighty animal here?

Students: Lion (2 children respond others join in) Oh, right, and here he is and who is this?

Teacher: Mouse (Most children respond)

Teacher: Yes, that's right, great. The mouse isn't strong and mighty is he, what's the mouse?

Student: Weak and (one child responds)

Teacher: Yes.

Student: Tiny (another child responds)

Teacher: Yes, it's tiny and it's weak and he is not anything like as strong as the lion. That's great.

The common knowledge from the previous lesson related to Patricia Scott's language choices. For example, in the moral of the story, 'Even the small and weak can help the strong and mighty,' as well as the conversation around the language choices in page two of the story, 'One day a lion was resting when a little mouse, who lived nearby, ran playfully over his back and down over his head to the ground' (Scott, 1993, p. 2). The discussion about the language choices included such comments as, 'in this story a little tiny mouse helps a great big strong lion. That doesn't seem possible does it?' Out of the shared interpretations of the illustrations and wording of the story, students were able to answer questions confidently and unambiguously. There was no uncertainty in responding to a quite general question, 'what's the mouse?' which could logically have been answered in many ways (an animal, a nuisance, food etc) but could only be answered in one way in the light of the previous conversation about the author's language choices and reasons for them.

In the context of this lesson, the students were able to operate *as if* they could read the text and *as if* they could make a literate interpretation of the status of the two participants in the story. Newman et al. (1989) explain that within a ZPD there may be quite different interpretations of objects (in this instance, the text) by the child and by the teacher.

But these differences need not cause "trouble" for the teacher or the child or the social interaction; the participants can act *as if* their understandings are the same. At first, this systematic vagueness about what an object "really is" may appear to make cognitive analysis impossible. However, it now appears to us that this looseness is just what is needed to allow change to happen when people with differing analyses interact (Newman et al., 1989, p. 62).

Within an Accelerated Literacy lesson the teacher and students may all start out with quite different understanding about what a text means and why it is being studied. Some may have no idea at all, but in the context of the lessons they are all able to appropriate the teacher's understanding as well as incorporate other students' contributions so that they jointly reach 'somewhere else' (Newman et al., 1989) in their understanding of how the wording of the text works. Students, in taking on the role of a literate reader with the support of their teacher and other class members, actually become that literate person.

The building of common knowledge around a text is a powerful tool for introducing and supporting students into literate discourse. Rather than literacy lessons being the site for failure for marginalised students, Accelerated Literacy lessons make explicit and accessible the 'general set of unwritten rules of interpretation which underlie successful participation in educational discourse' (Edwards & Mercer, 1987, p. 47).

Teaching in the Accelerated Literacy program

The next step is to explain how the Accelerated Literacy teaching sequence integrates these principles into the classroom literacy program. In Figure 1, left to right arrows indicate the flow of a lesson as it proceeds from Low Order Literate Orientation to Transformations. Following Transformations, teachers can choose to carry out spelling activities followed by writing or they can proceed from Transformations to writing depending on the focus of a lesson. The vertical double-headed arrows between spelling and writing illustrate the close interaction between these two activities. Not every Accelerated Literacy lesson progresses as far as writing but every lesson would include Literate Orientation as a starting point. Time spent on teaching one text varies according to the age of students and the complexity of the text and can be as long as a term or as short as one or two weeks.

Additional features of the diagram are the arrows pointing from right to left that illustrate the integrated nature of the teaching sequence. Learning from each strategy adds to students' growing competence in reading. For example, understanding of spelling feeds back into the ability to decode in reading.

The background to the teaching strategies, shown as a rectangle in Fig. 1, represents the fluent reading of the text and the common knowledge about the discourse of that text that is the focus of each teaching sequence. This fluent reading and common knowledge are powerful resources for all aspects of the teaching sequence. Writing develops from reading the text as a writer and oral language competence develops through discussion about it.

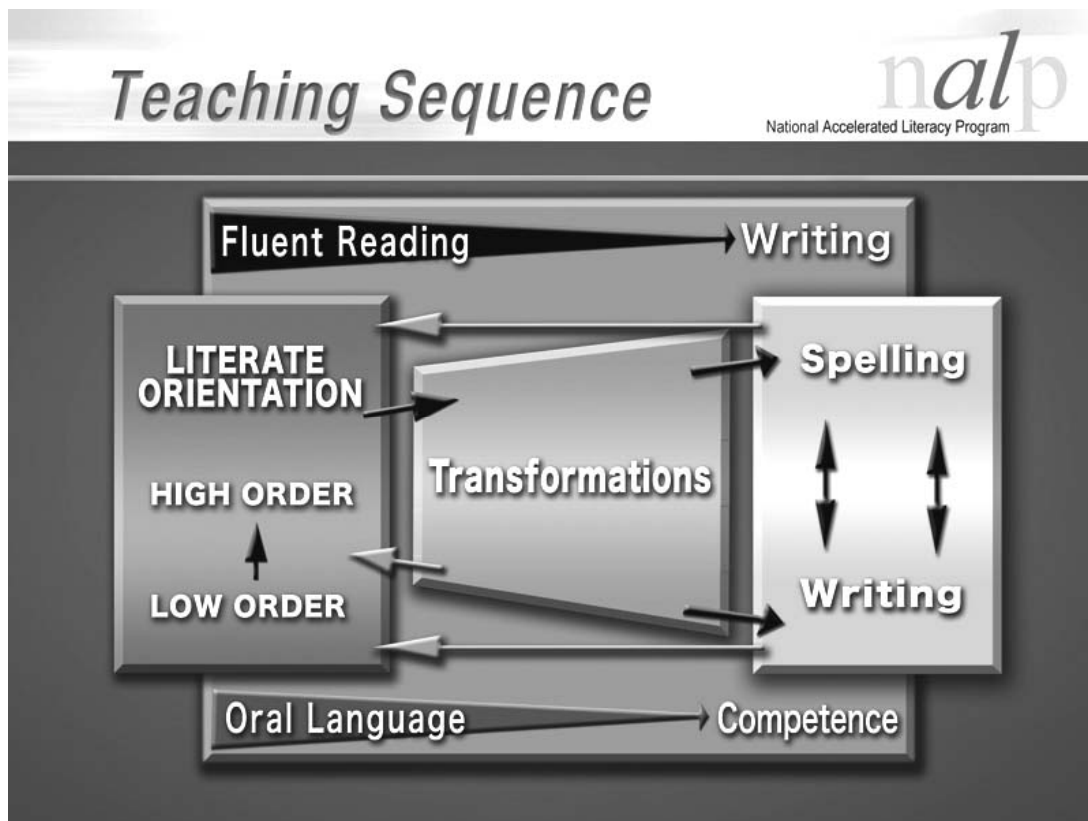


Figure 1: The strategies used in the Accelerated Literacy teaching sequence.

Although text selection is not shown on the teaching sequence diagram, it is nevertheless a crucial starting point for any successful lesson sequence. It is the choice of text that is the starting point in constructing the ZPD for the teaching sequence. Too hard a text will result in some students being unable to participate in lessons successfully and too simple a text will result in no new learning for some students in the class. It is through appropriate text selection, also, that students become engaged with books that model literate discourse. To provide a good model of 'literate discourse' for any group of students, the text selected has to be: as near as possible to age-appropriate for the students in the class; written in literate, not oral, language; rich in meaning and interest so that discussion about the text can be sustained over time; and chosen for what it can teach the particular group about writing strategies used by the author of the book.

Teaching sequence strategies

Literate Orientation is a pre-reading strategy: it is carried out before students attempt to read a text so that when they do read they are successful, that is, they can read the text independently at 90% accuracy or above. Earlier in the development of the Accelerated Literacy program this strategy was called 'Book Orientation' but the name change was intended to reflect its purpose more clearly. Literate Orientation provides the context for the teacher to model how a literate person interprets a text, and its illustrations when appropriate. In other words, it is at this point that teachers begin the process of making literate discourse and educational ground rules available to all the students in the class. The two dimensions to **Literate Orientation** are equally important.

Low Order Literate Orientation

This strategy is the starting point for every teaching sequence and is part of every Accelerated Literacy lesson, although it can sometimes be quite brief. The teacher explains what the book is about, how readers could interpret the illustrations, the story, and its ideology. The teacher does not ask students to answer questions unless they have enough understanding of the text to answer them adequately.

Superficially, Low Order Literate Orientation appears similar to ‘Shared Book’ teaching because in early childhood classes it involves teacher and students looking at a ‘big book’ together. Low Order Literate Orientation is, however, quite different in that the teacher is not calling on the students’ existing literate resources or experience with books to make predictions about the story but rather, provides a literate interpretation of it for the students’ consideration. Future lessons build on the common knowledge established as part of Low Order Literate Orientation. Following this step, the teacher **reads the text** or part of it (in the case of novels or longer stories) to the students.

High Order Literate Orientation

During High Order Literate Orientation the teacher shifts the teaching focus to an examination and interpretation of the actual wording of the text. The author’s language choices, their possible meaning and function are studied thoroughly. Here the teacher draws on shared knowledge already established during Low Order Literate Orientation and through reading the text to the students. At early stages of the teaching sequence, teachers ‘lend their consciousness’ or interpretation of the text to the students for negotiation (Bruner, 1986). For example, in the fable of ‘The Hippopotamus at Dinner’ apart from the implicit understanding about the substitution of animals as people in fables in general, the specific understanding that constitutes the ‘twist’ at the end would need to be shared.

In practice, the strategy requires an enlarged copy of the text to be visible to all students, usually on an overhead projector transparency, so that all students know what wording to attend to, and they participate in the lesson by underlining parts of the text on the transparency as well as through discussion. Throughout this part of the lesson, the teacher acts *as if* the students are literate (Newman et al., 1989). Students are never put ‘on the spot’, or expected to know answers to questions from their own resources. Rather, teachers make known the resources students need to answer questions by discussing literate features of the wording of the text and the inferences implied in the wording as if the students could already read it. For example, in Low Order Literate Orientation the teacher may have told the students that the author of the text includes characters’ reactions in stories to create an atmosphere of suspense and fear. In High Order Literate Orientation the teacher shows how the author made the language choices that create this atmosphere. They find the exact words the author used and underline them.

While High Order Literate Orientation involves explaining the meaning of the words in the text, that dimension is not all there is to this strategy. To make literate discourse available to the students, the teacher also explains the author’s technique or writing strategies, for example, why and when an author would choose to build suspense in a text as a writing device. The most dramatic feature of High Order Literate Orientation is that, following participation in it, the ability of students to read the text independently improves significantly because having such a clear explanation of the meaning of the text supports their developing or dysfunctional decoding or word analysis skills.

Transformations

The Transformations strategy shown in the centre of Fig. 1 is designed to change the student’s orientation to the text from that of a reader looking for meaning to that of a writer learning how to use a writer’s techniques. To carry out a Transformation, teachers write part of the text on strips of cardboard that can then be cut up and manipulated. The strips of cardboard are placed on a board designed with slots for the strips to rest in. The strips and board have to be large enough for the whole class to see easily.

Transformations allow text that was fixed on a page of a book to be taken out, examined closely and manipulated. The text can be rearranged, words, phrases or clauses can be taken out and discussed or word order can be examined closely. The activity where text is written on cardboard strips and cut up is not confined to this program. However, in the context of Accelerated Literacy lessons, this activity allows teachers to take a particularly analytic approach to the text. It allows a closer look at grammatical features of a text as well as punctuation than is practicable in High Order Literate Orientation. Transformations are also used, particularly in Early Childhood classes, to teach word recognition skills that lead to spelling activities.

Knowledge acquired from Transformations feeds back into Literate Orientation as a deeper and more exact understanding of language function in the text and also aids students’ ability to read the text fluently as shown by the arrows in Fig. 1.

Spelling

The spelling strategy is shown as following Transformations in the teaching sequence. It is the part of the lesson devoted to teaching word analysis skills and the system of English spelling. Spelling is always taught from words the students can read out of context and that is why it follows Transformations so effectively. When students have a strong mental image of a word they can separate the word into letter pattern chunks and identify each chunk. They can also write the word in its component parts and discuss the letter patterns that comprise the word, for example, the word 'mouse' would be cut into m/ouse. The origin of the word could also be discussed: an old English word 'mus', related to muscle - the little mouse that runs beneath the skin when you flex. The job of -ou would be discussed as would the role of -e on the end of the word. Students would then practise writing -ouse before writing m/ouse. If they had learned other words with the -ouse pattern they would be compared.

Spelling activities are carried out on small whiteboards so that words and their patterns can be practised, written and rewritten with errors being easily erased. In early childhood classes, small blackboards are sometimes used as the resistance between chalk and board aids the younger students with letter formation. The word analysis skills gained from the spelling strategy feed back into improved decoding competence in reading and improved spelling in writing.

Writing

Writing strategies can follow either Transformations or spelling activities. Writing activities capitalise on students' ability to 'read like writers'. When students have a sound understanding of the techniques an author has used, they can appropriate similar strategies for their own writing purposes. The understanding of writers' techniques also feeds back into students' ability to recognise these techniques in other texts and assists the development of high-level comprehension.

Writing activities comprise joint reconstruction of parts of a text, allowing further discussion of an author's writing techniques; workshop activities, where students practice appropriating these techniques; joint construction activities, where teachers and students think together to incorporate learned techniques into new situations; and independent writing where students incorporate new writing skills into their own repertoire of skills. Writing strategies only become useful to students when they develop from a profound understanding of why an author made particular language choices, what effect these choices have on readers and when it is appropriate to use similar writing techniques.

Challenges

An independent assessment of the program carried out by the Australian Council of Educational Research (2002) found that the results of the introduction of the program, known as 'Scaffolding Literacy with Indigenous Children in School' at that time were 'little short of sensational'. Some teachers, however, find some aspects of the program challenging. For a teacher to decide to work on literate texts with students without a background in literacy is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of the program. Although there are books written about Indigenous experience used in the program there are also many books that can be enjoyed by children regardless of their cultural background. The nature of the teaching sequence ensures access to books about subjects outside children's everyday experience.

Some teachers find it challenging to study one book or part of a book in detail over time. The fear of being 'boring' is strong in teaching. However, the opposite is the reality. Where teachers have a detailed understanding of a text, students find such a study engrossing. A teacher's own knowledge and enthusiasm are powerful factors in motivating students.

The Accelerated Literacy program does require careful preparation of lessons and ongoing commitment to assessment of student literacy outcomes. In response to these challenges, teachers are provided with a carefully staged program of professional development as well as the ongoing support of consultants or coordinators. Detailed teaching notes and video demonstrations of Accelerated Literacy lessons are also available and being developed to support teachers.

Conclusion

The necessarily brief outline of the Accelerated Literacy teaching sequence presented here may serve to demonstrate that the individual strategies are not, on their own, revolutionary. However, their regular application through the teaching sequence has proved to be successful in improving literacy outcomes for students in schools where the program is being implemented. While there may be questions left unanswered and while there is much more that could be written about all aspects of the program,

teachers working in the NALP have welcomed the satisfaction that comes from being able to teach literacy successfully in a context that has too often been extremely frustrating for both teachers and students; from remote Indigenous schools to any school context where students experience literacy failure.

Acknowledgement

True to the philosophy of the NALP, this article comes out of the shared knowledge developed by the National Accelerated Literacy Program team at Charles Darwin University. While one person has written it, one person has not developed the program. It has come out of the work of all the teachers, students and researchers who have committed their whole-hearted effort to its development.

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