ENHANCING STUDENTS’ LEARNING THROUGH LITERACY
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LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Most communication amongst human beings is driven by purpose. When communicating, we are constantly making language choices to express ourselves appropriately and effectively. Communication is made of oral language and written language and it involves two different processes: giving information, when the individual is active, and receiving information, when the individual is passive. We receive information through our listening and our reading skills and we give information through our speaking and our writing skills. Furthermore, language can be oral, through speaking and listening, and written, through writing and reading (figure 1).

Figure 1 – LANGUAGE STRUCTURE

The importance of reading

Within the passive practices of communication, though, we can still distinguish a significant difference between the role of a listener and the role of a reader. For example, while listeners are not necessarily able to fully control the listening process, a recipient can be actively involved in the process of reading by selecting the source of information. Reading is always driven by the reader’s will and needs and it never happens by chance. Reading gives independence and freedom of choice to the recipient. In particular, over the last decade, Internet and the development of new technologies in the Western countries has enabled readers to access an almost infinite amount of information. As a consequence, we should all become aware that, in order to become “powerfully literate”, a basic skill such as reading is a key element in the life of each individual.
TEACHING LITERACIES

Literacy can be defined as the ability to read, write, speak, listen, and think effectively. Literacy enables students to learn and to communicate clearly about what they know and what they want to know. Although literacy development is a process that continues throughout the life of each individual, it is important that we have a clear understanding of how to make our students powerfully literate. Our aim is the creation of literate citizens who actively contribute in a civic democratic society (Sawyer, 2007).

New literacies

In the last decade, technology has been introducing new concepts of reading and writing and our students should be given the opportunity to become familiar with them. Traditional literacy activities with paper and pencils should be extended through the use of computers so that students are encouraged to develop skills such as exploring texts on the Internet, making an effective use of search engines to find information, communicating through emails and chats and using word processing (Barone and Wright, 2008, p. 292). By providing such a wide range of approaches to literacy, we also offer equal opportunities to all students. However, trying to keep up with constantly changing new literacies can sometimes be challenging for us teachers, as it requires time and dedication (Barone and Wright, 2008, p. 293).

How our students can become “powerfully literate”

There is no specific procedure that we can follow in order to create powerfully literate students. However, as already previously stated, enhancing our students’ reading skills is undoubtedly one of the most important aspects when it comes to teaching literacy. The activities involved within this process vary according to the students’ level: they could involve supporting a beginner reader in decoding a word, facilitating the comprehension of a word or a text, encouraging a reader to critically engage with the text, facilitating the assimilation of what has been ridden in order to make use of it in daily life (STELLA, 2002).

Figure 2 – HOW INDIVIDUALS BECOME “POWERFULLY LITERATE”
A CONTEMPORARY MODEL OF READING

The four reading practices

In order to become a successful reader, children must be able to use effectively three language systems: the semantic, the syntactic and the graphophonic system. In other words, the reader must have a deep knowledge of the meaning of the words, the rules of the language, and the symbols that make up the words. (Harris, 2006, p. 34). Moreover, a successful reader needs to develop skills and engage in these four reading practices (figure 2):

1. **Breaking the code of texts**: the reader learns the relationship between sounds and letters, develops knowledge of punctuation, page layout, sentence structure and genre.
2. **Making meaning**: the reader understands the meaning of words in the text. In this practice, the reader uses their background knowledge to make meaning of the text.
3. **Using text functionally**: the reader understands the purpose of texts for different cultural and social functions.
4. **Critically analysing texts**: the reader investigates how texts can manipulate a reader and identifies a point of view in a text (Harris, 2006, p. 35) (Freebody and Luke, 2003, p. 56).

![Figure 3 – THE FOUR READING PRACTICES](image-url)
READING NEEDS

The reading skills of the students in my classroom are considerably low, due to a high number of ESL students (14 out of 24). This scenario reflects roughly the situation in all the other classrooms. Hence, the need for an intensification of our reading activities in our daily routine through a guided exposure to a wide range of texts. The aim is to give our students the opportunity to explore the features of different types of text and to become familiar with new vocabulary.

Based on the four reading practices previously described, the reading needs of each student can be gradually addressed through:

1. **decoding texts,**
2. **recognizing words and understanding their meaning,**
3. **enhancing deeper comprehension,**
4. **developing critical analysis of the text.**

Figure 4 – LEVELS OF COMPREHENSION

- **LITERAL COMPREHENSION** - the reader recognizes sentence meaning and main ideas, recognizes and recalls details and sequence.
- **INTERPRETATIVE COMPREHENSION** - the reader infers main ideas and supports details, predicts outcomes, relates cause and effect, distinguishes facts and opinions, reality and fantasy.
- **EVALUATIVE COMPREHENSION** - the reader examines information, ideas and options for meaning, values, emotions, recognizes points of view, detects bias, identifies cultural beliefs, articulates own ideas, views and understanding, understands how texts can manipulate emotions, reinforce values and undermine beliefs.
- **APPRECIATIVE COMPREHENSION** - the reader develops an emotional response to the author's language, ideas, values.
Meeting the reading needs through *guided reading*

Through *guided reading* the teacher is able to engage the students in an affecting learning by supporting them in their reading and by guiding them into deeper understanding of the text. Small groups of students have the opportunity to learn various reading strategies and develop the skills and knowledge required to read increasingly more difficult texts.

**Figure 5 – GUIDED READING**

![Diagram showing TEACHER and STUDENTS roles in guided reading](image)

Specifically, *Guided Reading* involves students in the following reading practices:

- **Code breaker**: readers identify words, letter patterns, and word meaning using a range of strategies. They also become familiar with different text structures.
- **Text participant**: readers use their background knowledge to make meaning of the text, they understand the literal and inferred meaning of the language in the text, they predict the story or the features of a text using pictures and meaning clues.
- **Text user**: readers explore the features of different types of text and identify the text type by examining features such as text structure, headings, the author’s writing style and use of vocabulary.
- **Text analyst**: readers investigate the writer’s point of view and develop a critical response to the text.
Reading needs and learning outcomes

My students’ reading needs will be addressed by using the four reading practices. The learning outcomes to be achieved through the teaching are specified in the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2012) under the English learning area, year 4.

Figure 6 – FOUR READING PRACTICES AND CURRICULUM

**CODE BREAKER**

- EXPRESSING AND DEVELOPING IDEAS - Understand how to use strategies for spelling words, including spelling rules, knowledge of morphemic word families, spelling generalisations, and letter combinations including double letters (ACELA 1779)
- TEXT STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION - Understand how texts vary in complexity and technically depending on the approach to the topic, the purpose and the intended audience (ACELA1490)

**TEXT PARTICIPANT**

- INTERPRETING, ANALYSING, EVALUATING - Use comprehension strategies to built literal and inferred meaning to expand content knowledge, integrating and linking ideas and analysing and evaluating texts (ACELY1692)

**TEXT USER**

- INTERPRETING, ANALYSING, EVALUATING - Identify characteristic features used in imaginative, informative and persuasive texts to meet the purpose of the text (ACELY1690)

**TEXT ANALYST**

- RESPONDING TO LITERATURE - Discuss literary experiences with others, sharing responses and expressing a point of view (ACELT1603)
HOW TO ENCOURAGE READING IN OUR SCHOOL

In our school, the majority of the students come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, therefore the necessity of adapting the curriculum becomes a priority for every teacher. The following dot points summarize some of the key aspects that should be fostered in a classroom in order to meet the students’ learning needs.

- **Meaningful learning.** As motivation and engagement play a key role in supporting the children’s learning, teachers should always provide students with texts that meet their interests and stimulate their curiosity (Harris, 2006, p. 48).
- **Positive and stimulating environment.** It is important that readers feel comfortable and at ease in their classrooms, therefore teachers should design an environment which encourages the reading (Harris, 2006, p. 47).
- **Additional support when needed.** The teacher should promptly identify when a student struggles with classroom activities and intervene with additional support (Johnston and Hayes, 2008, p. 118).

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**Figure 7 – STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE READING**

- **Meaningful learning**
- **Positive and stimulating environment**
- **Additional support when needed**

ADAPTING THE CURRICULUM
PROMOTING THE NATIONAL YEAR OF READING

There is a wide awareness among us teachers that the United Nations have designated 2012 as the International Year of Sustainable Energy for All. This campaign fits perfectly within our school, which has become a perfect example of how government funding can be invested in a praiseworthy initiative such as the installation of solar panels. I believe that our students should be actively involved in this initiative as it is important that they become aware of how they can contribute to make our world a better one. The SOLA tour held by students in year 5/6 is a concrete example of how we can achieve this goal. However, I would suggest that we expand similar activities to the other classes as well, so that everybody will be able to contribute to this campaign through their ideas, their creativity, their opinions, their discoveries.

By promoting the National Year of Reading and adopting the UN initiative within our school, we could enhance our students’ reading skills and, at the same time, meet one of the cross-curriculum priorities in the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2012), sustainability. Different activities can be organized and adapted according to the students’ year level and skills.

Resources

1. The books in the library. Our school library offers a wide range of books that could be used to explore the following topics:
   - RESOURCES OF OUR PLANET. How do we use our resources now and why? Could I use less water/energy? How can we explore, connect with, learn from, respect and utilise our habitat?
   - RECYCLING. What can we do to reduce the impact of waste? Why is recycling important? How does it work?
   - SUSTAINABILITY. What are the values of a sustainable community? What are our choices? How can I, my family, my community, and my culture contribute? What’s sustainable production/consumption? What are the choices/impacts of our transport/leisure? How has our life changed in the last 50 years? How have Indigenous people lived in close balance with nature? What can we learn from Indigenous practices towards sustainability?
   - FUTURE ENERGIES. How do we use our resources now and why? Are there alternatives? What are the most sustainable choices? What’s the energy of past, present and future? What’s the story of fossil fuels and what’s wrong with it? What’s the potential of renewable energy

2. The Internet. Using Internet in order to get information about a specific topic, the students will be exposed to different types of texts.

3. The website http://www.coolmob.org/ provides recommendable material for activities in the classroom and other useful links.

A gradual approach

The students will be exploring the concept of sustainability through a gradual approach. First, children will need to become aware of the importance of respecting our environment (through the books). Afterwards, they will get deeper knowledge of climate change and environmental issues (through the Internet). Finally, they will investigate energy use within the school and their own homes and community (through the CoolMob website).
The children will study and consider the consequences of human activities upon the environment and develop the understandings of how we can take positive steps towards building a sustainable lifestyle and a balanced approach to living within the environment. Students will the role they can play as current and future citizens of the world by developing positive thoughts and actions in relation to national and local issues.

Concrete suggestions for meeting the reading needs

The students will:

- become familiar with different text structures through the exposure to a wide range of texts (procedures and explanation from the CoolMob website, reports and interviews from different sources in Internet). The students will be able to Understand how texts vary in complexity and technically depending on the approach to the topic, the purpose and the intended audience (ACELA1490) as referred to in the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2012).
- improve their skills of expressing and developing ideas through the opportunity to use new vocabulary in their activities. For this purpose, two new projects will be introduced:
  1. “Morning News” a daily activity where children will tell the whole classroom about their good actions at home.
  2. A weekly newsletter which will be taken home. The newsletter will contain, for example, articles about how to reduce rubbish in the school or how to create a vegetable garden, an energy survey or a list of recommendations for conserving energy in their school or at home, a section GOOD NEWS FROM AROUND THE WORLD. The students will engage in personal writing and Incorporate new vocabulary from a range of sources into students’ own texts including vocabulary encountered in research (ACELA1498) as referred to in the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2012).
  Guided reading in small groups will help them to Understand how to use strategies for spelling words, including spelling rules, knowledge of morphemic word families, spelling generalisations, and letter combinations including double letters (ACELA1779).
- develop their skills of interpreting, analysing and evaluating a text. The resources selected will enable the students to explore different types of text: imaginative or narrative through the books, informative through the CoolMob website, persuasive texts through the Internet. The students will be able to Identify characteristic features used in imaginative, informative and persuasive texts to meet the purpose of the text (ACELY1690) and Use comprehension strategies to build literal and inferred meaning to expand content knowledge, integrating and linking ideas and analysing and evaluating texts (ACELY1692).
- enhance their ability of responding to literature by undertaking group discussions about environmental issues and sustainability. The students will be able to Discuss literacy experiences with others, sharing responses and expressing a point of view (ACELT1603).

THANKS FOR READING!
“...before teachers can be effective in their teaching, they must know each student as an individual, as a cultural being and as a learner” (Malin, 1998)
References

Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE). (2002). Teachers know how students learn to be powerfully literate. *Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA).* Victoria: AATE, ALEA, DE&T(Vic), and EdDeptWA.


