

# Connecting literacy into your English classroom

Although literacy is the foundation of the English curriculum, it continues to be one of the least explicitly-taught aspects of the English classroom. From my experience, this is due to two main elements: lack of teacher knowledge (or confidence) in teaching foundational literacy skills; and/or a curriculum which prioritises summative tasks and senior English expectations over literacy development. But I believe that both these blockers can be overcome with three key approaches: professional development for staff on the science behind how people learn to read and write; balancing the curriculum to focus on skills, rather than content; and driving English teaching with strategies to support the engagement, motivation and transferability of literacy skills.

So, what do teachers need to understand about what science says regarding how people learn to read and write? Firstly the Simple View of Reading builds the formula of:

**word recognition x language comprehension = reading comprehension.**

The formula is multiplied (rather than added) because if someone has zero word recognition, for example, no matter how good their language comprehension skills might be, they still would have zero reading comprehension.

Scarborough's Reading Rope elaborates on this idea by breaking the Simple View of Reading down into key components - see *fig #1*. The

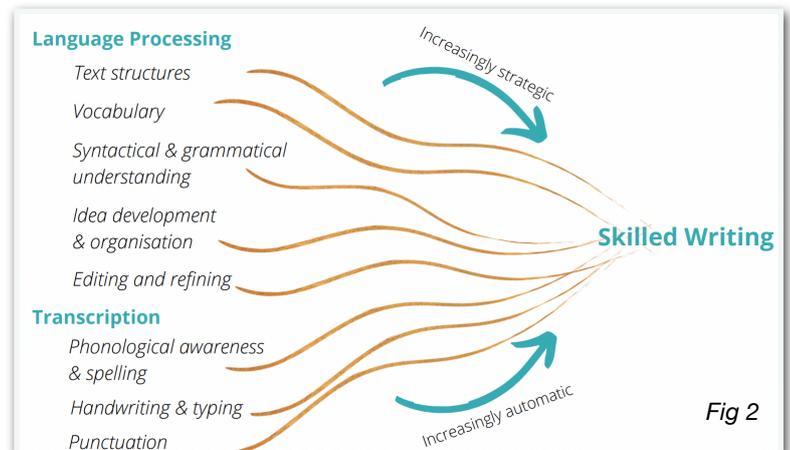
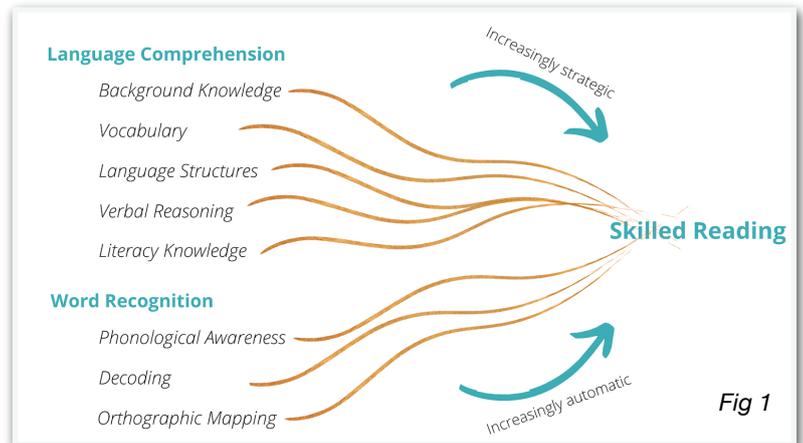
important thing to understand is that brain scans have proven that all brains learn to read in the same way - it might take longer for a neurodiverse person to orthographically map new words into their lexicon (most research suggest that whilst most people take between 1-4 exposures to orthographically map a new word, for someone with dyslexia this explodes to over 400 exposures!) but ultimately the process is the same.

The simple view of writing follows a similar formula where:

**transcription x language processing = written composition.**

The significant difference in this equation however is the necessity to take **mental control** into consideration. This is to do with the self-regulation required to write effectively, as well as the impact of our limited working memory. We are only able to hold between 4-7 things in our working memory at any one time, and the impact of that can be clearly seen when writing. If a student is struggling with their handwriting, working out how to spell a word, which words to draw from, how to answer the question, the key structures and features...is it any wonder that they suddenly 'forget' about basic punctuation and using capital letters effectively? The key focus therefore, in building writing capacity is automating as many skills as possible. If a student has solid handwriting, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and syntactic understanding, they have significantly more space in their working memory to consider writing in more sophisticated and insightful ways.

The second element for schools to consider is how to balance the *skills* of English with the *content*. This seems like a fairly simplistic idea: English is a skill-based subject, so obviously more time should be spent on teaching the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Unfortunately, from my experience observing English classrooms and curriculum, significantly more time is often spent on discussing a specific text: identifying narrative, character, theme, construction and setting-based elements. And whilst the skill of identifying, discussing and analysing such elements is a staple in any English classroom, the problem becomes when students (and teachers) perceive the *text* to be the most important thing in the lesson. In reality - the text is the ONE thing that will change the following year: it is the one thing that students don't need to transfer or hold onto the following year. The emphasis of teaching needs to be firmly on the *skills* being taught, the text just happens to be a way for the students to practice those skills.



| Reading                      | Writing                   | Speaking/listening           | Content   |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| Decoding                     | Encoding/Spelling         | Pronunciation/ intonation    | Structures and features of different text types<br>(including: narrative, literary, cinematic, staging, poetic, and persuasive devices etc)<br>Narrative elements:<br>Character - setting - theme - plot - construction<br>Context:<br>historical, cultural, social<br>World knowledge, issues, current affairs<br>Etymology, morphology, phonology |
| Fluency                      | Punctuation               | Pace/volume                  |   |
| Vocabulary                   | Handwriting/typing        | Gestures/ facial expressions |   |
| Comprehension/ inference     | Sentence structure/syntax | Body language                |   |
| Analysis                     | Flow/depth/sophistication | Accountable talk             |   |
| Synthesis                    | Brainstorming/planning    | Active listening             |   |
| Text structures and features | Drafting/publishing       | Observational skills         |   |
| Background knowledge         | Revising/editing          | Audience and purpose         |   |

Table 1

So this leads us to the final element to consider: how to actually effectively and explicitly teach literacy in the English classroom and to this I have five key areas to focus upon:

1. Using an EIM to support staff through teaching and learning
2. Establishing clear learning foci with skill-based emphasis
3. Using mini-lesson to teach in-the-moment and with purpose
4. Drawing from different strategies, for specific purpose
5. Maximising transferability of skills: across units, years and (ultimately) subjects.

### Using an EIM:

The philosophy, approach and impact of an Explicit Instructional Model (EIM) has been well documented. The most common approach is Pearson & Gallagher's (1983) Gradual Release of Responsibility which was loosely based on the educational theorist: Lev Vygotsky. This approach: *I do, you do, we do*; is a simple and effective method to remind teachers to explicitly teach and allow opportunity to collaboratively explore, before asking students to independently attempt any new task. I believe this is a positive approach in many ways, but I also find it a little redundant at times, because I'm less worried about WHO or HOW a student is working and more concerned about WHAT they are actually doing.

My preference is to follow a **Model, Practice, Apply** approach. It is very similar to Pearson and Gallagher's but it shifts the focus of the teaching and learning. (1) Initially the teacher explicitly teaches and models the skill being focused on. If it is a reading skill then they will model their reading using an expert text - something the students will be presented with throughout their day. If they are explicitly teaching a writing skill, then they should be using an authentic student text as their model. We aren't expecting students to be expert writers, so having a plethora of student texts to draw from as models is a powerful way to build student confidence, understanding and ultimately skill. (2) Then students are guided to practice and this could be done either with the teacher, in small groups, partners or individually - depending on the skill. The main priority in this section should be that it is an opportunity to experiment, notice, reflect and evaluate on the skill they are focusing on. This section is not about finding the 'right' answer, English isn't so black and white that something is right or wrong, and too many students think expert writers are able to sit down and simply write from start to finish without rewriting, revising, reordering and editing their work (in the moment and after writing). When we focus on *experimenting* rather than *perfecting* our literacy skills - we can maximise the engagement, confidence and acceptance for our students. (3) The final step is to apply. This is about the student using the skill in an authentic and meaningful way. It is also about retrieval practice: we don't just use the skill in one class and never again, we draw upon it in different contexts and purposes. We want to allow time for students to engage, connect, apply, reflect and extend each skill - initially in isolation as they explicitly learn it for the first time, but then cumulatively as they realise that each of these skills never works in isolation but we build upon each to develop our sophistication and understanding.

### Establishing learning foci

Many schools mandate a Learning Intention or Focus for each class, which again, comes from some decent research that suggests making the learning as explicit as possible assists students in clarifying the essential learning required. But whenever we mandate something, it can very easily become tokenistic rather than beneficial. The first thing to make the most of a Learning Intention is to make the distinction between skill-based and task-based classes.

Often times there is a specific skill we want students to understand and consolidate but there is also something we want them to do or complete as well. Differentiating this for students is important. They can cope with more than one learning focus - if anything, separating the skill from the task can be helpful.

It is also important to allow time to reflect on the learning: to check for misconceptions, confusions and concerns. It doesn't have to be extensive - a simple 5-finger evaluation of understanding at the end of the lesson would suffice - but just enough to remind students what skills and knowledge they are walking out the door with today.

The final element to consider is the importance of connecting each new learning with prior learning. Neuroscientist, Marike van Kesteren's study highlighted how much easier it was to learn something new if you can link it to something you already know and as literacy is a cumulative set of skills, this makes the impact of such consideration even more powerful. We will consider this further in the final section.

### Using mini-lessons

While literacy is certainly cumulative, each individual skill is complex and as such needs to initially be taught in isolation. This is where I find the use of mini-lessons to be most effective. A mini-lesson, in my perspective, is a short explicit teaching moment (under ten minutes). It is either used at the start of a lesson to establish the learning before entering the exploratory phase of the lesson, or is used to re-clarify, consolidate or extend upon learning during a lesson. They can be performed at the whole class or small group level and should directly connect to the learning and task expectations of the students. The key to the mini-lesson is to keep the learning as narrow and explicit as possible. One essential piece of learning that can then be immediately explored in the task expectations. Consider the impact of trying to keep students engaged in a whole lesson on punctuation, verses, spending ten minutes discussing the two ways apostrophes can be used and then asking students to keep this in their mind as they complete a reading and a writing task. The bonus of using mini-lessons at a small group level is you are then able to differentiate the explicit teaching, provide additional scaffolding if required or increase the complexity depending on the group.

### Using literacy strategies

I could (quite literally) spend days speaking about the notion of comprehension strategies and approaches. There have been some well-marketed and research-disproven ways of teaching comprehension that will take decades to undo, but the important thing to remember about comprehension strategies is that they should be explicit and direct ways that a person can unpack a text that they find confusing. For me, I need to break it down even further and consider whether the breakdown in comprehension is at the *word*, *sentence* or *text* level, because I will use slightly different strategies depending. Table 2 summarises some of the essential strategies I might draw upon, and suggest to students, when pulling apart a complex text. While students aren't asked to memorise such a list, what I want them to see is the different ways they can speed up, slow down, pull apart, notice and explore the words, sentences and paragraphs of a text to help them make meaning.

| Word Level  | Sentence Level  | Text Level  |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Connect the word to its function</li> <li>- Connect to the feeling of the word</li> <li>- Consider the meaning and pronunciation of familiar parts of the word</li> <li>- Find the parts to connect to the whole</li> <li>- Define, substitute and simplify</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Connect the punctuation to what is being said</li> <li>- Connect the subject and the predicate</li> <li>- Connect with the function of the sentence part</li> <li>- Connect with the language choices</li> <li>- Delete the fluff</li> <li>- Notice the connecting words</li> <li>- Reread the text at a slower pace and notice each word</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Annotate and make notes</li> <li>- Ask question to find answers</li> <li>- Identify and understand the pieces of the text</li> <li>- Pause to wonder and connect</li> <li>- Reread the text at a slower pace to search for specific information</li> <li>- Skim and scan the text for specific information</li> <li>- Understand the purpose of the text or feature</li> </ul> |

Table 2

There are so many strategies to support students through the explicit teaching and learning of the content, task/purpose and language of each written task (modelled texts, sentence frames, sentence combining to name a few...) but then it is important to have a number of different strategies to support students in their thinking, planning and organising. Table 3 highlights some of the plethora of organisers and processes that can support students through their brainstorming, synthesising and planning processes. The important thing to remember, however, is that we cannot assume because a student has a detailed plan they can translate that plan into an effective written draft. There are many layers of support and scaffolding that we can provide to transition a student between a plan and a draft.

| Brainstorming  | Researching  | Planning  |
|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- But why?</li> <li>- Cluster web</li> <li>- Concept map</li> <li>- Y-chart - T-chart</li> <li>- Lotus diagram</li> <li>- Network tree</li> <li>- Narrative map</li> <li>- Spider map</li> <li>- SWBST</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Note taking, Note making</li> <li>- Double entry diary</li> <li>- 5 W's and H</li> <li>- Summary graph</li> <li>- Events and consequences log</li> <li>- Causes and effects map</li> <li>- Cycle graph</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sequencing organiser</li> <li>- Evidence planner</li> <li>- Category table</li> <li>- Story map</li> <li>- Comparative bug table</li> <li>- Matrix</li> <li>- Essay planner</li> </ul> |

Table 3

### Maximising transferability

The final element to consider is how to maximise the opportunity that students will not just learn the skill being taught but that they remember and apply that skill in different contexts and purposes. This is the ultimate goal of literacy teaching: that student will be able to draw upon their skills whenever and wherever they happen to need it. Whether we are transferring skills between lessons or units in our own classes, or whether it is between year levels and subjects, the key elements to consider is the necessity to: active prior knowledge so you can hook new learning onto consolidated learning; compare and contrast new learning with skills and knowledge that are similar and different; and to consolidate and extend learning by keeping as much language as consistent as possible whilst allowing students the opportunities to practice the skill with increasingly complex texts and tasks.

Table 4 is a culmination of activities and template I have used to activate prior knowledge - many I've made up myself in the moment as I try different ways to connect and consolidate (feel free to email me if you want an explanation of any of these little gems!!!) Apart from being a great way to connect new learning, activating prior knowledge allows you the opportunity for retrieval practice regarding prior learning, so I see it as such a vital component to any lesson!

| Templates  | Whole class activities  | Individual   |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- KWL Table</li> <li>- Vocabulary sort</li> <li>- Venn diagram</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 30 second hot spot</li> <li>- 3 facts and a question</li> <li>- Question building</li> <li>- Cumulative brainstorm</li> <li>- Yes/No cards</li> <li>- Flashcard Pop Test</li> <li>- Paper pass</li> <li>- Placemat brainstorming</li> <li>- Think, pair, share, collaborate</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The known and the unknown</li> <li>- What do I mean when I say...?</li> <li>- The whole pie</li> <li>- Were you listening?</li> <li>- Sticky-note questions</li> <li>- Partner interviews</li> <li>- Quick write</li> </ul> |

Table 4

### Overall:

- It is important for every English teacher to understand the science behind how a person reads and writes, as this is where they are able to identify critical gaps and misconceptions and attempt to rectify them in their students.
- When planning and enacting lessons, the fact that English is a skill-based subject needs to be at the forefront of curriculum writing and teaching. The balance between teaching skills and content should not be balance and the emphasis of English should be on skill development rather than specific text analysis.
- Ensure staff have enough comprehension and writing strategies to draw from to support their students in-the-moment of teaching and learning. Allow opportunities for staff to explore ways to maximise student understanding, development, consolidation and extension across the subject.
- Finally, provide every opportunity for students to transfer their skills and knowledge across units, years and subjects, by activating prior knowledge and embedding retrieval practice strategies into the curriculum.