

Fact sheet – Learners with low literacy in the AMEP

These fact sheets have been developed by the AMEP Research Centre to provide AMEP teachers with information on areas of professional concern. They provide a summary as well as identifying some annotated references that can be used to broaden knowledge and extend understanding. These references can be obtained through the AMEP Resource Centre at rescentr@nceltr.mq.edu.au

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Context

Over the past few years, unprecedented numbers of students with little or no literacy in their own languages have been enrolling in AMEP classes. Although many of these students speak a number of languages, many have little or no oracy in English and little or no formal education. While AMEP teachers are highly skilled at developing the English language literacy skills of their students, many find that catering for this new group of learners presents them with new, and often confronting, challenges.

Australia is a highly literate society – that is, information and knowledge is predominantly recorded and presented in written texts. Consequently, literacy is considered vitally important for full participation in Australian society, and it is given equal priority with oracy in AMEP classrooms. However, whereas the majority, if not all, of AMEP students could be considered to have low literacy, until recently most were also from literacy-based cultures, and the majority, although by no means all, were literate in a language other than English. Consequently, they brought with them an understanding of literacy that they could transfer to the development of their literacy skills in English.

In contrast, many students now accessing English classes are from highly oral cultures – that is, societies where the spoken word plays a far greater role in the transmission of information than does the written word. Even where students have had some exposure to a written language, it was often in a second language such as Arabic rather than their home language, and had particular and restricted applications.

However, AMEP teachers report that, once settled in Australia, students from such cultures value the opportunity to become literate in English, recognising its importance in this society. Gunn (2003: 39), for example, reporting on a project involving newly arrived Sudanese, Somali, Ethiopian and Eritrean students, emphasised the importance that their

communities placed on the acquisition of literacy, because without it individuals in the Australian social context are always dependent on others.

Highly oral cultures

Whereas much communication in a high-literacy culture tends to be impersonal and non-interactive (for example, the newspaper, theatre, cinema), in a highly oral culture much importance is placed on the interpersonal sharing of information. A study conducted in London (Olden 1999) into the communication of Somali refugees found that although the subjects of the study were highly literate, oral (that is, interpersonal) communication was still the preferred mode. This supports Nicholas and Williams's (2003) suggestion that oracy is more than an absence of literacy. In high-oracy cultures, interactive stories, poetry, singing, and chanting often play an important role in the transfer and remembering of information. Nicholas and Williams (2003: 39) note that oral texts from Africa are characterised by, among other things, repetition, ideophones, digressions, imagery, and symbolism. Such devices serve to augment the poetry of a text, add emphasis, maintain a rhythmic beat, and, importantly, invite the listener to join in. Therefore, adult learners from high-oracy cultures not only bring with them adult cognitive and social capacities, but also a particular set of well-developed strategies for learning. Consequently, such learners may benefit from classroom learning that includes opportunities for:

- repetition and memorisation;
- rhythmic activities such as clapping, chanting, poetry, and singing; and
- 'imaginative' texts such as stories and poetry.

English written communication has distinct features that distinguish it from spoken communication – impersonality, precision, and the 'truthful' and verifiable presentation of facts in an orderly, 'logical' sequence. Slikas Barber (2002) has noted that while

many students from the Horn of Africa often achieve considerable fluency in spoken language, this is not mirrored in their writing. She described the written texts of these students as having a 'stream of consciousness' approach. Apart from the lack of punctuation, from an English literacy point of view these texts had problems with their discourse structure in that there was much repetition of ideas, indirectness, and convolution of expression. In other words, the students' written texts conformed closely to the discourse features of their high-oracy culture and showed none of the impersonal logic expected in a written English text. Slikas Barber's (2003) report of a project to address the needs of such learners suggests the importance of oral interaction for literacy students from highly oral cultures. She reports that extensive opportunities to talk about, and talk through, texts as whole-class activities and in individual discussions with teachers increased students' understanding of the discourse features of the genre being studied, as well as its social purpose.

What is literacy?

The 1996 literacy study conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics defined English literacy as involving 'those skills necessary to understand and use information from material which is printed in English and found in everyday life', including newspapers and brochures, tables, schedules, charts, graphs, and maps, as well as mathematical processes and numbers contained in printed texts (*Aspects of literacy: Profiles and perceptions, Australia*, ABS Catalogue No, 4226.0).

Many have criticised this 'functional' conceptualisation as being too narrow because it does not acknowledge the social and cultural aspects of literacy. Street (1993), for example, discusses literacy in terms of 'autonomous' and 'ideological' dimensions. He emphasises that while the 'autonomous' or 'technical' aspects of literacy (letter formation, sound-symbol correlation, word recognition) are its building blocks, literacy itself cannot be divorced from the ideology and values of the society in which it is used. The different discursive styles of Australian and African written texts, discussed above, are an example of the differing values underpinning texts. This was summed up by an Ethiopian student who described Arabic written text as having 'more spirit, moral and feeling', while writing from the West was more 'material' (Slikas Barber 2002: 14). Ideologies also influence the way in which texts are viewed. A person whose literacy has been developed for the purpose of reading religious texts will value the written word differently from an Australian student taught to critically appraise and evaluate the multiple texts encountered on a daily basis.

Pre-literacy

While all AMEP students can be characterised as having low literacy, those who have had little or no previous exposure to written texts have specific needs and characteristics. Gunn (2003: 46) suggests that the term 'pre-literacy' is a preferable descriptive term as opposed to 'non-literate' or 'illiterate' as it 'denotes a period of initial encounter with the behavioural practices of literate people at a personal and community level'.

Many such learners may lack confidence in a formal learning environment, and may lack familiarity with classroom routines and protocols. A supportive, appropriately paced learning environment that incorporates strategies for learning in a formal classroom environment is, therefore, highly beneficial. This may involve:

- activities that assist in socialising students into classroom patterns of interaction, routines and expectations;
- attention to the organisation of folders of work;
- helping students to learn from mistakes, that is, coming to see mistakes as a part of learning rather than an embarrassment;
- carefully scaffolding work so that there is a balance of support and challenge to enable students to experience success, thereby developing confidence and self-esteem (see discussion below);
- fostering 'collaborative autonomy' among learners. This involves encouraging students to use each other as support resources in completing tasks. Example activities include one student writing the day and the date on the board with input from the rest of the class, checking worksheets with others before referring to the teacher, collaboratively working on a group activity such as alphabetical order or reconstructing a text. This not only assists in providing a supportive learning environment, but also helps develop learning strategies such as monitoring the language of self and others, learning from a variety of sources, and learning from mistakes.

Classroom applications

Special focus classes

Recent reports relating to both 'low literacy' (Slikas Barber 2002, 2003) and 'pre-literate' learners (Gunn 2003) from high-oracy cultures, suggests that the needs of such learners can be better catered for in specific-focus classes. Many AMEP teachers will relate to Gunn's experience that 'classes with both first-language literate and non-literate learners

usually resulted in the non-literate students being left behind'. Consequently, Gunn proposes that the most appropriate classes for pre-literate learners are those in which 'while oral and aural skills [are] not excluded, handwriting and preliminary reading skills [are] the main focus' (Gunn 2003: 38). Further to this, teachers are finding that students who have never held a pen before are left behind in pre-literacy classes where other students have mastered this skill. Consequently, some AMEP centres have found it beneficial, where numbers allow, to conduct more than one level of pre-literacy class in order to cater for stages of literacy development. Nevertheless, teachers emphasise that the development of literacy skills goes hand in hand with the development of oracy skills – that is, that the mechanics of reading and writing (Street's 'autonomous' dimensions) cannot be taught in isolation from the spoken communication, just as the 'autonomous' dimensions cannot be taught in isolation from their social or 'ideological' dimensions.

Attending to the ideological dimension of literacy

Street (1993) emphasises that the 'cultural bits' of literacy cannot be added on later. Readers need to understand the specific social contexts of the texts with which they are presented. For example, students in AMEP classes are taught 'form filling' so that they can function effectively when presented with the myriad of forms that confront their daily lives, such as Centrelink forms, tax forms, Medicare forms, library membership forms, and so on. All are 'official' forms and are presented as such in classrooms, thus potentially creating the perception that all forms are 'official' and must be completed. Without a wider understanding of the social contexts of form filling, successful AMEP students, having learned 'form filling', can find themselves, as some have done, with an unwanted subscription to (and a large bill for) *Reader's Digest* or cable television. Teachers and students have found bilingual assistants to be invaluable when dealing with the ideological aspects of literacy in low-literacy/low-oracy classes. This suggests that, if at all possible, literacy classes should incorporate regular bilingual sessions devoted to clarifying issues and ideas, and discussions of the purpose and intent of texts.

Working with pre-literate students to develop 'autonomous' aspects of literacy

While teachers and researchers stress that developing the autonomous aspects of literacy cannot be done in isolation, they nevertheless acknowledge the importance of attending to this domain. The following understandings may be useful:

1 Students who may not have held a pen or pencil before will need to engage in activities to develop

the necessary manual dexterity and fine-motor coordination. Suggested activities include:

- air writing – writing letters in the air to help to develop wrist flexibility, as well as developing letter recognition and letter formation skills;
- using 'fat' pens or pencils before moving on to the standard versions;
- cutting, pasting, ruling lines, colouring, and drawing shapes;
- the tactile experiences of forming letters in playdough or sand may be useful.

2 Students need to develop an understanding of the 'code' – that is, at its simplest, that:

- a spoken and written texts are made up of words;
- b written words are encoded in letters that are symbols relating to the sounds of the words;
- c words are made up of syllables; and
- d words are linked together with punctuation to form whole texts.

For this, students need:

- activities that help them break the code, that is, understand the relationship between the sounds of the words and the symbols (letters) of their written forms. Teachers without a grounding in phonics (sound-symbol relationships), or those who want to refresh their memories, may find the THRASS (Teaching Handwriting, Reading and Spelling Skills) website (www.thrass.com) useful. However, the most meaningful sound-symbol correlations are those that emerge from classroom activities and relate to students' lives. Too great a reliance on commercial charts and graphics results in an overload of irrelevant vocabulary for low-oracy students, and detracts from the learning. Useful classroom activities include games that match topic vocabulary and sounds, such as first sound, last sound, and all the words with a particular sound;
- activities to develop understanding of syllables, for example, clapping the syllables;
- whole-word recognition of frequently occurring words, such as their own name, days of the week and months, high-frequency words in texts, and important signs in the community. Flashcard activities are useful, for example, writing students' names on individual cards and starting each lesson by flashing each card and asking 'Whose name is this?' Students retrieve their card (or are given it later if they don't recognise it) and

keep it for the lesson so that it is available for copying names onto worksheets and so on;

- access to relevant genres relating to their lives, for example, street signs, labels on products, maps, shopping brochures, and jointly constructed classroom stories. As well as being explored for their meaning, whole texts help students to understand how texts are put together – words, sentences, and the use of punctuation. The texts can also be used for finding particular phonic sounds, particular words, the number of capital letters, the number of sentences, and so on;
 - plenty of opportunity to copy words, sentences, and short texts;
 - plenty of opportunity to work with others to reconstruct/sequence cut-up familiar texts such as jointly constructed classroom stories/readers;
 - plenty of repetition and recycling of activities in varied and interesting ways;
 - a variety of activities – developing these technical aspects of literacy is mentally exhausting, especially for those unused to concentrating in a formal learning environment. Students need to change activities often and intersperse ‘technical’ literacy activities with oral/aural activities;
 - wrist and finger relaxation activities.
- 3 Teachers report that students appreciate a workbook for writing letters, words, alphabetical order, social sight signs etc. They report that not only do students use the workbook to practise at home, but often, if they have finished an activity in class, they will work independently on an activity in their book. Thus, the provision of a workbook not only contributes to the development of literacy skills, but also helps foster independent learning.
- 4 Computer-based technology can be a useful learning aid for these learners, where the appropriate facilities and easy access is available. As well as commercial computer software such as ‘The Alphabet International’, the use of basic word-processing and a printer can provide low-literacy learners with opportunities to produce written texts that are attractive and even polished in appearance. This can be highly motivating. The use of multimedia programs with good visuals and activities relating spoken and written language also can be motivating and effective in helping students to become familiar with new vocabulary and familiar sentences in both spoken and written form.

Working with low-literacy students

The outcomes of the studies reported by Slikas Barber (2002, 2003) suggest that low-literacy students benefit from intensive exploration of a single genre over a number of weeks, using the ‘teaching–learning cycle’ described by Joyce and Burns (1999: 124–131). This allows for the extensive ‘talk’ time that facilitated students’ understanding of the genre and its social purpose. The specific strategies reported as being of most benefit by teachers and students in the Slikas Barber studies were:

- Prolonged engagement with one genre.
- Following the teaching–learning cycle, including modelling, joint construction, and independent construction.
- Extensive oral interaction related to a text, including discussion of the social purposes of the text, student responses to the text, the text features, and vocabulary. Teachers found doing a range of whole-class and group activities at the pre-writing stage to be particularly important.
- Inclusion of visual, oral, and ‘hands-on’ components such as excursions, watching relevant videos, and sequencing cut-up texts. The latter was found to be very beneficial in building understanding of text structure.
- Analysis of model texts at text and sentence level, including attention to grammar and spelling.
- Using accessible texts on familiar and relevant topics as models.
- Paying specific attention to planning before writing. Teachers and students found *planning* worksheets and ‘thinking aloud’ to be useful.
- Mini-conferences were considered to be an essential teaching strategy. These involved allocating time when the teacher could talk to students individually about their writing.
- Reading aloud own text as a means of identifying errors such as faulty punctuation, word choice, repetitions, and omissions.
- Whole-class error correction on OHTs.
- Spending class time on drafting and redrafting.

Appropriate topic content

As with all classroom learning, any topics of relevance to the lives and interests of learners can be utilised. When choosing topics, it should be remembered that many of the current students have experienced torture and trauma, and the loss of family members through such acts. Therefore, certain topics, such as ‘The family’, require considerable sensitivity.

‘Survival’ topics and support services continue to be a high priority, just as they have always been in the AMEP. Such topics will be familiar to AMEP teachers and include:

- Shopping
- Transport
- Going to the doctor
- Social sight signs
- Emergency services.

In addition, the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Services (IHSS) program and teachers in the field are finding that certain topics have particular relevance for newly arrived learners who may have spent years in refugee camps devoid of the facilities and services taken for granted in Australia. These include:

- the safe storage of food, medicines, poisonous products;
- using the facilities and appliances found in the home;
- general safety in the home (for example, the safe use of electrical and gas appliances);
- when to call emergency services;
- managing the household budget;
- children and schooling (for example, being on time, taking lunch, going on excursions, doing homework, sporting activities, school camps);
- driving and the law.

Students have also expressed interest in:

- leisure, recreation, physical fitness, local clubs; and
- topics that familiarise them with Australian geography, life and culture (for example, expectations of politeness).

Concrete learning experiences

Wherever possible, topics are best dealt with in a concrete or practical manner, with frequent small-scale excursions (for example, to the supermarket with a shopping list – supported by pictures – and students working in pairs to find the price) and hands-on classroom activities (for example, making a ‘healthy breakfast’ of porridge). Such experiences relate the abstract to the concrete, appeal to visual and kinaesthetic learning styles, and contribute to the varied recycling of learning. Depending on their nature, they can:

- be used as a diagnostic tool before beginning a unit of work, to find out what students already know and what needs to be taught;
- be incorporated into a unit of work with pre-practical activity oral and literacy support work,

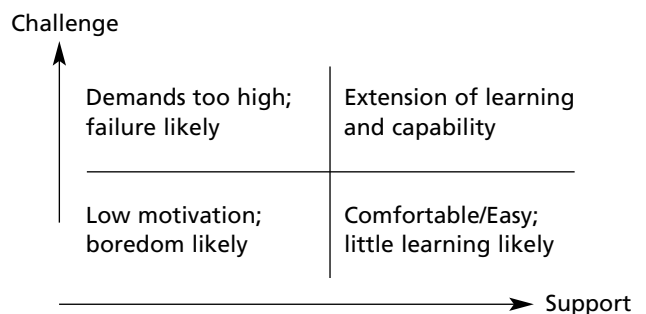
as well as follow-up oracy/literacy work such as matching photos of the experience with words or sentences;

- be used at the end of a unit of work to assess the extent of the learning.

Descriptions of how to build language and literacy development around concrete experiences can be found in Annesley (2005: 28–39) where she describes the series of steps she took within a teaching–learning cycle around a fire drill practice and an excursion to familiarise students with the local facilities.

Scaffolded learning

In describing the concrete learning experiences, Annesley (2005) also emphasises the importance of scaffolding. Hammond and Gibbons (2005: 9) define scaffolding as ‘the temporary assistance that teachers provide for their students to assist them to complete a task or develop new understandings, so that they will later be able to complete a similar task successfully’. They also discuss the consequences of high and low teacher support and challenge, which they summarise in the diagram reprinted below.



Source: Adapted from Mariani, L. (1997). Teacher support and teacher challenge in promoting learner autonomy. *Perspectives*, 23(2), Italy.

Figure 1: The consequences of high and low teacher support and challenge

As Figure 1 suggests, the optimum learning conditions involve those in which there is both high challenge and high support. Hammond and Gibbons note that ‘at such times, students are pushed beyond their current capabilities’ and that ‘good learning is ahead of actual development’. Teachers involved in recent research into appropriate topic content for low-literacy learners have reported that students have exceeded their (the teachers’) expectations when presented with challenging, but appropriately scaffolded, materials.

Annesley describes four units of work in which she anticipated the necessary scaffolding during the planning stage (‘designed-in scaffolding’) and also included ‘contingent scaffolding’ to address special needs as they arose. The teaching sequences she

describes clearly demonstrate how the 'autonomous' and 'ideological' aspects of literacy discussed in this fact sheet can be harnessed to provide the scaffolding required for significant gains in learning.

Class sizes

This fact sheet has synthesised anecdotal evidence from practising teachers with the outcomes of three action research projects conducted within the AMEP. All emphasise that special focus classes devoted to developing the literacy skills of the current cohort of students from highly oral cultures need to be small in size. Teachers speak of the intensity of literacy work, the demands of students unused to a formal learning environment, and the requirements of individuals that cannot be adequately met in a 'normal'-sized class.

Annotated bibliography

Annesley, M. (2005). Bringing beginner readers to a text. In A. Burns & H. Joyce (Eds.), *Teachers' voices 8: Explicitly supporting reading and writing in the classroom*. Sydney: NCELTR.

This chapter forms part of a volume devoted to the issue of supporting and scaffolding the teaching and learning of reading and writing in adult ESL classes. It includes excerpts from the author's classrooms that vividly describe the processes and classroom activities they are describing. It is, therefore, a very useful resource for teachers dealing with learners with low literacy.

Bayham, M. (1995). *Literacy practices*. London: Longman.

Drawing on ideas from linguistics and anthropology, as well as educational and social theory, this book includes research into, and practical experience of, the development of literacy in adults. It explores the notion of literacy as socially situated practice shaped by and shaping ideological positions.

Hammond, J., & Gibbons, P. (2005). What is scaffolding? In A. Burns & H. Joyce (Eds.), *Teachers' voices 8: Explicitly supporting reading and writing in the classroom*. Sydney: NCELTR.

Forming part of the same volume as Annesley (above), this chapter describes the key features of scaffolding in educational contexts, as well as its relationship to good teaching.

Gunn, M. (2003). Opportunity for literacy? Preliterate learners in the AMEP. *Prospect*, 18(2): 37–53.

This article describes the outcomes of a classroom-based action research project aimed at optimising the learning opportunities for a group of students from the Horn of Africa and southern Sudan. See also Gunn, M. (2003). Problem or opportunity? Providing for pre-literate learners in the AMEP. In G. Wigglesworth (Ed.),

The kaleidoscope of second language learning: Learner, teacher and researcher perspectives. Sydney: NCELTR.

Joyce, H., & Burns, A. (1999). *Focus on grammar*. Sydney: NCELTR.

The overall purpose of this book, as the title suggests, is to present an overview of theoretical issues and practical ideas for the teaching of grammar in English language and literacy classes, as well as in mainstream education. The chapter on grammar and teaching written language is especially useful for the development of literacy skills. It contains a description of the teaching-learning cycle: building knowledge of the field, modelling texts, joint construction of text, and independent construction of text. It also contains suggested activities for developing students' sociocultural understanding of the function of the text (Street's ideological dimension), as well as activities for the more 'autonomous' dimensions of literacy.

Nicholas, H., & Williams, A. (2003). Oracy is more than the absence of literacy: Changing learner groups in ESL classrooms in highly literate societies. In G. Wigglesworth (Ed.), *The kaleidoscope of second language learning: Learner, teacher and researcher perspectives*. Sydney: NCELTR.

This chapter compares and contrasts the ways that members of highly oral cultures interact with each other and the ways that members of highly literate cultures interact. It discusses the different characteristics of communication – the different structuring of texts – in the two types of cultures and suggests implications for teachers. See also, H. Nicholas & A. Williams (2003), AMEP Fact sheet – Teaching issues 2: *Teaching spoken and written language*, available through the Professional Connections website at:

<http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/pdamep/factsheets.html>

Olden, A. (1999). Somali refugees in London: Oral culture in a Western information environment. *Libri*, 49, 212–224. Downloaded 9/4/06 from: www.librijournal.org/pdf/1999-4pp212-224.pdf

This report of a research project involving 25 Somalis in London is interesting for the insights it gives into the preferred communication modes of peoples from highly oral cultures.

Slikas Barber, K. (2002). The writing of and teaching strategies for students from the Horn of Africa. *Prospect*, 17(2), 3–17; and

Slikas Barber, K. (2003) Special focus writing class for Horn of Africa and other AMEP students with similar needs. In G. Wigglesworth (Ed.), *The kaleidoscope of second language learning: Learner, teacher and researcher perspectives*. Sydney: NCELTR.

This journal article and book chapter describe two action research projects conducted within the AMEP. The projects focused on developing and documenting strategies for teaching special focus classes for developing the literacy skills of students from highly oral cultures and others whose writing exhibited similar characteristics.

Street, B. (1993). *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This book presents an interesting collection of discussions on the nature of literacy in different cultural contexts, including a chapter by I. M. Lewis that explores the nature of literacy in Somalia. The Introduction elaborates Street's notions of the 'autonomous' and 'ideological' dimensions of literacy.

Further resources

A sizeable number of resources relating to low-level and pre-literate learners can be found on the NCELTR website. These include teaching resources, books, theses, journal articles, conference papers, and book chapters. The site also includes links to electronic documents and articles.

The web address is:

<http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/resources/lowLevelLearners.html>

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