

Opportunity for literacy? Preliterate learners in the AMEP

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ABSTRACT

An encounter with adult learners of English as a second language (ESL) acquires a new focus for the teacher when those learners have minimal, if any, experience of being literate in their first or any other language. Instead of adopting a 'deficit' view of these learners, it is possible to view them as facing an 'opportunity' for literacy. However, this opportunity may dissipate if the specific needs of such learners are not addressed. These needs include: an opportunity to access basic reading and writing skills, bilingual support, and acknowledgment by the teacher that this is likely to be the learners' first experience of formal education. This paper describes the outcomes of an action research project funded by the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) which attempted to optimise this opportunity for a group of learners from the Horn of Africa and southern Sudan. Changes occurred in three major areas: in teacher attitudes and approaches, in the school's relationships with the learners' communities, and in the general curriculum and environment in which such learning was experienced.

Adult learners of English as a second language who have minimal, if any, experience of being literate in their first or any other language, have embarked on a 'journey twice as far' (Gunn 1994), not only adding another language to their repertoire, but also learning a new way to transmit it. This is usually happening in a highly pressurised context, where issues of resettlement in a new culture, family responsibilities, and the need for employment combine with an increasing awareness of the demands of a literate society.

Introduction to the study

During 2001–2, the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) Research Centre funded an action research project with a class of preliterate women from Ethiopia, Eritrea, and southern Sudan. All had entered Australia under its immigration program (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs).

The project class operated in a large metropolitan language centre in South Australia, alongside other classes of women and men from many other language and cultural backgrounds, most of whom were literate in their first languages. The majority of students in the project class were young women who had minimal experience of formal schooling, and whose exposure to

written text, if any, had been largely confined to religious texts in Arabic, the first language of only one student.

The class met for between six and eight hours a week over three ten-week terms, with the teacher-researcher devising the curriculum, implementing the courses, teaching the classes and reflecting on the processes that evolved. This was done in consultation with teaching colleagues, bilingual support staff and consultants from the AMEP Research Centre.

The need for the class arose because of an increase in the number of pre-literate, young adult learners amongst the newly arrived immigrant population. I was persuaded, from my past experience with Hmong learners in Tasmania in the 1980s and 1990s, that a systematic approach was warranted, different to that normally used for L1-literate beginners, which addressed the specific needs for literacy that these learners demonstrated. They needed a safe, uncritical environment with time to encounter the basics of reading and writing, bilingual support to provide clarification and an immediate means of feedback and the opportunity to participate in formal education for the first time.

I was excited by the learners' adaptability, their apparent rapid acquisition of oral English skills, their motivation and their hunger for learning. To regard these learners as 'a challenge' or 'a problem' obscured the fact that, above all, they required an opportunity to 'have a go' at literacy – something they had not previously been able to do. If such an opportunity could be created, there was every reason that these learners could become participants in a literate society. But I was also aware of the urgency of the opportunity. 'If we don't attend to this need, who will?' (Author's journal entry, September 2001)

The recommendations for the project class envisaged an English language class at beginner level which was to focus on reading and writing more than speaking and listening. There were three main reasons for this. First, in my experience, the extent of access to formal English tuition in the AMEP (510 hours) was insufficient for most beginner, literate students to acquire 'minimal social proficiency', or Level 2 on the International Second Language Proficiency Rating (ISLPR). Those entering the Program with minimal literacy were even less likely to achieve this outcome. As a result, I proposed a class where, while oral and aural skills were not excluded, handwriting and preliminary reading skills would be the main focus.

Second, again from my experience, classes with both first-language literate and non-literate learners usually resulted in the non-literate students being left behind. Teachers in such situations sought wistfully, but usually unsuccessfully, for 'someone' to provide the necessary input to enable the basics of reading and writing to be acquired by the non-literate learners. Volunteer home tutors regularly shouldered such tasks. My disquiet about this was

confirmed when I began recruiting for the class. A number of women who had almost completed their 510 hours asked to be admitted, indicating that they believed they had learned 'very little' in the classes with L1 literate students. They were to comment later and frequently, that they wished they had had a class 'like this one' when they began learning English.

The third reason for my choice to promote reading and writing ahead of speaking and listening emerged from discussions with members of the learners' communities. I was privileged to develop links with several key women who played pivotal leadership roles in the settlement of newly arrived families within the South Sudanese, Ethiopian (Oromo and Amharic), Somali and Eritrean communities. These women referred to the burden they carried because of the dependence exhibited by people with minimal literacy in the settlement process. It was imperative, from their point of view, that literacy levels within their communities, and the associated independence of individuals, should increase. Four of these women had post-secondary training, while one had arrived in Australia without L1 literacy herself and was committed to these people having a 'better start' than she had experienced. They responded with enthusiasm at the proposal for the class and immediately identified a large number of likely participants. AMEP eligibility criteria determined the final size of the project class.

As I organised the commencement of the class, I began a journal, compiling quotations from discussions, anticipating barriers, enumerating tasks and recording contact details. I reflected on my past experiences with preliterate learners and began anticipating differences and similarities with this learner group. For example, I expected the Horn of Africa students, like the Hmong, to lack mapping or 'bird's-eye view' skills (Achren 1991), but I was to be proved quite wrong when I presented them with such tasks. On the other hand, I recalled that the Hmong did not appear to acquire oral English as readily as the Dinka, many of whom, it seemed, were rapidly acquiring some proficiency in spoken English. This, I assumed, was because Dinka is one of a large number of languages spoken by tribal communities in southern Sudan, whereas the Hmong were a more discrete community in northern Laos.

As well as beginning a journal, I addressed the issue of learning materials. There is a dearth of materials commercially available for preliterate adult learners of English as a second language. People teaching in this area typically devise their own, usually using pre-primary or primary school methodologies and in response to the immediate settlement needs of their current students. I decided to put aside a lot of materials I would commonly have used in beginner, L1-literate classes, and instead, found myself creating other materials for the skill development I anticipated, for example kinesthetic skills such as

macro- and micro-hand-eye coordination (drawing large and small spirals, cutting and ruling lines, copying and colouring, folding and sticking) and cognitive skills (grid work and categorisation). I also decided to review my usual practice of supplying photocopied worksheets because, too often, these replace a valid opportunity for students to write.

I did, however, prepare three workbooks before the start of the class, which enabled me to introduce several of the components of initial literacy: a book for writing practice, an introduction to phonics and to alphabetical order, a list of basic vocabulary, a demonstration of the functions of capital letters and an approach which would foster word attack skills. The first book, *Writing alphabet letters* provided a lined page modelling the formation of each letter, opposite a page featuring four pictures and words of common items beginning with that letter, and chosen because they could largely be sounded phonically. The second book, *Writing capital letters* and the third, *Joining letters together*, followed similar principles. In addition to fulfilling the objectives set for them, I was to discover that this resource also served to promote learner autonomy, enabling students to practise their writing, reading and oral skills while I, as teacher, focused on the slower writers.

As the class took shape, I began to see the learners in the context of their communities, not as isolated individuals. I maintained the contact I had established with the community leaders by regularly reporting to them on the class's progress, seeking clarification, confirmation or correction about my assumptions and plans for the class. For example, I was advised to ensure I taught 'basic English, ABC, like in primary school' but was then warned: 'but we don't have apples'. This comment came to symbolise the need to challenge every assumption I had about the learners, to be open to perspectives different from my own, to deconstruct every activity into its component parts and identify the processes underlying the most familiar of 'literacy' tasks.

An example of this 'deconstruction' emerged as I reported to a workplace seminar about the project. I gave my colleagues the simplest of forms asking for personal identification: family name, given name, address and signature, then asked: 'What skills and knowledge did you engage in order to complete this task?'

The resulting list can be extensive. For example, the writing of your name assumes:

- that you recognise that a single word or phrase on a form (for example, 'family name') implies a question
- that you understand the purpose of such a text

- that you understand that the way in which you complete this task in public will betray your level of literacy and the control you have over your immediate environment.

It also assumes:

- the universal differentiation of everyone's name into 'Family' and 'Given' components
- that the transliteration that an immigration officer may have made of a person's name is sufficiently accurate and satisfactory to that person and so on.

Assumptions of similar complexity abound when you consider address, numbers, signature (Mace 1995) and so on, yet the contexts and functions of such writing became fruitful sources of exploration in the project class, especially where practice in completing such a form was incessant. For example, the endless task of practising your address also included lining everyone up into alphabetical order according to street name, locating the street in the street directory using newly acquired grid skills, phonological analysis of the sounds of the names, (the number of syllables, repeated phonemes), some local or national history – explaining the origin of the names and so on.

The establishment of this class also set a precedent in the Language Centre for employing bilingual assistants from the learners' communities. Two of the women leaders referred to previously were employed for 1.5 of the six hours of class per week. Between them, they spoke at least one of the languages of each student, with the exception of Nuer¹. I decided that this amount of time was adequate for students to clarify issues or ideas, for me to communicate organisational matters, and for the students to participate in the curriculum development that was ongoing. The students themselves indicated that they did not require the constant presence of the bilingual assistants 'because we'll become lazy learners'. (Author's journal entry)

As I prepared for the class, I also anticipated that there would be difficulties in documenting the learners' language and literacy skills development in conformity with the competency assessment practices of the curriculum of the AMEP, the Certificates in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) (Hagan et al 1993). This was because the CSWE assumes literacy as prerequisite to commencing CSWE Stage I. I joined nationwide discussions with colleagues about the need to record such achievements in a revised assessment document.

Considerations such as these culminated in the formulation of the project's research question:

What conditions are necessary to optimise access by preliterate learners to literacy in ESL classes in the AMEP?

Issues in learning and literacy

My previous experience with teaching English as a second language to pre-literate learners (Gunn 1994) had introduced me to a body of mostly Australian literature, many unpublished research reports, which were to inform much of my practice at that time (for example, Khoe and Kightley 1986, Eldridge 1989, Ramm 1992, Huntington 1992). As I began the project class, I looked again for publications which addressed the teaching of English as a second language to preliterate learners in an Australian context, with particular reference to students from oral traditions. Little new was forthcoming. I changed focus therefore, and decided to survey the research relating to 'literacy' published in the AMEP publication *Prospect: A Journal of Australian TESOL* during the first fifteen years of its production (1985–2000). This would provide an appreciation of the 'culture' of adult ESL literacy teaching in Australia and I could then relate my present research project to the national experience.

While Australia's Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) was not unfamiliar with preliterate learners, my search of *Prospect* revealed few direct references to the nature of the learning and teaching their presence had generated. This was despite the fact that substantial numbers of low-literate people from Indochina, Central and South America, the Middle East and parts of Europe had been present in the Program for over twenty years.

Kalantzis (1987) was the first contributor to address the presence of 'illiterate' people in AMEP classes. Her paper identified a number of themes which echo in the more general discussion about literacy throughout the intervening years. These themes are:

- finding an adequate definition for 'literacy'
- acknowledging that literacy is a social process and highly variable depending on learners' experiences
- acknowledging that there is an incongruity between learners' expectations and practices and the assumptions and practices of teachers in formal AMEP classrooms
- that it is imperative to enquire into the linguistic and cultural experience of learners, and
- that these learners are likely to be marginalised in the AMEP, even though they are the learners most in need.

Consideration of each of these five themes follows.

DEFINING LITERACY

Kalantzis (1987: 34–35) opened the debate by differentiating between the functionalist definition of literacy: *literacy means reading and writing*, and the process definition: *learning to be literate is an ongoing process*. Two groups of learners came under consideration: i) first language speakers without functional written language, and ii) second language learners. This dichotomy was pronounced during the 1989 International Year of Literacy. *Prospect* reported on the public debate between those who argued for literacy to be *a process for learners to gain access to powerful forms of language* (Burns 1990: 62–63) and the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP) (Department of Employment Education and Training 1991, Davison 1996: 49–50) which adopted an internationally acceptable definition of functional literacy as the ability:

... to read, write, speak and listen well enough to accomplish everyday literacy tasks in our society in different contexts, such as the workplace and the classroom.
(Davison 1996: 48)

However, ESL teachers were uncomfortable with the ALLP's reference to 'Standard Australian English' and its effective exclusion of proficiency in a language other than English as part of its vision of 'effective literacy' (Davison 1996: 48). Black and Thorp (1997) clearly stated that *the need for English language was not the same as a need for literacy*. They were attempting to counter an all-too-familiar sentiment in Australian society, which is reluctant to regard proficiency in a language other than English as an asset.

By the mid-nineties, the preoccupation with defining 'literacy' had subsided and other uses of the term were receiving careful scrutiny: for example 'critical literacy' (Murray 1998) and 'multiple literacies' (Black and Thorp 1997: 64). Terms such as these demonstrate the effectiveness of the 'process' view in ESL research. However, the notion of 'preliteracy' was not addressed. I adopted the term extensively throughout the project, possibly from Huntington (1992), unaware it had not been defined. I attempt a definition below.

LITERACY AS A SOCIAL PROCESS

ESL researchers and practitioners have established a clear link between literacy and social context (Black and Thorp (1997: 64), sometimes describing what happens when the relevance of context and social process is ignored in literacy teaching. Freebody (1995: 8) and Murray (1998: 42–3) reported that UNESCO's Experimental World Program was seen to fail because, although it was aimed at 'developing functional everyday literacy', the learners saw themselves being manipulated merely to become 'better workers'. In contrast,

the work of Brazilian Paolo Freire was noted (Murray 1990: 61). His work with dispossessed people was underpinned by his conviction that:

... literacy is a social practice that only finds expression by empowering people to determine their own need. (Freire 1970, 1994)

I found that the communities from which the project class was drawn had clearly stated needs and the learners identified with those needs and were ready participants in seeking to fulfil them. An example was the role of leadership: clear models of how to be a leader were presented to the students in the project class by the bilingual assistants. Such models, along with information about other kinds of participation in their own and the wider Australian community, validated the learners' interest in their learning.

LEARNERS' VS TEACHERS' EXPECTATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Kalantzis (1987) described the low self-esteem that characterised the learners in her initial study. It is not uncommon in the literature (Ramm 1992, Sangster 1996) to sense this attitude and find it reflected in teacher attitudes. Hood (1990: 60) responded vigorously to the stalemate that results, urging that 'more appropriate approaches to teaching English' should be found. In support, Davison (1996) claimed teachers' assumptions and attitudes towards their learners strongly influenced their methodologies and approaches.

The practitioner who emphasises literacy as part of language knowledge, skills and functions will adopt much broader goals than one who sees reading and writing as the only forms of literacy. A practitioner who sees language and literacy as a purely cognitive process rather than embedded in social or cultural practices will have a much narrower curriculum; a practitioner who does not understand the processes of first and second language acquisition will evaluate learner achievement on a far more restricted range of criteria.

(Davison 1996: 55)

Burns (1990: 63) also challenged teacher attitudes, highlighting in particular the tendency to relegate reading and writing to second place after speaking and listening in beginner ESL classes. She insisted that:

... in a technologically oriented and highly literate society, adult learners [should be] given instruction in written language as early as possible and in a principled way. (Burns 1990: 70)

Burns' argument (*ibid*) confirmed my conviction that the project class deserved an opportunity for literacy, and that this included introducing a range of written genres and texts as well as speaking and listening ones. This remains a contentious issue, especially for teachers and researchers taking their cue from needs analysis responses of preliterate students. Such students

may harbour a fear of literacy-related activities and not readily nominate a need for reading and writing because they do not see themselves as full participants in a literate society.

THE LEARNERS' LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

Kalantzis (1987: 37) foreshadowed the importance of learning about the diverse backgrounds of the learners and the inappropriateness of making generalisations about them. Black and Thorp canvassed this in their 1997 study of multilingual students in TAFE adult literacy classes. Within the AMEP, 'literacy' students have typically fitted Ross's (1999) profile where (older) age and (minimal) years of schooling combined to account for low levels of achievement in the competency-based curriculum of the AMEP, the Certificates in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) (Hagan et al 1993). However, the learners in the project class, by comparison, were relatively young, though with minimal formal schooling. They appeared to present a very different profile.

THE MARGINALISATION OF THESE LEARNERS IN THE AMEP

The final theme that arose out of Kalantzis's 1987 article is as unwelcome as it is prophetic. Freebody, in defence of learners with minimal literacy, described the extent of the marginalisation to which they have too often been assigned. These learners, he reported, were often seen as being:

... incapable of logic, scientific thought, literary appreciation, democratic processes, informed judgment and, in many cases, incapable of being employed or of contributing to the maintenance and development of social well-being. Freebody (1995: 6)

He went on to argue (1995: 9) that the issue is not how the 'commodity of literacy' is delivered, but how well the capabilities that are taught fit into the everyday beliefs and activities of the target group. In this, he echoes Freire (Murray 1990: 61). The implication is that teachers of literacy need to view their learners, not as isolated individuals, but as members of communities whose everyday beliefs and activities they need to understand better.

This survey of the research literature on 'literacy' in *Prospect*, demonstrates a complexity which was reflected in the issues thrown up by the project class. In terms of definition, the project adopted a 'process' view, where context and text function were equal components with the kinesthetic and cognitive skills required for writing and reading printed text.

The social process of acquiring literacy was demonstrated in the project class by the encouragement and expectations of the learners' own communities. By recording my reactions and responses in my journal throughout the

project time, I attempted to identify the clash of teacher attitudes and expectations with the needs and expectations of the learners. By seeking insight into the learners' cultural diversity through the assistance of bilingual support staff, it was possible to tailor the program to the distinctive needs of the students. In the project class, the shared need for 'literacy' served to unite the group. As well, the geographic proximity of students' countries reduced the sense of 'difference'.

Finally, my pro-activity with this group of learners was in direct defiance of the threat of marginalisation. While providing an opportunity for literacy may be pivotal in enticing these adult learners to future participation in Australian society, 'mainstream' education offers little to complement the work done within the AMEP.

Defining 'preliterate'

I chose the term 'preliterate' in preference to 'illiterate' or 'non-literate' in referring to the project class learners. This is because it denotes a period of initial encounter with the behavioural practices of literate people at a personal and community level.

Since the capacity to write requires manipulative skills and awareness of spatial and sequential processes, 'preliterate teaching' involves a deliberate fostering of kinesthetic and cognitive skills. The capacity to read involves the use of symbols to denote phonemes, phonemes to formulate words, words to denote concepts, and concepts to comprise discourse that can be captured from speech and made tangible in a variety of written modes that can then be read. Other skills or 'multiple intelligences' (Gardner 1993) are engaged widely such as intra- and interpersonal intelligences which initiate the learners into social interactions where written texts have a place, alongside interactive oral ones.

The dividing line between 'preliterate' and 'literate' is indefinable, but involves the learner's perception of self, as well as their evaluation of their own capacity to participate in a literate society. Consequently, the state of preliteracy is temporary; its duration is variable, but participation in a range of definable activities should result in most learners developing a qualitative change in their capacity to write and read.

Data collection

Interviews of class participants took place twice during the time of the project. The first was a mid-course evaluation at the beginning of the second of three terms. The second, at the beginning of the third term, was more extensive and targeted the ten women who had remained in the course for

the full extent of the project (30 weeks). While seventeen entered the class at the beginning of the project, (a much larger than ideal number, given the nature of the class), a total of twenty-five women participated in the class across the three terms. Most were under 35 years of age. The fluctuation in numbers was due to factors such as the policy of continuous intake, the imminent birth of children, relocation interstate, extended return visits to the country of origin and the expiry of AMEP eligibility. None left because of dissatisfaction with the class. This fluctuating population was not entirely detrimental. It was possible to establish a spirit of cooperation between learners, with the more confident invited to assist the newcomers.

The interviews of the ten core students were conducted by two colleagues, using the bilingual assistants as interpreters. Students were asked about their language learning background, their school background, their current learning situation and their use of English outside class time.

Language background

At least ten languages were represented by the interviewees: including Arabic, Swahili, Azandi, Tigrinya, Amharic, Dinka, Nuer and Tigre. While nine of the project participants had had some access to Arabic, this was the first language of only one student. Every student regularly spoke at least two languages in addition to English (Table 1). Some Arabic and Tigre speakers could read a little of their first language, but those from southern Sudan were from oral traditions and had had no access to the Roman script transcriptions, for example of Dinka, done by Christian missionaries. Such transcriptions were not accessible through formal school education.

Table 1: Number of languages spoken/written by project participants (excludes English)

Student number	Number of languages spoken	Are you able to read and write in these languages?
1	3	Not Arabic
2	4	A little Arabic and Tigre
3	2	No
4	3	No
5	2	No
6	3	No
7	2	Arabic
8	2	No
9	2	Arabic
10	4	No

School background

Table 2 collates data from the World Bank indicating a gender discrepancy in access to literacy in Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan, estimating the percentage of the school-age population able to access primary schooling in 1995. The figures are the average for each country as a whole. They do not differentiate for example, between the northern and southern regions of Sudan. A 1999 – 2000 Global IDP report (Global IDP: 1) indicated that less than 30 per cent of school-age children in southern Sudan were attending school, with that percentage dropping to a low as 5 per cent for areas afflicted by war.

Table 2: Extent of previous literacy and primary schooling: Horn of Africa (World Bank 1995)

Country	Literacy		Primary education
	Male %	Female %	%
Eritrea	66	39	31
Ethiopia	47	31	28
Sudan	68	44	51

Source: Yates (2002)

Against this backdrop, the years of formal schooling of the interviewees (Table 3) can be compared. Amongst AMEP enrolments nationally (Yates 2002), 26.8 per cent of students from the Horn of Africa are reported to have less than seven years of schooling. Of this percentage, 7.4 per cent report no schooling at all. Amongst the ten students available for interview from the project class, only one had received more than five years of formal schooling. Two (20 per cent) had not attended school at all.

Table 3: Age at which project participants attended school

Student number	Ages at which school was attended											
	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1												
2												
3												
4												
5												
6												
7												
8												
9												
10												

n=10 students (Shaded areas depict time at school)

Table 3 represents the impact on the students' formal education of many variables, notably war, economics, distance and gender. For example, Student 2 had her schooling interrupted by war and had been forced to move to another country, while such a move provided Students 1 and 3 with the only access to schooling that they had experienced, in a refugee camp, and that at age 16. Student 5 had been forced to leave school after only two years because her family could not afford to continue her schooling after her father's death, while Student 10, who also had only two years of schooling, had had to live away from home with an uncle in a far-off village. The issue of gender influenced access to schooling for some. Two students (2 and 7) had left school at puberty and were married soon after. Only two students had mothers who had attended school. On the other hand, one had an older sister who had escaped the war and completed post-graduate study overseas. Students 6 and 8 did not attend school. Both were slightly older, in their 40s, and had lived in rural Ethiopia. I asked the interviewees: 'Did you enjoy school?' I was to realise the folly of the question. It was like asking a hungry man if he enjoyed his food after only one mouthful.

The structure of the syllabus

Six key strands provided the backbone of the syllabus. The first of these was to foster skills in graphology, manual dexterity, fine motor coordination, and eye-hand coordination, essential for preliteracy teaching. In addition to the examples given earlier, students also relished the opportunity to develop computer skills using CD-ROM programs such as *The alphabet* and *The interactive picture dictionary* (Protea Textware n.d.). Several students often returned to the computer suite in their own time.

The second strand fostered aural-visual association with English text. This was where the basics of reading or 'code-breaking' (Freebody and Luke 1990: 8) were introduced. I was committed to introducing phonic interpretation of the letter symbols, despite the confusion this can create, given that most learners arrive in class having rote-learned the alphabet. But as with whole-word recognition, phonics had to become tools for word attack skills. We examined many genres, from labels and street signs to stories and maps. When the students 'read' something that related to their personal experience, for example, finding their place of birth on a map and incorporating it into a story about their journey to Australia, a new energy became evident.

Strand 3 aimed to promote meaning, encouraging the readers to become 'text participants' (Freebody and Luke 1990: 9). This required building an 'oral language pool ... an essential prerequisite in the move to literacy in L2'

(Kalantzis 1987: 41). By the end of the project and the production of a book of ten stories that were used throughout the third term (Gunn 2002), that pool had grown to over 300, by now, familiar words in stories that provoked considerable interest and lively interaction.

Strand 4 focused on making links with the 'real' world, using every possible opportunity to contextualise, interpret and encourage curiosity in whatever stimulus or information was encountered. When Burns (1990: 62–63) had recommended giving learners access to a wide range of genres from the start of their learning, she was predicting that teachers would feel overwhelmed by the possibilities of what could be introduced into the class. I was privileged, because I had access to bilingual support.

Inevitably, some of my personal biases showed. For example, I was attracted to the idea of helping students locate 'their place in space', so maps, grids, pictures, and items of personal and national interest, and of the local environment were immediate choices for class realia. Natural phenomena, human biology, mechanical processes (from staplers to car engines, overhead projectors to old-fashioned apple corers), historical references, personal stories – nothing was barred from investigation. Indeed, every topic was an opportunity for learning – if not the English language, then the immediate environment and how literate people behave within it.

Strand 5 incorporated numeracy. While initially unforeseen as a component of the syllabus, an optional two-hour numeracy module was offered from the second term. 'Minimal formal schooling' it emerged, provided little in the way of formal numeracy concepts. This was most evident in a series of lessons about time. Even the most proficient English-speaker in the class responded to a systematic demonstration of how analogue clocks depict time as 'something I now understand'. However, I had yet to learn how disorienting Australian society's construct of 'time' is to people whose world has been interpreted by seasons or festivals, not dates and hours.

Finally, Strand 6 involved the development of learning strategies which would promote independent learning. Through the writing books described earlier and the independent exploration in the computer suite, the students experienced some autonomy in learning and insight into the need to own their learning opportunities.

These strands were woven throughout the daily routines of the class. There was always an expectation of handwriting practice in the form of letter formation or copying of words or phrases, the sounding out of words and exploration of the meaning of words. 'Real world' activities were often spontaneous or incidental, but they were also scheduled when the bilingual assistants were on hand, for example to discuss diagrams of the internal

structure of the human body, or to discuss features of Australian society that amused or troubled the learners. Most students accessed numeracy class and where relevant, these skills were incorporated in the general classes, for example understanding contracts for hire purchase.

Outcomes

The interview with the ten core students also canvassed their opinions about the class experience. Most were satisfied with the number of formal tuition hours, once they realised there was a limit to the period available. They all referred to the suitability of the pace, the sense of protection from scrutiny of other (literate) learners and the nature of the activities which helped 'fill in the gaps' in their learning.

Each interviewee drew support from the bilingual assistants, recognising them as a conduit for feedback and clarification between students and teacher, as well as an independent source of advice and encouragement.

Some, more than others, were able to identify ways that they had progressed, but some retained strong self-doubt about their capacity to remember what they had learnt once the class ended. All viewed the acquisition of English as very important for their life in Australia. When asked about homework, most indicated a change in practice had occurred. Initially, homework, that is independent learning, was beyond the realm of possibility for most learners. By the time of the interview, most had regularly demonstrated evidence of some work done away from the classroom.

The need for autonomy was always in the background. The students were to highlight this when asked about their personal goals during interview. They were acutely aware that they needed extensive educational opportunities and were afraid these would cease all too quickly. All wanted to be well educated. Their children's education was important to them but they wanted to be independent of them. All wanted to work, some in an office, one as a doctor. These perspectives reinforce the relevance of adopting an attitude of 'opportunity' not 'deficit' in our approach to and provision for such learners.

My overall response to the outcomes reported by the project class participants was summarised in a journal entry:

These are a group of learners who, given access to basic literacy skills and sound teaching, would very quickly exhibit the range of capabilities, interests and personal goals of any other newly arrived member of an AMEP class. There is no inherent educational reason why most of them could not continue on the standard learner pathway, once they'd been given access to it. Will the gatekeepers open the gate?
(Author's journal, April 2002)

Conclusion

The realities of the learners' circumstances impinge on the creation of 'optimal' conditions for acquiring literacy. But where the goal of both teacher and student is to pursue an opportunity, rather than make up for a deficit, new momentum is engendered. The experience of the project class suggests the usefulness of a shared purpose, for example beginning to read and write, bilingual support from peers, bilingual assistants and the learners' communities, and a curriculum that builds upon the learners' experience and capacity. What we as teachers have to do is 'walk in their shoes', and be willing to make substantial adjustments in our assumptions and methodologies – perhaps for a prolonged period.

NOTES

1 Nuer is a language spoken in the Horn of Africa.

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