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Oral and Visual Language Strands in the New Zealand Curriculum: A Guide to Best Practice for Literacy.

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Every weekend in Auckland children are able to select from a huge range of oral and visual texts for their edification and perhaps the annoyance of their elders. Television programmes, animated series, their own PCs and laptops, interactive games, CD Roms and videos will be at many local children's disposal. Many will log on to the Internet early on Saturday morning or will be going to bed after late night "surfing the net".

The first interactive on-line movie was made recently in the U.K. where the audience created the movie in a twenty four-hour chat room. This is the reality.

Introduction

The Secretary for Education in 1994 wrote in the Foreword to the document *English in the New Zealand Curriculum* that it "focuses on developing the highest levels of literacy and understanding of language to enable students to participate fully in society and the world of work" (MoE, 1994: 5). Acquiring literacy to empower students to be fully participant involves listening, speaking, reading, writing, critical viewing and presenting. In an information age none of these components can be left behind. As a teacher educator it is my professional task to recognise and act upon these propositions.

The visual metaphor for the *English Curriculum* is the plaited rope. This motif graphically demonstrates the integrative and regenerative notion of full literacy. *English in the New Zealand Curriculum* (ENZC) has evolved out of the best practice of the past, previous concepts of what language is and what language can do. ENZC is informed by an expanded view of text which includes oral texts and visual texts.

The Strands

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Although the strands of oral, written and visual language are set out separately in the curriculum document "in practice they will be interwoven. English programmes should ensure that students' experience of language is coherent and enriched through all three strands" (MoE, 1994: 19). This is the Ministry's requirement for best practice. "Each strand includes…achievement objectives which span eight levels. These objectives are of two types: language functions, and (language) processes" (MoE, 1994: 19), thus informing practice from the weight of Hallidayan research and scholarship in the field. The achievement objectives are incremental and progressive in nature.

van Hees explores the interrelatedness of oral, written and visual text for non-English speaking background learners in this way:

> To underdo the visuals, is to not support my imaging processes; to underdo visual and written support when in (the) oral mode, is to not support the more transitory channels of communication with the more permanent and retrievable ones; to underdo the print, is not to recognise that I am literate, or need to become so (NZATE, 1999: 56).

> The focus of language teaching should be to provide children with authentic and relevant purposes for using language. Through…meaningful interactions the (learners) will develop a control of language that is functional and purposeful in meeting their immediate and future needs (Derewianka, 1990: 51).

This statement affirms the history of _English in the New Zealand Curriculum_ with its traces of _The Statement of Aims_ and _Language in the Primary School English,_ New Zealand's earlier documents. As early as 1928 best practice was seen as delivering programmes that recognized the interrelatedness of reading and writing and the same dichotomy of listening and speaking. Recognition of visual literacy is far more recent, and its disarming impetus completes the model which ENZC embraces. New Zealand's pragmatic history of educational revision has often seen English in

utilitarian terms and so the path ahead for best practice is lead predictably by the best teachers in the field spearheading innovative and often instinctual practice.

Best Practice

Best practice, what is it? Traditionally it would have been seen to be best practice in the teaching of reading and writing, literacy skills which were seen to be teachable. Learning to talk and to look at things were in the common wisdom seen to be naturally developmental processes which needed no interference from the pedagogues.

Best practice by its very nature must be that which is informed by research. The "age of enlightenment" for me was the seminal work of Donald Graves which validated oracy as a basis for written literacy. Graves' oft quoted (and misquoted) aphorism that "writing floats on a sea of speech" gave permission to teachers to surround writing with talk. It gave teachers in New Zealand permission to move into a fuller concept of integrated literacy. Joan Dalton in Australia delineated categories of talk and researchers such as Courtney Cazden and William Labov enlightened us as to the complexity and sophistication of talk.

Best practice in relation to reading in New Zealand involves oral and visual elements. Reading to children and shared book experiences are surrounded by talk. Guided processes involve questioning, sharing, and discussion using triadic models of teacher to learner, learner to learner and learner to teacher.

> When students are involved in critical collaborative problem solving the presence of an 'expert' allows students to 'see beyond' their current conceptualizations. Without this scaffolded assistance, it is doubtful that students, having maximised their present knowledge, would pose questions or make insightful discoveries which would help direct themselves or their peers towards more contextual and relational levels of thinking (Barta, 1996: 31).

Using Bloom's Taxonomy applied to questioning lifts the level of comprehension of written text using oral strategies.

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Information Literacy

This is the age of information. In New Zealand we are seeking to generate and become part of "a knowledge economy". Gwen Gawith, one of the gurus of information literacy in New Zealand, defines information as "the process of being informed". It is she says "the process of adding to the state of your experience" (Gawith, 1987). She argues that to become informed and to use information effectively

> you need reading, *listening, viewing, observing,* library and retrieval skills; you need to know how to skim, scan, synthesise, and present information selectively with originality and impact (Gawith, 1987).

These skills form a raft of what we might call comprehension skills with the oral and visual components integral to the access and achievement of information literacy. The paradigm shift to a technical holistic literacy has implicit dangers – the most significant of which, depending on one's point of view, is children's literature but that's another story.

Downes and Fatouros in *Living and Learning in an Electronic World,* talk of a need to make use of information that is given in forms other than books.

> It challenges teachers to look beyond print, to restore the emphasis on talking and listening …to include viewing as a distinct mode of communication and to expand (the) teaching of English to include multi-modal, mass media and computer based texts (1995: 7).

The implications of this for best practice is that it is important for teachers, indeed imperative, to have knowledge and expertise in other venues and sites of information. The Internet is the obvious verbal, visual site and the teaching of Boolean logic important. Information and technology are expanding at such a rate that the exponential growth of state of the art information cannot be captured by the publishing industry. Depending on the currency of the study visual and human resources may be apposite, interviewing experts for example, or selective viewing of

video, television, CD Roms and the Internet. "In an integrated curriculum all activities (need) to allow students to represent their developing ideas" (Pigdon and Woolley, 1993: 12) in diverse ways, in text, and orally and visually.

Within the English Curriculum, linking reading and writing objectives together, in an examination of genre that involves factual text, to develop the learners' skills in both reading and gathering information, visual and oral explication will make the learning transparent to the learner, to the audience, and to the teacher.

Lesley Wing Jan uses the term modelling "to mean the planned and incidental exploitation of opportunities to introduce children to the purposes, structure and function of various writing forms" (Wing Jan, 1996: 5). This view of modelling could be and is, in New Zealand practice, expanded to the purposes, structure and function of all literacy practices be they oral, visual or written.

Co-operative learning has social as well as academic benefits. "(Many) students learn better when they work together co-operatively in small groups to solve a problem, acquire a skill, or complete a task" (Barta, 1993: 30). Using groups is a strong feature of best practice in New Zealand. In planning units of work best practice would indicate that opportunities to talk and interact with peers may help to clarify concepts. Using mixed ability groups enables the talent pool to be shared and gives learners access to their peers' thinking processes (Vygotsky, 1978). The challenge for the teacher is to choose children who will be able to work well together, however it is probably unrealistic to expect this of all groups. For many instructional purposes ability grouping is the most appropriate arrangement. Friendship groups are a powerful agent which may be underutilised in our (NZ) context. Christina Igoa used friendship groups and groups of cultural comfort in her work in the Californian State system with migrant children. She also stated that learning can not take place unless the cultural and psychological aspects are in balance (Igoa, 1995: 119).

Scaffolding children does not always have to be done by the teacher however. The more able peer has a lot to contribute in co-operative and collaborative learning arrangements. The more experienced or skilled learner benefits too, in learning to

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think more critically, reflect on the responses of the peers, and be involved in meta processes such as meta-teaching and meta-cognition. Research indicates that the more experienced child's gains in learning, improved self concept and enhanced meta-cognitive awareness, are considerable.

Constructivist and co-constructivist theory alerts us to the premise that children construct meaning from a variety of experiences including social experiences. McInerney and McInerney emphasise the importance of "the active role of the learner in building personal meaning and in making sense of information" (McInerney & McInerney, 1998: 5).

This conceptual model of learning includes per se oral and visual components as part of the processing of diverse experiences.

The EAL Learner

Oral and visual literacy and the English as an Additional Language (EAL) learner is a key issue. A recent Ministry of Education study by Kennedy and Dewar explored best practice in the field of English language acquisition in a range of NZ schools. A teacher in the study validated the central role of talk in the learning process in the following statement:

> I place a high emphasis on my oral language programme…I do a great deal throughout the day of oral language and repeating other children's answers and those sort of strategies so they hear plenty of sentence patterning and have plenty of opportunities to repeat rather than produce language, which they can't do at all (at first). Having a very structured day is the other thing I have in place too…they pick up those routines very quickly and feel at home and know what's happening. I think that's fairly valuable as well (MoE 1997: 172).

Using taped stories and adding directions to the tape facilitating listening comprehension, using the School Journals, a New Zealand wide school resource, was considered to be very helpful, because they contain much culturally relevant material.

Fitzgerald (1993) states that oral and written language is more likely to develop when EAL/NESB students are provided with activities based on social interaction with other students. This is the case too for first language speakers of English.

> In the indigenous education context the oral/literate dichotomy has until recently been relatively unchallenged. The oral cultural tradition is used to explain the cultural and linguistic mismatches between home and school for indigenous (and EAL) students and is then used as an explanation of school failure (Walton, 1996).

Best practice in New Zealand for language minorities has arisen from the grass roots in the form of language nests. It is a sad commentary that successive Ministries of Education have had to be held to account by local initiatives which have often been led by the socially and economically disenfranchised.

van Hees (NZATE, 1999: 54-55) identifies indicators for best practice and successful acquisition of English for NESB students as follows:

- the strength of oracy and literacy in the first language
- previous education
- congruence of the first language with the target language e.g. phonology, directionality, syntax….
- extent of the parent/caregiver education
- social and economic factors
- affective factors e.g.

  - self confidence
  - personal learning style
  - self motivation

  - experience of trauma
  - level of acculturation

- age and experience of learner

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- exposure to the target language

- social interaction with first language/and MT speaker

- cognitive learning ability.

Exploring Language a relatively recent Ministry resource gives guidance to teachers who themselves may not have a background of linguistic knowledge yet still be fluent users of language, in the area of visual language. It states that "by learning how visual language works, by making ….implicit knowledge explicit, and by acquiring terminology, ….the means of identifying, describing, discussing, analysing and evaluating….visual texts" is possible. "As close reading of written texts" (MOE, 1996: 174), deepens understanding, so too with visual texts. The document states that moving images have their own "grammar".

The Role of the Teacher in Best Practice in New Zealand Schools

For a considerable period in New Zealand the teacher has been seen as a catalyst for learning, a facilitator. Learning now is seen in co-constructivist terms and so the role of the teacher has made a shift. The teacher, with the learners, engages in the explication of contextually based content in a learning partnership. According to Lochhead & Yager (1996: 25-28) "teachers should be mostly observers, moderators and instigators". This seems to be a position somewhere between a facilitator and a co-constructor and aeons away from the past model of the all-knowing teacher, with the teacher instigating the learning, motivating and resourcing the learners and scaffolding independent activity. The teacher as moderator conferences with the learners, reports progress, refocuses and engages in brainstorming and questioning. As part of assessment the teacher acts as observer.

Conclusion

> It is difficult to think of an activity in which learners would not be using oral language and there would be many instances where written language is the medium for recording ideas and information (Pigdon & Woolley, 1993: 7).

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This integration of the oral and written aspects of literacy is more or less inseparable in the construction and representation of ideas.

If socially constructed models of empowerment are applied, students and teachers need to be able to:

1   articulate a position about literacy

2   defend a position about literacy

3   realise how multifaceted many literacy issues are

This requires high levels of oracy, to manage the complexities of discourse structure. Intellectual passivity will not motivate or empower tomorrow's learners. What is modelled in teacher education needs to be congruent with the future. Continuing to rely on linear models, when non-linearity is the literacy skill needed now is not useful.

Best practice must pivot on integral propositions.

Why are we doing what are we doing?

What is its purpose?

What are the children actually learning?

What is the *quality* of the learning?

These are the challenges we face.

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