How language works:
Success in literacy and learning

READINGS
Acknowledgments

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Reading 1

Seriously scaling up the complexity in just six weeks

Sharyn Clyma


At the time of writing, Sharyn was working at St Martin’s Catholic Primary School in Greenacres. For this project, she worked in a team teaching role with two Year 4/5 classroom teachers, Linda Gentilcore and Graeme Frick.

Introduction

In this article, I report on the exciting outcomes from an ESL action-research project conducted in 2007. The project involved collaboration between two classroom teachers, Linda Gentilcore, Graeme Frick; their students; ESL consultant Sandra Hewson; and myself. We were interested to see if teaching the students explicitly about particular language features of recounts would make any difference to their writing.

Many of the teachers at St Martin’s had previously undertaken a professional development course in functional grammar through the Catholic Education Office and wished to implement it in a meaningful way within their classrooms. However, one of the challenges was to work out how we could begin to implement some of the understandings built up through the course. After some initial discussion, we decided to focus on some of the main language features of a recount genre as a starting point. We chose this genre because it was a familiar and less complicated one, especially for people who were just beginning to incorporate an explicit approach to teaching about language. As well, we felt that it would be reasonably easy to assess and measure any improvement in students’ writing through such an explicit focus.

As a way of capturing any improvement in the students’ writing, we collected samples of students’ recounts before and after. The ‘before’ was collected at the beginning of the project and the ‘after’ at the end of a six-week teaching and learning cycle. The two texts below are written by the same student, Carla, who clearly demonstrated a significant improvement in her ability to write a recount.

**Carla’s recount (before)**
Mum, dad and I stad at home. I playon clap Regwen and wach lots of vedos and dvd. My family and I did not whont to go eney where. I went to Litge I thort I whod be the olee one but I was n’t. Thanek goonds for Theat.

**Carla’s recount (after)**

It was Tuesday. We all dressed up because it was the fancy dress parade for Book Week. Everyone was there.

Mr M and Catherine called upon each year level, reception to year 7. All of the class walked around the hall in stile. After everybody had a turn it was time for the competitions. The school was excited that was for shor.

Miss Gray took the grey microphone and announced the winners for the drawing, colouring, construction and guessing the winning book. I was hoping that I wude win but I dident. The book that won was The Arrival.

When the teches called each of the class everyone was sad because we knew that once we got back we all had to get back to work. But I had great fun.
The ‘before’ text is much shorter and is made up largely of simple sentences, a narrow range of processes and very simple nominal groups. The second text, in contrast, is significantly longer, uses simple, complex and compound sentences, has a much broader range and sophistication of processes and uses more complex nominal groups.

Carla is just one of the forty-nine students we worked with over a six week period and all but three of the students moved up one or two ESL Scales. When we consider that it usually takes ESL students one year to move up one Scale, this is a very significant improvement over a very short time.

**How did it happen so quickly?**

We achieved this by adopting the explicit and systematic teaching of specific language features based on the functional model of language. These features were taught within the framework of the recount genre, the focus genre of the teaching and learning cycle. Our aim in the project was guided by two key questions:

- How does the explicit teaching of the language features of recount impact on student writing?
- How does an understanding of the SACSA Framework’s ESL Scope and Scales impact on teaching and learning?

Our first task was to gather evidence to determine what the students already knew about the recount genre. With this in mind, and with minimal guidance, we asked students to write a recount on their own.

With forty-nine recount texts in our hands, Linda, Graeme and I set about using the SACSA Framework’s ESL Scope and Scales to assess the levels of all the students in the two classes. The results, which were to form our baseline data, are set out in Figure 1. We also used this analysis to indicate the areas we needed to work on to build up the students’ resources for writing their recounts at the end of the cycle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SACSA Framework Standard</th>
<th>Scale 4</th>
<th>Scale 5</th>
<th>Scale 6</th>
<th>Scale 7</th>
<th>Scale 8</th>
<th>Scale 9</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year 4</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Year 5</strong></td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tbody>
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*Figure 1: Baseline assessment of ‘before’ texts of 49 students in total (10 ESL)*

**Data analysis**

From the ‘before’ text analysis, we were able to identify some common areas for development in the students’ written texts. These included the:

- overuse of simple action processes such as *went*
- majority of students using predominantly simple and compound sentences
- overuse of simple linking conjunctions such as *and* and *then* to link clauses so that there was little text cohesiveness
- predominance of simple nominal groups.
After careful examination, we prioritised the language features to teach explicitly within the context of the recount genre over the next six weeks. On average, the students received one lesson/session per day.

Our teaching and learning cycle was to include:

- **Processes**: action, saying, thinking/feeling and being/having
- **Sentence structure**: linking and binding conjunctions to construct compound and complex sentences
- **Nominal groups**: pointers, counters, intensifiers, describers and classifiers.

### The teaching and learning cycle

Our teaching and learning cycle included a range of developmental hands-on activities where students were able to manipulate words/cards to categorise processes, form simple, compound and complex sentences and create expanded nominal groups.

One strategy that we found extremely powerful for the students and which helped to cement their grasp of the identified language features was consistently using particular colours to colour-code language features in text. We used green to underline processes, we circled linking conjunctions in blue and binding conjunctions were circled in red. We found that this visual strategy assisted students greatly when categorising sentences in texts written by others as well as in their own sentence construction.

We began by looking at how a sentence had to have at least one process in it. After exploring different process types we moved on to the difference between simple and compound sentences. Using A3 sheets with a visual on each, such as in Figure 2, small groups of students worked collaboratively to compose a compound sentence and each sheet was passed on to another group and the process repeated. In each case, students had to underline the processes in green and circle the linking conjunctions in blue. From there, we used a similar process to develop students’ understanding of binding conjunctions to compose complex sentences, this time circling the binding conjunctions in red (see Figure 3).

![Figure 2: Composing compound sentences](image)

![Figure 3: Composing complex sentences](image)
Once we felt the students were confident in constructing simple, compound and complex sentences, we moved on to using all three sentence types in creating a short text based on visuals such the one in Figure 4. Here as well, students had to identify the processes and the linking and binding conjunctions.

We also introduced students to the nominal group, initially looking at describers and classifiers, using visuals such as the one in Figure 5. From there, we introduced the other elements of the nominal group, identifying each with the appropriate metalanguage.

By using visual aids, we were able to build up common understandings of particular fields which enabled students to participate effectively in the various activities. It allowed all students to focus on the specific language feature being introduced. In this way, students were able to gain confidence in identifying and using the language features at word and sentence level before experimenting with them within larger chunks of text.

We also used the same recount text for all specific instructional purposes (ie deconstructing texts: finding and classifying processes, identifying compound sentences and locating components of nominal groups) as we believe that the students, particularly our ESL and students requiring Adaptive Educational support, could then focus on the language features and skills being taught and not have to grapple with making meaning of a new text each time. At other times, for example when the class teachers were teaching about the structure of a recount text, the students were exposed to a range of recount texts.

These activities were undertaken in class groups, in smaller groups and in pairs before students experimented individually. This allowed all students to build confidence in manipulating these language features in the written word as well as gaining verbal skill in using the metalanguage associated with these language features. In this way, the process supported the teaching and learning cycle of building the field, deconstruction, joint construction and then independent construction.

In particular, this explicit teaching gave our ESL and Special/Adaptive Education students the scaffolding and confidence to take risks with their learning and thus build on their literacy skills. Similarly, the more able students were able to experiment with the same language features but with more complex and challenging language, including a greater range of binding conjunctions such as comparative conjunctions.
Final scaling results

At the conclusion of our six-week teaching and learning cycle, the students were asked to individually construct their own recount text based on the knowledge and skills that they had gained. We again used the ESL Scales to assess each student’s development.

Figure 6 provides our results which show the comparison between the initial text (baseline data) and the final text post-teaching (note that two students were absent when the final recount was written). It is evident from the table in Figure 6 that the students made really significant progress up the Scales over a relatively brief period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SACSA Framework Standard</th>
<th>Scale 4</th>
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<th>Scale 9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 4 Initial text</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final text</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year 5 Initial text</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final text</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6: Comparison between Scales at the beginning and the end of the action research project

The evidence of improvement of our students is summarised below:

- 15 students improved by 2 Scales
- 31 students improved by 1 Scale
- 3 students did not improve a Scale.

To sum up

These findings clearly demonstrate the value of having a focus on language as a key part of an explicit teaching and learning cycle. We were able to move nearly a third of the students up two Scales, or the equivalent of two years of schooling. As well, we also saw over 60 per cent of the students move up one Scale, the kind of improvement we would expect to see after one year.

As well as these more tangible outcomes, we also identified the following:

- deeper student understanding of the metalanguage associated with functional grammar and used orally with increasing confidence
- greater empowerment of students as they took on increasing responsibility for their own literacy development
- supported collaborative learning amongst students as well as staff
- methodologies being transferred to other genres and learning areas
- class teachers feeling more confident in critically analysing their students’ writing, using the SACSA Framework’s ESL Scope and Scales in identifying their specific learning needs and then planning their teaching accordingly
- fostered professional learning conversations within the wider staff regarding functional grammar and the use of the SACSA Framework’s ESL Scope and Scales to assess literacy progress.
It was a tremendous result that the majority of the students were incredibly empowered to experiment with these language features and, in doing so, developed increased confidence and responsibility for their own writing as they were able to analyse and assess their own texts. Similarly, their use of and control of the specific metalanguage of functional grammar such as binding conjunctions, complex sentences, and various functions within the nominal groups aided in building their confidence and awareness of the various components of their writing.

A highlight for me, apart from the tremendous development in their written texts, was the dialogue which occurred between the students and their teachers based on this new shared metalanguage: excited students at lunch time sharing the complex sentence that they had composed the previous night, or telling me about the rather vivid nominal group that they created about their little sister! It was an absolute thrill to see students playing with language and showing such creativity and enthusiasm as they experimented with these newly discovered language resources.

References


Reading 4

A whole-school approach for improving student outcomes: A case study

Chris Newton and Mary Clarke

Chris Newton is the Regional Literacy Manager for the Cairns Region in Far North Queensland and Mary Clarke is a Learning Support Teacher in the case-study school.

Introduction

In this article, we report on the success achieved in improving one school’s results in national testing. We link that to the implementation of a program informed by an action research project and that also involved significant professional development supported by two key elements: the provision of a literacy mentor and the central role of an explicit teaching and learning cycle to engage students in meaningful learning.

The context

The school is a P–12 college situated in a low socio-economic area in the far north of the state of Queensland. Its enrolment includes a significant population of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Island, Hmong and Pacific Island peoples for whom Standard Australian English1 is not their first language. In the past, the school performed poorly in state-wide testing regimes and there was a large number of students identified as requiring learning support.

In 2007, the school administration team agreed that it needed to undertake a systematic approach to addressing the problem of poor student results and to re-think the way resources could be used to assist all students to improve learning outcomes. Up until this time, the Learning Support Teacher would withdraw students in small groups from classes and provide intense support once or twice per week. The limited effectiveness of this approach was one of the major catalysts for the workplace reform described here. When Mary Clarke took over the role, she was keen to change the practice of withdrawing students to one of working with teachers in a coaching and mentoring role. It was decided that a group of Year 6 students who had performed poorly in the previous year’s state-wide test would be targeted as part of the action research project undertaken as part of the school’s wider intervention program. In 2006, 21 of these students, who were then Year 5 students (turning 10 years of age), were below the national minimum standard in writing and no students achieved the top standard expected for the year level, although two students scored in the standard immediately below.

In the year prior to Mary taking up this new role, Education Queensland had launched its Literacy Professional Development program as part of ‘Literacy the Key to Learning: Framework for Action 2006–2008’. One of the principal aims of this program was to ‘conduct professional development conferences and workshops with a focus on literacy, including literacy in the curriculum’ (Education Queensland 2006). Under the program, Regional Literacy Managers such as Chris Newton would deliver five days of face-to-face professional development to teachers of Prep, Years 1–3, Years 4–7 and Years 8–9, with each program tailored to suit the needs of both the students and the teachers. Mary’s school wanted to ensure that the understandings about literacy developed during this professional development would be taken up by the teachers and become part of their classroom practice.

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1 There is, for example, a dialect of English called Aboriginal English.
Action research: Informing practice

In the early ‘informing’ stages of what would become a whole-school implementation model, which is described below, it was decided that it would be helpful to build in action research projects that would allow the various stakeholders in the school to focus more closely on the processes and issues arising and on some of the outcomes resulting from the program itself. Here, we will focus on one group of teachers from the middle school who worked with the Year 6 students. We will outline briefly the theoretical frameworks that they drew on as part of the action research.

One of the major concerns for this group of teachers was how they might change their current teaching practices to achieve improved literacy outcomes. While they were required to teach all of the Key Learning Areas (KLAs), they realised that they had not considered the explicit literacy demands of each of the KLAs with all the tensions that that brought with it. What did it mean to teach literacy in science as against literacy in English?

Here the work of Elmore on the ‘core of educational practice’ (Elmore 2004, p 8), which he defines as ‘how teachers understand the nature of knowledge and the student’s role in learning, and how these ideas about knowledge and learning are manifested in teaching and classwork’, became an important reference. The instructional core is about the relationship between content (curriculum) knowledge, pedagogy and student needs and engagement. He asserts that any program designed to bring about improvement needs to attend to all three elements of the ‘core’. If the content or curriculum knowledge is improved without attention to pedagogy, for example, then teachers may deliver the content in inappropriate ways and as a result students will not be engaged. If pedagogical improvements are made without attention to the content, then a ‘bag of tricks’ approach may result with little or no connection to the intended learning of the curriculum. Students must also have explicit knowledge of what it is they are required to learn, otherwise learning becomes reduced to a game of ‘hide and seek’ or ‘guess what the teacher wants us to know’. Teachers, therefore, must know where their students are in relation to the desired learning, have a deep understanding of curriculum intent and then work hard to engage the students in appropriate and challenging ways if improved outcomes are to be achieved.

In developing their understanding of the instructional core, the teachers at the school realised that the subject of English as a discipline of knowledge had not actually been taught explicitly. What had been labelled as ‘English’ in their classrooms was actually literacy. For this reason, writing in the English KLA was chosen as the focus for their action research.

At the same time, the school was grappling with the issue of how best to build understandings about language within the teaching body. Initially, the school hoped that having one or two teachers at each level attend the Language and literacy: Classroom applications of functional grammar (DECS 2004) course would enable those teachers to pass on the knowledge gained in the course to their peers. This was soon superseded by a more ambitious plan to have every teacher in the school do the course and so a more targeted and strategic delivery was set in place.

One of the first steps the school took was to have the associate principal trained as a tutor in the Language and literacy course. The associate principal then began to train teachers at the school, including Mary, who was identified as a literacy leader in the school. Importantly, the principal and deputy principals undertook the training as well, which enabled them to both understand what the teachers were experiencing and also have a shared set of understandings about what constitutes an explicit pedagogy and how it might look in practice. One of the challenging issues for teachers was how they would begin to work with Mary in her new role as teacher mentor. From the outset, Mary began working closely with the teachers, supporting them in the classroom with their teaching, with planning and preparing units of work and guiding their reflections. When the associate principal moved from the school, Mary completed tutor training so that the training could be expanded to all teachers, including those new to the school over time. With these issues in mind, the school designed the whole-school implementation outlined below.
Whole-school implementation model

We now describe the more macro-processes that were designed and undertaken by the school as part of the whole-school implementation, which consisted of five major phases. Once again, we give a brief summary of what happened at each of these major phases, although it does not exactly capture all of the complexities of such a process.

Phase 1: Development of teacher knowledge

The aim of this phase was to deliver intensive, explicit professional development to enable teachers to effectively teach the required curriculum knowledge to their students. The teachers’ feedback from Education Queensland’s professional development program indicated that although functional grammar had been introduced during the course there was a general lack of confidence and depth of knowledge in this area. Therefore, Language and literacy: Classroom applications of functional grammar was chosen, a school-based tutor was trained, and the course was delivered to a group of teachers including the teachers in the action research and the school administrators.

Phase 2: Goal setting

During this phase, the teachers and tutor examined student data very closely. The requirements and marking key of the national writing task were investigated, along with other class and school assessment tasks. Student results were then examined to determine students’ strengths and weaknesses. This information provided the basis for collaborative group planning and the development of assessment criteria for school-based tasks.

Phase 3: Guided practice

After collecting baseline data (ie what students were able to do before explicit teaching), Mary worked with teachers to develop responsive units of work for each class. When the teachers did not feel confident in teaching particular aspects, the mentor was able to model lessons for them. The teacher would then deliver a similar lesson with the mentor as a critical friend to observe and provide feedback or, if the teacher required further scaffolding, to work cooperatively in delivering the lesson. Although some teachers were a little unnerved at first, this model very quickly became one of the strengths of the implementation process and teachers were eager to take part in the lessons. Regular reflection time was also built into this process to enable teachers to reflect upon their own strengths and weaknesses in a safe and supportive environment. This reflection was crucial to the teachers ‘fine tuning’ their pedagogy to engage students in the most effective ways possible.

Phase 4: Independent practice

Having been scaffolded through the process of explicitly teaching students the language demands of their writing tasks, teachers were then able to apply their learning to the delivery of other lessons. Again, collaborative reflection and sharing played a major role in monitoring the progress of both teachers and students.

Phase 5: Evaluation

The teachers collected student data at each phase of the teaching and learning cycle and used this to plan the next teaching and learning phase with the mentor. At the end of the cycle, student data were compared with the baseline data and reflection centred on focus questions such as ‘What goals have we met?’ ‘What worked well?’ ‘Were there any things we could change?’ and ‘Where to now?’. These questions were considered in terms of both student learning and teacher learning.
Having designed and engaged in the implementation process, the school now directed its attention to the question of the pedagogy itself and, in particular, what an explicit pedagogy around language might look like. Here, the teaching and learning cycle (Figure 1), advocated also in Education Queensland’s Literacy—the Key to Learning Years 4–7 Professional Development, formed one of the key elements of the pedagogical approach.

![Teaching and Learning Cycle](image_url)

Figure 1: The teaching and learning cycle

When planning using this cycle, teachers begin by focusing on assessment and then working backwards through the model. This is the opposite direction to how students would encounter the learning, where they would begin by developing field knowledge.

**Developing a unit of work**

In this next section, we outline the steps the teachers at the school followed in developing their units of work.

**Step 1: Consult syllabus documents**

In Queensland, this means that teachers need to consult the Essential Learnings for the KLA under consideration. They identified the specific knowledge and understanding and ways of working to be developed in the unit of work.

**Step 2: Design a task**

Teachers then designed a task which afforded students the best possible opportunity to demonstrate the knowledge and understanding and ways of working that have been identified as the focus for teaching and learning.
Step 3: Write an exemplar in response to the task

Teachers wrote an aspirational response to the assessment task, though on a slightly different topic. As the teachers in this school were targeting writing and the data showed that their students performed poorly in the character and setting and the sentence structure criteria of the national test, it was decided that the student task would be to write a literary description.

The teachers each wrote an exemplar of a literary description of a favourite place. The Years 4–9 Literacy indicators\(^2\) were consulted to ensure appropriateness and consistency. The mentor assisted in this task and exemplars were compared and adjusted where necessary. Below is one teacher’s response.

A favourite place of mine is Ross and Locke swimming hole on the Mulgrave River, nestled at the base of the Gillies Range. As we pull up, the wafting aroma of roasting steak and sizzling sausages enters my nostrils and my mouth waters in anticipation of lunch. Leaving the car, I stroll over to the water’s edge, the wind blows through my hair and cools my sweaty skin. The rocks beneath my feet start heating up so I run to the cool grass to relieve the burning sensation. I can almost feel the cool refreshing rapids lifting my spirits already. The sound of flowing water takes me away like reading a good book on a rainy day ...

Step 4: Analyse the exemplar to identify the salient language features

Teachers used their exemplar and the functional model of language to identify the salient language features of the text. In this way, teachers focused their lessons so that students were able to develop deep knowledge and understanding of particular elements rather than make a cursory attempt to cover everything in the text. To identify the salient features, teachers first considered the purpose of the text and then identified the elements that enabled the text to achieve its purpose. In this case, teachers chose the following language features as the focus of their teaching:

- extended noun groups
- sentence structure—using dependent clauses to expand meaning
- use of figurative language
- vocabulary.

The mentor also led teachers to examine the texts used in different KLAs as an effective way for teachers to develop a deeper understanding of each of the disciplines. In investigating the texts used, teachers were able to clearly see the difference in how each of the KLAs constructs and values knowledge and so situate their teaching firmly in the discipline; in this case, English.

Step 5: Pre-test

Baseline data were then collected so that teachers could identify the students’ prior knowledge and identify any gaps which may not have been previously considered. Below is one student’s literary description before any explicit teaching (unedited).

My favourite place is Charlie’s restaurant because it has lots of food, charlies is next to Espieland. It smells like chocolate pudding. It feels like a pillow on the floor. The people around me were big fat pigs and lots of food. Charlies look big fat pack with people. The people how swerve me donenst serve me they only take drink orders plate and cup and rubbish, charlies has a swimming pool witch is so cool.

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\(^2\) At the time of writing, these were available at <http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au/downloads/early_middle/yrs_4-9_ltr_indicators.pdf>.
Step 6: Design explicit teaching episodes

The teachers considered the demands of the assessment task and the students’ pre-test results to design explicit and focused teaching episodes. The use of the metalanguage of the discipline was essential in developing the students’ knowledge and understanding. Teachers also considered pedagogy, and shared teaching strategies that would actively engage the students.

Step 7: Implement

Each teacher then began teaching the unit of work to the students, with support and modelling from the mentor as required. Elmore (2004, p 97) claims that

The focus of professional development on enacted practice—the combination of academic content and pedagogy into classroom delivery that is responsive to issues of student learning in specific settings—requires that the physical location of the learning be as close as possible to where the teaching itself occurs ... It has to involve professional developers who, through expert practice, can model what they expect of the people with whom they are working.

This model of coaching, mentoring and shared responsibility was one of the keys to the success of this whole-school implementation model.

Step 8: Assess and reflect

After explicit teaching, the results were compared with the students’ pre-test results. The text below is the same student’s work (unedited) as shown in Step 5. Students chose a picture as a stimulus for their writing and wrote a literary description.

The ocean

There was a splash from a whale far out to sea. Pods of dolphins too sometimes play beyond the waves darting and weaving amongst each other like silvery shadows. Over head flocks of terns wheeled and dived. Once in a while the surface of the sea would boil as a school of mackerel would feed near the surface. The land is full of grass and flowers. The beach is full of people. There are 2 big houses; one on the beach and the other on the farm. The sky is full of clouds; and the waves are wild beasts.

Surprising us with the results

So, after all this hard work, what were the outcomes? In the analysis that follows, we will present some of the findings, focusing on the results achieved with the cohort of Year 6 students. We will start with those students who performed particularly poorly in the 2006 state-wide testing. These were the students that were the main focus of the research project, the so-called ‘long tail’.

At the time this state-wide testing program was undertaken, there was no national testing program. By 2008, when these students were tested again, a nation-wide testing scheme, National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLaN), was in place and superseded the state scheme. Despite these different testing regimes, there were strong similarities, and comparisons could be made between the results (Table 1) despite the difference in using an alphabetic scale (State—see column 1) as against a numeric scale (NAPLaN—see column 3). So, even though the testing regime changed during this time, the writing task and the assessment criteria did not.
The shaded row in each case in Table 1 indicates the minimum standard expected at that year level. Beginning with the column giving the actual results in 2006, we can see that there were 21 students below the National Minimum Standard (D), with 18 achieving Standard C and 3 students achieving Standard B. The column giving the ‘expected’ results for those same students in 2008 provides the figures for the average expected improvement. Clearly, the students who were below the minimum standard in 2006 were expected to remain below the minimum standard expected two years later.

What emerges, in fact, is a very different picture. While there are still 4 students not achieving the benchmark standard, 17 out of the 21 are now operating at or above the standard, demonstrating accelerated improvement. At least 8 of the students have made a very significant improvement, with 2 students moving up at least 5 levels since 2006. This is quite a remarkable shift in such a short time.

Another interesting outcome from this research is that similar results occurred for students at the higher end of the achievement continuum. Table 2 presents the results of the higher achieving students from the same cohort.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actual State Results 2006</th>
<th>‘Expected’ State Results 2008</th>
<th>Actual NAPLAN Results 2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>BAND</strong></td>
<td><strong>YEAR 5</strong></td>
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Table 2: Higher achieving students
To begin, there has been a dramatic shift across the whole cohort with all students now operating well above what was expected and above the national benchmark standard. Two students have greatly exceeded the expectations for the high achieving students in that year level. Across Australia, only 8 to 9 per cent of students are performing at this level.

From the data in both tables, we can claim confidently that the teachers’ interventions made a significant positive difference for most of the students, whether they were lower or higher achieving students.

The process also had a positive effect upon the teachers involved in the action research. The results of a quantitative survey revealed that all the teachers:

- felt that teaching functional grammar was important
- had seen evidence of improvements in their students’ work
- indicated that they would continue to use functional grammar to assist curriculum design and delivery.

The administration team noted that these teachers shared ideas and resources more readily and were willing to engage in professional dialogue with their colleagues, resulting in the ‘de-privatisation’ of practice and creating a culture of learning for students and teachers. As Hattie points out (2009, p 24), ‘it is critical that teachers learn about the success or Otherwise of their interventions; those teachers who are students of their own effects are the teachers who are most influential in raising students’ achievement’.

The school continues to focus upon improving outcomes for all students, and the teachers are involved in a cycle of inquiry, design and implementation of programs, and reflection and evaluation of those programs. They are continually asking: ‘Where are we going?’, ‘How are we going?’ and ‘Where to next’, with the ‘we’ referring to both teachers and students (Hattie 2009, p 37).

**In summary**

In this action research project, we saw the potential for improving student literacy outcomes through the kinds of interventions described. The outstanding improvement seen in the NAPLAN results cannot be put down to one element but rather a number of key factors. Each was important but alone could not achieve the same results.

At a macro level, there needed to be a systematic approach to how the school was going to support teachers in improving outcomes for students. Budgeting for professional development and support resources needed to be planned and prioritised to enable the smooth implementation of the plan.

Demonstrated and supportive literacy leadership was another important element in the success of the plan. The administration team was able to demonstrate its support for staff by participating in the professional development. Mary Clarke demonstrated support for staff by working with them in a coaching and mentoring role and she was supported in that by Chris Newton, the Regional Literacy Manager. These layers of support were important in building communities of teachers who were focused on learning, for both teachers and students.

At the classroom level, teachers needed to develop understandings of, or engage in, the following four elements.
The instructional core—Relationships between content, students and pedagogy

Teachers must know where their students are developmentally, in order to assist students to make connections to the new, required learnings. They must have a deep knowledge of the curriculum intent and choose learning experiences that are authentic and valued by the discipline. Finally, these learning experiences must be engaging if students are to participate actively in the learning.

The functional model of language

The functional model of language allows teachers and students to share a metalanguage to talk about the way in which knowledge is communicated appropriately in the different KLAs. It allows students to examine very closely the choices that authors make for particular purposes in particular contexts. Teachers and students use the model to clearly identify the differences in the texts that are used in particular KLAs and so make more informed choices in constructing their own texts.

The teaching and learning cycle

This cycle assists teachers to clearly focus their pedagogy on improving student outcomes. By beginning with an analysis of the task and the text that students will be required to produce, teachers are able to tailor and sequence very explicit learning experiences for their students.

Coaching and mentoring

Engaging in the coaching and mentoring process allowed the teachers to build confidence in themselves as educators. Reflecting on their pedagogy in an honest but supportive environment assisted them in becoming more discerning about the strategies they chose and led to teachers being more open and sharing about their classroom practices. This practice is at the very heart of what a learning community should be.

References


