Assessing the reading and writing of EAL/D students:
Issues and implications

by Jennifer Miller, Anne Keary and Joel Windle

Abstract

This paper reports on the preliminary findings of a study on literacy strategies for learners in established English as an Additional Language (EAL) classes in Years 7-10 in three Victorian secondary schools. The paper draws on baseline reading and writing assessment results (N=45). The findings showed that within a single classroom, around 70% of students were operating at well below their high school year level, and that teachers faced a six-year spread of literacy levels in each class. At the lower levels, students were weak in both reading and writing. At higher levels, students were stronger in reading than in writing. The reading assessments have several implications for teaching. They point to a need for instruction in decoding skills, especially semantic and syntactic cueing systems. Because decoding is necessary but not sufficient for comprehension of academic texts, knowledge about vocabulary, grammar and genre needs to be embedded in the curriculum in a systematic way for literacy development to be maximised. The study also shows how ongoing formative assessment is required to ground literacy pedagogy.

Introduction

Learners of English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) are not a homogenous group but emerge from diverse backgrounds (Matthews, 2008), yet those with low literacy levels constitute one of the most marginalised groups in Australian schools (Miller, 2009). The students in this study included refugee background students with interrupted schooling as well as students who had immigrated to Australia with their families for a range of reasons. Some were recent arrivals whereas others had been settled in Australia for several years and had strong oral skills.

This article draws on a study which examined existing pedagogical frameworks for literacy and their effectiveness for this group of students in the lower-middle levels of secondary schooling. The study used mixed methods, including teacher surveys (Phase 1) and intensive case studies involving action research (Phase 2) in three Victorian secondary schools. The aim of the project was to establish

interventions in which researchers and teachers construct a model for literacy pedagogy which takes into account both sociocultural factors and second language learning principles. This paper reports on one aspect of the Phase 2 case studies, specifically, the literacy pre-assessment, issues arising from the assessment and their implications for teaching. We assessed students to gain a snapshot of their skills in the areas of reading and writing and to establish a baseline for the literacy intervention. The assessment was also designed to inform future planning for this cohort of students in content-based literacy. Our assumption was that information gleaned from this low stakes assessment would assist with planning units of work across the curriculum for this particular group of students. Our intention here is also to discuss the broader notion of assessing this cohort, and the links to literacy pedagogy. Our interest is in diagnostic and formative assessment which enables better teaching, rather than standardised assessment which can restrict the literacy curriculum and hence prove self-defeating (Johnston & Costello, 2005).

It should be noted that assessing EAL/D students entails a number of difficulties and compromises. Even with low stakes assessment, research indicates that a range of issues arises for this cohort of students. These include cultural bias in test items, the use of vocabulary or tasks which are out of the experiential range of the students, diverse learning and cognitive styles, culturally unsuitable assessment contexts and the impracticality of testing in the student's first language (Ovando & Combs, 2012). Research also shows that EAL/D students struggle to succeed on most standardised tests due to low academic language proficiency levels (Laguardia & Goldman, 2007).

There is a movement for standardised tests to be supplemented by teacher evaluation to identify students at risk of developing reading difficulties (August & Shanahan, 2006). Instead of standardised assessment, researchers advocate for informal reading inventories such as running records (Clay, 2002) or the collection of writing samples, for example, as used in one study to evaluate a summer literacy program (Burgin & Hughes, 2009). Using multiple sources of evidence based on a range of literacy aspects for EAL/D learners is also advocated, as this group of students may possess adequate L2 social language skills but lack a depth of language (Spinelli, 2008). It is argued in this paper that informal low stakes literacy assessment, such as that used in the current study, can be reliably used to make informed decisions about student achievement and literacy needs. We argue also that formative assessment is still vital, and there is a real danger that any swing away from an assessment focus may mean that vital formative assessment is neglected.

Ongoing and recorded formative assessment plays an important role in literacy learning, and in curriculum and lesson planning. It is also important that EAL/D students are taught how to perform on tests, which are in many contexts a part of life (Solórzano, 2008). Classroom assessment can also

socialise students into checking and directing their own literacy learning (Johnston & Costello, 2005). Concept-based learning, where curriculum and teaching is tied to assessment, enables students to take more responsibility for their own learning and results in effective learning outcomes (Twyman, Ketterlin-Geller, McCoy & Trindal, 2003). For reading tests, teachers who assist students to engage thoughtfully with text will ready them for a wider range of assessment tasks (Applegate, Applegate, McGeehan, Pinto & Kong, 2009). Overall, however, literacy assessment remains a vexed issue, particularly at the secondary school level. Our interest here is primarily in how assessment informs planning and pedagogy, as well as being a critical tool in identifying student needs.

Methodology

The project focused on established classes for EAL/D students in Victorian secondary schools. These classes cater to students who have completed six to twelve months in a specialised language school, and who are now entering mainstream classes. The 45 students assessed for reading and writing were in Years 7-10 and were aged from 12 to18 years. Languages spoken at home included Korean, Burmese, Khmer, Urdu, Vietnamese, Dinka, Amharic, Bosnian, Swahili, Spanish, Tagalog, Cantonese, Pashto, Karen, Thai and French. Oral skills were not assessed, although they are clearly implicated in academic literacy (Gibbons, 2009; Hertzberg, 2012). The students attended three government secondary schools, two in outer metropolitan Melbourne and one in a nearby regional city. All three schools have a high proportion of refugee-background EAL/D students. Classes participating in the study included a Year 7-8 English/EAL class, a Year 9 Science class, a Year 9 Mathematics class and a Year 10 transition Science class. The assessment criteria were developed and results assessed against the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development ESL Developmental Continuum which provides evidence-based indicators for a range of levels in each macroskill. The aim of the ESL Developmental Continuum is to assist teachers (and in this case researchers) to increase their understanding of the breadth of increments involved in English language development, to make teaching more purposeful and to construct a shared language to explain and articulate student progress (DEECD, 2006).

Several methodological issues emerged from the assessment process, including text selection, timing of the reading tests and the link between oral skills and reading. First, selecting age-appropriate texts was problematic as the students were in the early-middle years of secondary schooling but many were operating at primary school literacy levels. We chose a series of primary non-fiction graded readers with visual support for the lower levels, which were matched against the ESL Developmental Continuum reading levels. Second, the time constraint was also a limitation when assessing 45 students. Students read enough texts for the researcher to gauge a text at an instructional level, that is, 90-95% accuracy on a running record assessment (Clay, 2002). Students did not have access to the

texts prior to reading and so the only orientation was via the covers of the books and interaction with the researcher. It is possible for students to read texts aloud successfully with minimal understanding of the content (Sweet & Snow, 2003). This can be difficult to judge and, in some cases, time did not permit the researcher to find the level of text at which the student could comprehend literal and inferential information at an optima level. Third, even when the student was reading text at an instructional level, they did not always have the oral language to answer comprehension questions. By contrast, there were students who spoke fluently about the pictures, for example, but struggled to read the text or answer questions.

It should be added regarding the writing task that it was difficult to reach a reliable consensus in judging levels of writing, and many teachers also struggle with this (see Mallozzi & Malloy, 2007; Turbill, 2007). It has been noted that raters may differentially take into account language proficiency, cultural factors and style (Huang, 2009). To facilitate validity, one researcher assessed all written samples and then results were moderated by all three researchers using the ESL Developmental Continuum, and adjustments were made. This is not an objective scientific process but all efforts were undertaken to achieve consistency in these assessments. In addition, we collectively had over forty years of language teaching behind us to inform the decisions. Below we outline the assessments in more detail.

Reading assessment

The reading assessment we used was a running record followed by a series of literal and inferential comprehension and vocabulary questions, the same for each text. The running record permits the researcher/teacher to assess a student's reading performance as s/he reads aloud from selected texts (Clay, 2002). The texts were benchmarked against the ESL Developmental Continuum. Short factual texts with pictures were selected for the early stages of reading (levels S1 and S2). These texts offered visual support, high-interest content and some repeated words and phrases with graded lexical demand. The challenges presented in these texts included some unfamiliar content and vocabulary, and a variety of sentence structures. At S1 and S2 level students were given the choice of three texts to read, which opened up opportunity for the subject matter to be familiar to students. A short passage from a book of short stories written by secondary school students was selected for level S3, and an excerpt from a Year 8 Science textbook was selected for level S4. The students' reading performance was mapped onto an assessment template taken from the ESL Course Advice (DEECD, 1997). Criteria included comprehension, strategies/skills and use of contextual cues, error, accuracy and self-correction rates.

The running records provided information about whether a student was self-monitoring his/her reading, whether the reading material was at an appropriate instructional level for the student and what cueing strategies (semantic, syntactic or graphophonic) the student was using to identify unknown words (Clay, 2002). We observed that in most cases students over-relied on the visual letter-sound relationship to decode text, and did not employ much use of syntactic and semantic systems to assist with decoding (Parker et al., 1995). That is, students were often able to sound out words using syllables, but did not look at structures within the word or sentence to decode meanings.

It is acknowledged that current research into the use of running records indicates that students should be allowed to read a text silently prior to being required to read aloud. This practice provides a more accurate guide to the student's ability to read (comprehend) and decode. Another assessment issue is that students may focus on decoding, enunciating or 'performing the text' when reading aloud, rather than comprehending, no matter what their reading ability. This is particularly relevant for a student's first reading of a text (Hertzberg, 2012). Hence, the reading assessments offer a guide to the students' ability to read rather than a definitive result. Another limitation was that the texts were not embedded in curriculum content, so students may or may not have had prior knowledge of the topics being read.

Writing assessment

The writing assessment required students to write a short text about one of six coloured stimulus pictures presented on an A3 sheet (Simpsons cartoon; African singer; mobile phone; dead pelican; soccer player; laptop). This was an open-ended writing task which aimed to show what students could do without teacher input. The only scaffolding prior to the task in each of the three classes was a brief researcher-led introduction to each picture, to ensure students could identify the subject and understood the procedure and the task, including planning options. The same information was given each time. The students were given approximately five minutes to write a plan for their story based on one picture, which could include a list of vocabulary words, a concept map, answers to 'WH' questions, sentence starters and so on. Some students wrote detailed plans while others wrote only one or two words. For some students the concept of a plan was a new idea.

Analysis of the writing samples was recorded on a modified template taken from the DEECD Course Advice and mapped against the ESL Developmental Continuum (DEECD, 1997, 2006). Pauline Gibbons' breakdown of writing analysis terms also assisted with the analysis (Gibbons, 1991). A series of levelled writing samples produced by the DEECD was also used as a guide for analysis. In what follows, a brief description of results and a comparison of students' reading and writing levels are presented.

Analysis

Reading results

The findings of the running records and comprehension questions indicated that the students were reading at the full range of levels in these Year 7-10 classes, as follows:

S1 (early primary level) *N*=11

S2 (lower primary level) *N*=9

S3 (middle-upper primary level) *N*=12

S4 (lower-middle secondary level) *N*=13

This means that only 29% of the students in Years 7-10 were operating at a secondary school reading level. That is, 71% were working at a pre-secondary level, with half operating at early to lower primary levels. In spite of this, students are expected to read and learn from mainstream content textbooks in Years 7-10. The range across the classes was also significant. The best reader (S4) was able to decode 'Mesopotamia' while others struggled with one-syllable words such as 'gem' or 'rich'. Many students were, however, able to self-monitor and use the (infrequent) prompts from the tester to decode the word when it was repeated. For example, a student who could not decode 'mineral' was prompted and then read it accurately the next four times. Fluent reading did not always indicate comprehension. Decoding is necessary but not sufficient for understanding (Paris, 2005). Some students read well, but could not answer comprehension or vocabulary questions.

Writing results and samples

Writing results showed the students were predominantly writing at levels S1 and S2:

S1 (early primary level) *N*=33

S2 (lower primary level) *N*=11

S3 (middle-upper primary level) *N*=1

S4 (lower-middle secondary level) *N*=0

In the written texts, almost all students were operating at an early to lower primary level, and the writing often looked like oral language.

In what follows we present brief analyses of two written samples. The first sample was written by a 12-year old Sudanese girl who has been in Australia for approximately six years. She was in a Year 7-8 parallel English/EAL class. The second sample was written by a 16-year-old girl from Liberia who has been in Australia for approximately two years. She was in a Year 10 Science class.

The first student wrote about a picture of a pelican with a plastic bag caught around its neck (Appendix 1 – Student A). In her plan she asked two questions about the pelican. She wrote an elongated recount linked with conjunctions ('and', 'then'). Thematically, the focus is on domestic activities, such as meal times and interactions between siblings and parents. The student has attempted to self-correct and has written the recount in the mode of an oral story telling about a daily routine. She uses temporal conjunctions such as 'then', 'after that' and 'next'. She does not use paragraphs or consistent punctuation. Her spelling is inconsistent and includes invented spelling ('braftes' for 'breakfast' and 'dienna' for 'dinner'). She attempts to use contractions ('dident', 'couldent') and uses past tense, consistent with the recount genre. From our analysis the student was operating at S1 level.

The second student also wrote about the pelican, including a detailed plan using 'WH' questions and a list of seven words to use in her story (Appendix 2 – Student B). The story uses a narrative structure but is incomplete. The student's use of tense is accurate most of the time. She uses cohesive devices such as reference pronouns ('they', 'he', 'she') throughout the text. The student begins her story with a time marker ('two years ago') and uses paragraphs. She uses punctuation including commas, spells frequently-used words correctly most of the time, and uses the conjunctions 'because', 'when' and 'if' to create complex sentences. She uses adjectives ('beautiful day') and some nominal groups ('rich and famous man'). At the end of the story the student attempts to use the conditional form: 'If they do they will be banish.' From our analysis the student was operating at S3 level.

These two samples and the analysis of all 45 writing samples show that students were operating at a limited range of levels. In all cases reading was significantly stronger than writing. Fifty-one percent of the students had a gap of at least two levels between their reading and writing. For both Student A and Student B, their writing was at a lower level than their reading levels, which were S2 and S4 respectively. Eleven students scored S1 on both reading and writing. The range in writing abilities across the classrooms was not as great as the range in reading abilities. The running records showed that most students were using the graphophonic cueing system but their use of cueing systems related to word meanings (semantic) and the general structure of language (syntax) were not found in the data. This has implications not only for their reading but also for their writing development. More detailed pedagogical implications are presented below.

Another finding from the tests was that certain students had extremely strong oral skills in English but were still at early primary levels in their reading and writing. Although it is common to assume that speaking scaffolds writing development (Gibbons, 2009), this cannot be taken for granted. One student was able to discuss images in a text in near native English, but was unable to read the text fluently or with comprehension.

Reading and writing compared

The key finding of this study lies in the wide variability of student performance. While the average student was operating at a lower primary school level, by combining the means of the reading and writing test results (*SL* 2.1, *SD*=.76) we are actually masking a far more complex picture. Overall, the students' reading scores were significantly higher than their writing scores (*t*-test of difference in means: *df* =44, *p*<.001). A comparison of reading and writing scores, ordered from the highest to the lowest individual reading score, showed that the gap between the two scores was largest amongst the stronger readers, converging amongst the weakest students. That is, the weak readers were all weak writers whereas some strong readers were also weak in writing. Reading scores were more variable than writing scores. The strongest student scored 4.3 on reading and 3.1 on writing, while the weakest student scored 1.1 on both reading and writing. Since the Victorian Department of Education S Levels are meant to correspond to school year levels, scores for reading and writing should be similar for any given student. In fact, the mean score for reading (2.8, *SD*=1.8) was a full S Level above that for writing (1.5, *SD*=.5). Unsurprisingly, there was indeed a strong positive correlation between reading and writing scores (R^2=.54, *p*<.01).

Figure 1 – Reading and writing scores compared

There was no positive correlation between age and literacy for this group. Writing performance was indeed negatively correlated with age (R^2=-.309, *p*<.05). Nor were there significant correlations between scores in either reading or writing and year level of enrolment or length of residency in Australia. On the basis of this sample, it would be impossible for teachers to predict the level at which to pitch their classes by the age of the students (ages in the sample ranged from 12 to 18), by whether the class is Year 7 or Year 10, or by whether students arrived two months ago or had been in Australia for six years (to take the full range in the sample). For some students, however, interrupted schooling was certainly a factor.

Implications for literacy pedagogy

We wish to argue that, if age, length of residency and year level are not clear indicators of ability, the only way for teachers to plan and differentiate instruction is to know, via formative assessment, what their students can and can't do. Strategies must be linked to reading and writing levels. With around 70% of students in this study reading at primary school levels, content learning through textbooks and ICT in the high school becomes very problematic, unless reading texts and activities are highly scaffolded. Most importantly, it is essential that teachers construct curriculum and tasks that engage learners in meaningful content, in which activities both build on and extend the literacy practices the students bring with them to school. This includes integrating oral language and written text activities.

From the data, we determined that there are six areas of implications for literacy pedagogy. The first relates to choosing appropriate texts and adapting or modifying texts, particularly from textbooks. Wallace points out that reading levels in content area textbooks are a serious concern, while other researchers go further in suggesting that flaws and limitations in Science textbook content and unsuccessful approaches to teaching reading may mean that using textbooks is ineffectual (Wallace, 2005; Radcliffe, Caverly, Hand & Franke, 2008). Our observations showed that Internet texts were equally challenging. Irrespective of mode or medium, comprehension is a concern when text is dense and uses complex and decontextualised language (Chamot, 2009). The second pedagogical implication relates to the importance of explicit vocabulary teaching for progress in reading and writing. Unfamiliar vocabulary and difficult text structures result in confusion (Fleming & Billman, 2005), and even many average native-speaker students struggle with content area reading as a result of complex vocabulary combined with new concepts (Greenwood, 2004). This is not to say that content area reading cannot be scaffolded, age-appropriate and challenging, but over-reliance on a textbook for low literacy EAL/D learners limits both engagement with the text and the possibility for meaningful scaffolding. We argue that presenting these learners with unmodified mainstream texts is a more significant access and equity problem than scaffolding with modified text. It also tends to create a very teacher-centred pedagogy. Thirdly, it is important to build students' reading strategies and their awareness of these. Poorer readers need a range of strategies to help them decode text. If students do not understand text with the use of one cueing system, they need to be able to use another (Gibbons, 1991). It is also important that students have some knowledge about the subject matter they are reading so it is easier to make inferences about the text (Allington, 2002). Fourth, we suggest that no obvious relationship between oracy and literacy can be assumed by teachers, even though students' oral communication skills were not formally tested in the study. Further, there was no clear link between language proficiency and length of residency for many of these students. We argue that where students have strong speaking skills, teachers should spend far more time on explicit written language practice and development. Fifth, since 29% of students in these classes were operating at an

appropriate literacy level for their Year group, it seems vital to differentiate the curriculum so that more advanced EAL/D learners are cognitively and linguistically challenged. In a pedagogy which assumes that most students are struggling, a complex picture remains hidden, and the stronger students miss out as well as, in some cases, the weaker students. Finally, as the students who participated in the study were not using semantic or syntactic cues as well as graphophonic decoding, teachers also need to help students recognise cohesive lengths within a text (see Gibbons, 1991).

Conclusion

This paper has presented findings from an initial assessment of reading and writing in a study on content literacy for struggling EAL/D learners. In particular, the paper focused on the findings from the literacy pre-test in reading and writing, and the implications these findings have for teaching. The findings demonstrate that students within the Year 7-10 classrooms were working at a range of literacy levels that varied from lower primary to middle secondary, a range of seven years. In regard to reading, it is argued that some learners need explicit instruction in the early stages of literacy, specifically in learning semantic and syntactic decoding skills. Such foundation skills provide the baseline from which unconstrained skill sets such as comprehension strategies, grammar, and genre and content knowledge can be taught.

The students' written tests showed that students were operating at different levels although the level of variation was not as great as it was for reading. Writing samples showed that a number of students were writing at an emergent level, and need to read a range of texts, including texts that they have written. Word knowledge and word-solving skills need to be embedded in the curriculum for writing development. But to do this effectively, teachers need to be informed by assessment results, not just observation. The task ahead is to generate models of professional development which combine this knowledge, and stress the importance of formative assessment for lesson planning and meaningful differentiation of the literacy curriculum for struggling language learners. Future research must address practical ways to do this in high school EAL/D contexts.

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Appendix 1

Student A writing sample

MY PICTURE (circle):   1   2   3   4   5   6

TITLE: The Pelicans go an adventuer

Once on the holiday the Pelican
was going an anvinturer
with his family. He had 1 son
and 1 dafter. After they came they
had to fine a room frist then they
toveked they staffe to have fun.

after that they went outside to go
and lracks and have fun after that it
was 6:00 and they went to go and have
dinner then they play a family game
then they read a bock After that they
went to Sleep. Next
morening they eat brafters after
brafles they went to the Park
to go and play then they went
back after 2 hours then it was
dienna time after drenna they
wet to bed to go and sleep

Appendix 2

Student B writing sample

MY PICTURE (circle):   1 . 2   3   4 . 5   (6)

TITLE: ....

Two years ago in a village call Pamot, there lived a King call Dalton. Dalton was a rich and famous man who had nine willes and thirty children. He was not only famous, he was also strict when it comes about rulling his Kingdom.

One beautiful day, Dalton decided to call all his counsils and elders all around the villages so he can talk to them about the way all the animals should be treated in the villages. "You should go and tell eveyone in your various villages never to throw rubbish in the stream, play ground or foot path even on an open place. If they do they will be barnish."

Jenny Miller *is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. She teaches in the postgraduate and preservice TESOL area. Her research concerns language and identity, literacy pedagogy, EAL/D learners and teachers' work. Her ARC linkage project with Joel Windle looks at content-based language learning for refugee background students.*

Email: jenny.miller@monash.edu

Anne Keary *is a research fellow in the Centre for Research in Educational Futures and Innovation at Deakin University. She has worked on the Monash ARC project and is now working on a project focused on the aspirations and expectations of students in disadvantaged schools.*

Email: anne.keary@deakin.edu.au

Joel Windle *is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. His research analyses the implications of cultural and linguistic diversity for pedagogical and social relations across institutional settings. He is currently working on projects investigating school choice and transition programs for students with interrupted schooling.*

Email: joel.windle@monash.edu