



## Adult literacy and adult ESL

**R**emember from schooldays those essay questions that asked us to 'compare and contrast'? We can only compare like with like. We are never asked to compare a cat with a pea.

Do adult literacy and adult ESL really have enough in common to be sensibly compared? More importantly, do they have enough in common for them to be funded as the same thing?

In *Blurring the boundaries* on this page, contributors Michael Chalk and Rachel Wilson look at some tough issues facing the profession as a consequence of recent policy moves that treat literacy and ESL as the same thing. Miriam Faine's *Making a difference* (page 2) continues this theme and finds much theoretical confusion behind the current policy.

Perhaps for homework the policy makers in question should be given an essay to write over the weekend, topic: 'Compare and contrast adult literacy and adult ESL'.



• Artist, Mirka Mora (centre) lunching with ESL students. (see back page)

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## Blurring the boundaries

*This article is a brief summary of a workshop of the same name given at the March 2001 Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC) Conference. The impetus for the workshop was the decision by the Adult Community and Further Education Board in Victoria (ACFE) to collapse the ALBE and ESL funding categories into one category called language and literacy. This has led to some renewed discussion about the similarities and differences between ALBE and adult ESL and some concern in the adult literacy field about the possible implications of this decision.*

If people ever thought they should teach language in an ESL class and literacy in an ALBE class - they don't any more. 'Language and literacy' is what teachers teach in all ESL and ALBE programs. Over the last fifty years or so, the ideas and methods behind teaching language and literacy in these different areas have converged.

# Making (a) difference

by Miriam Faine

*Since the early '90s, adult ESL and literacy professionals have both jostled for attention and resources from policy makers.*

*On the one hand, the ESL professional associations voice concerns about the welfare of migrants who can't speak English well enough. On the other, adult literacy has distanced itself from ESL, arguing that the problem of insufficient literacy skills is common to the whole community.*

*There are many ways to group adult learners, for example according to gender or age or work or study background. Historically, the important difference for funding purposes has been language background, with Commonwealth funding corralled for 'migrants' until recently. Since the Commonwealth also became interested in adult literacy, funding guidelines have been complex, shifting and transitory. There is now a mess of Commonwealth and state funded language and literacy programs addressing different public agendas like settlement and economic development. In this article I argue that in order to get it right we must unpick the confused theoretical positionings of the two fields.*

## What we mean by teaching English

At its most simplistic, adult ESL is for 'migrants' and adult literacy is for 'Australians'. I will turn later to the problems posed by the use of these terms.

Sometimes the difference is argued in terms of different practices such as curriculum or pedagogies.

In Victoria since 1987 there has been more or

## Blurring the boundaries (cont)

Adult literacy began in the radical volunteerist days of the 1970's, and was influenced by alternative philosophies, remedial and special education (primary and secondary), local community action and Freire's 'conscientizacao', focusing as much on empowerment of individuals and communities, as on language.

Adult ESL teaching had quite a different set of beginnings, moving from behaviorism, the structured and situational approaches, through to the communicative approach favoured from the late 1970's. All these approaches, not surprisingly, focused on the acquisition of language skills. Both fields have always favoured 'eclecticism' as a way to ensure all learners had the best chances of success.

However, despite their different origins, both fields now draw on a very similar range of methodologies including psycholinguistics, whole language, and genre theory/systemic functional linguistics (Hammond et al, 1992: 49-58).

Where the difference lies, as readers will know, is in the learners. Differences between learners affect how teachers draw on their theory and methodology, and differences between learners should affect the type of program in which they are placed.

## So what might the implications be?

Of course, when placing learners into a 'language and literacy' program, practitioners know how to consider the language, literacy, socio-cultural and educational profiles of the learners. Providers with a range of language and literacy

programs are able to place them accordingly into ALBE, ESL or ESL literacy programs. However, smaller providers are often forced by economy of scale to combine learners from across a whole range of categories with little regard to individual needs. Is there a danger that, with ACFE's blurring of the boundaries, this practice will become more widespread and gain some legitimacy?

While ESL literacy providers, whose programs do not fit neatly into either ESL or ALBE, may welcome the change, others are legitimately concerned. Some adult literacy providers have expressed concern that ALBE provision may decrease as a result of the amalgamation, given that ALBE is generally more problematic and more expensive to deliver. The ACE sector is experiencing a strong demand for ESL programs which is likely to take up a majority of the available 'language and literacy' places. This visible demand may displace ALBE clients who are traditionally more difficult to identify and retain in programs.

There are also concerns about how ACFE will measure provision of ESL and ALBE under the new arrangements. The collapsing of programs will make it difficult to track demand and outcomes from the two areas and ACFE is yet to clarify how this will occur.

## Reference

Hammond, Jennifer, et al (1992). *The Pedagogical Relations Between Adult ESL and Adult Literacy*. Commonwealth of Australia.

Michael Chalk and Rachel Wilson  
Olympic Adult Education, Melbourne

2001  
ADULT LITERACY  
ODYSSEY

ACAL in collaboration with QCAL presents the  
NATIONAL CONFERENCE  
1-3 November 2001, Surfers Paradise, Queensland  
Email: R.Roebuck@mailbox.gu.edu.au  
Fax: R.Roebuck ACAL/QCAL conference organiser - (07) 3875 6868

less consensus on definitions of adult literacy practice - that is, that it 'involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking ... and to recognise and use language appropriate to different knowledge contexts and social situations.' [Ministry of Education 1989]

Adult literacy teachers are clear that they need to increase the range of registers/genres available to learners by introducing them to rich and diverse meanings and forms within the English language. Many adult literacy teachers who are influenced by theories of language such as systemic functional linguistics argue that a careful and sustained focus on linguistic forms is as useful for native speakers of English as it is for ESL students. So it is very hard to come up with cast-iron differences between ESL pedagogy and literacy pedagogy.

Nevertheless, at times adult ESL will involve distinctive practices, insights, research and teaching methods to those of adult literacy [Lo Bianco 1998]. ESL has assisted in redressing inequality of opportunity and life chances. Certainly, many recently arrived immigrants suffer economic and social disadvantage.

ESL Literacy, also known as migrant literacy, is a hybrid field. In the late 80's, immigrants who had been in Australia for more than 5 [or sometimes 2 years] were rerouted from AMEP ESL provision to adult literacy classes. In this case, definitions of ESL need [and available Commonwealth funding] were based on the length of time in the country. But many immigrants settled in Australia for years still seemed to need English lessons and often the learners themselves expressed this powerfully. They frequently explained this by the fact that they had not had the benefit of classes on arrival in Australia. Though many learners did end up in adult literacy, many needed or preferred ESL and as a result ESL literacy classes developed. [Adults who had completed secondary school overseas, needed ESL rather than ESL literacy.]

### Two discrete groups of learners?

Adult ESL teaching and adult literacy teaching are slippery constructs that slide into each other. The troubling problem is how to discuss them without suggesting there are two discrete and distinct client groups, making a binary between ESL learners or migrants or ethnics or NESB on the one hand, and on the other 'Australians' who need literacy classes.

The problem becomes one of OUR language.

Being NESB or migrant or ethnic is not the same as needing ESL. The term NESB is nothing more than a marker of certain kinds of ethnicity and it is normal to be both NESB and English speaking, like me. My mother, who arrived in 1939, speaks English with a German accent and makes the very occasional grammar mistake. She is furious if I point it out and she HATES being called a migrant.

Teaching a foreign language is different in some ways at least from teaching a native language. But the issue becomes the degree to which English can be still described as 'foreign' to people long settled or otherwise part of the Australian community and who use English every day of their lives. Is teaching such people different or special compared to others in a diverse community?

When an adult learner speaks not a word of English, the instruction they receive can be clearly identified as ESL. Many literacy teachers would be unhappy tackling such a pedagogy without special training. But many new settlers today know more, or at least a little, English on arrival. And when students complete their 510 hours of settlement entitlement, and presumably have mastered at least the rudiments of English, ESL teachers usually suggest that they would benefit from further ESL instruction. The ESL field has long resisted government definitions of ESL as a settlement program. Instead it has described categories of adult ESL learners who are 'intermediate' 'advanced' 'second stage' 'fossilised' and 'long term residents'. But when does ESL finish?

Adults who immigrate after puberty generally retain non-standard features in their English even after attending classes. Whether such adults still might benefit from ESL teaching depends partly on their age at arrival. The decision as to if, and for how long, they should stay in ESL classes, or ESL Literacy, or Advanced ESL, requires considerable judgement based on experience and doesn't translate easily to the sort of guidelines that a Centrelink officer can apply.

### Assessment

Assessment is a perennial source of anxiety in adult ESL, dominating staff development programs of the major providers with whom I am familiar.

For a long time, something called 'native speaker standard' was the criterion for profi-



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ciency in ESL. Increasingly the term 'native speaker' is being problematised. With globalisation, non-native or world Englishes become viable as teaching models. There is no longer one uniform type of English or one standard of usage internationally.

What standard of English should we expect adult immigrants to reach? The spoken language of adult 'migrants' can never conform to that of native speakers. By definition an adult ESL learner [unlike a child] can never become a native speaker.

How then is it possible to define a candidate for ESL without the circular argument that an ESL student is someone who needs to learn ESL and who requires assessment by an ESL teacher? The answer lies partially in tools like the NRS which assess competence against real world criteria and which apply to everyone. But such tools don't specify who needs which pedagogy.

### **Two homogenous groups of learners?**

Both ESL and literacy learners are often described as if they are homogenous groups with stable, fixed attributes. For example, ACTA idealises adult literacy students: 'ESB learners draw on their extensive experience in the English language and Australian culture ... [They are] confident speakers of English and have considerable cultural and idiomatic knowledge' [Mackay 2000]. Needless to say this doesn't conform to a lot of adult literacy learners, nor for that matter the particularly inarticulate rugby player with the Anglo name describing John Hopoate's exploits on the radio as I write.

Secondly the 'Australianness' of the adult literacy learner is taken for granted and is elided to mean ESB which is code for AngloCeltic ethnicity. In reality, urban adult literacy classes reflect the ethnic make-up of wherever they are situated. The varied circumstances that lead Australian born adults to adult literacy classes are universal and not confined to any one ethnic group. Clearly a diverse ethnic make-up should be, and is the norm in a literacy class in an urban setting.

So what makes a literacy class culturally distinct from an ESL class? Sometimes it is argued that cultural differences distinguish Australian born NESB from ESB learners. For how many generations do we make these differences? Or, like the NSW Police Commissioner recently, are we suggesting that certain behaviours [like the alleged propensity in 3rd or 4th generation Australians for carrying certain kinds of weapons] are essential attributes of particular ethnic backgrounds and genetically or otherwise inherited? What

makes two young unemployed school leavers from the same school and the same street culturally different simply because their parents came from different places? Youth culture is global and heavily US influenced anyhow.

Counter examples of successful mixed classes are legion. For example, the Mandarin speaking professional who resisted all attempts to move him out of the adult literacy evening class and into Advanced ESL. He enjoyed the chance to practice fluency with the literacy students; they in turn were enthusiastic about meeting someone out of their everyday; and the teacher was pleased to have a more able student in a slow class. Then there are Pacific Islanders, West Africans and others whose language of choice is English. And finally one Gael, born in the Western Isles of Scotland, speaking mostly Gaelic till the age of 15, but who everybody agreed would feel more 'at home' in an adult literacy class.

In practice, ESL learners are not thrown out of adult literacy classes and indeed may make up the majority of adult literacy learners. Less usually and of greater concern, we find people born in Australia but with an 'ethnic' name placed in adult ESL classes.

### **'ESL students are different. . .'**

Claims that ESL is distinctive slide too easily into assertions that ESL students are different. Different to whom? That is not spelled out. But if

ESL = MIGRANT

LITERACY = AUSTRALIAN,

then ESL learners, and by extension non-native speakers, become excluded from the construction of the normative Australian. This is reminiscent of what Hage calls the fantasy of White multiculturalism [Hage 1998].

If we take all the 'migrants' out of adult literacy, who is left in? When do ESL students stop being different and become a taken-for-granted part of the Australian scene, even if they don't talk like native speakers, that is, like us?

The two fields are locked into funding guidelines where in order to press for resources, originally for ESL and latterly for literacy, they have had to imagine two discrete groups of adult learners; NESB or ethnics or migrants; and ESB or native speakers or Australians. [Another term I've heard used by ESL teachers to describe [non-ESL] literacy students is the word 'indigenous' which is highly contested!] On the other hand, the WELL program offers a good model of an ethnically and culturally inclusive program which offers a service across ethnic groupings based on educational need. In my Utopian dream, adult education providers would be funded to run integrated as well as separate programs, employing specialist teach-

# Literacy in a phone booth

by Jo Shaw

I wonder if Telstra has any idea about how its program of updating telephone booths across Australia has hindered the progress of many students trying to improve literacy skills in country areas.

The NSW AMES Distance Learning Program won the tender for the LANT program in several country areas of Australia, one of which was the Darling Downs in Queensland. This article particularly relates to students from this area who have given us many difficulties but who have also been very rewarding in many instances.

The students from this area are mostly Mutual Obligation clients, that is, people as young as 16, referred by Centrelink to fulfil the requirements for the receipt of their benefits. Some students are older and on Newstart benefits; the oldest so far has been 54. The majority of our LANT students are Australian ESB, including a number of Aboriginal students. Only a few of our referrals from the Darling Downs have been NESB—a couple of Vietnamese and Arabic students so far.



Quite a number of these students are involved in farm work but the majority are involved in seasonal work. A lot of the seasonal work centres around the cotton industry but there are other jobs such as 'stick picking' (walking in front of a tractor picking up sticks that could get caught in the blades) all day, that sound exhausting in the extreme. When the

seasonal work is available we have to be very patient, as students tend to be totally exhausted.

Many of the students from the Darling Downs live in remote areas, on properties or in small townships, and do not have access to a phone. This surprised me initially but no longer. It seems to be not uncommon!

This presents a great problem to the student studying literacy/numeracy by distance mode! Although work is sent and returned between teacher and student by the post, at AMES Distance Learning we rely heavily on the fortnightly phone lesson to not only explain problems and answer questions, but also to motivate and cajole students, and build up that wonderful personal relationship which is the hallmark of the distance learning arrangement.

Many of our students have had very bad learning experiences in the past and benefit greatly from the one to one teaching situation where the teacher can become tutor, mentor and friend.

Therefore, as the phone lesson is an integral part of the learning process, students who do not have a phone have to find one. In some cases this can be at a friend's house, but often it seems that students want to maintain a certain privacy regarding their lessons. Hence the phone box!

(continued over)

ers as required and deploying resources according to community and industry need.

Calls to defend ESL are not the same as defending 'migrants'. From the adult literacy side, claims that 'NESB' are 'swamping' literacy or taking resources from deserving or disabled 'English speaking' adults are unhelpful. To suggest that someone somewhere is disadvantaged by the attention paid to the ethnically different Other is potentially playing to the politics of envy. We professionals need to develop educationally sound understandings that don't lead us into the murky waters of making unsupported difference on the grounds of ethnicity; and to argue for more resources to best meet the diverse educational needs of all Australians.

## References

Hage, Ghassan 1998 *White Nation Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*

Pluto Press NSW

Lo Bianco, Joseph 1998 'ESL...Is It Migrant Literacy or Is It History?' *Australian Language Matters* 6/2

Mackay, Penny 2000 *Letter to Con Sciacca* Australian Council of TESOL Organisations, <http://www.tesol.org.au/pensciacca.html>

Division of Further Education, 1989 *Adult Literacy and Basic Education Into the Nineties* Ministry of Education, Victoria

Said, Edward W, 1995 *Orientalism* Penguin Books England

*Helpful comments by Delia Bradshaw and Rosa McKenna are gratefully acknowledged.*

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Although we use the competencies from the AMES Certificates in Literacy/Numeracy to underpin the teaching of LANT students, we try very hard to contextualise as much of the learning as possible within a framework that is relevant to these students. Each student has their own curriculum customised to their interests and needs wherever possible. This has been a sharp learning curve for many of us as requests to read about fishing, horses and dirt bike racing have been the most common!

Even choosing what to send is a problem because if we send a book that the student can study from and write in, when they send material to the teacher to correct they have to send the book, and then they are left without anything to do while it is sent back. We have come to the realisation that it is much more efficient to send students a folder with loose pages, maybe also a book and usually a reader as well. These are either photocopied from AMES publications or other books that we are able to photocopy from, or created by the teacher. Then students are able to send a few pages to the teacher and continue to do some work while they are waiting for their work to be returned. As all of the LANT students have to be either NRS Level 1 or 2 to be eligible for this training, everything is at a pretty basic level. We end up developing quite a few materials ourselves as some students study with us for up to two years and we just run out of appropriate things to do with them.

This means that students may have a book, a reader, or a folder with numerous worksheets or all of the above.

Here is our dilemma! Telstra, in their modernisation program, has removed the shelf from phone boxes.

Imagine the literacy/numeracy student with a book and a number of pages of work, pen in hand and nothing to rest their work on. Some students have tried in vain to sit on the ground with their work in their lap but the phone cord won't stretch that far. I must admit, I can only admire these students for their perseverance. The mental picture I have of a student with pages propped against the phone booth, pen in one hand, phone in the other, talking to their teacher for often up to 30 minutes, with a queue forming outside, the occasional shout of 'you'll have to bloody wait, I'm talking to my teacher' and the road trains roaring past, is one that would not be considered as the ideal learning arrangement. But learn they do, and many have greatly improved their literacy skills.

Two of these young people are taggers and we can only hope that we are doing more than simply improving the spelling of their graffiti.

Actually one of our 'taggers', let's call him Shane, has partially solved the problem of the phone box in his very own way. He rides his bike into the phone booth, sits on it and balances his work on the handlebars. The lesson is then peppered with the occasional sound of the bike crashing into the side of the phone box, or even more colourful, Shane stating loudly 'hang on a minute, I have to adjust me arse'!

This young man used to call from a variety of phone boxes as he had a different address almost every lesson, such was the transient life he was leading, but he now seems to be more settled and mostly uses 'his' phone box for his lessons. His work is mostly returned in his very florid tagging script, but the teacher was delighted recently, after pestering him to return an assessment task, to find it in very legible script, and neatly paragraphed. Oh the joys of the literacy teacher! I really wanted to give her a gold star for perseverance (the teacher that is), and she agreed that she was duly chuffed.

There are quite a few outcomes that we are proud of. Some are like Shane where we are thrilled to see him writing legibly in sentences. It may be the completion of a simple form from someone who couldn't previously write their name. A couple of students have improved sufficiently to enrol in courses at TAFE. One student has just completed a computer course and now emails his teacher. Not bad for a former illiterate. A number of students have found full time work as a result of now being able to complete the necessary forms involved with their work, and two students have returned to school to do their HSC feeling that they were now more confident about their writing. We feel very proud of them all. But what I really see as a great outcome, is that by nurturing these students along this very difficult path, we have motivated them to continue to study. I feel that this increase in motivation and learning strategies is a huge outcome and should be recognised as such when outcomes are being recorded.

The fact that these students are prepared to continue their trek to a phone box, lesson after lesson, is testament to their determination to improve their situation. Their perseverance is to be admired, rewarded even, but I suppose they would say that we are in fact helping them achieve the best reward possible.

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*Tutors' Tips first appeared as a series of inserts in the QCAL newsletter 'Write On'*



## Tutors' Tips

This issue focuses on our place in time - reflecting on past centuries and looking forward to the new. We are privileged to be able to experience the transition to the new millennium. Exciting times lie ahead, offering wonderful opportunities for you and your students.

### **BEYOND 2001 - SET YOUR GOALS!**



In five years time I will be....

In 20 years time I will be.....

**SHORT-TERM GOALS: .....**





## PERSONAL TIMELINE

(Optional -  
be aware of  
sensitivities)

Born



Family

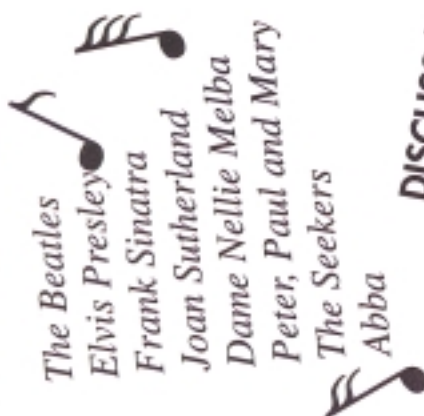


School



## REFLECTING ON THE PAST

- **TALK** to your tutor or group - share memorabilia
- **CHAT** with older persons
- **RECORD** stories and songs (Prepare questions)
- **RETELL** the story to your tutor or group
- **READ ALOUD:** poetry, plays, words of songs, novels



The Beatles  
Elvis Presley  
Frank Sinatra  
Joan Sutherland  
Dame Nellie Melba  
Peter, Paul and Mary  
The Seekers  
Abba

**DISCUSS/DEBATE**  
the importance of:

- great events
- discoveries
- inventions
- famous people
- changing social roles
- human rights
- developments
- environmental protection

**COMPARE** life in  
1900 to 2001

**PREDICT** future developments -  
in the world, in Australia, in  
your town.



**DISCUSS**

Stories of the Dreamtime  
My Place (Sally Morgan)  
Over the Top with Jim (Hugh Lunn)  
A Fortunate Life (A.B. Facey)  
Summer of the Seventeenth Doll (Ray Lawler)

**RESEARCH:**

- Local history

**LEARN  
TO**



## HISTORICAL TIMELINE

Inventions



War



Transport



Fashions



Medicines, e.g.  
vaccines



Politics



Space



## LEARN

- Visit libraries, museums - take notes
- Use the internet & CD Rom encyclopaedias
- Relatives killed in wars (see Internet site)

### DERIVATION/SPELLING:

Milli (Latin) = 1000

Centum (Latin) = 100

Learn more Latin and Greek prefixes, roots and suffixes and use the dictionary to make a list of related words (millilitre, millennium, century, centipede...)

## WRITE

**WRITE** family stories, amusing anecdotes

**CAPTION** photos - develop an album or storybook

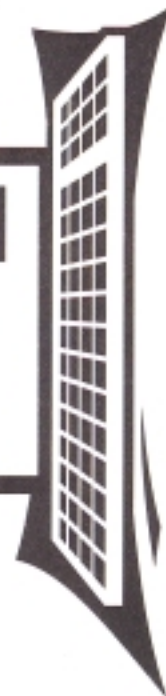
**PREPARE** a time capsule

**WRITE** a 'letter' to family members who lived long ago - what would surprise them now?

**DESCRIBE** plans for New Year's Eve

**COMPARE** shopping (corner store to supermarkets to internet)

**LOOKING  
TOWARDS  
THE FUTURE**



**RESOURCES:** Web sites: <http://rememory.com/> (A collection of memories from around the world. Add a memory.); <http://cwgc.org> (Commonwealth War Games Commission; Remembering, Book 2 - ISBN088336 351 8 - 1988 - New Readers Press, New York)

Homes

(Add photos,  
drawings)

Jobs

Achievements

Important  
Moments

Now

Exploration

Science

Events, e.g.  
Federation

Work changes

Natural Disasters

Explorations

Food

Decimal currency

Music

TV, radio, movies





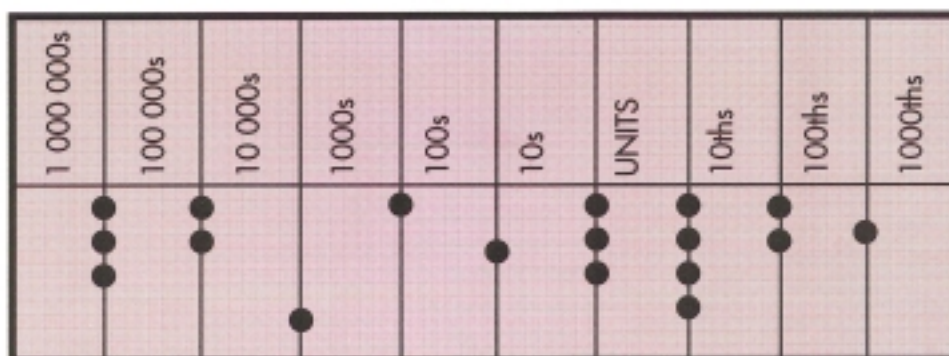
# IDEAS FOR NUMERACY



12:00

## PLACE VALUE CHART

Relate to \$ and c



## THE FRACTION CIRCLE

Cut cardboard strips or circles into fractions



## RELATIONSHIPS

Add to this to learn the commonly-used equivalents.

1	—	1.0	—	100%
3/4	—	0.75	—	75%
1/2	—	0.5	—	50%
1/4	—	0.25	—	25%

### ACTIVITIES:

- Read large numbers; spell numerals.
- Divide a pizza or cake into fractions; which would you rather have -  $5/6$  or  $3/4$ ?
- Cook - compare the measurements.
- Multiply by 10/100/100.
- Role-play - shopping, giving change.
- Calculate hours of work/study (start to finish - lunchtime).
- Read timetables (include the 24 hour clock).
- What time is it in Perth, London, New York, Tokyo?
- Learn Roman Numerals - where are they found?
- Estimate, calculate and compare distances between towns.
- Measure each other, a pen, the desk...calculate perimeters, areas of the room....
- Read graphs and charts, e.g. a weather map.

### RESOURCES:

Mathematics: A New Beginning (Marr B., Helme S.,) - ISBN 0 7241 2878 4 - 1987 - State Tng Bd of Vic.; Strength in Numbers (Marr B., Goddard S., Martin, J.), ISBN 0 7306 1652 5 - 1991 - Ministry of Edn and Tng., Vic.;  
Web site: <http://sunsite.anu.edu.au/language-australia/numeracy/anamol/>

# Who calls the Reading Writing Hotline?

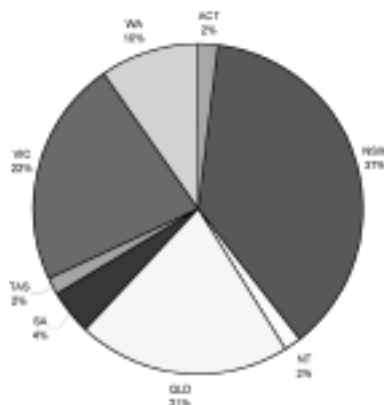
by Stephen Goldberg

The Reading Writing Hotline, the national telephone literacy referral service funded by DETYA and managed by Access Division, TAFE NSW, is now in its seventh year of operation. Since its inception in 1994, over 77,000 people have called the Hotline and it remains a valuable service through which adults across Australia can receive advice from an experienced Adult Basic Education teacher and a referral to one or more of the 1200 language, literacy and numeracy providers.

The Hotline gathers data on every caller. Key information sought includes:

- Age of caller
- Gender and family background e.g. NESB, ATSI
- Home state and region i.e. city or country town
- Educational background
- Employment
- Reason for calling the Hotline

Call activity by state, 2000

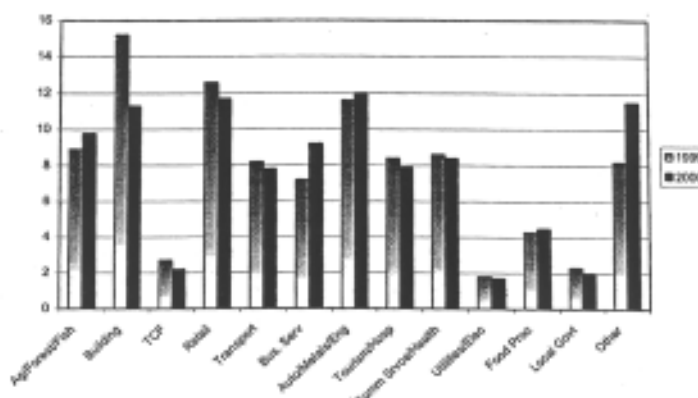


In 2000, the Hotline fielded 9047 calls, a figure that compares well with 1999's tally of 9123; a substantial rise on 1998's tally of 6315 calls.

One trend that became evident in 2000 was the increase in the number of callers to the Hotline who had never previously sought help for their literacy skills—an increase of nearly 15% in just two years.

The Hotline has also seen a steady rise in the number of callers who are employed. In 2000, almost three in five callers were employed, a four per cent rise in just two years.

Employed Hotline callers by industry, 1999-2000



New promotional strategies for the Hotline presented at the annual meeting of the National Reference Committee (NRC) held in February included:

- Targeting to major employers and employer groups with Hotline publicity materials
- Using the Hotline to promote Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) programmes.
- Promoting the Hotline to the various Industry Training Advisory Bodies (ITABs).



## Reading Writing Hotline National Reference Committee 2000

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# In the field of disaster

by Lyn Wilson and Margot McManus

A genre based approach has for a considerable time now been entrenched in practice in adult literacy teaching. The 'building of the field' component has proved to be a strong teaching tool. In the teaching of reading it is an integral component of pre-reading activities, and in the teaching of writing it underpins the teaching cycle. So it was with surprise that we, two literacy teachers at Petersham College in TAFE NSW, stumbled on a strategy to capitalise on the value of building the field, leading to successful outcomes for students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

An unexpected collaborator in this teaching was the media with their frequent use of the language of disaster. We found that the students' prior knowledge of language in this field enabled reading and writing with greater success than other articles with similar literacy demands. This finding surfaced when one of us used a newspaper article about flooding and storms with higher than expected literacy outcomes. After discussing this, we decided to put it to the test by using the same article with a different class. Again, higher than expected outcomes resulted.

## Learner profile

Petersham is an inner Sydney suburb, with a high proportion of NESB residents. Within the two classes, all but two students are NESB. They cross a wide range of countries and age groups. Class A is a small group enrolled in an unaccredited course with literacy and oracy levels varying across the group. Eighteen students are enrolled in Class B, in an accredited course at NRS Level 2. Again, there is great variation of skills across the group.

## Background to the teaching

Both classes had chosen to work in the area of current affairs, so newspaper articles had provided the focus for teaching for several weeks. In Class A, the aim of the 'disaster' unit was to write a summary. The teaching began with developing the vocabulary of disaster. Students then wrote a summary of the article, focussing on use of paragraphs and tenses. Students in Class B had identified the need to read newspaper articles better.

## Description of the materials used

Prior to the 'disaster' unit, Class A had worked on an article about Don Bradman and another about adult learners. Class B had read an article about bullying in schools, and one about Russel Crowe. The 'disaster' article was titled

'Floods force exodus by air and train' (Sun Herald, 11/3/01). Materials used in both classes included field building. In Class A, relevant vocabulary was underlined and a word list was provided for students to add meanings. This included words such as 'military personnel', 'devastation' and 'closely monitoring'. In Class B printed materials were prepared for group work. They guided the students through stages of reading a newspaper article. The field was built through prediction using the headline, photos and captions and a brainstorming activity, designed to draw out students' prior knowledge. Materials then led the students through skimming the article, scanning for detail and scanning for unknown vocab.

## Teaching the unit of work

Class A discussed the floods in North-Eastern NSW, which they knew about from the media. It was explained that because the language of disaster is repeated constantly in the media, by understanding this language they would be able to read many articles. It was assumed the students would not know the meanings of the selected words, as had been the case in work done with other articles of similar difficulty.

What happened in class was astounding. Students were able to read all the vocabulary, even though it is not everyday language. Students agreed that they hear it constantly in the media. They were able to add additional phrases such as 'flood stricken areas', 'drought stricken areas', 'massive evacuations'. They were able to confidently pronounce and give meanings for the words underlined in the text.

The class then moved to the writing task where they were learning to write in paragraphs organised by time. Three columns were drawn on the board, and labelled 'what happened', 'what is happening now', 'what will happen'. Main points from the story were placed in appropriate columns. Students used this scaffold to write a summary, with the information in each column providing content for each paragraph.

All students were very pleased with their results, and had grasped the concept of completing a paragraph about each time phase so that a reader is able to follow their text. One adopted a journalist style that was much more sophisticated than the writing he usually does.

In Class B teaching strategies aimed to give the students increased independence in the use of pre-reading strategies. It was hoped that stu-

dents would increasingly recognise the value these strategies in their own reading, particularly newspaper articles.

The 'disaster' unit was the middle unit in the series of three. An incredible difference was found in students' capacity to read and understand the 'disaster' article, though all three articles were of similar difficulty.

Students' knowledge of the field was observed first in prediction from the title. They had considerable knowledge of vocabulary and, more surprisingly, their spelling was accurate. Predictions included 'evacuation', 'disaster', 'emergency', 'state emergency services', 'rescue operations', 'heartache'. None of the students had heard the word 'exodus' previously, yet there was much discussion about movements of people. Some students gave personal accounts from the former Yugoslavia. The students did not hesitate to 'guess' the meaning; something they did not do in other units.

When brainstorming the topic, diverse themes emerged from each group. Themes included the refusal of some people to evacuate during disasters; the impact of a disaster on the rest of the state (eg food shortages); issues of government support; erratic weather around the world; insurance shortfalls for the affected. Emergence of different themes suggested that real conversations had taken place, rather than compliance with a teacher-set task, which was what the other two units of work appeared to produce.

## Implications

Disaster scenarios feature strongly in the experiences and understandings of NESB students. This results in a capacity to recognise what would otherwise be difficult vocabulary, and even reproduce this vocabulary accurately in writing. This control over the 'disaster' field also means an increased capacity to predict meaning using context and an unusual willingness to share experiences and give personal opinion in a whole group.

In both classes the students' knowledge of the media's language of disaster was outstanding even though 'disaster' is not part of everyday discourse. It seems to indicate the extent to which we are immersed in the media's use of this language - other articles were much harder to read. In teaching writing, the familiarity of the words and phrases removed a barrier for students learning writing skills and allowed greater success than they usually achieve. Knowledge of the field provided a way to success in writing.

There are implications for teaching reading too. NESB students bring unique experiences to the

**Floods force exodus by air and train**

**COASTAL CHANGES**

South-west Queensland: Floods have forced thousands of people to evacuate their homes and businesses in the coastal areas of the state.

Queensland: Thousands of people have been evacuated from their homes and businesses in the coastal areas of the state.

**Disaster worst in north for 38 years**

**THIS WEEK'S WEATHER**

Forecast for the week ending 10/11/95. The weather is expected to be mostly cloudy with some rain.

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classroom which have a great impact on their capacity to read and interpret text, which should influence teachers' choices of materials to use. In assessing reading, the sight words we generally use to assess literacy skills may need review. Why are we still restricting ourselves to use of words such as 'stop', 'ambulance', 'police' when our students seem to have other words that are in common use, for example 'SES', 'evacuate', 'emergency', 'WESTPAC rescue'?

Students seem drawn to this topic. Is this because they already have the language? Is it because they can relate to the experiences? Perhaps we should be looking at students' knowledge of field when we select content for reading and writing classes, rather than choosing by levels of readability. Whatever the answer may be, students in both classes were found to have a readiness for this language that offers opportunities for successful literacy teaching.

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# Investigating migrant reading: classroom implications

by Anne Burns

**L**in, from China, has lived in Australia for six years. During this time she has attended several AMEP classes, and is now up to intermediate level. In a conversation with Judy Perkins, an AMEP teacher from South Australia, she highlighted one of the things that had helped her most to 'get going' in reading:

*...she had to read a short, simple book and give an oral presentation about it...when she told her teacher she could not read it, the teacher spent some time with Lin individually after class...At first the teacher read aloud and Lin listened, frequently asking about vocabulary...then Lin started to read aloud, very hesitantly at first, but within one session her speed increased and she stopped talking about the meanings of words so often...After three or four sessions, she was reading much more fluently...Lin went on to finish the book by herself in a few days. (Perkins, 2000: 15)*

Learners' enthusiasm for reading aloud was one of the - surprising - findings from a research project on reading practices, conducted by NCELTR (1998-99) with AMEP learners from three different language groups - Arabic (from Lebanon), Chinese (from mainland China) and Spanish (from El Salvador) (1).

A major aim of the study was to investigate the cultural and social reading practices outside the classroom of adult migrants in three-generation families. The researchers involved (Burns, de Silva Joyce, Lahoud, O'Sullivan and Perkins (2)) had considerable experience in teaching reading in ESL classrooms, but we felt we had limited knowledge of the daily reading practices of AMEP students. By trying to understand more about their interests and purposes for reading and the kinds of texts they and their family members read, we would extend our knowledge about how to teach reading more effectively.

Our approach was to follow recent trends in the field of 'new literacy' studies (e.g. Prinsloo and Breier, 1996; Barton and Hamilton, 1998) that use ethnographic accounts (Hammersley, 1990) of the literacy practices of different community groups to understand how reading is related to people's cultural and social lives. We wanted to look at i) how students from these different cultural backgrounds integrate reading into their daily lives and how the learners' reading practices interact with those of immediate family members; ii) what were the experiences of learners currently in AMEP classrooms, espe-

cially in relation to learning to read; iii) what could this tell us about teaching reading in adult migrant classrooms.

We collected our data through three sources:

- interviews with a family from each of the three language backgrounds conducted in their own homes. We selected families in which the learner was one of three generations in order to give a broader picture of reading practices beyond the individual learner.
- records of the material read in first and second language over a period of one week, through a daily reading 'diary' kept by the family members.
- follow-up interviews with other students from the same cultural and language backgrounds to gain broader perspectives on the areas raised in the first interviews and a greater sense of how individual or general the experiences were.

The study was conducted over six months, with regular meetings of the project team interspersed with periods of data collection and analysis.

## An example of reading practices:

### Lin's family

Lin's family consisted of her daughter Susie, aged six, her mother, Jin Li, and her father, Dong. The family lived in an area with few Chinese so Lin often acted as interpreter. Originally Lin, a chemical engineer, had come to Australia to join her husband. Sickness during her pregnancy prevented her from attending English classes and when her marriage failed after two years, she moved to another city. She felt more settled and started to learn English. Her parents had come to Australia to give her support but were not yet residents. The family had experienced a rich reading life in China. Dong, an officer in a large city council water planning department, had read a wide range of work-related materials, and especially enjoyed reading newspapers and famous Chinese classical novels. Jin Li, a former kindergarten principal, enjoyed newspapers and magazines, classical and other novels, biographies and Chinese editions of *The Readers' Digest*. Apart from workplace documents, Lin herself often read novels and magazines about health, beauty and fashion.

In Australia, their reading life had become drastically altered. Reading materials in Chinese were difficult to obtain apart from the weekly Chinese newspaper which they reread avidly.



The few books they had in the house were those they had managed to carry with them from China - three favourite classical novels, a recipe book, books on food and health, and child health and development. Jin Li had also brought Chinese picture books and cards containing Chinese characters for Susie and spent considerable time reading to her. Their reading in English was limited: Jin Li could now read the alphabet in English and Dong had learned to negotiate the TV Guide. The family's move to Australia seemed to have resulted in two significant 'reading losses': the loss of the reader self, where reading has previously pervaded one's life; and the loss of contact with the world, where knowledge of events and connectedness to the local community are curtailed.

Lin's account of the place of reading in her learning of English highlighted three major issues. Firstly, she had wanted to read more, but she had no idea what to read. Reading aloud had helped her finish a book and she had felt a great sense of achievement. She wanted her teachers to discuss with her what reading material might be available to her. None of her teachers had done this. Secondly, she wanted her teachers to focus more on vocabulary learning strategies. She had found knowing about prefixes, suffixes, root words and so on very helpful and wanted more explicit vocabulary teaching in order to meet what she saw as one of her biggest challenges as a reader. Thirdly, now that she was at a more advanced level, she wanted to develop better research skills to help her locate information through different sources such as the library, the internet. She had begun to do this in her new class and it was beginning to open up new possibilities and give her more confidence.

### Implications for teaching

Building up a picture of learners' reading practices and learning experiences enabled us to reassess some teaching practices which have perhaps been overlooked. Learners wanted

teachers to be, much more explicitly, their reading guides and mentors, deliberately introducing them to materials through which to replicate their first language reading practices and to extend their reading skills. Mentoring reading also included indicating clearly to learners when an activity focused on reading. Several of the learners stated that they were not sure whether the teacher had been teaching reading or not. Certainly, learners placed great store by reading aloud as a way of familiarising themselves with the written code and conceptualising sound/letter correspondences, but also as a means of enhancing pronunciation and intonation skills. Especially in early learning, they requested texts that were written for ESL learners, indicating that they enjoyed some of the beginner readers that controlled the amount of new vocabulary and grammar. This challenges teachers to think carefully about the kinds of authentic texts they use in reading activities and whether some may need to be modified or reduced.

The research also reminded us of the significance of reading in people's lives outside the classroom. Learners do not come as 'blank slates' to the process of learning to read in a second language and their reading experiences are not fixed. As teachers we can gain a great deal by taking time to learn about the 'literacy histories' (Barton, 1994) of the learners in our classrooms and their families.

### Notes

1. A full account of this study and of the follow-up classroom-based action research projects that emerged from it can be found in Burns and de Silva Joyce, 2000.
2. In writing this article, I wish to acknowledge the work of whole research team.
3. References for this article can be found on the ACAL web site—[www.acal.edu.au](http://www.acal.edu.au)

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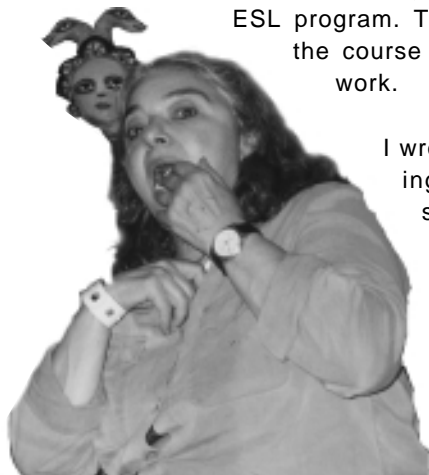
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## Forging community links with artists

The Literacy and ESL Department at Melbourne's Centre for Adult Education is piloting an 'Interface' (General Curriculum Option) course this semester called Art and Culture. The course participants come from the General Education core subject area and from the ESL program. The introductory unit to the course explores Mirka Mora's work.



I wrote to Mirka Mora inviting her to come and speak to the students not really expecting a reply and in her usual unconventional manner, she graciously accepted the invitation because she liked my handwriting.

International Women's Day was thus appropriately marked by her visit for not only is she a very special woman but also - like the majority of students in the class - from a non-English speaking background.

Students from the Art and Culture class were bedazzled and charmed by her very special 'view of the world'; they took to her with amazing ease.

For those of you who might be looking for your next 'train book' snap up a copy of Mirka's autobiography *Mirka Mora - Wicked but Virtuous - My Life*. She writes in the closing paragraphs:

*...I have never listened to reason ... it is incomprehensible to me. It is too abstract, too complicated; the logic of reason baffles me ... I have always protected my work, my free spirit and I remain independent...in my old age - ready to tackle death my way...*

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