The Accelerated Literacy Program: Developmental Outline

Brian Gray

Overview

Accelerated Literacy is the name given to a variation of the Traeger Park Concentrated Encounter work (Gray 2014). It was developed when Gray was an Associate Professor and Director of the Schools and Community Centre at the University of Canberra in the 1990s (Gray 2007). Gray introduced the principles and strategies of the Traeger Park program to his undergraduate and graduate students and to the teachers working at the Centre who were seconded from the school system in the ACT. As he did at Traeger Park, Gray worked with the teachers at the Centre and especially with Wendy Cowey who worked closely with him to implement and demonstrate the strategies. They also worked together to extend the implementation of the program into Indigenous schools.

The Accelerated Literacy program is not as broadly focused across the whole of the school curriculum as was the Traeger Park program. Discussion of theory and text teaching notes accompanying the program concentrate only on narrative and other similar texts that draw on interpersonal motivation as the means of creating the primary field of experience from which the meanings in the text derive. Consequently, if teachers using Accelerated Literacy want to study factual texts, they need to do supplementary work to develop students' perception of the social roles and field knowledge involved. This was done comprehensively at Traeger Park.

In terms of the two concentrated encounter models outlined by Gray at Traeger Park, Accelerated Literacy represents an instance of a Type B concentrated encounter sequence.
The program also uses some terminology that reflects its origin in the Schools and Community Program so it is important to have some grasp of the circumstances surrounding the development of Accelerated Literacy.

Methodology

The Schools and Community Centre was set up by Dr. Max Kemp at the University of Canberra to support students who were still falling behind in literacy despite school remediation efforts. The program worked with both children and their parents. Parents attended a series of seminars that had the dual aims of relaxing the tension and communication breakdown that frequently built up between parent and failing child and of providing parents with teachings strategies that allowed them to support their children productively at home. The Centre teachers then worked with the parents and their children over a series of 10, one-hour sessions to help the parents consolidate control of the strategies. The teachers in the Centre were all Reading Recovery trained so the teaching strategies employed in the Schools and Community Centre were drawn primarily from Marie Clay's Reading Recovery program. These were used in conjunction with writing practices drawn essentially from Whole Language pedagogy (e.g. especially Process Writing: see Gray, 1987).

Reading Recovery and Process Writing strategies had a number of deficiencies that were highlighted when they were used with the children attending the Centre. For this reason, when Kemp (on his retirement) invited Gray to take control of the Centre, it was in the expectation that a new set of teaching strategies would be developed around the Traeger Park model.

In general, the original teaching program in the Centre provided little mediating support for learners and, as Gray had observed at Traeger Park, teaching strategies placed too much emphasis on the children's individual performance levels. This assessment was made despite the fact that both Marie Clay and Gray claimed allegiance to the work of Vygotsky in the development of their respective programs (Clay, 1991; Clay & Cazden 1990). However, Clay and Gray took very different interpretations in their reading of both Vygotsky's work and the parent-child interaction research that was inspired by Vygotskian theory.

These differences centred largely on,

- The interpretation of the size of the gap that could exist between a teaching text and a child's individual performance level within the notion of the 'zone of proximal development'.

- The nature of the mediation process that took place, especially the nature of questioning.

- The role of imitation in learning.

- The interpretation of the nature of the interactive routines that support 'scaffolding' between parent and child in the home.

These different interpretations greatly affect the nature of the learning negotiation that occurs within the respective programs. For that reason, repeated work on routines in the original Schools and Community Centre program produced very different learning negotiation processes to those which had occurred in the program at Traeger Park.

Accelerated Literacy has a number of features that mark it as different from most literacy programs in use.

Texts used are set at or close to grade level for all readers.

In the original program in the Schools and Community Centre, the goals set for writing, spelling and reading were low. For example, children in Years 6 and 7 were still being taught using simple contrived (sentence controlled) texts from the Reading Recovery levels. These texts contained very little in the way of language resources that were useful in writing effective narrative. It needs to be said that Clay had not intended that Reading Recovery should be used beyond the first one to two years of schooling.

In the new program, as his work at Traeger Park had demonstrated, Gray advocated the use of authentic texts from the commencement of schooling and into primary and secondary grades. Thus, Gray's first change was to insist that all children be taught using texts at their benchmark grade level. Further, the texts chosen for teaching had to employ language choices that were representative of legitimate literate texts that incorporated writing choices and structural choices that could be pointed out and taught to students.

A progressive and systematic set of steps that led from discussion of texts to intensive analysis of writing strategies and, subsequently, on to phonics/spelling analysis and writing.

The strategy that allowed teachers to work with grade level text in the Schools and Community Centre and later in Indigenous schools was conceptually simple. Teacher and students worked on carefully chosen, small sections of the text being studied. The teacher mediated intensive study and discussion of 'why' the language choices were made by

authors and 'how' these choices affected readers. These discussions around text choices progressed much as they had a Traeger Park (refer Traeger Park project: Concentrated Language Encounters). However, virtually all of the students in the Schools and Community Centre were from upper primary and lower secondary grades so the texts were much more complex. This allowed for the discussion process of text analysis to become far more sophisticated (as is appropriate for older students reading more complex texts) than it had been at Traeger Park.

Once a small section of text had been intensively discussed, the process was repeated on another section. The rationale underlying this approach was that it is just as easy to teach students to read 250 - 400 words or so from a grade level text that is meaningful as to teach the same amount from a distorted basal reader text.

Once one section had been studied, the teacher and students moved on to work on another section that had been carefully selected for its potential to teach about other choices made by the author.

As Gray had observed at Traeger Park, the outcome of this process was that, as students built up the capacity to read the supported sections of the text, they became more and more able to read those parts that had not been studied intensively.

This process also modeled a process through which children come to learn to read in literate homes. They focus on sections of the text and generalise skills from that point.

An advantage of this approach for teachers is that they do not have to keep working on the same text until the students can read every word. However, as the students study more and more texts, they do achieve this capacity.

For each section of text studied, a progressive series of activities was available. These could be configured in various orders to create a routine or 'format' of familiar activities that allowed for a progressive build up of common knowledge between teachers and students.

The stages of the Accelerated Literacy teaching sequence in normal order of progression are as follows:

- **Literate Orientation:** This stage includes two primary routines that are distinguished as **'Low Order'** and **'High Order'** Literate Orientation.

- **Transformations**

- **Writing & Spelling:** This stage includes a number of routines that focus activity on various goals from word level deconstruction (phonics/spelling) to different kinds of writing routines that allow for variation in teacher support.

In general, the progression of a sequence within a 'format' lesson worked from the top of the list towards the bottom (writing). However, considerable flexibility occurs in the way the stages are selected and configured depending on the amount of common knowledge that has been built up and the extent to which students have gained control of the processes and understandings being taught in each stage. For example, at the beginning the emphasis might be Low Order Literate Orientation followed by reading the text to the students. Soon the routine is expanded to include High Order Literate Orientation - a little at first, then the emphasis becomes more dominant. Later the teaching emphasis on Low Order Literate Orientation falls away and the combination between High Order Literate Orientation and Transformations takes over to be replaced eventually by Transformations and Spelling or Transformations and Writing and so on.

Low Order Literate Orientation

In Low Order Literate Orientation, the teacher engages students with the kinds of understandings a literate reader would take from the text. These vary from the author's

purpose in constructing the text to motivations and choices in the behaviour of characters to discussion of the author's themes and interpretations that are apparent to a literate reader. These tap into aspects of what Gray refers to as the 'intentionalities' inherent in the text. In doing this, the teacher is attempting to introduce and engage the students with a 'model' of what might be called a 'literate reading' of the text

With illustrated books that are commonly encountered in the early primary grades, Low Order Literate Orientation is typically extensive and it concentrates upon a careful deconstruction of the intentionalities that are inherent in the illustrations.

Following the Low Order Literate Orientation, the teacher reads the story/text to/with the class.

High Order Literate Orientation

High Order Literate Orientation is a critical component of the program for it is in this aspect of the teaching sequence that a direct relationship is drawn and made explicit between motivations, responses raised earlier within the Low Order Literate Orientation and the arrangement and choice of the actual language elements (grammar and vocabulary) in the text. Using scaffolded questioning techniques, the teacher leads the students through selected areas of the text to build reflective dialogue around the links between specific language choices and the intentionality and meaning effects that are achieved from their use. For example, the effect the author has achieved by introducing a character in a secondary clause, "The house was enclosed in darkness and Miss Pebble was all alone." (*Spooks Incorporated* by Paul Jennings in *Quirky Tails*: Puffin Books Australia,1994). Also, with the same sentence the teacher and students would discuss the effect of the choice for 'enclosed' and 'all alone' and so on for the larger text segment being studied.

As part of the High Order Literate Orientation, the teacher would engage the students in co-operative activities such as 'text marking' where (on an OHP, Smart Board, Black Board etc.) they would underline the sections of the text they were discussing. The use of text marking in the context of students' participation in discussion about the realisation of intentionality and meaning within the text, followed by joint cooperative reading work greatly increases the capacity of the students to read the text extracts being studied. The text marking activities also prepare the students to engage with the next stage, 'Transformations'.

Transformations

The movement to engagement with word analysis and writing activities in later stages of the teaching sequence is facilitated using 'Transformations'. Teachers write a carefully chosen sentence or larger passage (that has already been explored in previous steps) from the reading text onto strips of cardboard. Drawing upon the common knowledge that has been built up in the work on Literate Orientation, teachers and students deconstruct the passage while they are discussing the writer motivations and reader effects that are carried in various language choices. Then, this process is reversed as the students and teacher rebuild the passage starting from the motivation behind the choices the writer has made. In this way, students practise the implementation of writing strategies such as, for example, expanding a topic sentence into a descriptive paragraph. 'Transformations' (as the term is used in Accelerated Literacy) represents an intensification of a similar Traeger Park strategy to accommodate the more complex texts encountered in upper primary and secondary grades. The reversal from the deconstruction of language choices to the process of construction of those same resources as text represents a conscious shift from the role of reader (interpreting meaning and responding to the writer) to that of writer (creating meaning and responding to a constructed reader). In the writing role the students discuss the selection of language resources from the strategy perspective of a writer. By placing themselves in the role of writer within transformation activities, students rehearse known strategies that they can, in future, adopt in their own writing.

Writing and Spelling

Transformations provide a focused introduction to decoding activities (e.g. phonics and spelling) and also into what have been termed 'writing workshops'. Writing workshops are organised in such a way that they build upon prior Transformations activities which have been used to make explicit, writing strategies targeted by the teacher as a useful resource to incorporate into students' writing.

Spelling

To develop students' spelling skills, teachers expand their strategic knowledge. Moving from 'sounding out' to develop visual and morphemic and etymological knowledge with priorities determined depending on their developmental spelling stage. For example, teachers cut words into letter patterns (e.g. m/ouse) based around onset and rhyme in the root word. They also explain how the letter patterns and sound/symbol relationships work and students practice spelling the word using those strategies.

Writing

During the Transformations stage of the teaching sequence, teachers will have already made explicit the nature of writing strategies they want the students to explore. Writing workshop activities provide a point where the students practice and take these new strategies into their writing. Writing activities are categorised according to the level of teacher support or 'scaffolding' required. These activities are, from most supportive to least:

- Joint reconstructed writing
- Writing workshops
- Free writing

A highly supportive teaching/learning negotiation process.

Both behavior management strategies and strategies for promoting learning that are employed in the Accelerated Literacy program are taken directly from the negotiation strategies developed at Traeger Park. For both, the fundamental principal is that no action should marginalize the student. The key elements are,

1. The adult (i.e. teacher) supports the child in the learning task by supplying those parts of the task that the child/children can not do when left to their own resources. Whatever the child/children can do the adult (teacher) lets them do it.
2. Learning occurs across sequences of related lessons that are organised to form 'routines' or 'formats' (Bruner 1983) similar to bedtime reading sessions.
3. As experience with the task progresses over a number of 'routines', shared knowledge is built up and the adult/teacher is able to extend both the complexity and depth of the shared learning. As this extension process progresses, children are encouraged to contribute and lead the extension activity.
4. There is a recognition that, especially in the early stages of the children's learning engagement, they join in not because they understand fully the task goals but because of the collaborative and positively social nature of the task.

The preformulation/reconceptualization questioning pattern from Traeger Park is also employed. This pattern is,
Teacher Preformulation -
Teacher Question -
Child Response -
Teacher Acceptance -
Teacher Reconceptualisation

In this pattern, preformulation allows the teacher to prepare and give clues to the learner being questioned. Teacher reconceptualisation allows the teacher to expand and develop understandings. The use of both preformulation and reconceptualisation is adapted by the teacher as common knowledge around the topic builds up between the teacher and the children over the progression of routines or formats generated from the steps of the model outlined earlier.

Another important feature of questioning at Traeger Park was that questions were directed at a group level rather than individually unless the teacher was sure the child could provide an adequate answer. This strategy is continued in the Accelerated Literacy teaching as are the considerations around refraining from correcting responses.

Evaluation

In its early stages, the program developed at the Schools and Community Centre was called Scaffolding Literacy. This name was changed to Accelerated Literacy when the Northern Territory Department of Education requested a name change that was outcome rather than process focused. The program structure and content, however, remained unchanged.

In 1997, Gray and Cowey were invited to implement the program with Indigenous students in the north of South Australia. The request came through the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Council (PYC) from David Rose, then an adult educator working in the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands. A trial of the program was funded at Amata because a number of teachers volunteered to take on the program. The funding was provided by the then Commonwealth Department of Education and Youth Affairs (DETYA) under the 'What Works' program. This trial reported successful outcomes that were detailed in a series of project reports. Further implementations were funded that produced strong outcomes across a number of schools in Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjata Lands in the north of South Australia.

Because of the success of the program, the Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET – previously DETYA) also funded an expansion of the program across schools of the Aboriginal Independent Community Schools (AICS) in Western Australia. At this stage, the project was reviewed positively by Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) (Cresswell et al. 2002). The review did, however, point to the requirement for adequate support to assist program implementation because of the complexity of change in practice that was required.

Next, an additional trial was commenced with six schools in the Northern Territory at the request of the NT Department of Education. This trial was funded by DEET and led to the NT Department of Education instigating a project that was funded primarily by the DEET with a significant addition of NT funding to extend the program on a broad scale across 100 Indigenous schools and 10000 students in a four-year period. The project also continued at the APYC schools in South Australia as well as AICS schools in Western Australia.

The project was also joined by a number of South Australian schools that catered to low socio-economic background children within the South Australian Department of Education and Community Services (DECS). This group (South Australian Accelerated Literacy Project (SAALP)) joined the project but received no Commonwealth DEET funding with participation supported out of individual school funds.

The results of the large-scale rollout in the Northern Territory were mixed. The NT small advisor team was overstretched to keep up with the support requirements for successful implementation and this was reflected in the eventual outcomes. Essentially, the more thoroughly a school took on the program the more effective were the results.

The model in the Northern Territory contravened the model Gray advocated at the time. Gray proposed a model based around carefully developed key schools as dissemination and training points for a more staged expansion of the program. However, this model was not accepted.

With the exception of a group of Northern Territory schools that demonstrated strong outcomes, the sustained results were obtained from the group of South Australian schools that joined the program later. These schools joined voluntarily and the program was strongly supported by principals and school executive staff. The program in these schools has been monitored independently by ACER testing and analysis (SAALP site reference is listed below). In 2013, this group was a catalyst for the setting up of a national association (Accelerated Literacy Practitioners Association of Australia - ALPAA). This association was established by committed Accelerated Literacy educators and consultants from across Australia. The Association web site offers training and support resources and materials and is listed as a reference below.

References:

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