LORRAINE'S FEEDBACK

'My Experience with the How Language Works Course as an EAL Teacher'

Lorraine Batres, NAP Teacher, WELS

In Australia, the English as an addition language New Arrivals Program (NAP) provides initial, on-arrival intensive English tuition for newly arrived students in primary schools, high schools and Intensive English Centres in order to develop their English language skills so that they are able to participate in learning with their peers in mainstream classes. Lorraine Batres is an NAP teacher (Grades 2/3/4) at the Western English Language School in Victoria, Australia. She recently completed the How Language Works course. She explains how the course helped her achieve a dramatic increase in students' achievements.

When you have been teaching Language and Literacy for over 17 years, the last thing that you expect is to be enrolled in a language course as part of a whole school PD. However, in early 2017 a course called **How Language Works** (HLW) was rolled out at the Western English Language School (WELS) where I teach.

WELS is a government primary and secondary co-educational school providing education at seven sites across the South-West Victorian Region. The students are predominantly from refugee backgrounds and so often have interrupted schooling or no schooling at all. Some have never had the opportunity to play with toys, let alone hold a pencil. Furthermore, many have suffered trauma from witnessing horrific violence.

As an experienced English as an Additional Language (EAL) teacher, I questioned how such a course, with its strong emphasis on teachers and students building a shared metalanguage, could possibly help my students, given their difficult, and often traumatic, refugee experiences. My focus has always been to address my students' immediate needs, to teach an intensive English Language program and to prepare them for transition into mainstream schools. I felt that my students' achievements were a testimony to my hard work, dedication, teaching content and teaching style.

Yet, despite my many years of teaching experience working in a Newly Arrived Program (NAP), I was challenged by the ideas from the HLW course, which allowed me, in turn, to challenge my own students to even greater levels of achievement. (In the process, I saw the power of

introducing a metalanguage, which the students took up willingly and with great effect on their writing outcomes, not to mention their confidence as language users.)

The HLW course was first introduced at our school by **Brian Dare**, an international consultant in Language and Literacy. After delivering a version of the course to the Curriculum Team, the leadership team led by Yolette de Zilwa decided to set up an HLW tutor training course to train a group of tutors who in turn would roll out the Teacher Course to the whole staff over the following year.

Earlier, Brian, Bronwyn Custance (EAL and Literacy consultant) and the Curriculum Teams introduced components of the course to all school staff, both primary and secondary as part of after-school PD. This included the introduction of **different genres and registers**, the use of a **common metalanguage**, a **colour-coding scheme** to break down parts of sentences and an overview of a **Teaching and Learning Cycle** (TLC). Next, staff elected for which term they wanted to complete the course and the rollout began. All participants completed 10 modules, which included Between Module Readings (BMR) and Between Module Activities (BMA) to receive a certificate of completion. Participants were given time-release to meet with a tutor-mentor, who provided them with guidance and assistance throughout and beyond the course with continued time-release to meet with mentors and for peer-to-peer support. At first, I thought that this was a mammoth project, which would be difficult to pull off. However, within a year, all WELS staff were trained in HLW and positive results in students' achievements began to emerge.

As previously mentioned, I was reluctant to do the course at first, mainly because I was already a fully qualified teacher with many years of teaching experience. For the first seven years of my teaching career, I taught EAL to adult migrants and refugees. Since 2008, I have been teaching EAL to primary aged children in a NAP at the Western English Language School (WELS). Having been a child migrant myself, I understand the immediate needs of newly arrived people to a foreign land. I know what it feels like to be five years old and not understand a word of English when everything around you is foreign and it is easy to feel lost and trapped. Every day feels like a challenge. Common tasks for mainstream students are challenging for newly arrived EAL students. Our students are only entitled to be in an Intensive English Program for a total duration of 6 – 12 months, depending on previous education, trauma and individual progress within the program. So prior to completing the HLW course, I questioned how teachers at our school would possibly be able to settle our students into the new schooling system, teach an intensive language program, along with the new content of learning in such a short period of time. Yet I was surprised to see that it can be done with a carefully thought-out timetable.

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When I commenced the HLW course, I tried to keep an open mind. I participated fully in each session and committed myself to the between module activities and readings. My initial thoughts were that this course, with its functional metalanguage, simply renamed traditional terminology and threw in a colour-coding scheme (1) for innovation. Was I wrong! As I progressed through

the modules over a period of 10 weeks, my thoughts on the course began to shift. The HLW course empowers teachers to highly challenge students, whilst adequately providing high support. The course begins with an explicit focus on genre and register. Using the **register continuum**, which includes the Field (the topic) – from every day/concrete to technical/abstract, the Tenor (the roles and relationships of the language user) – from informal/personal to formal/impersonal and the Mode (channel of communication) – we can see the challenges for students as they progress through from the more spoken, everyday spoken end to the more technical, formal and written end. The following modules take up various aspects of the language system and emphasise the importance of a having a **shared metalanguage** between teacher and student.

The course also emphasises a clear **teaching and learning cycle**, with **four key stages** that are well structured and easy to follow:

Stage 1: Building the Field

In this stage, students are pre-tested on the chosen topic and genre, for a clear understanding of their background knowledge. The focus is on building on that knowledge and introducing new vocabulary as EAL teachers normally would. Students learn through pictures, songs, games, audio and visual texts, books, role-plays, etc.

Stage 2: Modelling and Deconstruction

In this stage, the genre is introduced through modelled texts and the content is deconstructed. Students learn about headings, sub-headings, labelling and language features. There is a focus on functional grammar and a breakdown of words or groups of words in sentences to understand the parts and make meaning.

Stage 3: Joint Construction

In this stage, students jointly construct text with the teacher or with each other. They start to become more confident at contributing thoughts and ideas. Functional grammar continues to be a focus as students progress in their understanding of each genre and its associated language features.

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Stage 4: Independent Construction

In this stage, students are given a post-assessment, which involves independent work. Students who are unable to write could still be assessed orally.

Implementing this cycle with my cohort of students was much easier and more effective than I expected it to be. I am still able to cater to the immediate needs of my EAL students. Moreover, I can still deliver an intensive English Language program and cover letters, sounds, hand-writing, oracy skills and other curriculum areas. The difference is that my teaching is now more directed and structured. I am able to differentiate as I normally would and to provide each ability group

specific, goal-targeted work. Each group can be highly challenged and given high support based on their abilities. For example, students with very little to no English could work more on oracy-based tasks and be provided with repetitive sentence structures whilst more competent students could be further challenged with technical language and complex sentence structures.

During one term, our class focussed on the genre of procedural writing with 'Food' as the topic. I completed a **pre-assessment task** with each student in my class. Some students were able to verbally identify a couple of fruit names. Only three students could identify up to five fruit names and attempted to spell the words. A couple of students were able to sequence the pictures of the procedure in the pre-assessment and verbalize basic phrases. One student attempted to write the procedure. As a class, we spent the first couple of weeks building the field by learning new vocabulary and basic oral structures. We focussed on processes (verbs) in cooking and throughout the following weeks, we followed basic recipes in class. I read Possum Magic to the students and we made some of the Australian foods that were presented in the book, such as Vegemite sandwiches and Pavlova. I took photos of the students cooking along the way and used these visuals as aids during writing tasks.
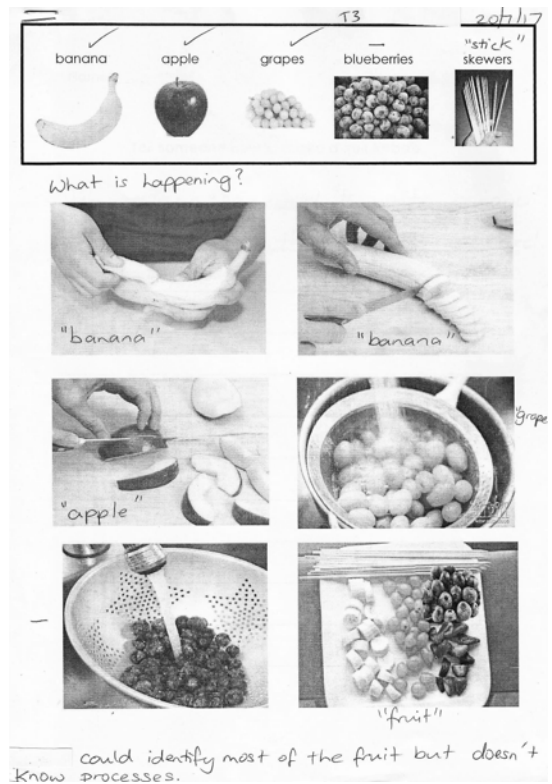
As a class, we read through model procedural texts and discussed structures, including the heading, subheadings and other features of the text. We deconstructed sentences together using a colour-coded scheme. We coloured all the processes green and discussed if these processes were action, saying, sensing or relating words. They started to associate my questioning to locate other information and to use the colours in the scheme.

For example:

  • What is happening? What did we do? (process)

  • Who or what is it? (participant)

  • Where, when, how, with what, with whom? (circumstance)

For example:

  Peel the banana and slice it into little pieces.

  What did we do? Peel and slice

  What did we peel? the banana

What did we slice? it

What is it? the banana

How did we slice it? into little pieces

With this new knowledge, we moved onto **joint construction of procedural texts** based on the recipes that we had done or intended to do in class. We continued using the colour-coded scheme to construct sentences through questioning. From there, I divided the students into ability groups and each group worked on independent writing at their own level. During conferences, I was able to use the metalanguage to communicate ideas to improve students' work. For example, if a student wrote 'Put the banana' without specifying where, I could suggest to that student that they needed to include a circumstance of place to complete their sentence, for instance, 'on the Pavlova'. With colour-coded model structures around the room for support, students began to see patterns in texts and subsequently used these patterns to guide their own independent writing for their post-assessment tasks. By this stage, most students were able to write basic procedural texts independently. Some students were able to write detailed procedural texts using a combination of processes, participants and circumstances in the correct sentence structure.
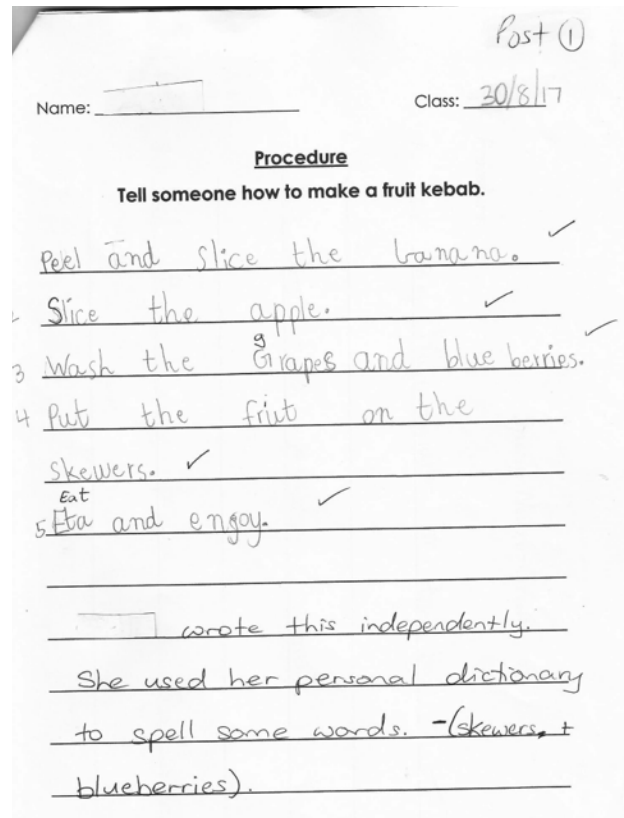
Throughout each term, I expand students' writing skills by specifically teaching other grammatical structures. For example, when I focus on conjunctions, I generally teach 'and' to the whole class and use everyday objects to create verbal and written sentences, e.g. I might ask a student to choose three items around the room and to create a sentence using 'and'. "I have a ruler, a sharpener and a book". I challenge higher functioning students with more complex conjunctions including 'but', 'so' and 'because', depending on the genre focus at the time. Whatever grammatical structure I work on in class, I simply tailor the level and mode (spoken or written) to cater for the ability of each student. In addition, I provide each student with homework on the grammatical structures we practise in class based on their ability.

Since the completion of the HLW course, I have created a richer learning environment and the quality of my teaching has increased. Reflecting on my previous way of teaching, I could say that I was a great teacher based on the knowledge and training that I had at the time. Now I can confidently state that I am a better teacher, with clearer goals and structure and I am experimenting and learning more every day.
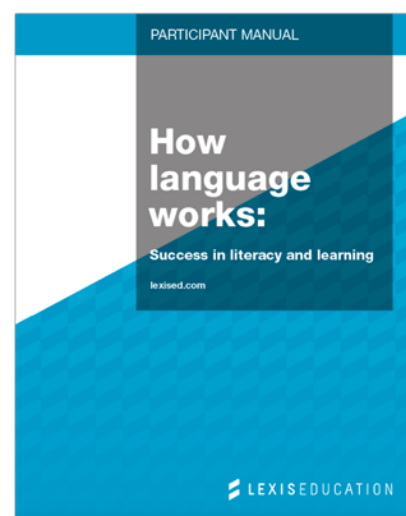
Students are like sponges and they soak up whatever we as educators choose to teach them. Should we simply settle for an intensive English Language program survival skills, some vocabulary and grammar? Or is it possible for our EAL students to learn way beyond this, through explicit teaching and higher expectations? I was quite surprised to see how quickly some of my students, who have only been in Australia for such a short period of time, were able to pick up on the functional grammar that I presented to them. They quickly grasped and began using the technical language, which I initially assumed would be too difficult for them. Some of my students, who had never written a procedural text before, independently wrote near perfect procedures at level 5 by the end of the cycle. Sometimes, I have debates with my students when breaking down parts of a sentence into processes, participants and circumstances. I feel amused and delighted as they are empowered with the knowledge to debate their views using the learnt metalanguage. Imagine how far students could go if this metalanguage and style of teaching was taught across their entire schooling life?

This metalanguage has given me an effective and efficient way to communicate, assess language, share knowledge, thoughts and ideas, not only with my students but also with my primary and secondary colleagues. The metalanguage is transferable across genres and curriculum areas and therefore, school planning is more effective, especially because all teaching staff at WELS have completed the HLW course. Teachers have all been able to be involved in the development and implementation of our new curriculum.

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I personally have had the privilege to work as part of the curriculum team to create unit planners for teachers of grades 3/4, including class resources and functional grammar based worksheets. Our school has given all teachers the opportunity to contribute to the units of work and to provide feedback for continuous growth and improvement. Now, staff across each site can come together to discuss common goals. For example, we can moderate assessment tasks in primary and secondary using a provided rubric that has been aligned with our EAL levels. Teachers can plot students at a starting point, teach and scaffold specific genre-based content and systematically measure students' progress. Through this process, my colleagues and I have noticed a dramatic increase in students' achievements in a short space of time. We look forward to seeing how our whole school data will reflect the changes we have made in the future.

Despite my initial hesitation to do the course, feeling that I was delivering a great intensive English Language program that addressed my students' immediate needs and being sceptical that our EAL students would even be capable of learning technical terminology and functional grammar within genres, the HLW course has inspired me to get out of my comfort zone and to explore teaching in a new, dynamic way.

PARTICIPANT MANUAL

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Through the process of whole school training and the opportunity for input from all our staff, I see WELS as a leading school in quality education. I feel that we are setting up a good foundation for our students before they transition into mainstream schools. For this, I am very grateful to our school principal Yolette de Zilwa for choosing to invest in the HLW course for our school. I genuinely encourage other schools to consider taking on the challenge to improve the future education of students in Australia.

1 *This is taken up later but basically coding the processes (verbal group) in green, the participants (most often nominal groups) in red and circumstances (adverbial and prepositional phrases) in blue.*