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The significance of story and song

Orally told stories, rhymes, songs, prayers and routines for meeting and greeting people all have an important role in literacy acquisition, and children participate in these activities within many cultures long before they begin any form of formal education. In making the links between literacy and language, some researchers have defined literacy as a 'specific oral language register' (Jones, 2003, p. 166) which shares many of the elements of the language used in early reading texts (Heath, 1983; Gregory, 1996; Greenhalgh and Strong, 2001), and hence has been labelled 'literate language' (Jones, 2003). One of the differences between text and spoken conversation is that written stories have a different structure, for example Lüthi's (1970) 'story grammar', whereas, for the most part, spoken conversations do not. Features of story grammar can enhance the quality of children's story-telling and create a mental picture of the plot. Familiarity with story language often enables children to retell their own story, verbally or in writing. In reading also, they are able to recall 'chunks' of language that help them later to predict written versions of the same story (Dombey, 1988; Fox, 1988).

In many cultures, stories and songs contain genealogical information, historical interpretations of events and geographical knowledge (oral maps) that are central to maintaining the integrity of the culture. Strong oral traditions and the practice of keeping history and genealogy alive through stories in chants and songs have helped to ensure that traditional practices and understandings of many cultural groups continue, to various degrees, to this day (Dewes, 1977; Karetu, 1977). Dewes (1977), for example, contends that these oral traditions, extending continuously from the past to the present, ensure that an indigenous Māori person in New Zealand can be seen as, 'master of his [sic] environment with a brain, heart and soul; with a religion, a

philosophy of life and of nature; who had (has) highly sophisticated educational institutions and agencies of culture transmission to preserve and perpetuate knowledge' (p. 53).

Sarbin (1986) notes that it is through story that children learn to become functioning members of the society into which they are born:

It is through hearing stories . . . that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of any society . . . except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources.

(Sarbin, 1986, p. 201)

From the time children first begin to understand the world, they appear to do so by means of story:

. . . it is a 'push' to construct narrative that determines the order of priority in which grammatical forms are mastered by the young child.
(Bruner, 1990, p. 77)

They are born into a world of culturally contrived meanings:

We do not hear the story as separately constituted beings who can scrutinise it from a position of safe separation. We are in the story and the story is in us. . . . Any understanding we have of reality is in terms of our stories and our story-creating possibilities.

(Mair, 1988, p. 128)

The stories themselves, as well as the purpose for which story-telling is used and the manner of their telling, can vary across cultures. Familiarity with the language of story implies a need for familiarity with the context of stories also, in order to make stories intelligible. Gregory (1996, pp. 100-1), writing from the context of educators in the UK working with children for whom English is an additional language, discusses an approach to classroom literacy learning which makes certain assumptions, among which are:

- That language and experience are inextricably linked (Sapir, 1970). Effective use of semantic clues in reading a text will depend on understanding or 'feeling' for the experiences described in the language in which they are described.

- That learning to read and write promotes a greater consciousness of language structure.
- That the teacher's awareness of the child's home culture and an explicit introduction to the new culture of school are prerequisites for the 'joint culture creation' (Bruner, 1996) important for successful classroom learning.

(Gregory, 1996, p. 100)

Gee (1990) describes an example of a small African-American girl telling a story at the class 'sharing time'. She based her story on an oral discourse which was valued in her community, namely that a story should be a good performance, an entertainment. Her story was full of rhythm, pattern and repetition and held the other children's appreciation. The teacher, however, was looking for a different (unarticulated) discourse, that of being informative, linear and to the point, and did not appreciate the child's own poetic or entertainment discourse. In another school-based situation with other conventions, for example a high school literature or creative writing class, the child's narration would be closer to what was valued. Eventually this child was sent to the school psychologist for telling tall tales.

One of the reasons for this unfortunate incident has undoubtedly been successive attempts to displace the validity of minority culture understandings with that of the dominant culture. As above, Cazden's (1988) analysis of classroom discourses also showed that when teachers were unfamiliar with the language patterns of their students they changed the way in which they responded to students' reading errors. Wood (1988), commenting on teachers' perceptions, said that they:

... perceive children who do not talk using 'received pronunciation' and the 'standard' form of their language as less able or less motivated than children whose talk corresponds more closely to that of the currently 'dominant' dialect. Making (perhaps implicit or unconscious) judgements about children's educational potential on the basis of how they talk, teachers set up self-fulfilling prophecies which lead to the anticipated differences in levels of achievement. Crudely, because teachers expect less of children from social backgrounds, these children are taught and learn less.

(Wood, 1988, p. 112)

The language and sociocultural knowledge that children bring to school should work for them, rather than against them (McNaughton, 2002). For this to happen, collaboration between teachers and home communities is essential.

Literacy achievement and revitalization of indigenous language and culture

In some countries, indigenous communities are dissatisfied with the current levels of achievement by their children in English medium classrooms, as for example the Māori community in New Zealand (Bishop et al., 2003). Many non-indigenous educators also share this concern. One response to these concerns has been a move towards developing student confidence and proficiency in both the indigenous language (for example Māori) and English.

In New Zealand the revival of the Māori language and culture has to a large extent been the result of initiatives such as *Te Kōhanga Reo* (the Language Nest, Māori immersion early childhood centres) and more recently *kura kaupapa Māori* (schools which operate within a Māori worldview and deliver the curriculum through the medium of Māori language). There are also Māori immersion mainstream schools and Māori immersion classes established within mainstream schools. However, as one would expect, difficulties arise when the language being acquired is the students' second language and not the language of the parent community. While it is crucial that students immersed in language programmes should be exposed to the most expert models, many teachers of Māori are themselves second language learners, under pressure to teach through the medium of Māori in all curriculum subjects as well as to develop their own proficiency in the language (Benton, 1993). This situation severely limits schools' ability to connect the 'school' language students experience with the language and sociocultural knowledge of the home.

Despite the strong resurgence to revitalize Māori language, English is still the only language constantly available and is still the majority language spoken and heard in New Zealand communities (Smith, 1995). An experienced, mature junior Māori immersion classroom teacher who is a native speaker of Māori and works in a mainstream New Zealand school commented:

I find it really sad. Even though the tamariki [children] speak te reo [the Māori language] when they are in my classroom, as soon as they go out the door, all that they hear is te reo Pākehā [the English language]. My kaiarahi i te reo [expert language assistant] and I try to be the best language models we can but it's not enough. When they go out the door it's English. When they go out the school gate it's English. When they go home it's English and when they turn on their TV that's English too.

You know when I was at school we used to get the strap for talking in Māori yet even though we weren't allowed to speak Māori at

school we still heard more Māori in a week than my babies hear, and they're meant to be learning in Māori.

This comment provides a stark illustration of the differences between the responsive social contexts available for first language learners and those available for second language learners, and the dilemmas these differences pose for bilingual educators.

So all-pervading is English in the wider community, it is the language likely to be used by the majority of parents to communicate in the home (Benton, 1993), and it is still also the first language of the majority of children attending education in Māori immersion settings (Hollings, Jefferies and McArdell, 1992; Benton, 1993; Education Review Office, 1995). The benefits of growing a language base from the home and within early childhood facilities are well appreciated and well founded.

Language, literacy and early childhood

The vision of *Kōhanga Reo* is to teach children the language at the side of their elders and other family members, and within the embrace of the extended family and *marae* (traditional cultural meeting places) (Royal Tangaere, 1997a, 1997b). The *Kōhanga Reo* movement initiated a programme that totally immersed pre-school Māori children in the values, traditions, customs and stories of traditional Māori, capitalizing on the relationships and interactions within the family in order to recapture and revitalize Māori language and culture (Smith, 1995). For the first time in over two generations, Māori pre-schoolers were receiving the language, cultural knowledge and life principles that would help them make better sense of their own cultural worldview. The New Zealand Māori Education Commission (1998) identified that inter-generational learning contexts such as this were an important part of the traditional Māori philosophy that underpinned the pedagogy of *Kōhanga Reo*. The Commission reinforced the need to nurture relationships between elders and their grandchildren and identified the language, social, cultural, emotional, cognitive and physical benefits that accrue as a result.

Rangiwhakaehu Walker, a well-respected Māori elder who was instrumental in the initiation and consolidation of the *Kōhanga Reo* movement in her tribal area, explained how some of her peers grew up without the benefits of their own language (Berryman, 2004a, unpublished interview):

Rangiwhakaehu: Parents were looking for the *Reo* [Māori language] for their children. Most of them had missed out on the language as children.

Rangiwhakaehu believed they were afraid that their own grandchildren would be raised equally disadvantaged, and although there had been many challenges, they had welcomed the *Kōhanga Reo* initiative with open arms.

Rangiwhakaehu: Everything was voluntary. It wasn't until some time down the line that we got any funding. We started in the *wharenuī* [Māori meeting house] then we shifted into the garage at the back of the *marae* [meeting area, focal point of settlement, space in front of a meeting house] dining room. We really started with almost no resources. We had nothing so we used all of the resources from the environment.

Māori elders, family members and the Māori community in general took responsibility for modelling the Māori language and preferred cultural practices of their ancestors with these children, using experiences and resources that came from within their own culture (Hohepa, Smith, Smith, and McNaughton, 1992; Ka'ai, 1996). Every opportunity was taken to immerse the children in Māori language and Māori experiences.

We took the *tamariki* [children] to the sea, to the bush, to places that had been important to our people. When we went to the bush we talked to the *tamariki* about the trees, what they looked like, where they grew, what their leaves looked like. We talked about the birds that lived in the trees. We talked about food from the bush like *piko-piko* [edible asparagus-like fern shoot]. We took them to the farm. The farm belonged to one of the *whānau* [extended family]. We took them to gather *titiko* [winkles] and *pipi* [cockles]. We gathered them, then cooked them and ate them. All the time talking, talking, talking. There was a lot of learning from each of these experiences. Learning for the children and for the parents that came with us. Learning about what to do and how to do it properly and also learning about the language that went with those experiences.

We took them to the beach for a swim, to play in the sand, to gather stones and shells. We used to get the shells with the holes in them. There was only one place you could get them, that was at *te akau* [the ocean beach]. These shells we used to thread on *harakeke* [strips of flax]. We took those things back with us, then we would use them to work with our *tamariki*. We would get the *tamariki* to feel them to look at them, to talk about them.

This conversation illustrates the extraordinary lengths to which many Māori elders and educators went in order to create, or re-create, powerful second language learning contexts. These contexts can be seen as genuinely

responsive social contexts, centred on shared tasks of cultural importance, within which young children could learn to speak their own language. Rang-iwhakaehu talked about how the land and resources from the land linked back to special stories from the area.

Each of those places had a special story from the old days. Way back in the old times they used to put a net out in front of the *marae* to catch herrings. We talk about those things when we go there, we tell those stories.

Rangiwhakaehu then shared how the resources and stories were often linked to learning through song. Even though it had been almost 20 years ago, she recalled a specific learning experience she and another teacher had provided for their children.

One time we took our children out to the river. There are lots of river stones there. We gathered them, big ones, small ones, the smooth and rough ones. Why? Because there's a *kōrero* [story] for each of those stones. We used them as teaching tools for our *tamariki*. We made up a song to sing when they were playing with the stones. We taught them the words that go with the smooth ones, *maeneene* [smooth], the rough ones, *taratara* [coarse, jagged]. The *tamariki* would play with the stones and sing along with us.

Kohatu nunui [large stones]

Kohatu rikiriki [small stones]

Kohatu maeneene [smooth stones]

Kohatu taratara [rough stones]

Horahia ngā kohatu [spread the stones out]

Tamariki e kori [children play with the stones]

Kia mau ai ngā tauira [so that you can hold on to what you have learned]

As they played we'd ask them questions. *Kei hea te kohatu nunui?* [Where is the large stone?]

Rangiwhakaehu recalled that this had been one of the ways that she had learned the language as a child:

When we did this it reminded me of my own mother when we used to sort the potatoes out after we had harvested them. We would sort them according to their various sizes for storage. You identify the ones to eat straight away, the ones that will be put into storage and the very little ones that you couldn't eat. They were *ponaho* [useless] and they were fed to the pigs.

This was how me and my brothers and sisters learned the language. We learned the language, and we learned what the language meant as we did the activities. So that is why we taught in *Kōhanga* in this way.

The shared tasks in both of these examples, labelling and categorizing stones and potatoes, were tasks of genuine significance to the survival and well-being of the community. Smooth stones were selected as *hāngi* stones (suitable for heating and used for cooking in an oven in the ground) and the selection of potatoes for eating and for keeping as seeds ensured the continuity of supply of an important food source as well as avoiding any waste.

Rangiwhakaehu shared another learning context:

An important resource was the *harakeke* [flax] plant. We would cut it and let the *tamariki* taste the juice. We would talk about that. Then we would strip the flax and plait it. Teach them how to plait it and then for the older ones teach them how to make it into a headband. Some of them were crooked and didn't work properly. But that was all right. It was not about the finished thing, its about what you learn on the way. Sometimes you've got to make a few mistakes before you get it right.

This piece of advice from Rangiwhakaehu speaks of the importance of children being able to experience and trial activities in contexts where they are supported and where new learning can continue to build upon existing knowledge and experience. She finished with a reflection on one of the changes that have taken place in the last 20 years.

Nowadays they have got their resources, their books, so they don't go out so often. I think we had more fun with the natural resources than from the plastic toys they have nowadays.

Many of the activities described by Rangiwhakaehu incorporate features of 'literate language', for example 'story grammar' (see above, Jones, 2003), and connect oral language with children's entry into reading and writing. Particularly important here is a sense of the close link between 'literate language' and the children's lived experiences. Other teachers in *kōhanga reo* in this area also used a combination of story-telling, song and the local *marae* complex as contexts for learning. They capitalized on the strengths provided by people from the local *marae*, including family, even though many may have had little Māori language proficiency. The granddaughter of one such teacher shared how her grandmother used the stories, told in the stylized

carvings, weavings and paintings in the *wharenui* (the main *marae* building) as the context for learning for both her students and their parents. Each part of the *wharenui* represented traditional stories about the genealogy of the people and/or their local environment.

First, the teacher encouraged other family members, her granddaughter included, to develop resources to support the re-telling of these stories. Resources included recordings of the stories themselves, artwork to represent the events, characters and places in the stories, simple repetitive songs and actions that also told the stories (many long and complex traditional songs for use in adult gatherings already existed) and lists of words and phrases. Units of work would then involve the teacher engaging in extended conversations and language interactions with both her pre-school students and their family members. Units began with story-telling, followed by excursions into the wider community to visit the places and participate in the situated language activities pertinent to the story.

Just as Rangiwakaehu has described, these excursions also included hands-on experiences with traditional resource-growing or food-gathering techniques. From oral language interactions around these stories or experiences, young children acquired important cultural knowledge and practices to do with history and geography of the area, and gender roles and responsibilities. Back inside the *wharenui*, the students and their parents learned about the carvings or other artwork that the stories related to. Simple songs and their actions were incorporated into this exercise, as was the use of the contemporary artwork that family members had prepared. Children were encouraged to use the props to re-tell the stories to their peers and to family members. Given that adults were learning alongside the children, they too were able to assist with these exercises so that everyone benefited.

Responsive interventions

Students' proficiency with spoken language affects the development of all other communication skills. It is especially important to recognize this when students are learning at school in a second language. This situation is faced by many recent immigrants to English-speaking classrooms in different countries. The Education Department of Western Australia (1997) highlights the importance of recognizing and responding to the following when teaching children for whom English is a second language:

- the diversity and richness of experience and expertise that children bring to school
- before cultural values and practices that may be different from those of the teacher

- the need for children to have the freedom to use their own languages and to code-switch when necessary
- the context and purpose of each activity needs to make sense to the learner
- the learning needs to be supported through talk and collaborative peer interaction
- the child may need a range of 'scaffolds' to support learning and that the degree of support needed will vary over time, context and degree of content complexity
- the children will need time and support so that they do not feel pressured
- the supportive attitudes of peers may need to be actively fostered
- there may be difficulties in assessing children's real achievements and the active involvement of parents will make a deal of difference, as will on-going monitoring.

(Education Department of Western Australia, 1997, pp. 4-5)

These principles are compatible with those already advocated in this chapter for all children, including those who are learning in a second language other than English. For these children, sufficient exposure and experiences with oral language prior to school are important if they are to make an easy transition between words used in oral language contexts with those used in written language contexts. Because of the many variables associated with the acquisition of language in a society where the language of instruction is not the dominant community language, some students need a great deal of additional support to develop their oral language base before they can fully participate in classroom literacy practices.

Writing from a UK perspective, and from a wealth of experience of supporting children for whom English is an additional language, Gregory (1996) poses the question: 'What enables learners to take the step from speaking to understanding writing on a page or screen, to realise that knowledge of life and language can help them make sense of words and texts?' (1996, p. 95). Gregory advocates addressing building from the known into new literacy acquisition by explicit scaffolding of children's learning through:

- recognizing children's existing linguistic skills and cultural knowledge, and building these into both teaching content and teaching strategies;
- limiting the size of the reading task by introducing explicitly common new lexis and language 'chunks';
- modelling chunks of language orally and in an idealized way through puppets and/or songs and socio-dramatic play;
- devising home-school reading programmes which recognize the role

of both parent and child as mediator of different languages and cultures and which families feel comfortable with.

(Gregory, 1996, p. 112)

Gregory (1996, p. 110) outlines an example of a reading session that draws on children's oral language and makes use of puppets to mediate learning. This should draw on the child's emotions, for example fear, love, sympathy, hate, and aim to tell an adventure or drama such as 'Dina (a puppet) in hospital following an accident':

- Initially, teachers 'model' the experience through the puppets. Teachers use (sometimes hesitantly and sometimes needing the children's help) essential chunks of the target language which are to be introduced and practised. The chunks (or structures) of language practised will form the basis for early class 'Big Books' for reading together. As the theme is developed together orally, children are encouraged to experiment, and the language used is less controlled.
- After the scene has been enacted by the puppets, the children offer their own parallel experiences and key words are noted by the teacher. They then re-enact the scene shown by the puppets. Sometimes, the teacher will use a song she has found or invented which practises these particular language chunks. The children will act out the song.
- During the early stages, one or two sentences (later more) are written on strips of card using the language chunks that the teacher wishes to practise and containing the children's key words. Two copies of each sentence are made: one is cut into separate words which fit on to the teacher's word stand or can be attached to the magnet-board; the other remains intact as a sentence and is stored with a collection of past class sentences.
- The class reads the sentence cut into individual words first in chorus after the teacher, and then individually. As the teacher changes children's key words, the child who originally 'owned' the word is given the chance to read the sentence first. During the early stages, one or two replacements are sufficient, but these increase rapidly. The teacher is careful to refer to terms like 'word', 'sentence', 'full stop', 'question mark', and so on as the children work and, where relevant, calls children's attention to letters that recur.
- Finally, the sentence is entered in the class news-book and illustrated by the child whose key word it contains. These big sturdy books, together with the class sentence and past sentences, are freely accessible to the children to practise with each other during free moments.
- At odd moments during the day, take the pile of key words. Choose a word and ask the child to whom it 'belongs' (or any child who

volunteers) to read the word first and then to use the word in a sentence or question.

In a Māori context in New Zealand, Berryman et al. (2002) describe *Hopungia* (pick up the language), a range of interactive oral language activities aimed at getting children to collaborate in small groups. The tutors, the activities and the resources provide a scaffolded and meaningful context for this language learning.

Hopungia activities can utilize classroom or natural resources and be developed around classroom themes or learning areas. One of these activities uses co-construction to produce a group picture and to tell stories. The tutor and group members select a theme for a picture, preferably connected with any of their current learning topics.

On a large sheet of paper or whiteboard, the tutor draws the first image and tells their story pointing at the same time to the image they have drawn. For example, '*he maunga tino teitei*' (this is a very tall mountain). The second person draws another shape that will complement the first image. They then repeat the first story before adding their story, each time pointing to the appropriate image. For example, '*he maunga tino teitei, he awa kōpikopiko*' (this is a very tall mountain, this is a winding river). The third person draws another shape that will complement the first two images and repeats and adds to the story, each time pointing to the appropriate image. For example, '*he maunga tino teitei, he awa kōpikopiko, he tūna kei roto i te awa*' (this is a tall mountain, this is a winding river, there is an eel in the river). The activity continues in this manner until a group picture has been constructed. The tutor could add labels as each picture is added or write each person's story as a group story to be displayed alongside the picture. The pictures can be displayed on the wall and/or shared with other groups by having the students tell stories about the picture they have constructed. Pictures from all of the groups can be stapled together into books for independent reading at other times.

Peer collaboration in developing literate language

Much of the recent research on the development of children's literacy skills emphasizes the crucial importance of the social context in which learning takes place (Pellegrini et al., 1998) and, in so doing, stresses again the crucial link between oral language and literacy acquisition. Included in the construct of social context is classroom pedagogy, in particular interactions between peers and between adults and children. Although the value of peer collaboration has been researched for a number of years in relation to overall improvement of literacy, both for students with and without difficulties in

literacy acquisition, research into how peer collaboration supports literacy learning is comparatively recent (Jones, 2003).

Literate language includes 'story grammar', as we have noted earlier. 'We dream, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, love, hate, believe, doubt, plan, construct, gossip and learn in narrative' (Westby, 1991, p. 352). It is important for students to learn to express these feelings in written as well as oral form. Narratives can be seen as an early step towards later expository text since they contain a number of essential elements such as: comparisons, problem-solving, exhortation and persuasion, and so on (Montgomery and Kahn, 2003). Some students who experience difficulties in literacy may need support to reproduce story grammar. Montgomery and Kahn (2003) note an interactive oral teaching strategy 'scaffolded story writing' that has been used as an interactive group activity to support struggling writers:

In the scaffolded narrative method, questioning is used to help students build their comprehension, organisation, sequence of ideas, and metacognition. This questioning encourages students to become 'meaning makers'.

(Montgomery and Kahn, 2003, p. 145)

The learning support teacher introduces the concept of an author, what s/he does and why students might want to be one. The students are taught five elements of an effective narrative: interesting character(s), context, a credible problem, possible solutions to the problem, good ending (Apel and Masterton, 1998). The support teacher sets up a series of questions to support the students in thinking about the stories they want to write and the students discuss possible approaches with each other. The approach comprises five steps:

Step 1: Draw a sequence story. The [teacher] divides an 8" × 11" blank sheet of paper into six sections and asks the students to draw their stories on the paper in correct sequence, using as many sheets as are necessary . . . The students may use stick figures and simple drawings . . . Some students need help in sequencing their stories properly

Step 2: Describe the main characters. Students should list descriptive details for the main characters, including age, height, weight, body build, hair color and style, eye color, clothes, family, favourite foods, things they like to do . . .

Step 3: Begin writing the narrative. The students begin their narratives with an interesting opening sentence or two to catch the reader's interest. The teacher might read to the students opening paragraphs from stories he or she has enjoyed. Students should follow

their picture sequence when writing their narratives. They should also incorporate the information they compiled before they started writing the story, including the character descriptions.

The teacher uses a questioning technique throughout this intervention. She or he must facilitate the student's ability to come up with creative, independent ideas . . .

The dialogue between the student and the teacher continues until the student is certain about what he or she wants to write. . . . The teacher needs to ask questions until a coherent story emerges, which sometimes occurs in stages. The teacher may get the first part down and then move on to the next part. Some stories change in the process as better ideas occur and the student revises his or her initial thoughts. It is best to get a first draft completed and then rewrite.

Step 4: Write the story. From the beginning, the teacher reinforces the idea that the story belongs to the student, and changes are never made without consulting the student. . . .

Step 5: Rewrite and correct. Some students require corrections and help throughout the writing process. They need words to be spelled for them, or they want to try out a sentence or two orally before they write. . . . Grammar is often incorrect, and syntax is sometimes awkward. Editing the final draft is the point at which these areas must be addressed.

Many students approach the editing process with trepidation . . . suggestions for change must be given diplomatically. When the teacher suggests a possibility and the student does not like it, the change should not be made.

(Montgomery and Kahn, 2003, pp. 146-7)

Montgomery and Kahn suggest that punctuation and spelling should be taught within the context of such stories:

The editing process is an ideal point at which to teach language structure to students who want to learn, because it pertains to their stories. They want to make their stories the best that they can be. It is nice to have a final product of which they can be proud.

(Montgomery and Kahn, 2003, p. 148)

As well as story grammar, literate language also includes metacognitive and metalinguistic talk that helps to support children in thinking about both how to track their own understanding of what is going on, and how stories fit together. Jones gives two examples of this:

This type of language . . . includes talk about linguistic processes (e.g. 'Let's read this part again') as well as talk about cognitive processes (e.g. 'I think this goes here').

(Jones, 2003, p. 166)

There is increasing interest in sociocultural frameworks based on Vygotskian theory (Vygotsky, 1978) to investigate the influence of interactions with peers on student's use of literate language. Cognitive development is able to progress only 'when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his [sic] peers' (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90). The language that is exchanged facilitates whatever joint activity is being undertaken and also the internalization of new skills and new knowledge construction. Collaborative reading and writing activities can provide children with the opportunity to scaffold peers' learning in the zone of proximal development through observing, guiding or offering assistance, while the less skilled learner is motivated to respond to and initiate language interactions, as well as respond to peer questions and challenges. Metacognitive and literate language as described above can be seen to have their origins in interactions of this sort with peers and adults as shown by Jones's (2003) sequential analysis of the language interactions of young children during collaborative writing. In a seminal study of 'comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring activities', Palincsar and Brown (1984) showed that reciprocal oral language exchanges between learner and 'tutee' (more experienced other) has a positive impact on reading comprehension. Six elements were identified as contributing to comprehension:

- 1 Understanding both explicit and implicit purposes of reading.
- 2 Accessing relevant background knowledge.
- 3 Focusing attention on the major content of text.
- 4 Evaluation of the content of the text for consistency and compatibility with the learner's prior knowledge.
- 5 Self monitoring of understanding of the text as the reading proceeds.
- 6 Drawing and testing a range of inferences: interpretations, predictions and conclusions.

The researchers selected four specific language activities in which to train learners and tutors, which embodied the six elements above. These are 'self-directed summarizing (review), questioning, clarifying and predicting' (Palincsar and Brown, 1984, p. 121). These activities were embedded in the context of dialogue between tutor and tutee that took place during the reading of text:

The basic procedure was that an adult teacher, working individually with a seventh-grade poor reader, assigned a segment of the passage to

be read and either indicated that it was her turn to be the teacher or assigned the student to teach that segment. The adult teacher and the student then read the assigned segment silently. After reading the text, the teacher (student or adult) for that segment asked a question that a teacher or test might ask on the segment, summarized the content, discussed and clarified any difficulties, and finally made a prediction about future content. All of these activities were embedded in as natural a dialogue as possible, with the teacher and student giving feedback to each other. . . .

Gradually, the students became much more capable of assuming their role as dialogue leader and by the end of ten sessions were providing paraphrases of some sophistication.

(Palincsar and Brown, 1984, pp. 124–5)

The success of that initial research project has been replicated many times with pairs of tutors and tutees and within small groups, for example by Pickens, Glynn, and Whitehead (2004). Several syntheses of research (Mastropieri et al., 1996; Swanson et al., 1999; Fuchs et al., 2000) have been conducted which demonstrate a number of critical elements common to each other and to the initial work of Palincsar and Brown. These elements relate both to the social context of interactive classroom activity, in which oral exchanges of language are embedded, and also to a commonality of understanding and respect between learner and tutor. Among them are:

- a Making instruction visible and explicit
- b Implementing procedural facilitators or strategies to facilitate learning
- c Using interactive groups or partners
- d Providing opportunities for interactive dialogue between students, and between teachers and students

(Klinger et al., 2004, p. 291)

Conclusion

This chapter discusses the crucial role that oral language plays in literacy, and how it is acquired through guided participation with more-skilled speakers in learning contexts that are responsive, social and interactive. Most children readily learn to speak through social interaction with parents, family members, peers, and other mediators around shared activities that are important to both parties. Within these activities, mediators both model appropriate language usage, and, more importantly, respond to the messages children are striving to communicate. By learning to initiate language interactions, as well

as responding to instructions and questions from others, children acquire a share in the topic focus and the direction of these interactions.

However, when students enter school, the oral language contexts they experience may not be so responsive and interactive, and students may have less agency within them. Among the three intersecting school literacy domains of oral language, reading and writing, oral language is the domain that is often undervalued and under-represented in classroom literacy programmes. A major theme in this chapter is the need for teachers to expand the opportunities for students experiencing difficulties with literacy to elaborate their oral language structure by using it in a variety of different literacy contexts in order to improve their reading and writing achievement. These students need to be supported to talk more about what they have been doing at home and at school, to re-tell stories and experiences and to talk about what they are going to write. This strategy may be a more effective way of improving students' reading and writing achievement than increasing the time they spend in practising mechanical production skills that reflect an understanding of literacy as a largely technical, rather than a communicative, activity.

The chapter also draws attention to the many communities of oral literacy practice in which students successfully participate prior to entering school, and the extent of the knowledge and experience with oral literacy they bring with them. This is particularly true for students who are second language learners, and students who come from language and cultural backgrounds that are different from those of their teachers, especially indigenous students. Such students may be highly competent in song, dance, chants and rituals of greeting, and in the stories of their home communities. Teachers need to understand that these are important literacy achievements to be built upon in classroom reading and writing activities, and not construed as barriers to literacy learning. The chapter outlines a number of evolving strategies that some teachers are exploring in order to expand students' oral language use in their classrooms. Some of these activities are stand-alone oral language activities, while others are activities that build more opportunities for oral language interaction within reading and writing programmes.