

# ▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

## Investigating the impact of intensive reading methods in adult literacy

Helen de Silva Joyce, Sue Hood and David Rose

▶ **THIS ACTION-BASED** project examined the implementation of an intensive teaching methodology, Reading-to-Learn, in six adult literacy classrooms. The method adopts a systematic, explicit and deliberately 'scaffolded' approach, which utilises crucial teacher support. 'Scaffolding' refers to teaching that supports and guides learning through collaboration, discussion and negotiation between learner and teacher.

The project demonstrated that the Reading-to-Learn approach realised benefits for both teachers and students. Teachers increased their knowledge about language and reading processes, while student reading and language skills improved, along with their attendance.

### ▶ Methodology

Six teachers in adult literacy classrooms located at two adult and community education (ACE) colleges and one technical and further education (TAFE) college participated in the project. The study comprised a professional development component to introduce teachers to the methodology, and to cover the principles and techniques underpinning the approach. The teachers also used 'action research', which involved implementing the new approach in the classroom and participating in workshop discussions to review and analyse classroom data.

### ▶ Background

Adult literacy students often encounter obstacles to their learning such as difficult family lives and uncertain work opportunities, resulting in irregular attendance and non-completion of courses. In addition, courses are often limited to 10 to 20 weeks. These characteristics make it crucial that teachers adopt more explicit, carefully planned

methodologies to ensure that all students develop reading and writing skills in the limited time available.

Usual techniques for teaching adults from non-English speaking backgrounds to read involve testing students' comprehension of text, with reading tasks dominated by various kinds of 'read and answer questions' activities. The emphasis on testing comprehension means that classroom activities do not explain the relationships of words and language to meanings. Teachers frequently underestimate the reading abilities of students, with adult literacy teachers tending to choose texts that students can already read, rather than ones that encourage the students to develop their reading skills.

### ▶ Reading-to-Learn

The success of the Reading-to-Learn method depends on both careful attention to the relationships between words and their meaning within texts and to scaffolding processes with students. The method comprises six stages:

*Stage 1:* Preparing before reading—students are given the background to the selected text, told what it is about and the sequence of events explained.

*Stage 2:* Detailed reading—students are supported by the teacher as they read each sentence in a short passage.

*Stage 3:* Preparing for writing—students plan what they're going to write, based on what they've just read and understood.

*Stage 4:* Joint rewriting—the teacher supports the class to write a new text, based on the original text.

*Stage 5:* Individual rewriting—students practise writing a new text based on the original and the joint writing exercise.

*Stages 6:* Independent rewriting—students write completely new texts using what they have learned from previous stages.

Teachers using the Reading-to-Learn method must adhere to the logic of the six stages. Key to this approach is adequate preparation before each learning task and ensuring that all students are given the opportunity to complete the task successfully, thereby avoiding simply asking questions to test students' understanding and abilities.

## ► Outcomes of the Reading-to-Learn approach

The *teachers* involved in the project reported a number of positive outcomes, largely in the context of changed teaching practices. They reported that:

- Their professional knowledge was strengthened and they developed a greater awareness of language. This enabled them to improve their ability to select appropriate well-constructed texts, identify key phases of texts, prepare texts for reading and to manage the process that helped students to make connections between meanings and words.
- The more conscious planning processes demanded by the new approach meant they managed their time more effectively.
- They paid more attention to all students in the class, especially those for whom reading was most challenging, and found they praised students more frequently.

In terms of *students*, teachers reported the following gains.

- Students' writing and reading greatly improved, as did their grasp of grammatical structures. The method also increased their enthusiasm for discussing the language of the texts they were reading.
- Although this method focuses on reading, it is also the basis for learning to write. Teachers reported widespread improvement in writing ability, attributing this to a developing awareness of text structure, an expanded vocabulary and a growing understanding of grammar, gained through the detailed reading and the joint rewriting stages.

Students were able to write texts across a much wider range of genres.

- The reliance by English-as-a-second-language students on electronic dictionaries (for translations into their own languages) was greatly reduced as they became familiar with the approach. In some cases students gave up their dictionaries entirely as they were introduced to more effective ways of understanding texts.
- Attendance patterns were significantly improved which also improved the potential of success.

## ► Implications

The introduction of the Reading-to-Learn approach demonstrated gains for both students and teachers: for students, in terms of reading and their attitudes to language; and for teachers, in terms of their growth in professional knowledge, particularly in relation to language, with flow-on implications for their day-to-day teaching practice. These results were achieved thanks to a systematic program for teachers, including periods of intensive professional development, support through the initial stages of implementation, and opportunities to share experiences and results. This has the following resource implications for a wider application of the approach.

- Introducing the Reading-to-Learn method requires ongoing professional development for teachers, interspersed with periods of implementation, reflection and classroom observation.
- The implementation of the approach in the adult literacy sector will require a substantial commitment of time and funds. Targeting centres or locations with existing strong literacy strategies and strongly supportive senior staff and program managers would therefore be the most effective strategy.
- The success of the implementation of the Reading-to-Learn approach will depend upon institutional support in the form of financial commitment to enable the employment of expert trained teachers or consultants to provide the training, and release of teachers for periods of time to undertake the training.

*Investigating the impact of intensive reading methods in adult literacy*, by Helen de Silva Joyce, Sue Hood and David Rose, is available at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2064.html>.

November 2008