LITERACY TEACHING IN THE SECONDARY YEARS

Fact sheet 10/2020

Peter Underwood Centre

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OVERVIEW – LITERACY FROM YEARS 7-10

In Years 7-10, students need sound literacy skills to access the secondary academic curriculum[2]. However, many secondary school teachers (outside of English) do not see themselves as teachers of literacy.

The *UK-based Education Endowment Foundation*[3] has synthesised the best current evidence, to provide guidance about good practice in the teaching of literacy in the secondary school years. Their guidance has been updated for the Australian context by the *Evidence for Learning (E4L) Group*[4] and aligns well with the Australian Curriculum[1]. This fact sheet provides an overview of the seven recommendations in these Guidance Reports, illustrated with examples from our research in Tasmania[5].

Key overall points:

The elements of literacy are interconnected, although they are separated in the recommendations[3,4].

All subject area teachers share responsibility for literacy development in the secondary school years.

When teachers help students to master the literacy needed in their subject (from Art to History to Science), then those students are more likely to learn successfully in those subjects.

Prioritising disciplinary literacy across the curriculum (Recommendation 1)	• Adopting a cross-curricular approach to literacy is key to improving literacy in the secondary school years. • The key concept of 'disciplinary literacy' recognises that literacy skills are both general and subject-specific. • Teachers need to help students to learn the language, ways of knowing, doing, and communicating for their learning area.

SPEAKING AND LISTENING

Providing opportunities for structured talk (Recommendation 6)	• Speaking and listening skills remain important in secondary school for improving students' reading and writing and for developing their communication in different subjects. • High quality classroom talk uses structures of accountability and genuine open-ended questions. • Metacognitive talk is also useful: students asking themselves questions about how they are learning.

Tasmanian teachers of Years 7-10 spoke about having "lots of discussions before we write" and "developing public speaking skills using activities such as oral presentations, debates, and poetry competitions", including by "giving students a choice to talk passionately about something which they find important".

READING

Providing targeted vocabulary instruction in each subject (Recommendation 2)

- Every subject has its own, specialised vocabulary. This is different from everyday language and needs to be taught explicitly so that students can access the curriculum.
- Promising approaches include etymology (the study of the origins of words) and morphology (the study of the structure and parts of words).
- School and subject leaders play a role to support teachers to:
    - align vocabulary instruction with curriculum materials, and
    - recognise words that have different meanings in different subjects, which may lead to confusion among students.

Participants in our research were aware of the importance of expanding students' vocabulary repertoire in the secondary school years, for example making sure that students "leave class each time with at least one or two more words that they can add to their vocabulary".

Secondary teachers also linked vocabulary work with their spelling approach, often displaying new words on "word walls" in classrooms and highlighting technical terms that students need to understand in order to progress in their learning.

Developing ability to read complex academic texts (Recommendation 3)

- Secondary students continue to need opportunities to consolidate and practise reading strategies: activating prior knowledge; predicting; questioning; inferring; and clarifying and summarising.
- Cooperative learning, such as reciprocal learning, can help students to apply reading strategies and make sense of information-dense texts.
- Subject-specific approaches to reading comprehension are likely to have more impact on literacy learning than general approaches such as regular, whole school 'silent reading' sessions.

In general, participants in our research emphasised reading for comprehension with their 7–10 students, stressing the importance of strengthening the use of reading strategies and critically analysing texts, so that "for every time we read, there will always be a strategy, it's never just read". Teachers also modelled the kinds of questions to ask of a text, such as "Should we just believe what this person said? Why does this person want us to believe that?".

WRITING

Breaking down complex writing tasks (Recommendation 4)

- Writing is cognitively demanding because it relies on the ability to combine three processes: transcription (physically writing or typing); composition (coming up with ideas and putting sentences and paragraphs together); and using executive functions (planning, drafting and editing / reviewing).
- Strategies to help students manage this cognitive load include: providing sentence starters; teaching subject-specific vocabulary; providing tools to monitor and review their writing; adopting a process approach that shows that writing involves multiple steps.
- Providing support to students with dyslexia or dyspraxia is important so that difficulties with transcription do not preclude them demonstrating their knowledge in writing tasks.

Combining writing instruction with reading in every subject (Recommendation 5)

- Writing and reading are complementary skills. Improvement in one aspect leads to improvement in the other. They both help students to learn subject content.
- Integrating reading and writing can involve: writing before reading (e.g. writing questions they have about the topic); annotating a text while reading; noting examples of useful phrases used in a text.
- Both spelling and grammar are best taught within the context of the subject content.

In Years 7-10, common strategies in our research were modelling, for example using 'think-alouds', and the use of 'mentor texts' or 'mentor sentences' to identify different elements of writing, including grammar, punctuation, structure and style.

Tasmanian secondary teachers spoke about the importance of teaching writing in ways that integrate the elements of literacy: "Kids can't read the question if they don't understand the vocab. It's the same with writing. You can't expect kids to improve their writing if they can't use more complex words to express themselves. There is that interconnected link with things".

ASSESSMENT AND SUPPORT FOR STRUGGLING STUDENTS

Providing high-quality interventions for struggling students (Recommendation 7)

- It is likely that in all secondary classrooms there will be some students who require extra literacy support.
- Support is best provided in 'tiers' to address different needs: whole-class teaching, small group instruction, and individual support.
- Because there is a wide range of literacy problems that high school students might experience, it is vital to accurately assess the nature and source of the problem and match interventions to identified needs.
- Not all literacy support programs have been rigorously evaluated, so care is needed when assessing their claims. Targeted interventions should support all the recommendations[3,4]. The following features are valuable: regular sessions over a sustained period; delivery by experienced staff; structured supporting resources; assessment to monitor progress; content that is clearly connected with normal classroom lessons.

An example provided in our research related to support for students with dyslexia in secondary school. This often involved "going back and doing more work on phonological awareness with them and then building up that awareness of phonics", because that foundation may not be in place. Staff also provided explicit support on "the strategies that they're using for reading and writing" and ensured they gave targeted feedback.

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Further reading

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For more information please contact:
The Peter Underwood Centre
Private Bag 7, Hobart TAS 7001
Phone: (03) 6226 5735 Email: UnderwoodCentre.Enquiries@utas.edu.au
Website: https://www.utas.edu.au/underwood-centre

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