



# Teaching reading for inference and the four roles of the reader.

The Australian curriculum, NSW English Syllabus K-10 and the ACARA literacy progressions have been built and continue to be developed by new research which reveals further understandings about the complexity of the reading process.

Our work with teaching reading is informed by the four roles of the reader model articulated by Luke and Freebody (1999, in Callow & Hertzberg 2006) – **code breaker, text participant, text user** and **text analyst**. A comprehensive description of a context for reading using this model by Callow and Hertzberg is in *Beyond the Reading Wars*, edited by Robyn Ewing (2006).

One of the strategies for reading that we teach really well, and that students learn really well, is to read exactly what is on the page. Yet the development of reading skills requires students to ‘read between the lines’, to make inferences about implied and unstated meanings. Making inferences is a feature of everyday life. When does it begin for students as they engage with text?

In early days in that first year of school, much of the reading by children is done aloud. The teacher needs to be able to see what strategies the child is using, and reading aloud is one way to do this. As reading behaviours become internalized and automatic, they are less visible, so reading aloud doesn’t have the same usefulness.

The criteria for reading aloud are pretty strict, with variations from the printed word discouraged - no additional words can be included, no substitutions; the text is the highest authority. The reader isn’t an interpreter, and has little role beyond the direct decoding of the printed word. This is the code-breaker role, recognising the patterns of letters in the words.

Purpose-built, literal texts are used for early learning to read, and for the child to consolidate the early reading behaviours. Texts have limited plot, a limited model for narrative structure, little character development, and the text may be limited to description, or a command, as in ‘Look at my red car.’



In NSW, for the first year of school, NSW *English Syllabus K-10* (2012) reading content is found in:

Objective A: *communicate through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing*, Outcome ENe-4A: Reading and viewing 1:

*A student demonstrates developing skills and strategies to read, view and comprehend short, predictable texts on familiar topics in different media and technologies and*

Objective B: *use language to shape and make meaning according to purpose, audience and context*, Outcome ENe-8B: Reading and Viewing 2:

A student demonstrates emerging skills and knowledge of texts to read and view, and shows developing awareness of purpose, audience and subject matter.

(NSW English Syllabus K-10 p.37)

These need to be considered together, if our students are to develop their skills of inference.

In this single clause text:

***Look at my red car.***



much of the content of the first of these outcomes is covered as the reader uses both the words and the image to decode the text.

Features of this text include concepts about print including directionality and identifying a sentence. These, among others, are found in *Understand and apply knowledge of language forms and features* (p.37).

This text provides opportunity for the student to demonstrate *graphological, phonological, syntactic and semantic knowledge*: direct letter/sound matches (*at, red*), initial consonants (*l, m, r, c*), short vowel and consonant combinations (*at, -ed*), long vowels (*-oo-, -y*), and the long vowel sound (*-ar*).

Included are features of clause structure, including sentence markers, a pointer, an article, a relating verb, an adjective and a noun group - structural elements of English which will become



familiar as the student reads more. The text supports the student to develop their knowledge of the structural conventions of texts. That is, part of the grammar that helps to build meaning.

In NSW in Early Stage 1, these skills and understandings sit in Respond to, read and view texts (p.38).

Here, students

- *read predictable texts, practising phrasing and fluency, and monitor meaning using concepts about print and emerging contextual, semantic, grammatical and phonic knowledge*
- *identify literal meanings presented in texts, eg character, setting and events (my emphasis)*
- *use context to predict meaning in written texts to supplement decoding attempts*
- *use with increasing awareness appropriate reading behaviours, eg pitch, intonation and fluency*

(NSW English Syllabus K-10 p.38)

The student moves to understanding how these features work together as the text is decoded, to the literal meaning of this text. That is, the student shifts from the **code-breaking** role into that of a **text participant**.

They are able to demonstrate this syllabus content:

- *make acceptable substitutions when reading simple texts*
- *begin to use self-correction strategies, eg rereading, pausing, using picture cues and semantic and syntactic skills, to make meaning from print and non-print texts*

(NSW English Syllabus K-10 p.38)

When students interact with the text in class and participate in events built around the text, such as creating visuals that reflect character, setting and events, they are taking on the **text user** role.

For students to move beyond this, into the process of reading for inferred meaning, they must develop the **text analyst** role. They need the opportunity to apply their knowledge of the world to their reading in order to draw inference from a text, and to include what they think about the text. We shift the emphasis from correct decoding of the words and their literal meaning into such behaviours as:



- use comprehension strategies to understand and discuss texts listened to, viewed or read independently
- predict meaning using elements of texts prior to reading
- make connections between a text and own life
- interpret meaning by responding to an inferential question

*(NSW English Syllabus K-10 p.38)*

Each of these indicates an engagement with meaning, with the relationship of the text to the student, and to real life. There is opportunity to think about, and talk about other possibilities than just the words and visual on the page. It is in working this way with text that we assist the student to begin to think about possible inference behind the text.

We can consider such ideas as:

I wonder who owns this red car? Is there a word that tells us?

I wonder why the author chose to write a sentence about their red car?

Do you think s/he likes their red car?

If you were writing about your car, what would you say?

It is obvious that this single clause text is not going to provide a lot of opportunity for deep inferential thinking. But these activities open up the possibilities for the child to engage as **text analyst**.

*The reader is able to move towards understanding that a text has particular features based on its purpose. The reader can think about what the writer believes, and how the reader may be able to agree or present an alternative view.*

Ludwig, from Freebody & Luke, 1990, Freebody, Ludwig & Gunn, 1995, Luke & Freebody, 1999 (2003)

This is the beginning of applying those familiar strategies of inference, of drawing conclusions based on evidence, to the reading and interpreting of text in all subjects.



While students are learning to read for themselves, we provide the opportunities for exploring more complex texts, and the potential for more complex thinking about text. We act as the reader – of poems, picture books, stories, factual texts, labels, multimodal texts etc - and model the different roles the novice reader takes on as they decode, participate in the text, use it, and analyse it.

## References

Australian Curriculum (2017) *Literacy Progressions* <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/resources/national-literacy-and-numeracy-learning-progressions/national-literacy-learning-progression/reading-and-viewing/?subElementId=50915&scaleId=0> accessed 20/9/2018

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