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Genre Approach to Written Language: Classroom Report

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Background

Carlton Primary School in Port Augusta has an enrolment of approximately 200 students in years R - 7. Over 50% of these students are Aboriginal and a large number of our Aboriginal students have been identified as having English as a second language. This year is the first year an E.S.L. teacher has been appointed to the school. I work in the school for one day a week as E.S.L teacher and the following report is from one of the targeted classes.

A genre approach is now being used in most classrooms. Students are learning that the way written language is structured depends on its purpose, e.g. the written form (or genre) of a story is different from the written form (or genre) of a recount. Students are learning what the distinct linguistic structure is for each of the genres as they are exposed to it. In some cases the teaching process used is one of deconstruction of supplied text and construction of new text.

Aboriginal students particularly are benefitting from the modelling of written language that is taking place in these classrooms.

Children have always been encouraged to talk about what they are going to write and as a result have been motivated to write.

However written language is different from spoken language. Spoken language does not supply an adequate model for the written form of language only a written language model can do that.

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By observing a written model for the language form or genre being developed the E.S.L. students (and others) have been given an opportunity to gain new insights into the act of writing .

There are noticeable changes in the way these students are now approaching the writing task and also in the structure of the written language produced.

Recount Genre

This year I have a year two class with a 76% Aboriginal component. Approximately half of the children in the class are English-as-a-second-language learners.

The children who have been identified as E.S.L. seemed to experience a lack of confidence and desire to write. A lot of their writing time was spent trying to find an idea to write about and then struggling over spelling because they lacked the confidence to take risks. It was on the basis of the lack of development in the children's writing that I decided to take a genre approach in my written language programme.

The first genre that I chose for my students was 'recount'. This genre was chosen because the children were not using their imaginations when writing and the writing they were producing was a very basic form of recount. The children found writing about their own experiences a relevant and worthwhile writing experience.

A recount consists of the reconstruction of a past experience or event. The author can be involved in this event or it can be an imaginative recount. It is important that the information presented in a recount is arranged in a time sequence. The language used must show the passing of time. In our classroom we worked on a maths time theme during the term, concentrating on the passing of time and sequencing.

I believe it is very important to provide young children, and E.S.L. children in particular, with relevant, worthwhile experiences to write about. All too often we send children back to do 'free choice' writing when they are unable to undertake such writing. I found that if the children had been involved in a shared worthwhile experience followed by a whole group construction of a written text they were keen to write and the quality and quantity of their writing was significantly improved.

Our first recount was about fishing. We found that we had all been fishing at some time and we could confidently write about it.

We discussed the importance of getting details of the fishing trip in the correct sequential order. I explained that in a recount it is important to establish time, setting and participants in the introduction. These concepts were explained and modelled as part of the whole recount text being modelled on the overhead projector.

During the following week the children worked through the writing process of first draft, conference, edit and publish. Children had use of the computer and recounts were published on a fish mobile.

The first recount was probably the most difficult for the children because it was based on individual experiences and children had to write on their own. They were also experimenting with the structure of recount. However, the class as a whole showed an improvement in their writing.

Recount 2 :

As part of our Resource Based Learning Theme on transport we visited the local railway yards. This experience was excellent and really had a positive effect on the children's writing. I was amazed by their concentration and effort in writing this recount and also in the quality of the written language produced. The less confident writers were so 'turned on' by the experience that they even surprised themselves with their writing. Some examples are included.

The children then set about doing their independent writing. While they were doing this the modelled example was left on display so the children could refer to it for spelling and to keep their ideas in order. None of the children copied the model provided, they all chose to write their own recount.

I showed the children's recounts to some colleagues and they agreed the content of the writing was remarkable. It showed just how valuable and worthwhile shared experiences, followed by modelling of written language, are prior to children engaging in independent written language. Concrete experiences are essential not only in maths, but in writing also if we want our children to be successful.

Recount 3 & 4 :

We tried recounting other experiences or events that were not excursions so children could experience other forms of recount.

We recounted jokes that we liked. For children who could not recall a joke we searched through books to find some. I wrote the jokes on to paper and cut them into jigsaws and the children put them together. This is another example of providing scaffolding for children.

We published our jokes in a folding book. We also recounted our jokes on to a video using puppets to show children that there are other ways of publishing than by writing. The children showed a tremendous amount of pride in the finished product.

Another recount that we did was about making a cake. We read the instructions, made the cake and then the children recounted the exact process we went through and included fractions of ingredients used (We had been working on fractions in maths).

Here we really stressed the importance of ending the recount with an opinion. We brainstormed interesting taste words and decided on 'delicious'.

Recount 5 :

In the final week of the school term we visited the E.T.S.A. Northern Power Station to learn more about electricity (our Science theme). When we got back to school I didn't even suggest that the children write a recount. They asked if they could do it ! The children had my modelled writing book ready for me on the big book stand. This demonstrates how familiar and confident they are with our recounting process. The children told me what to write. I was pleased that they remembered to finish off their recounts with an opinion on the trip.

I have read literature on the recount genre. There is a much lengthier process involved in recounting but I believe that with young developing readers and writers it is important to keep tasks simple. We worked through very simple recounting processes.

The children have felt very pleased with their writing achievements this term and all feel as though they have improved. The examples of work included with this article have come from Aboriginal Children who were virtually non-writers prior to engaging in this unit of work.

In closing I can't stress enough the value to the children and myself of using the genre approach in our language programme. Next term we will be focussing on a different genre - the genre of procedure.

Even the simplest shared experience can provide these emerging writers with the fabric for a written text. I recommend the genre approach for Aboriginal students.

Bibliography

Writing and Reading to Learn; Edited by Nea Stewart - Dore: N.S.W. Primary English Teaching Association, 1986

Martin, J.R. *Factual Writing: Exploring and Challenging Social Reality* : Waurin Ponds; Deakin University Press, 1985.

Derewianka, Beverly. *Exploring How Texts Work* ; Razelle, N.S.W: Primary English Teaching Association, 1990

Samples of students' work

Student A.

E.T.S.A Visit

8-4-92

Today we visited the
Northern Power Station
We were given safety
glasses hair nets and hard
hats to wear.
We watched a video on the way they
make electricity. We saw where
the coal comes from and

Student B. (age 7)

11-2-92

Fishing I Went
Fishing on The Jetty
and I Caught a Crab

The Railway's

12-3-92

On Thursday We Went to

The Railways and We ~~and~~ got

on The train It was Good

We Went to The Workshop

Student C. (age 8)

We had glasses and We
Went in the train and we
See a room and table
and a Chair and We
back to School and We
had ^{some} Zoo Dooper and we had
Some lunch and some recess
and at was was home time
and we SatP - at the ga